

God's Plan of the Ages

Volume Four

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God's Plan of the Ages

Volume Four ~ King Ahaz to Messiah

A historical fiction epic imagining what it may have been like
to accompany the Creator of the universe
from the beginning to the end of time.

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Maps drawn by Nathaniel Santa Cruz, Graphic Illustrator

Note: This story begins in Volume Two and is continued in Volume Three. I recommend you read them first, to properly understand Volume Four, which concludes the Old Testament portion of the story. Volume Five tells the New Testament portion of the story and beyond, to the end of time.

Be sure to see the back pages for the timeline, maps, diagrams, and index for this volume.

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God's Plan of the Ages – Volume Four – King Ahaz to Messiah

Isaiah had been prophesying only in Judah. But the Earthquake, followed by Tiglath-pileser III's sweep through the Levant with his huge army in 743 BC, had devastated Israel. Pekah's heavy taxes made it even worse. The poor farmers in the northern districts of Zebulun and Naphtali were hit pretty hard. It seemed such a short time ago that Jeroboam II had brought great prosperity to Israel, but now poverty and famine stalked the land. In their despair, some turned to witches and wizards for advice, but others cried out to YHWH. So Logos gave Isaiah-Alysa one more message for Israel (the northern kingdom).

"They say, 'Consult the mediums and the wizards who whisper and mutter.' Should not Israel consult YHWH her God instead? Must you consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the law! To the testimony! If anyone does not speak in accord with this Word, it is because his mind is darkness and he has no dawn in his heart. So he will pass through the land hard pressed, famished, even enraged. He will look up and curse his king and his God. He will look down and see only distress, darkness, and gloom. That is why YHWH treats the land with contempt, yes, even the north-lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, who have plunged themselves into darkness and gloom when they turned away from the Light.

"But one day there will be no more gloom for her who was in darkness. YHWH will make Zebulun and Naphtali glorious, even Nazareth and Galilee of the Nations. Then the people who walk in darkness shall see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light shall shine upon them. The people shall multiply, for YHWH will increase their gladness. They will be glad in His presence more than the gladness of the harvest or the joy of dividing the spoil. For YHWH will break the yoke of their burden, the rod of their oppressor, as with Gideon against the host of Midian. For a Child will be born to us; a Son will be given us; and the government will rest upon His capable shoulders. Thus His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, Eternal Father, and Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over His Kingdom, to establish it and uphold it with righteousness and justice from then on forevermore. The zeal of YHWH of Hosts will accomplish this." It clearly spoke of Messiah!

But King **Pekah** was angry at the letter. "This is just the ramblings of a madman!" he screamed. "How could the Messiah be just a child? And He will certainly come from Samaria or Jerusalem, not despised Galilee!" He said that because he didn't really want Messiah to come at all. So he refused to heed Isaiah's warning. Satan had occasion. He filled him with hatred for Judah. Pekah went to Rezin and Zoba with plans to attack Elath, so he could cut off the southern trade flowing into Judah.

Outwardly, Judah still prospered abundantly. **Jotham** was a good king; a little naïve perhaps, but committed to YHWH's laws as well as loving and kind to his people. And his wife Jeko'ach was a pretty good queen. Her only flaw was that she didn't have much of a concept of how to be a mother, as she had grown up in a communal household. She didn't even know who her birth mother was. So she mostly left the mothering to the nanny. But Jeko'ach was faithful and true to her husband the king and thus a good example to the people. They all loved them dearly.

But alas. With peace, prosperity, open borders, and free trade comes the greatest challenge of all: to continue to seek YHWH even when you don't think you need Him. Don't get me wrong. Buzz, Jeko'ach's father, really did love YHWH. He was committed to doing what was right in His sight, for Jotham and Jeko'ach, for Judah, and for his rather large family. But don't forget, he had been a high priest of Baal. His family consisted of numerous wives, children, mistresses, and prostitutes from the priesthoods of Baal and Astarte. Along with Buzz, many of them had converted to become faithful servants of YHWH, due to the astute dealings of Jotham. But there are always a few for whom godliness is just a charade they play.

It was not the fault of Buzz – he was doing his best. But he should never have been put in charge of religion and morality in the kingdom. He didn't have the experience! Or rather, his experience was mostly negative. Judah's people were getting more wicked and idolatrous, but to Buzz, they all looked relatively good.

In Buzz's concept of family, the husband took as many wives and mistresses as he could afford (which for a high priest of Baal was quite a few); they shared all the work and he made the decisions. I know, it doesn't sound very fair, but that's the way it was. So with Jotham and Jeko'ach off being king and queen, Buzz just naturally took it upon himself to make the big decisions for his grandchildren, especially the oldest, Prince **Ahaz**. Jotham and Jeko'ach were delighted – as I said, they trusted him explicitly.

So when Buzz arranged the marriage of Ahaz to the daughter of one of the 'converted' priests of Astarte, they gladly gave their approval. Ahaz was 18; it was time to find him a wife. Jotham promised that when he turned twenty, he would be crowned co-regent. It's always best for a king to have a wife.

Her name was Abi, meaning 'daddy's favorite', and her father's name was Zackry, 'unforgettable'. He had been a good friend of Buzz back in the old days, so he had gotten him a good job as a buyer of supplies for the Levitical priesthood. But before he introduced them to the royal family, Buzz became concerned that his prior occupation might raise a stink in the 'YHWH conscious' court.

So Buzz decided to make a minor compromise. His conscience smote him about it, but he didn't have the discernment to know that was a warning from the Spirit of YHWH. He justified himself. This was his job. He was in charge of the religious aspects of the kingdom, including oversight of the priesthood. He appointed Zackry to be an honorary priest of YHWH on condition that he officially change his name to Zechariah, 'YHWH remembers'. That sounded a lot better – Jotham and Jeko'ach would love it.

Zackry and his wife were delighted with the prospect of their daughter being chosen to marry the young Prince of Judah. Abi was pretty tickled, too. That is, she was until Buzz decided to change her name to Abijah, 'YHWH is my Father'. She did not like that at all, having been used to being called Abi all her young life. Buzz solved it by telling her that Abi was just her nickname – her real name had always been Abijah. She bought it. From then on, when introducing herself, she would let them know, "My name is Abijah, but all my friends call me Abi."

Abi and Ahaz hit it off just fine. They married near the end of 737 BC, and by the end of 736, they already had a son, whom they named **Hezekiah** ('YHWH is Mighty'). Abi had gotten quite good at the YHWH charades, and never mentioned her past as daughter of a priest of Astarte. Instead, she slowly instructed her husband in the modern way they worshiped YHWH. Each week she would take him to a different ancient sacred place, a hill, a grove, or under a sacred terebinth. There they would offer a sacrifice and burn some incense, 'to YHWH', of course. She made a picnic of it. Within a year or two they had visited every pagan cult center in the land, and Ahaz was thoroughly involved in the spread of idolatry in Judah. All this time, King Jotham and Jeko'ach thought they were enjoying a lot of picnics.

But Logos was not happy with Judah. They needed something to wake them up to the direction they were headed. He allowed Pekah, with his allies Rezin and Zoba, to flank Judah and attack their southern trading center of Elath. They easily captured it, for King Jotham thought they were at peace with all the surrounding nations and was not prepared for an attack, especially from the south! In early 736 BC, Rezin invited the Edomites to help manage the trading post, depriving Judah of much income.

Jotham was not a warrior, but he understood their pain. Rather than try to fight against Pekah, Rezin, or Edom, he negotiated a peace compromise. He was willing to give up Elath, just to keep them happy.

Tiglath-pileser III went to Media to set up Assyrian provinces there. He took captives to deport to the Levant, which he planned to subdue again in another few years. He had not lost a battle. His plan to set up Assyrian control over conquered states, deporting their best and wisest to other conquered states, had proven very successful. *Israel should be preparing to face him rather than fighting Judah.*

Isaiah and Alysa had married just before the death of King Uzziah in 738 BC. Since then, Isaiah had basically set work aside to spend time with his new wife. Oh, he visited the palace a few times, such as to attend the coronation of Jotham, and to send that prophecy to Pekah of Israel. But mostly he spent his days just getting to know his wife and discovering what a treasure he had. In 737 BC, Alysa bore a healthy baby boy. By faith, they named him Shearjashub, 'A remnant shall return'.

Buzz was still in charge of guarding the religious health of Judah. King Jotham crowned his oldest son **Ahaz** co-regent in 735 BC, as he had promised. He appointed his second son, Maaseiah, to be captain of the palace guard, and promised that if he did well, he would take his turn as co-regent in a few years. That fall he also gave Ahaz control of the military, protecting the land from the surrounding nations. Jotham didn't even want to think about fighting. Now he would do what he had always wanted to do. He bought a pair of matching plain white tunics. Then he and Jeko'ach began touring the countryside, just like his father Uzziah used to love doing.

What a joy that was! This was what Jotham was made for – visiting with his people. Everyone in the kingdom knew and loved him and Jeko'ach, so their homes were always open. He heard their problems. He brought plenty of money to help any who were struggling. He understood them, encouraged them, and made sure they got justice from their elders and judges. With the palace in such good hands, he never wanted to return. He and his wife made the rounds from town to town throughout the land.

But the kingdom was not in good hands. Buzz was too tolerant. Flagrant idolatry was springing up everywhere. Abi and her father Zackry had gained more influence than Buzz ever thought possible. King Ahaz welcomed their reformed paganism. It was not long before he cast a pair of golden calves for Judah just like Jeroboam had made for Israel! By now all pretenses were off. Ahaz became openly accepting of all kinds of worship, pagan or not.

Near the end of 735 BC, when baby Hezekiah was only one year old, Abi bore Ahaz another son. But it was a rough delivery and the baby seemed deformed and sickly. Poor Abi ended up depressed and morose. She confided in her husband, "If I have another one like this you may lose me! Our problem is that we didn't sacrifice our firstborn to the gods. We ought to do that with this one right now while he's too young to feel any pain. Take it down to the Valley of Ben-Hinnom where King Solomon used to sacrifice to Molech. Then the gods will bless us again."

How Ahaz bought that I'll never know, but he did. He didn't want to deal with a squalling, sickly infant, who almost certainly would die anyway. He already had an heir. He certainly did not want to lose Abi! But Logos was furious. He allowed Pekah and Rezin to start planning another attack against Judah.

As the armies of Syria, Hamath, and Israel assembled in Ephraim, the news came to Ahaz of their plans to attack Jerusalem. Ahaz had been in charge of Judah's military for less than a year. He was terrified! He sent for his father, but Jotham was still on tour and couldn't be located.

As he feared, they came and besieged Jerusalem. Judah was doomed! Ahaz mustered his own army, but it was less than half the size of the forces camped around the city. Ahaz panicked. He ordered pagan priests to offer sacrifices on every high place and under every green tree. Idolatrous worship swept the land.

"I just knew we should have sacrificed our firstborn!" Abi swore, "Now it is the only way to save the country. Hezekiah is only a year old – still too young to feel the pain of the fires. Take him to the Valley of Hinnom. Offer him to Molech, the god of battle. Then we will be victorious."

But this time Ahaz wasn't buying. He'd come to love the little shaver, and was unwilling to give up his only heir. "Wait a minute," he said. Some things about his wife were finally becoming clear. "You're lying to me! Hezekiah is certainly not too young to feel pain. Just look at the pain in his eyes when I have to leave, and his joy when I return! There is no way in Sheol I'm going to send him through the fires of Molech. And I'll bet you lied about our second son, too. I'll bet all your worship of the Baals has offended YHWH. Maybe that's why we're in trouble."

The angelic host cheered! Ahaz had finally awakened to the truth. Logos took the form of a man and knocked on the door of the country home where Isaiah and Alysa were enjoying some playtime with baby Shearjashub.

They came to the door together, their baby in Alysa's arms. The stranger immediately began to prophesy to them the Word of YHWH, telling them to go out to meet Ahaz and give the Word to him. Then, without awaiting a response, He vanished.

It was obviously urgent. Pausing only a moment to grab some baby food and stuff some extra diapers in the diaper bag, they began the hike to Jerusalem.

They found Ahaz where the angel had told them he would be. "Take care, O King. Be calm. Have no fear. Do not be fainthearted because of these stubs of smoldering firebrands who have teamed up against you. I know, Rezin and Pekah in their fierce anger have come up against Judah to terrorize you, determined to breach Jerusalem's walls and to make Zichri son of Tabeel, mighty man of Ephraim, king in your place. Thus says YHWH, the King of Israel, 'Because you have rejected Ashtoreth and all the Baals, and have not sacrificed My son Hezekiah to the fires of Molech, their plans shall not stand, nor shall they come to pass. Rezin will never be more than king of Syria at Damascus, and Pekah – well, in another 25 years all of Ephraim will be shattered and dispersed to the nations. However, if you will not believe My Word, you shall not last.'"

Ahaz wrestled with this. It's tough to simply believe and be at peace when you have been so terrified.

A new thought from Logos hit Isaiah-Alysa. This time, Alysa voiced it. "O King, YHWH loves you. He knows your struggle. He would comfort you. He Himself has declared that any prophecy of good must come with proof. So He wants you to test Him in this. Ask of Him a sign. Ask it as deep as Sheol or as high as the heavens."

"No!" Ahaz backed away. "I will not ask a sign. Who am I to test YHWH? I fear Him! I won't do it."

"That is wrong, O house of David!" Alysa spoke so boldly that it startled her. "Listen to me! Is it too small a thing for you to try the patience of men, that now you try the patience of my God as well? He told you to ask a sign; do you refuse Him? Therefore, YHWH Himself grants you a sign. This!" She held up her little baby. Filled with the Spirit, she prophesied, "Shearjashub will be here, eating curds and honey, when he learns to refuse the evil and choose the good. But before that time, those two kings you dread will be slain and their lands will be devastated and forsaken. For my son is a type of the Messiah, who will be born of a virgin. His name will be called Immanuel, 'God with us'. But you, O King, because you have not believed YHWH, will instead place your trust in the king of Assyria and in the Pharaohs of Egypt. I swear neither will help you. They will shave both Israel and Judah like a razor, cutting off everything of value from your people and your land, plundering your harvest, and destroying your vineyards and croplands. So you'll subsist on curds and wild honey, because you did not trust in the Word of YHWH." She hugged her son close to her breast, adding, "Shearjashub also prophesies to you, O King. Whether you believe YHWH or not, 'A remnant shall return' to believe in Him."

The word laid out before Ahaz was clear. All he had to do was believe YHWH, reject his fears, and resist the urge to call for help from Assyria. Still struggling with it, he told Abi, "YHWH forgave us. He's going to protect us. Isaiah said Rezin and Pekah will not be able to take Jerusalem."

But Abi got angry. "You fool! YHWH is just one God. We need the protection of all the gods! Don't you know that Israel and Syria have only grown so strong because they sacrifice to the Baals and Asherim? If you can't handle this, I will!" She stomped out, heading for the nursery.

In a sudden burst of determination, Ahaz ran after her and grabbed Hezekiah out of her arms. He hugged his son, praying, "O YHWH, Abi is right. I am weak and foolish. But You called Hezekiah Your own son. Take care of him, I pray. Don't let Abi kill him. I choose to believe Isaiah's prophecy as Your word, and I accept Alysa's sign..."

As if in answer to his prayer, a servant ran up to Ahaz. "O King! The Israelites and Syrians seem to be packing to leave. And Pekah is calling for you from just outside the city gates. I think you should go talk to him."

Ahaz hurried to the tower above the city gates. Indeed, they seemed to be packing to leave. Pekah was waiting down below, so he called down to him. "I am Ahaz, king of Judah. Do you give up so soon?"

"Don't think you are so lucky!" Pekah shouted back. "An urgent matter has required our attention. But I swear that we will be back stronger than ever! So don't get cocky. By this time next year Rezin and I shall be feasting at your table in your palace!"

By the end of the day, they were gone. Ahaz breathed a sigh of relief, hugging baby Hezekiah. He praised YHWH that the crisis was over and that the word spoken through Isaiah-Alysa had proven true. He sent out an invitation to Isaiah and Alysa for a big victory celebration party in the palace. Abi was still angry with him, but with the attackers gone, what could she say? She invited her father Zackry (now known in the palace as Zechariah) to the party, too.

Before dinner was ready, a group of the king's advisors and elders came to petition Ahaz. They were led by Buzz, Jotham's father-in-law and chief advisor. Abi and Zackry were among them. "We lucked out this time," Buzz began. "But Pekah said he'd be back, stronger than ever! So we earnestly recommend, O King, that you send a gift to the king of Assyria. His armies are invincible. If we ally with him, then Pekah can ally with all the other nations he wants and he still won't be able to defeat us. But we need to do it now! For if Pekah is smart and allies with Assyria first we are burnt toast!" The others were all nodding.

At only 20 years old, Ahaz was easily swayed by all these older and wiser advisors, especially Buzz, the most trusted counselor in the kingdom. He gave his permission to get the gift ready, and sat down to compose the letter. It read, "King Ahaz of Judah, to Tiglath-pileser, great Emperor of Assyria. I am your servant and your son. Please come and deliver me from the hands of the kings of Israel and Syria who are rising up against me." But as he wrote, he kept Hezekiah on his lap, for he no longer trusted Abi.

That evening, Isaiah and Alysa pulled Ahaz aside just before the dinner began. "You are young, O King. YHWH understands. He will forgive you. He is Judah's Protector. So you must not give in to the wicked counsel to put your trust in the king of Assyria. You must make the choice to put your whole trust in YHWH God of Abraham. Your own destiny and the destiny of Judah hang in the balance."

The dinner was delicious. When all were satisfied (and possibly just a tad tipsy) they called on Isaiah to prophesy for them against Israel and Syria. He started to refuse, for prophecies don't come by the will of men. To his surprise, Logos said to take Alysa and Shearjashub to the speaker's platform. He obeyed, with not a clue what he would say.

When he opened his mouth, the Spirit of YHWH took over and began to prophesy through him. "YHWH sends a Word against Jacob, which falls upon Israel!" he began.

Everyone in the banquet hall cheered and then quieted to hear the message. "It falls on Israel," he repeated, "And the people there know it. The sons of Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria assert in their pride and arrogance, 'The mud bricks have crumbled, but we will rebuild with stones. The sycamores have been cut down, but we will plant cedars.' Therefore YHWH raises adversaries against them, and spurs their enemies on. Rezin and the Syrians turn against them on the east, and the Philistines on the west. They devour Israel with gaping jaws. In spite of this, YHWH's anger does not turn away and His hand of wrath is still stretched out. Yet they do not repent to Him who struck them, nor do they seek YHWH of Hosts."

Isaiah finished. But before his mouth shut Alysa took over. "So YHWH cuts off the head and the tail from Israel. both the palm branch and the bullrush in a single day. The head is the gullible noble, the foolish elder, or the ignorant guide; the tail is the prophet who teaches lies. For those who guide are leading them astray. Those who are led are filled with confusion. YHWH does not take pleasure in their young men, nor does He pity their orphans or their widows. Every one of them is godless, wicked, immoral, and idolatrous, and every mouth speaks foolishness."

Alysa finished. Before her mouth closed, Isaiah began anew. "For wickedness burns like a fire. It consumes the briars and thorns, and even sets the forests ablaze. By the fury of YHWH the land is burned up. The people are like fuel feeding the flames. No man spares his own brother. Ephraim devours Manasseh, and Manasseh, Ephraim. *And both together come against against Judah.*"

Now Alysa joined in, prophesying together with Isaiah in perfect concert, as if they had memorized this together. "Woe to those who enact evil statutes, who record unjust decisions, so as to deprive the needy of justice and rob the poor of My people of their rights, to spoil the widow and to plunder the orphan. Now, Judah, what will you do in the day of judgment, in the devastation which will come from afar? To whom will you flee for help? Where will you hide your wealth? Nothing remains but to crouch in fear among the captives or fall on your face among the slain. In spite of all this, YHWH's anger does not turn away. His hand of wrath is still stretched out."

Isaiah and Alysa turned toward each other and bowed to acknowledge each other's contribution. Then without another word, they returned to their seats, hand in hand.

Some applauded, but many were angry that Judah had been included in the stern prophecy. Isaiah and Alysa kept out of it, not willing to give their own opinion on anything. Then somebody shouted, "Hey, Isaiah, prophesy about Assyria. They're going to come and help us defeat Pekah and Rezin, you know." The room suddenly became quiet. Isaiah looked at Ahaz, whose face turned red. It seemed like everyone in the room had heard the gossip about the letter and gift Ahaz was preparing for the king of Assyria.

Alysa put her arms on the table, bowed her head into them, and began to weep quietly. Isaiah, with Shearjashub on his arm, made his way back onto the platform. “Woe to Assyria!” he thundered. “For it is but the rod of My anger, the staff of My indignation! I send it against a godless nation; I commission it against people with whom I am furious, to take their booty and seize their plunder, and to trample them down like mud in the streets. For Assyria is My tool of judgment, though they do not intend to be so. They only want to destroy all nations around them until they are supreme over all. But I shall use them to punish Samaria and her idols; *then in the same way I shall use them to punish Jerusalem and her idols*. After I have completed all My work, I will then punish the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the pomp of his haughtiness! I will send a wasting disease among his stout warriors and a flame of fire under his glory. For the Light of Israel will become a fire, and Israel’s Holy One a flame, which shall burn and devour his thorns and briars in a single day. In that day the remnant of Israel and those who have escaped from Judah will never again rely on the one that struck them, but instead will truly rely on YHWH, the Holy One of Israel. For only a remnant, the remnant of Jacob, will return to the mighty God. Therefore O My people who dwell in Zion, do not fear the Assyrian who strikes you with the rod. For in a little while, My indignation against you will be spent, and after that My anger will be re-directed to Assyria’s destruction.”

This was really getting interesting. Two scribes were writing furiously, determined to not miss a word. For everyone knew this was neither Isaiah nor Alysa; it was YHWH Himself! Even the tone of Isaiah’s voice rang with a heavenly authority, quite unlike his normally rather mild and friendly voice.

So far, the prophecies had been pretty good for Judah, although those who wanted to get Assyria’s help against Pekah and Rezin were miffed when he said they would punish Judah, too. But many in the banquet hall had never heard the Word of God spoken so boldly and plainly. They wanted more. Jerusha, Uzziah’s widow, sensed the mood of the people. She brought up what has been on every true Israelite’s mind since Adam’s Fall. “Isaiah and Alysa, will you please prophesy to us about the promised Redeemer, the Holy One coming to restore the throne of David?”

Isaiah looked at Jerusha, seeing the longing in her blind eyes. He looked at Alysa, who smiled back and nodded. He looked down at his baby, who gave him a big grin. He still didn’t know how to answer, but often prophecies start that way, until God’s Spirit takes over. So he breathed a prayer, “YHWH my God, speak through me now,” and began to talk to his baby. “In the fullness of time, in the town of Ephrathah of Judah, a baby will be born – born to a virgin! His name will be called Immanuel, ‘God with us’, and also **Yashua**, ‘YHWH is Salvation’.” Isaiah paused, as he saw Alysa walking back up toward the platform.

Then the Spirit of God within him overflowed. “He will be a shoot from the stem of Jesse, for a branch from Jesse’s root will bear fruit. And the Spirit of YHWH will rest upon Him in fullness, the Spirit of Wisdom and Understanding, the Spirit of Counsel and Might, the Spirit of Knowledge and the Holy Awe of YHWH – the seven Spirits of God.

“For He will take delight in the nature and character of YHWH Himself, rather than judging by what His own eyes see or deciding by what His own ears hear. Thus He shall judge the poor in righteousness, and decide in favor of the afflicted of the earth in justice. He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked.”

Alysa now stood beside him, looking intently over the heads of the people. As Isaiah paused for breath she raised her arm to point above their heads. “I see it!” she cried, wide-eyed and voice high-pitched with emotion. “I see the Kingdom of Jacob’s Messiah! He rules in righteousness and faithfulness, with truth as a belt around His loins. The wolf dwells peacefully with young lambs, and the leopard lies down with the kids. The young lion with the fatling calf and the cow with the bear graze together, for the lion and the bear eat straw like an ox. Look! A little child leads them to find good pasture. A barely weaned infant plays beside a viper’s den. They shall neither hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the whole earth is full of the knowledge of YHWH as the waters fill the sea!”

Tears filled her eyes and her voice choked up, so Isaiah took over. “It will come about on that day that all nations will depend on the root of Jesse. He will stand as a banner for all peoples, and His throne will be incredibly glorious. On that day He will recover for a second time the remnant of His people who remain. He will bring them back from afar, from Assyria, Egypt, Pathros, Nubia, Elam, Shinar, Hatti, Hamath, and from the coastlands of far-off nations. He will assemble the banished families of Israel and gather the dispersed people of Judah, bringing them back from the four corners of the earth.” He paused for breath.

So now the clear, sweet voice of Alysa rang out like a silver trumpet, bringing tingles to every spine. “Then the jealousy of Ephraim will be gone! Those who harass Judah will be cut off! But together as brothers they will swoop down upon the Philistines on the west and plunder the sons of the east. They will possess Edom and Moab, and even the sons of Ammon will be subject to them. Then YHWH will split the Euphrates into seven tiny streams to make a highway from Assyria, and our God will dry up the tongue of the Red Sea to make a broad road up from Egypt, so the remnants of My people can return in safety.”

Isaiah joined her in a chorus, “Then you will say, ‘I give thanks to You, O YHWH! Though You were angry with me, Your anger has turned away. You comfort me, O God my savior!’ I will trust, and never be afraid, for YHWH is my strength and my song. He has become my salvation!”

Their chorus became a song, with Alysa taking the lead and Isaiah carrying the harmony. “Therefore with joy shall you draw water from the well of salvation. And in that day you shall say, ‘Praise YHWH! Give Him thanks. Magnify YHWH’s holy name! Make known His deeds among the peoples! Proclaim the name of YHWH, for He is worthy. Praise YHWH in song, for He has done great things. Let the chorus be heard across the earth. Cry aloud! Shout for joy, all you who dwell in Zion, who live in the city of the great King. Marvelous in your midst is the Holy One of Israel!’”

After the echo of that final chord, stillness. For a few moments, a holy hush reigned in the great hall. Then a muffled sob was heard, then another, and soon everyone was kneeling or flat on his face, weeping, repenting, and swearing a fervent commitment to the awesome vision. But when Isaiah looked for Ahaz and Abi, they were gone, along with Buzz and some others of the king’s counselors.

Ahaz had gone out to see if he could stop the messenger he had sent to Assyria with his letter and the big gift they had collected. Abi had followed him, suspecting as much. She argued, “Hey! Those are only words. Pretty words, but words, just the same. We still need Assyria on our side. You heard Buzz. If Pekah gets to them first, we’re dead!”

“I don’t trust you anymore, Abi. You wanted to kill Hezekiah! Why should I listen to you?”

“Oh, stop it. We don’t need to sacrifice the baby any more. Pekah’s gone. But I swear we will need to sacrifice him if Pekah comes back and we don’t have Assyria behind us. So,” she sneered at him, “if you really want to save your precious son, don’t try to stop the messengers.”

“My precious son? This is our son! And I will save him! ... Okay, Abi, I’ll do it. I’ll let them go. Even if I die, I’ll do whatever it takes to save Hezekiah.”

Thus again Ahaz yielded to his wife, even knowing now that it was wrong. Logos sadly told Satan. “You have won a victory over Ahaz. After all My warnings and examples, all the holy ones I’ve sent him, he has chosen foolishness. You have My permission to bring harm to him and to all Judah under him, yet you must spare his life, for I still see some good in him. Ahaz truly loves Hezekiah, My precious son. He is willing to give his life for him. Someday, he may be able to repent of his faithlessness and trust Me.”

Satan wasted no time. Rezin and Pekah returned to Jerusalem the next summer. Tiglath-pileser had gotten the letter and gift Ahaz had sent, but hadn’t had time to respond, so this time there was no stopping them. Zichri, son of Tabeel, slew Maaseiah (Jotham’s second son, now captain of the palace guard), Azrikam (a palace steward), and Elkanah (Ahaz’ military general). On that one day, they killed 120,000 and took 200,000 hostages, including King Ahaz himself. Rezin and Pekah took all the Judean captives, along with the spoils of war, back to Samaria. It was all over before Ahaz figured out what had happened.

This was a catastrophe of the first magnitude. It was the 9th of Av, 734 BC. Abi was slain. Her father Zackry was slain. Buzz was slain. Many other nobles and counselors of Jotham’s court were slain, as well as all of Ahaz’ own circle of advisors. King Ahaz was put in chains and dragged into the court of King Pekah in Samaria. There he became sport for Pekah and his nobles. They beat him, mocked him, and laughed him to scorn. They gloated over him with tall tales of all they had done to Judah. They told him that his queen and father-in-law were dead, together with all his officers. And they told him that Zichri son of Tabeel, the ‘strong man of Ephraim’, now ruled at Jerusalem in his palace. Finally, when they tired of their sport, they threw him into the dungeon and left him to rot.

They had, however, unintentionally given him one tiny glimmer of hope. In all their cruel taunts, they had never mentioned his son, the Crown Prince Hezekiah. *Perhaps he was yet alive. Perhaps someone had seen the child and had taken pity on him.* Oh how he prayed it was so.

In fact, someone had. It was Jerusha, Uzziah’s widow. She had seen clearly what was coming, and had stolen him away before Pekah even broke down the city gates. How could she do that, being blind, you ask? Her sight was of a different nature than yours or mine, and she had learned to use it well. As Isaiah had prophesied, she could see things that you or I only wish to see. She had managed to avoid the onslaught and secret Hezekiah down to the School of Prophetesses, where the ladies all cared for him as if he were their own son. But Ahaz didn’t know that.

He heard noises, loud arguing, outside the palace. He couldn’t see, because the sole window was too high, but he could hear the shouting. Evidently the army had brought the rest of the captives, mostly women and children, into Samaria. *Someone wasn’t happy with that. Oh! Rezin! He wanted to take his share of the captives up to Damascus.* Ahaz leaned the bench next to the window and climbed up so he could see through the bars. But what he saw made him cringe. Rezin was taking 100,000 captives to give to his nobles as slaves! Ahaz fell to the floor in agony.

Suddenly the commotion outside quieted down. Ahaz climbed back up the bench to see again. “I am Oded, prophet of YHWH, God of Abraham!” Oded’s voice rang out so Ahaz could hear clearly. “Because YHWH was angry with Judah He delivered them into your hand. But you have slain them in a rage which has reached the heavens. And now you are proposing to enslave your brothers? Do you not already have enough transgressions of your own against YHWH your God? Now therefore, you had better listen to me. Return the captives which you have taken from your brothers. For the burning anger of YHWH has turned away from them and come against you!”

Rezin angrily ordered his half of the captives on, saying, “Who cares what YHWH thinks? Do whatever you want with your share. I’m taking my share to Damascus!”

But some of the elders of Ephraim who had not gone to battle sided with Oded. “Wait, Rezin. Oded is right. We’ve been too harsh with Judah. We must return the captives. We can’t enslave them. The Law of YHWH prohibits us from enslaving our brothers. Our sins are already so...”

“Law of YHWH? Bah!” Pekah interrupted. “The law of war asserts, ‘To the victor belongs the spoils!’ I know you, Oded. You’re just a troublemaker from the School of Prophets in Gilgal. Of course you take Judah’s side here. So get back to Judah where you belong, and prophesy against them like all the other prophets. Rezin, go ahead. Take your share of...”

“No, my lord the king.” It was Azariah, son of Johanan. Behind him stood Jehizkiah son of Shallum, Amasa son of Hadlai, and Berechiah son of Meshillimoth, all respected elders. “You are proposing to add more guilt upon the land, but our guilt is already so great that YHWH’s wrath has fallen upon Israel.” He stood firm, arms akimbo.

Pekah suddenly saw that he had a crisis of confidence here. These were leaders supporting his administration. They could easily turn all the people against him, and he might then be assassinated. He quickly changed his mind. “King Rezin, take your share of the spoils. It will make you very rich. But you do not need the burden of all these rebels. For they are a stiff-necked and hard-headed people, who will cause you nothing but trouble. I will deal with them. In their place, I give you their king, Ahaz himself. March him in chains before you as you enter Damascus, to add to your great glory and honor before your people.”

Rezin bought it. Ahaz was hauled out of the dungeon and handed over to him. Now the taunts and abuse started anew. All the way up to Damascus Ahaz was humiliated and tormented. After they had tired of their sport, Rezin tossed him into his own dungeon and left him to rot. There he languished in despair for two years, utterly broken in spirit. Still he would not repent or turn back to YHWH.

Bowing to the will of the elders, Pekah assigned Azariah and his friends to dispose of the captives however they wished. Then he turned his back and walked away.

Azariah quickly reorganized the hostages into smaller groups and assigned each of his friends a group. They fed and clothed them. They bandaged their wounds, anointed them with oil, loaned them donkeys for their little ones, and brought them safely back to Judah.

Logos was pleased that they had shown mercy, and He vowed to show them mercy in return when Tiglath-pileser (king of Assyria) came to devastate the land. For yes, he had gotten the message from Ahaz and had already made plans to come to the Levant to help him. In 733 BC he left Media. He brought many captives to repopulate the lands he planned to conquer. First he had to re-establish control at Arpad and Calneh in northern Syria. Then he headed south through Sidon and Tyre and reconquered Philistia.

With that devastating loss to Pekah and Rezin, King Jotham finally woke up to his dereliction of duty. Some of the returning hostages told him that his son Ahaz had been taken in chains up to Damascus, and Pekah had installed an Ephraimite as king at Jerusalem. Jotham hurried back toward the palace with his bodyguard, to see for himself. But he was met on the road by Isaiah and Alysa. “No, O King. Do not go up to Jerusalem now. You’ll just be slain, accomplishing nothing for your people. Bring your wife to our country home. We need to talk.”

Jotham came with Jeko’ach. They were full of plans to muster the armies of Judah and storm Jerusalem. While listening to their plans, Isaiah and Alysa sat them down with some tea. Finally, “...so what do you think, Isaiah? Will you ask YHWH to bless our plans before we go?”

“You’ve been very tolerant...” Isaiah began.

“Yes, I have! I swore to Jeko’ach from the day I first met her father Buzz that I would always remain tolerant and kind, loving and non-judgmental, not only toward her family but toward everyone. For as Moses said, we are all made in the image of God. Who am I to criticize another person made in God’s image? As God is my witness I have kept that vow, and He has blessed us for it.”

“Oh. He has blessed you.”

“Yes, and all Judah with us. We spend all our time going around the countryside helping the poor, providing for their needs, understanding their pain, encouraging them that their sufferings are not their own fault, and helping them to feel good about themselves. Why, we even...”

“Jotham! Do you even realize what just happened to Judah? Have you been living in a vacuum?”

“Well, of course I know what happened. Pekah overran Jerusalem. I’m afraid I haven’t trained my son in the art of diplomacy – he probably said something to offend Pekah. I’ll apologize – negotiate for him. Once Pekah understands that we mean him no harm, I’m sure he will take...”

“Jotham!” Alysa interrupted. “You are a fool! A kind, loving, tolerant, non-judgmental fool, but a fool just the same. Some people really are evil! You can’t deal with the evil in the land by pretending it doesn’t exist – by loving everyone and sitting around a campfire singing Kum By Hyah. You are the king! It is your responsibility when evil floods your kingdom! Why do you think YHWH’s Law is so strict against evildoers? You have assumed that loving people means tolerating their wickedness!”

King Jotham had never gotten a tongue-lashing from a woman before. He shut up in bewilderment. Isaiah took over. “My friends, the trouble in Judah is more severe than you know. 120,000 of your brothers are slain, including nearly everyone from your palace. Jerusalem’s walls are broken down. The surrounding land is plundered and ruined, and is still occupied by the army of Israel.”

Alysa continued, “The Edomites have taken advantage of Judah’s weakness to enslave whole towns on the east. The Philistines have done the same on the west. Pekah and Rezin planned to enslave their captives, too – 200,000 of them! Rezin had begun to take his half up to Damascus. They were only released after we sent Oded up to Samaria to meet the army and put the fear of God into them!”

Jotham, finally faced with the magnitude of his defeat, turned white. “What... What should I... What does YHWH want me to do?”

“Stay here with us. You and Jeko’ach can have the guest room. Your bodyguards can sleep in the barracks with the field workers. Pray. Repent. With all your heart. Perhaps YHWH will hear you. Perhaps He will respond by bringing back your son and restoring your kingdom.”

“Repent? Me? Repent for what? I’ve done everything YHWH has told me to, all my life!”

Isaiah covered his eyes with his hand and shook his head. “Repent for what. Right.” He was trying not to be exasperated. “What was the first thing YHWH told you to do through me after my death?”

Jotham didn’t remember. So Isaiah told him. “He said to depose Buzz and give his job to another. So did you do it? Do you know where Buzz is now?”

“Ahh, well no, I guess not. But Buzz is a good man. A godly man. He repented. He is loyal and true – my most faithful advisor. So I didn’t think that was YHWH. You’d just come back from the dead, so I thought you were...”

“I had just come back from the throne of God in heaven, you mean. I had His Word as much as ever in my life. And Buzz is neither godly, nor loyal and true. He is dead. He took your own toleration of evil, and let it spread across the land. God judged him for it. He is now being buried in a shallow mass grave in the Valley of Hinnom, along with Abi your daughter-in-law, her father Zackry, General Elkanah, and hundreds of other palace nobles.”

“Oh my God! What have I done?” Finally good King Jotham was ready to repent. He remained at Isaiah’s house, crying out to YHWH for forgiveness and wisdom.

King Pul (Tiglath-pileser III) and the invincible armies of Assyria swept into Israel the next spring, 732 BC. King Pekah had planned to join up with the armies of Syria and Hamath but he was too late. He sent for help, but all his runners were intercepted and killed. He had no defense and no hope against such incredibly superior forces. He took the only option left to him; he opened the gates of Samaria and walked out alone to plead for mercy. But mercy was not a concept that was well-understood by the Assyrians. Pekah was bound in chains, marched back through the city gates in front of King Pul, and treated like he had treated Ahaz. After the taunting and beatings he was thrown into his own dungeon, where Ahaz had been.

King Pul saw a young nobleman in the palace named Hoshea, and took a shine to him. His was 24 years of age, handsome, and well-liked by his own people, but with just the right mixture of humility and respect for Assyrian power that Pul looked for in a vassal king. Pul established him on the throne of Israel and promised that he wouldn’t devastate Samaria as long as Hoshea remained faithful and sent the required annual tribute. Hoshea gratefully vowed his allegiance, and worked closely with Pul to establish a government of those willing to submit to Assyria. All who refused to swear fealty were slain.

Azariah, Amasa, Jehizkiah, Berechiah, and others who submitted were granted clemency and given the freedom to remain living in Samaria as a vassal state of Assyria. Assured that the tribute would keep flowing, King Pul did not deport anyone from Samaria. To everyone’s surprise, the Assyrian army actually behaved, treating the Israelites with respect and neither plundering nor harming the land very much. Thus the mercy which they had granted to the captives from Judah returned upon themselves.

But not so with northern Israel. Once Tiglath-pileser got past the Valley of Jezreel, he conquered Kedes, Hazor, Galilee, Gilead, and all the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, and deported all but the peasants back to Assyria. He repopulated the area with his captives from Media. He established three new Assyrian provinces: Dor on the west coast, Megiddo, and Gilead. Then, at the end of the year, he headed up toward Damascus, leaving northern Israel plundered and ‘shaved’ behind him.

King Rezin of Syria was terrified. He opened the gates of Damascus and came bowing and pleading for mercy, just like Pekah had a few months before. But King Pul had no mercy left. After a few days of making sport of Rezin, his family, and his entire court, he tortured them all to death one by one. The last thing wicked Rezin saw before his eyes were put out was the sight of his wife and children being misused and slain with unspeakable cruelty. Everything Rezin had done to others all his life returned upon him in full measure. He slowly succumbed, in ultimate pain.

As usual, the Syrian nobles, leaders, tradesmen, and teachers were rounded up and taken hostage. Captives from Media were released to live in their fine homes. Only the Syrian peasants and farmers were left on their farms to till the land. King Pul divided up the land of Syria into Assyrian provinces and installed his own governors to rule them – governors who swore to keep the tribute flowing.

But while rounding up the captives from Damascus, they found King Ahaz in the dungeon. At first they didn’t recognize him, for he was a sick and broken man. But after they treated his wounds, Ahaz was granted an audience with King Pul. He managed to convince him that it was indeed he who had sent the letter and the large gift to Assyria, pleading for deliverance from Rezin and Pekah. So Ahaz succeeded in making friends with King Pul.

Thus when Tiglath-pileser III returned to Assyria, King Ahaz went with him, as confidanté and favorite of the king. He remained with him for two years, learning the ways of the Assyrians and worshiping their gods. Then in 730 BC, King Pul had to go quell a rebellion in Babylon, so he sent King Ahaz back to Judah with a royal bodyguard.

But that's getting ahead of our story. In 732 BC, shortly after the Assyrians went up to Syria, Isaiah-Alysa knew that Jotham's repentance was complete. "Go," they told him. "Muster the armies of Judah in the name of YHWH, for He is with you once again. With His help, you will be able to overcome. Slay the usurper who has taken your throne and re-establish the house of David over Judah." King Jotham was able to do that easily, for the people of Judah loved and supported him. Judah had been ruled by Zichri son of Tabeel, the strong man of Ephraim, for nearly two years. Now Zichri's ruthlessness toward Jotham's sons fell back upon himself and his house, in full measure.

Once the kingdom was restored in Jerusalem, Jotham came against the Philistines. Philistia had become a vassal of Assyria. Gollum, king of the Philistines, swore he had Tiglath-pileser's permission to conquer the areas around Beth-shemesh, Timnah, Aijalon, and Gimzo. But Jotham knew it was a lie. The Assyrians had come at Ahaz's request to help Judah, not oppress her. So he drove the Philistines out and recovered all the western Judean border towns.

Then Jotham turned his attention to his eastern and southern borders. The Edomites had cruelly devastated the towns and villages they had captured. It made Jotham's kind heart sick to see the oppression of his people that had resulted from his own naïveté. Again, he delivered them, and began to help them with the restoration process. He was working with them, his face wet with tears, when a young man approached. It was a prophet of YHWH!

"My name is **Obadiah**. I was sent by Isaiah to bless you and to curse your enemies, for YHWH, God of Israel, is pleased that you have obeyed Him. He has forgiven your sin, O King, and has cleansed and healed your land. He has established your kingdom upon the throne of David. Do not again let it fall into wicked hands! He says, 'You are finally learning how to love as I love and hate as I hate. You will not soon forget that My true love carries with it intense wrath against all that would destroy My beloved!'

"Now, thus proclaims YHWH Elohim against Edom. 'I've heard the report of how you took advantage of the weakness of Judah My son to arise against him, as at Elath, and to oppress and enslave him. Behold, I will make you small among the nations. You are greatly despised, you who dwell in the cleft of the rock at Petra. In the loftiness of your dwelling place, you have become arrogant. You say in your heart, "Who can ever bring me down?" I swear to you, though your nest be higher than the eagles, though your home be set among the stars, yet from there I shall indeed bring you down!'"

Obadiah bowed his head, shuddering with the vision. "Oh! How Esau will be ransacked! How his treasures will be plundered! How his mighty men will be dismayed and cut off from the mountain of Esau to leave no survivor in his house. Because of the violence you did to your brother Jacob you will be covered with shame until you are cut off forever. For you stood by and watched while Pekah and Rezin conquered Jerusalem and stole her wealth. You rejoiced; you even gloated over your brother's misfortune! Then you boasted as you picked the pockets of the slain and enslaved the weakened sons of Judah. Beware! For the Day of YHWH is coming upon all nations. Then it shall be done to you just as you have done; all your dealings will return on your own head. Only in Zion will there be those who escape, for Jacob will finally totally possess all that I intended, and the Kingdom will belong to YHWH."

Thus peace was restored to Judah. But Jotham longed for his sons who had been slain by Zichri. He didn't know that Ahaz was still alive in Assyria, or that baby Hezekiah was safe in the School of Prophetesses at Gilgal. Jotham and Jeko'ach believed Obadiah's prophecy that God would establish their kingdom. They prayed earnestly for Ahaz, in faith that God would miraculously keep him alive and bring him back to restore the kingdom, as Alysa had said.

Now we can return to Assyria with Kings Pul and Ahaz. Satan was very smug about how this was all working out, for he had big plans for Ahaz. Where better to teach Ahaz the depths of wickedness than his own city, Nineveh? But while he focused on Ahaz at the palace at Calah, a lonely pair of old travelers entered the great city from the north. It was **Jonah**, now 90 years of age, and Nina, his beloved wife. He returned one last time to the great city that had once repented and turned, almost to a man, to worship YHWH.

Jonah wanted to see his church there, to encourage them, and to exhort them to remain faithful in spite of the persecution. But alas, his church was gone. Jonah and Nina walked through the city, finding not one still faithful to YHWH. The light had gone out. The city was dark and cold. Satan and his demons reigned.

But over the years, Jonah had managed to save a bit of money for his retirement. What better way to spend it? He rented the coliseum for the first day in June, and hired an energetic ad man to publish the date throughout the city, "Wise old historian to teach on the past glories of Nineveh. At the coliseum on June 1st. Be there!"

By 8 AM the coliseum was already filling. Even the king and his nobles decided to hear him out (and they brought King Ahaz). After all, if he really tells the glories of Assyria, Tiglath-pileser ought to be there to take the bows, for he has been the most glorious king ever. But if he turns out to be an impostor, speaking against the king, trying to plant sedition, all the more reason for him to be there, to order him slain. As you can imagine, Satan also came, eager to see if this wizened old dude was a threat to his city.

At the appointed hour Jonah stood on the platform, in the precise location where the acoustics of the coliseum allowed every ear to hear. I won't repeat his speech, as you now know the story. He told it all, from the decline of Assyria under King Shalmaneser III after his amazing defeat at Qarqar, after which his own son Assur-danin-pal rebelled and his second son Shamshi-Adad V finally took over and ruled in his place. Then Adad-Nirari III and his son Tukulti-Ninurta II worked to restore the glories of Assyria. After them, wicked Shalmaneser IV nearly ruined the empire by his decadence, until his general Shamshi-Ilushadad had the courage to confront him. Jonah waxed eloquent as he told the thrilling tale of the Mars flyby of 780 BC, in exquisite detail. Soon everyone was perched on the edge of his seat. They realized why Jonah knew the story so well: he and Nina had been right there in the middle of it all!

The audience was spellbound, like putty in his hands. Jonah told of the repentance, deliverance, and finally the command to worship no god but YHWH. He told of the peace and prosperity that followed. The Yawists worked with King Shalmaneser to better the kingdom. But then Jonah told about the betrayal by General Shamshi-Ilushadad, his assassination of Shalmaneser IV, then the assassination of his brother Ashur-dan as well, so that his youngest brother Assur-nirari V could take the throne. Under him came the terrible persecution of the Yawists, in a kingdom torn apart by civil wars and rebellion. Finally, the monstrous Earthquake of 750 BC devastated the land and ended the power of Assyria until Tiglath-pileser III took control.

Through it all there was no direct criticism of the king, so he allowed Jonah to continue. Now Jonah began to line up two different ways of living. One way is the fighting, conquering, and getting rich by taking tribute from the labors of others. The other way is the peace and prosperity by integrity and hard work under repentant Shalmaneser IV, when the Yawists filled the land. Under both ways of living, the glory and prosperity of Assyria was foremost in the world. Tiglath-pileser was nodding. He understood.

Suddenly, evangelist and apostle that he was, Jonah began to urge the people to turn away from the conquering and plundering and the gods of war, and to turn back to the God of peace and love and the prosperity of following His Law. "Wealth by plunder always brings trouble, for the planetary gods can bring disaster but they cannot deliver you from it. That is because Astarte and the Baals, Nisroch and Marduk, are not gods at all, but just things made with men's hands to represent the planets. That is why there are so many catastrophes and plagues in Assyria's history, as I described. But when Shalmaneser repented and Assyria turned away from the planetary gods to worship only YHWH, there were no more catastrophes! For YHWH is the Creator of the planets – the Creator of all! He protected us. But if you will not turn back to Him, I prophesy that within 30 years, Assyria and her 'invincible' army will suffer a terrible defeat, and Nineveh will be destroyed!"

'Defeat' is not an acceptable word among the Assyrians. Tiglath-pileser was outraged. "Enough!" he screamed, standing and pointing at Jonah. "He has spoken against the king, and against the glory of Assyria's gods! He is not a patriot. He is a seditious traitor! Guards! Slay him and his wife, immediately, before he can utter another word!"

It was over in a minute, as ruthless guards sliced off the heads of Jonah and Nina there on the speaker's platform. Satan ground his teeth in anger. "Who was that old coot anyway, and how did he get into my city?" he raged. He wouldn't admit he'd been caught napping. He thought he had every soul in Nineveh wrapped around his finger.

But the cat had been let out of the bag. The Word had been proclaimed, and it never returns to Him who sends it without bearing fruit. Of course there were many in that coliseum who were loyal to the king and the Assyrian gods, and who hardened their hearts. But thousands received the Word, were pricked in their hearts, and repented. They studied their history to learn that Jonah was right. They returned to YHWH. The Yawist church in Assyria was born anew. Tiglath-pileser raged against it, and persecuted it, driving it underground. But Logos sent evangelists, prophets, pastors, and teachers – many came from Jonah and Nina's own children and grand-children. The church, *Jonah's church*, again grew strong.

Ahaz had been seated beside King Tiglath-pileser III during Jonah's speech and had seen and heard the whole thing. He was shocked at the ruthless slaying of Jonah, whom he recognized as an Israelite. But he hardened his heart. *Jonah believed in YHWH, Ahaz thought to himself, but He didn't deliver him. So YHWH must be powerless here. And these gods of the Assyrians? They must be strong indeed!*

Tiglath-pileser had to go down to quell the rebellion in Babylon in 730 BC, so he sent Ahaz home, as I said. Ahaz stopped in Damascus on the way. Now that Syria was an Assyrian vassal province, Nisroch and Assur were publicly worshiped in the central market of Damascus. Ahaz was intrigued by their gods. He decided to make a copy of their altar, so he wrote down the dimensions.

As you can imagine, Ahaz made quite a stir when he arrived in Judah. He had been treated very well by King Pul. He rode up on a chariot with fine white horses. He was dressed in royal robes. He had slaves, and bodyguards. He also brought with him much wealth, including a complete matched set of small gold images of the Assyrian gods.

King Jotham, his father, didn't care about all that. He should have! He should have seen that his son had been thoroughly corrupted, 'bought and sold' by the gods of the Assyrians. But he was just so glad to see his son alive again, that he welcomed him with open arms. The next week, everyone came to celebrate their restored co-regency.

His wife Abi had been slain, so Ahaz took another wife, Bella. Soon all was as it had been before the catastrophe.

Then word reached Ahaz that Hezekiah, his baby, was still alive! Some ‘sisters’ from the School of Prophetesses were bringing him. Ahaz was stunned – overjoyed – and all the palace with him. Ahaz ordered a gala reception. His son, whom he had thought dead, was returning alive!

Ahaz tried to imagine what Hezekiah would be like. He had been only two when Pekah and Rezin had conquered Jerusalem, and Ahaz had not seen him since. That was four years ago. So now he must be six.

“They are here, my lord the king.” A small group of ladies entered the hall. Jotham and Ahaz were waiting on their thrones. Jotham held up his scepter for the ladies to approach. But Ahaz just couldn’t wait. He leaped up off his throne and ran toward the group. “Hezekiah! My son! You have my son!” he cried, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Jerusha and her friend Miriam stepped forward from the group, a young lad between them. Ahaz didn’t really recognize him, but the ladies nodded and pushed him forward, so he knew this must be his son. He ran to him, fell down on his knees, and threw his arms around him, sobbing for joy.

Young Hezekiah was not so thrilled with this stranger. He permitted the hugs and kisses for just a bit, then pulled away and clung to Miriam and Jerusha. “I’m sorry, my lord.” Miriam was apologetic. “We told him that you are his father, but I’m afraid he does not remember you at all. He’s a little shy. Give him time. He will warm up to you.”

“Yes. Yes, I understand.” Ahaz looked over the group of ladies. “And to whom am I indebted for saving his life, and caring for him all this time?”

Jerusha spoke up. “It was I, my lord, who stole him away from the palace as it was being overrun. I took him to the School of Prophetesses. We all cared for him there. Miriam here did the most to mother him and train him.”

“Aren’t you Jerusha? My grandmother? I thought you were blind. How could you do that?”

“YHWH led me,” she answered simply.

“Well, I thank you, and I shall honor you, all of you, with rich gifts! Let the celebration begin!”

During the party, Ahaz got the rest of the story. He offered an apartment in the palace for Jerusha and Miriam, and a well-paying position as nanny and tutor to his son. Jerusha declined, as she was a respected leader in the School of Prophetesses and they needed her. But Miriam accepted the offer. Thus young Hezekiah was raised and tutored by one of the most godly women in the land.

Bella, the new wife of Ahaz, didn’t like that. She became jealous and manipulative, trying to find ways to do away with Hezekiah so one of her own sons could become heir to the throne. But Miriam was a wise and capable ‘mother’, protecting him from Bella and from all sorts of evil.

More than half of Israel (everything north of the Valley of Jezreel or east of the Jordan) was now ruled by Assyria. And while Tiglath-pileser had been merciful to Samaria and had not devastated it, yet the tribute he demanded was a heavy burden. But King Hoshea was determined to be a faithful servant of Assyria. He immediately began the daunting task of collecting the next year’s tribute.

Hoshea was a fool. His servants recognized that he was but a lap-dog for the hated Assyrians. So they conspired against him, secretly releasing Pekah from the dungeon. Thus they reclaimed the kingdom and restored **Pekah** to the throne. Hoshea had ruled for less than one year.

Now, Pekah should have killed Hoshea. But the poor kid was so young (at the age of 25) – and clueless! – that Pekah had mercy on him. He banished him from Samaria on pain of death, telling him, “If you like the Assyrians so well, go live with them. You’ll soon see how cruel and oppressive they are. Then you’ll regret ever cooperating with Tiglath-pileser.”

Hoshea headed for Assyria. He didn’t care if they were cruel or oppressive. He’d had a taste of power and he rather liked being king. He knew that only by Assyria’s support could he hope to regain his crown. But when he reached Nineveh in 730 BC, he found that Tiglath-pileser had gone to Babylon to quell that rebellion. So he waited at Calah.

King Tiglath-pileser III never returned to the Levant. He captured and deposed the rebellious Babylonian King Nabu-mukin-zeri and had himself crowned ‘King Pulu of Babylon’ in 729 BC. He returned in triumph, and began plotting a new campaign through the Levant with Hoshea, set for 727 BC. But Logos was angry with him for killing Jonah and for persecuting the Yawists. He caught a flu bug. He ignored it. *Kings of Tiglath-pileser’s power and glory don’t get sick!* But the flu bug didn’t know that. In two weeks he was dead. His son Ululayu succeeded him as king of Assyria, taking the throne name Shalmaneser V.

Shalmaneser labored long and hard to get his kingdom under control. Calah and Assur were squabbling; Yawist supporters were urging him to be more like his namesake and stop the persecution; and a few of his tributaries were testing him to see if he had the will to keep them under subjection. So he put the Levant campaign on the back burner for a bit. Poor Hoshea wasted years of his life trying to interest the new king in his case, but Shalmaneser just had too many other pots on the stove and ignored him.

In Judah, King Ahaz was successfully leading a double life. He worshiped YHWH with King Jotham his father every Sabbath, and went through the motions of keeping the nation pure of idolatry. He loved his wife and family. He was a good father to his sons, especially Hezekiah, his heir. He continued to honor and respect Miriam, treating her as the queen mother though she remained unmarried.

But secretly Ahaz had brought the Assyrian gods into Judah. He had sent his sketch of the Assyrian altar he had seen in Damascus on ahead of him, with instructions to **Uriah** the high priest to build it for him, using exactly the same materials and dimensions. “YHWH has shown me a new and better way to worship Him!” he avowed.

A few months after his return from Nineveh, Ahaz went to the temple. Uriah (son of Azariah) had built the altar from the pattern Ahaz had sent. Now Ahaz showed the priests how to use it. He had them move the big bronze altar of YHWH off to the side, saying, “Keep it, but we’ll only use it for divination. Use the new altar for everything else.” He rearranged the furnishings of the temple court, and took off the covering over the secret passage that ran between the palace and the temple, so the whole effect would look more like the pagan temple he had enjoyed so much in Assyria. He planned to invite the king of Assyria to visit, and he wanted him to feel right at home.

Then he re-established the cult worship center on the southern peak of Mount Olivet, with his golden gods of Assyria as the focal point. He hired the priests of Baal to maintain the center – they didn’t care that the new golden gods were Assyrian; they knew how to deal with idols. For in fact, they are the same planetary gods as worshiped by all the surrounding nations, except under different names. (Mars changed to Nisroch, Venus to Assur, Jupiter to Nabu, Saturn to Ninurta.) The priests were overjoyed with that matched set of idols representing each of them.

In all this, Ahaz outwardly maintained an attitude of humbly, sincerely, worshiping YHWH. His father bought the charade. In 723 BC, Jotham decided to permanently retire, to concentrate on traveling around the country helping the poor as before. He was 52 years old, and had reigned 16 years from the time of Uzziah’s death.

Young Shalmaneser V still faced problems on too many fronts. Babylon rebelled, again! He crowned his general Sargon II as co-regent and sent him south to deal it.

Chaldean prince Marduk-apla-iddina II had paid his tribute and seemed loyal, at first. But now he had declared Babylon’s independence, ruled by himself. He took the name Merodach-baladan. He worked to unite Elam and the Chaldean states, taking advantage of the fact that they all feared and hated Assyria. He even managed to gain secret alliances with Syria, Israel, and other tributaries of Assyria to aid him in getting Assyria off their backs. For 20 years he plotted. But he mistreated his allies and they eventually turned against him. He was unduly embroiled with political maneuverings. They only wanted to get rid of the Assyrian governors and stop paying the crushing burden of tribute, but Merodach-baladan’s goal was higher – he wanted to create a new Babylonian Empire, with himself as the emperor! Sargon tried again and again to unseat Merodach-baladan. He even claimed victory a few times, but to tell the naked truth, he failed.

To catch up on the Third Intermediate Period Pharaohs in Egypt – in 720 BC, Piye of the 25th ‘Nubian’ Dynasty took over from his dad Kashta Maatre at Napata in Nubia. For the 22nd ‘Libyan’ or ‘Bubastite’ Dynasty, Osorkon III became the ruling high priest of Amun at Thebes, also in 720 BC. The next year, Shoshenk III died, so his oldest son Shoshenk IV became Pharaoh at both Tanis and Bubastis.

Merodach-baladan had attained renown as the king of Babylon and deliverer of all the Chaldean states from the strong arm of Assyria. It had been a long time since the many Chaldean princes had been united about anything. Merodach-baladan gained great riches and honor as well as power. Defeating the Assyrian juggernaut made him the admiration of the entire known world. But his empire and all his alliances were on shaky ground, because he ruled Babylonia by threats, violence, and political chicanery.

Hoshea was getting nowhere with busy Shalmaneser V. He finally realized he might never get Assyria’s help in regaining his lost throne in Israel. But now that Assyria’s tiff with Merodach-baladan seemed finally more or less settled, Hoshea got an idea. He secretly left Nineveh and went down to Babylon to sweet-talk Merodach-baladan.

At first, he was not interested. “I already have a good alliance with Pekah of Israel. He has been helping me throw off the yoke of Assyria. So who are you?”

Hoshea had been trying to recover his throne for twelve years. He was now 37 and not getting any younger. So he was not taking no for an answer. He had learned a little political chicanery himself along the way. “I know secrets about Pekah and Israel! They’re playing Babylon against Assyria, to get them both off their backs. Pekah is actually building his own coalition of the western states (including Syria and Hamath) and plotting to stab you in the back!”

Merodach-baladan did not believe it. He was correct. Hoshea was lying through his teeth. He would do anything to get back in power. He knew that the small tribute from Pekah was nearly due. But instead of tribute, Babylon received a brash note ‘from Pekah’ rescinding their treaty. As Merodach-baladan read it his anger blazed. “Pekah is a fool! An idiot! Doesn’t he realize how much we need to stand together?” Suddenly all that Hoshea had been saying made sense. He had not been asking too much of Israel, just a token! So after getting Hoshea to swear fealty and agreeing on a modest annual loyalty tribute, he sent him off with a small contingent of trained warriors and a plan to retake the kingdom of Israel. The plan was pretty simple: *Hoshea comes in the name of the king of Babylon, who has heard news that Pekah is secretly plotting with Syria against him. When Pekah denies it or tries to justify himself, Hoshea draws his sword and slays him on the spot. Then he declares himself king, with the full authority of Merodach-baladan himself. If there is any trouble the crack troops support him. He’s got signed documents to back up his claims* (strapped to his chest next to a dagger). *What’s to go wrong?*

Well, as it turns out, a lot could go wrong. Pekah didn't get to be king by being naïve. When he got news that some Babylonians were coming, he mustered his entire army to greet them. As Hoshea neared the city gates with his little band, he saw Israelis surrounding the city with 200,000 armed soldiers! Time for a quick change of plans. As I said, Hoshea had been working toward this for twelve years and had not been getting any younger. This game was for all the marbles. He may not get another chance.

So Hoshea told his guard to wait there for him. Then, knowing he risked his life, he threw back his shoulders, put on a bold face, and strode through the Israeli forces toward King Pekah. When he got close enough, he called out, "My lord the king! We meet again, though this time under more favorable circumstances. His Royal Highness King Merodach-baladan sends greetings. He has sent me with an important message for you. But first, I must thank you for sparing my life twelve years ago. I am and will be forever grateful! I have had a good and prosperous life since then – as you can see, I am now a favorite of the king of Babylon. For all this, I owe you thanks..."

He was prepared to bubble on, but Pekah knew blather when he heard it. He interrupted, "I banished you from Israel, on pain of death. Your life is already forfeit. So skip the platitudes and give me the king's 'important message' before you die."

Thinking fast, Hoshea answered, "The message is this, O King Pekah. Merodach-baladan has been remarkably successful in Babylonia. He has gained great power, and great wealth. He doesn't any longer need the tribute you agreed on. He now wants to accept you, not as a tributary, but as his partner, on equal terms in our alliance against Assyria. He sent me to verify your continued loyalty and friendship, and to ask if you needed any other assistance."

Pekah didn't totally believe that (for very good reason) but he could not take the chance of being wrong. Hoshea plunged on. "You may slay me if you wish, King Pekah, for who am I but a messenger, and what are these few guards against your mighty army? Indeed, Merodach-baladan only sent them to protect me from bandits along the way, for he cares about my safety. But I do warn you that if I do not return, he will know that you've turned against him. He defeated the 'unbeatable' Assyrian army, O King! I do not think you want to get on his grumpy side."

The veiled threat hit home. King Pekah gave orders to provide food and lodging for the Babylonian guards and invited Hoshea into the palace with him. At first, Hoshea tried to get alone with Pekah, but he soon saw that wasn't going to happen. Pekah was much too suspicious of him. He kept him in the great room, with guards all around, and even made him lay his sword at the foot of the throne, 'as the traditional sign of peace'. Hoshea felt naked without his guards or his sword, but as I said, this game was for all the marbles. He put on a bold front.

Hoshea spent the day telling King Pekah of all King Merodach-baladan's accomplishments; how strong and numerous his armies were; how wealthy he had gotten; how he had united all of Babylonia, Media, Persia, and Elam against Assyria; and how well he was respected and feared among all the kings of the East. He waxed eloquent about his desire for peace and trade among all nations, and freedom from the oppression of Assyria. Of course a lot of that was rank baloney, but there was enough truth mixed in to entice Pekah to believe and relax his guard.

That evening they dined together with all the nobles of the court in the great hall. But again, Hoshea was seated across from the king, not next to him as he had hoped. After dinner and wine, Pekah seemed a bit more friendly, so Hoshea begged leave to address the group regarding the things he had told Pekah. He had to figure out a way to get closer, and the speaking podium was right behind Pekah.

Loosened up by his wine, Pekah granted permission. Hoshea strode boldly around to the platform and began to speak. He reminded them all of Merodach-baladan's great power, glory, and wealth, saying basically the same things he had already told Pekah. Finally, he said why he was there: he had been sent to verify Israel's continued loyalty. Then as he leapt upon Pekah and stabbed him in the heart with his dagger, he shouted, "And I have found your king to be disloyal, having plotted with Syria and Hamath against Babylon! Therefore I have the full authority of King Merodach-baladan himself to slay Pekah and to rule in his place. Here are the documents, signed and sealed by King Merodach-baladan, detailing Pekah's crimes and proclaiming me as your new king. Anyone who cannot accept that will have to deal with the might and fury of the Babylonian army – the army that defeated the Assyrians!"

It was all over very quickly. They read the signed papers and found everything as Hoshea had said. As he had hoped, the nobles of Israel feared the Babylonian army, for their fame in defeating the Assyrians had spread over the Levant like wildfire. Hoshea was crowned king of Israel in 719 BC. Pekah had ruled for nearly twenty years.

King Hoshea did not make the same mistakes that had been made twelve years ago. He became cold and ruthless. He slew the relatives or friends of Pekah – all who might not be loyal to their new king. He sent his Babylonian guards home with the good news of his success, and his promised loyalty tribute. And he told the people of Israel that they would no longer need to pay tribute to the hated Assyrians. In alliance with Babylonia and other nations, including Egypt and Judah, Israel would be strong.

So the very first month he was king, Hoshea began his bold plan with a trip to Judah. King Ahaz was amenable to a coalition with Israel. He hated Pekah for what he and Rezin had done to Judah, and was delighted with Hoshea for killing him. He also feared the cruel Assyrians and was only too glad to agree to an alliance against them.

But then Hoshea asked King Ahaz about his father, King Jotham. “Oh, don’t worry about him. He wouldn’t agree to this coalition, because he claims to trust only in YHWH. He won’t even allow us to worship the planetary gods! So we must keep this a secret from him. But he’s harmless. He gave up his throne to me so he could travel around the nation helping the poor. He won’t stop us.”

But Hoshea was taking no chances. Even if King Jotham had given up his throne, he still had a lot of clout with his people. So if he was against it... who knows what trouble he could cause? Hoshea sent secret agents into Judah to find him and kill him. Thus King Jotham and his beloved wife Jeko’ach were slain at the age of 56. It was the fourth year since he had given up his throne to Ahaz and the twentieth year since his father Uzziah had died. Ahaz never found out that Hoshea had ordered his father slain.

Thus another evil was added to Hoshea’s many sins. Logos’ back was still turned against Israel, but He grieved for righteous Jotham and Jeko’ach. Michael grieved with Him. “I am so sorry, my Lord! I do not know why their angels weren’t strong enough to protect them from the demonic onslaught from Israel. They had a good heart; kind and generous! A right spirit! Why could we not cover them from Hoshea’s schemes?”

“Yes, Michael, they had a right heart toward Me. They loved Me, My people, and My ways. But they had one blind spot: a willful ignorance about evil. They chose to close their eyes and pretend that evil does not exist – pretend that everyone is only good. Thus they never disciplined the evil in their own son Ahaz. *They didn’t hate evil to the degree that I hate it.* They didn’t work at protecting Judah from the evil of their son, or from the wickedness flooding in from Israel. Thus the very evil that they did not hate or guard against eventually slew them. You cannot defend people from the consequences of their own choices.”

Once Hoshea and Ahaz had forged that alliance, the surrounding Assyrian tributaries soon fell into line. Tyre, Sidon, Byblos (Geba), Philistia, Hamath, Syria, Ammon, Moab, Edom; King Hoshea garnered some kind of secret political agreement with them all. They were like aces up his sleeve, to pull out and play when the time came, as he knew it would. Now with his list of accomplishments, it was time for the big one. He got ready for a trip to Egypt.

With so many alliances now under his belt, Hoshea was confident of Egypt’s support. So before he left, he made a fateful decision. Knowing that he wasn’t strong enough to rebel, Pekah had been paying an annual tribute to Assyria, as well as that secret token tribute to Babylon in hope of overcoming Assyria. (Of course Pekah had never written that note to Merodach-baladan – that lie had been hatched by Hoshea. Pekah would have paid Babylon’s tribute on time if he had not been slain by Hoshea.) Now that Israel’s tribute to Assyria was due, Hoshea ordered it cancelled. Israel, in essence, declared her independence.

What arrogance! How foolish to place your trust in kings and princes, rather than in YHWH, King of kings and Lord of Hosts! Hoshea left for Egypt in 718 BC. His first stop was Tanis in the Nile Delta. There Shoshenk IV of the 22nd Dynasty was desperately trying to unify Egypt. He was happy to receive Hoshea and eager to negotiate that alliance. But he gave him the straight scoop on Egypt. “I’m struggling with Iuput at Leontopolis, Peftjauabast at Herakleopolis, Nimlot at Hermopolis, and Ahmose of Abydos. They all are competing against me to become the Pharaoh of Egypt, now that my father [Shoshenk III] is dead. I am preparing to visit them now to see if I can talk sense into them. My father’s general at Herakleopolis has also rebelled and is further dividing the country. Egypt is splintered, fighting itself. We’ve got to get unified! The Nubians have rebelled. Kashta’s son Piye is building an army at Napata, with ambitions of coming against Egypt. Osorkon III fears they plan to invade Thebes. I’m sure that he’ll be glad to join your alliance, too. The Arabians are fighting me in the eastern deserts. Ever since Assyria annexed Phoenicia and Philistia I have gotten no tribute there, and my profits from trade through the Levant are next to nothing. I want all the alliances I can get, for I need them to get my country back together. But... I’m afraid that I won’t be much help if the Assyrians or Babylonians attack the Levant. Right now I’m not even able to field an army sufficient to protect my own country!”

Hoshea left him with the best alliance he could get, and headed up south to Thebes. Osorkon III was also glad to ally with him, but right now he was frantically preparing to defend Thebes from an imminent Nubian threat. Hoshea realized that further alliances with Egypt were fruitless. They needed the help more than he!

So Hoshea headed back to Israel, shaken to the core. How could a country of the might and glory of Egypt have sunk so low? Now he regretted stopping the tribute to Assyria, but it was too late. He was already committed. He immediately began to build up his forces, and ordered the others in his coalition to do the same. King Ahaz of Judah was only too eager to comply, as they thought alike.

Now that Jotham was dead, all restraint against the idolatry in Judah was gone as well. Ahaz and Hoshea worked together to prepare for the assault from Assyria that was certainly coming. Part of their preparation was sacrifices to the planetary gods of the nations, to the gods Ahaz had brought from Assyria, and to two golden calves Ahaz had made to match Jeroboam II’s calves in Israel. Thus they established pagan cult centers on every sacred hill; they carved Asherah poles; they served the Baals more than the nations before them. They practiced sorcery and witchcraft, and gave themselves over to immorality. They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fires of Molech. However, King Ahaz sacrificed only Bella’s children. He took good care of Hezekiah, his heir. So Bella’s conniving to do away with Hezekiah came back on her own head.

Isaiah and Alysa came to Ahaz once again. “O King, hear the Word of YHWH. He is not blind. He cannot fail to see the idolatry which has spread across the land. He says, ‘My heart is grieved for you, O King Ahaz, for you have brought great destruction on yourself, and on all Judah.’”

“Now wait a minute, Isaiah. You’re being unfair. I am no worse than King Hoshea in Israel!”

“Forget Israel. Logos has already given up on them. But He has not given up on you, O King. He finds something good in you. You care for His precious son Hezekiah!

“Therefore, YHWH tells you, ‘This is your last warning. Cancel your alliance with Hoshea, before he drags you into the pit with him. Crown Hezekiah as your co-regent, and give him the authority to begin cleansing the land of its idolatry. Gather the elders of Judah and repent before them. Tell them you were wrong about sacrificing to the planetary gods. Then go to Uriah the high priest and have him make atonement for your sin. Pray that God will...’”

That was too much. “Uriah? Make atonement for me? Uriah is helping me! He made that Assyrian altar for me. He is sacrificing to the golden gods of the Assyrians just like I showed him. Why should I repent to him?”

Isaiah sighed sadly. He hated to use threats, but sometimes it’s necessary. “Because if you do not, you shall die within two years. You are only 37, and you feel invincible, but I assure you that your life hangs only by a thread. Uriah fears you, O King, more than he fears YHWH. But if you do turn back to YHWH, so will he, and so will all Judah.”

“Well now, that’s even more unfair than before! Why should the entire nation be judged for my choices?”

“YHWH made you the king. He gave you His people to guide, as a shepherd guides his sheep. If you guide them into the desert where there is no food or water, they shall suffer and perish, but their blood will be upon your head, for you knew what was right yet you failed to do it.”

“Huh. I still worship YHWH. All Judah worships Him! But why should He care if we also worship the gods of the Assyrians? They are powerful gods! They must be strong, for Assyria has conquered all the nations of the earth! And now Hoshea is teaching me about some new gods of the Babylonians. He thinks they are even stronger!”

Isaiah shook his head. “When Tiglath-pileser came and delivered you from prison, brought you to Nineveh, gave you riches and honor, and sent you back to Judah in a chariot with white horses, honor guards, and servants, you thought he was helping you, right?”

“Of course he was helping me, you ninny!”

“No, O King. He was your adversary, afflicting you with his idolatry. He has led you to the brink of ruin. You would have been better off in the dungeon where you could do naught but look up to YHWH.”

Ahaz couldn’t understand. His mind was darkened. He had spent too much time with the wicked king of Assyria, worshiping the Assyrian gods. He rejected the warning of Isaiah. Satan laughed at all the plans he had for his son!

Logos realized it was hopeless. There would be no more warnings. In 716 BC He told His death angel to withdraw Ahaz’ spirit. But Satan wouldn’t give up that easily. “He is mine! Totally and unconditionally mine! It is not yet his time to die. You cannot take his breath. I won’t let you. I yet have great plans for him. I’ll fight you for him and I’ll win. For he himself has granted me the authority.”

The death angel didn’t wish to argue. “You may have all that is yours. All I have come for is that tiny bit of his soul that still belongs to Logos. He gave it. It is His. It must return to Him in His perfect time. He has called for it now.”

“There is nothing here that still belongs to God!” Satan was indignant, nearly apoplectic.

“Then why does he still have such love and care for God’s precious son Hezekiah?”

“Bah! That’s not the divine nature! It is purely human nature to love one’s own son!”

“Okay. I promise I will leave his human nature for you to play with. I will take only that spark of the divine nature. You don’t want that in him anyway. Once I remove it, he will be all yours, body and soul.”

Satan grudgingly lowered his sword. “I’ll agree to that. But you must show it to me before you take it.”

“It’s a deal. Though you may regret that request.” The death angel gently reached deep within the heart of King Ahaz and removed a tiny spark which Satan had not seen. He held it up before Satan’s terrified eyes. It glistened like the sun glinting off a diamond. Satan fled before it, for he could not bear to gaze upon The Holy. The angel left, to return it to the Holy One who had given it.

Outwardly, little changed in Ahaz at first. But he never smiled or laughed anymore, except perhaps in bitter cynicism or cruel self-satisfaction. He seemed incapable of polite conversation. He took offense at everything and appeared angry all the time. His face grew dark and hard, and his countenance sullen. The watching angels were reminded of the changes in the appearance of Lucifer, the Shining Star of the Morning, after committing himself totally to evil. Similar marks of unfathomable evil began to appear in King Ahaz. He had always had fun with Bella; he had always treated Miriam with respect; he had always laughed with joy when greeting his son at each day’s end. But now Bella, Miriam, and even Hezekiah began to fear him and avoid him. To see him was to look into the face of death itself. His dark eyes had a cold, vacant look, warning ‘No one’s home!’ He enjoyed nothing more than to worship in the temples of his Assyrian gods, unless it was to stare in sadistic satisfaction at some sad soul’s suffering.

Logos came to Isaiah-Alysa in a vision. “Ahaz is dead. Pray earnestly now for Hezekiah, for he is in grave danger. But do not pray for King Ahaz, for he is dead.”

They woke up. It was still the middle of the night. They cuddled together for a bit, discussing the vision. “Why did He twice say that Ahaz is dead? I should think once would be enough. And if he is dead, why would we be tempted to pray for him anyway? Once he goes on to Sheol, he is in YHWH’s hands and there is no more need to pray for him.”

“Don’t try to analyze it, Isaiah. We don’t need to understand. We just have to obey. Let’s pray for Hezekiah now.”

So, bowed in deep intercession, they ascended together to the throne of the Almighty. Divine power flowed out from the throne, borne on the wings of their prayers. Indeed it was needed! For Ahaz had awakened in the dead of night, burning with a purpose to finally sacrifice his son, his firstborn, on the altar of Nisroch his god. Only then would the raging in his soul be appeased. Only then would he be at peace within. Only then would he gain power over his enemies. *Abi had been right.* This he knew, from the depths of his soul. He got up, dressed in his royal robes, called his four most-trusted royal guards, and led them to Hezekiah’s apartment, rope in hand.

They reached Miriam’s bedroom first. Ahaz intended to simply slice off her head with his sword and dispose of her body before she could give the alarm. But she was gone. He did not know that she often was awakened in the night, burdened to pray. She had made a tiny prayer closet, where no one could find or disturb her. She was there now, her face drenched in sweat at the fervency of her prayer.

They came next to Hezekiah’s bedroom. Still young (at the age of twenty), he was sleeping soundly. “Wake up, my son. I have tragic news for you.” Ahaz put on a sad voice.

“What is it, my father? What has happened?”

“YHWH has spoken to me, my son. I love you dearly, but YHWH told me to sacrifice you on His altar, just as he requested of Abraham our father. I do not know if He will deliver you as he did Isaac, but I must obey Him.”

For a moment, Hezekiah was speechless. Something about that didn’t smell quite right to him, but he had barely awakened and could not yet trust his senses. Finally, “Okay my father, if you’re sure that’s what YHWH wants. But I need to say good-bye to Miriam first.” They went next door, but Miriam was not there. So they left the palace by the king’s secret passage and headed toward the southern peak of the Mount of Olives, where the pagans worshiped.

Finally awake, Hezekiah began thinking along the way. *Why had his father been so dark and angry lately? Was this really the voice of YHWH talking to him? Or was it the voice of the adversary? And why were they going up the Mount of Olives? That was where Ahaz maintained his Assyrian altar to Nisroch.* Hezekiah sensed an oppression in his soul.

The moon had set. The night was intensely dark, two hours before the dawn. “Meaning no disrespect, Father, but if I am to be sacrificed like Isaac, I would like to know why. Why in the dark of night? Isaac’s was at high noon. And why here, rather than on YHWH’s altar as you said?”

“No, Hezekiah. Surely you know that human sacrifice is prohibited in YHWH’s house. That is why YHWH had Abraham prepare Isaac’s sacrifice on Mount Moriah.”

“Then let’s go to Mount Moriah. I’m young and strong. I’ll help you carry the wood and rebuild the altar there.”

“No. There’s no time. YHWH insisted it be done here, right now. We will do it my... er... His way.”

Hezekiah caught the hesitation and the inconsistency. “I don’t believe that was YHWH at all, Father. I must talk to Miriam before we go any further. As a prophetess, she will know if it was really the voice of YHWH.”

Ahaz signaled his guards. They grabbed Hezekiah and tied him with the rope. Then they half led, half dragged him to the temple at the top, where they bound him to the altar of Nisroch. The priests were all asleep, but he knew how to do this. Ahaz picked up the flint knife they always used there. He was caught with a compelling sense of urgency. He could not wait for a priest, or anything else. It had to be done right now, by the flickering light of the few candles still burning.

Lying on that pagan altar, Hezekiah looked up into his father’s face. In the dim light it appeared cruel, even demonic. Now he knew this was not right. He felt a creepy loathing. He struggled to free himself, but the rope held fast. He began to call out to YHWH, as Miriam had taught him. His prayers joined those ascending to God from Isaiah-Alysa and Miriam. The angels fluttered their wings to blow out the candles. Except for some glowing sticks of incense, the temple was plunged into blackness.

Ahaz still knew where his son was by the feel and sound of his struggles. He held the sharp stone knife high in both hands. He uttered the terrible incantation dedicating his son to Nisroch, and then plunged the knife down toward Hezekiah’s heart. Except the sharp knife hit the rope going across Hezekiah’s chest. It nearly severed the rope, but did not quite penetrate his chest. Ahaz felt with one hand, swore a vile oath, and raised the knife to try again.

The knife had knocked the wind out of Hezekiah. He gasped, then frantically lunged at the rope. The weakened strand parted, and he managed to slip off to the side just as the stone knife came down for a second time. It hit, stone upon stone, and shattered into a zillion sharp shards of flint. One of them pierced the king’s hand. He cried out with another vile oath. “I broke the knife! He’s getting loose! Guards, get him! Quickly, you fools! You slay him!”

What happened next was unthinkable. However, in the darkness, odd things sometimes occur beyond our ken.

Ahaz leaned forward across the stone altar, feeling for his son, who had slipped part-way down the other side. Still bound hand and foot, he was helpless, so Ahaz struggled to pull him back on top. His guards had their orders. Swords drawn, two ran for the door to prevent his escape, and two rushed for the altar to slay him. They could not see, but with their hands they found a struggling body on top of the altar, right where they had tied Hezekiah. Without a moment's hesitation they both thrust their swords through his chest. "We got him sir! ... uh... Sir?"

But alas, the body on the altar was that of Ahaz. The feel of his royal robes told the tale. Hezekiah heard the death gurgle and felt his father's grip loosen, and he realized what had happened. "Now you've done it! My father the king is dead, at your hands. I am now the king. Untie me, and serve me as you have served my father, and I promise you all will go well with you. But if you try to slay me also, you cannot escape. All shall discover that you have slain the king and his son. Your lives will be forfeit."

Shocked at what they had done, the guards all agreed. Still under cover of darkness, they returned to the palace by the secret passage without anyone else awakening. Along the way, Hezekiah swore the guards to total silence about their part in the affair, to which, frankly, they were only too happy to agree.

So the next morning, when the tragic news came from the temple on Mount Olivet, Hezekiah and the guards appeared as mystified as any. But strangely, no one seemed inclined to do much mourning for the angry, sullen king that Ahaz had become. They buried him in Jerusalem, but not with the tombs of the kings, for over the last two years everyone in Judah had grown to hate him. They crowned **Hezekiah** king in his place, with great joy and many oaths of fealty. Hezekiah's first official act after the coronation was to demand an investigation of the pagan priests and the temples on the Mount of Olives. Of course they had no defense. "I was sound asleep. I didn't hear anything," was not considered a defense in those days. So King Hezekiah ordered them all slain, their pagan temples torn down, their altars and idols destroyed, and their Asherim burned.

But he didn't stop there. Miriam had taught him well. Since his own mother was dead, he officially appointed Miriam as the queen mother. Then, still in his first week, Hezekiah commanded that the temple of Solomon be cleansed of the pagan altars and idolatrous paraphernalia that Ahaz had brought there. He ordered the Levitical priests to purify the temple and all the holy furnishings of YHWH. "Hurry, for it is already the 8th of Nisan, and the law of YHWH says to celebrate the Passover on the 14th."

But it was too much, too soon. By the time they got rid of the false priests who had been in control, and then got the temple cleaned out and sanctified, a week had passed. Many of the priests had been so busy they hadn't yet had time to consecrate themselves.

CHAPTER 3 – HEZEKIAH'S REFORMS

It was the third year since Israel's King Hoshea had returned from Babylon. All his plans were going down the tubes. His alliances – Egypt had turned out to be a bust, but the one with King Ahaz was to have been the cornerstone of his coalition. Now Ahaz was gone, so suddenly it made his head spin. So Hoshea visited Hezekiah at Jerusalem.

After the normal polite political maneuverings and flattery, Hoshea assured Hezekiah of his desire for peace, and brought up the subject of Israel's alliance with his father Ahaz, for mutual protection against the Assyrian and Babylonian threats, of course.

Hezekiah's answer surprised him. "I'm not at all against alliances. We're brothers. I hope we'll always be at peace with each other. But alliances can be good or they can be harmful. I will not enter into an agreement lightly, for if I agree to something, I intend to keep my word! And right now, I simply don't have the time to devote to developing a mutually beneficial agreement. Don't you know it's time to celebrate the Passover? Doesn't Israel celebrate Passover? My father never did, but I intend to. I have studied it in the Law of YHWH, and His law is my law."

Thus Hoshea was politely put off, and Hezekiah again concentrated on preparing for the celebration. That night the high priest came to tell the king that the temple was finally cleansed and ready. They were now three days late, but King Hezekiah decided to go ahead with the Passover anyway. "Send out messengers throughout Jerusalem. Proclaim the good news, that we will assemble for the Passover tomorrow morning." It was Nisan 17, 716 BC.

Hezekiah got up very early the next morning, to be sure all was in readiness. He sent callers to every apartment in the palace, as well as to the houses of the nobles and elders of the city, ordering them to assemble at the temple. At eight AM sharp the priests began the sacrifices: first the sin offerings for their atonement, then the burnt offerings and the incense offerings, accompanied by the musicians.

Hezekiah had been well-trained, for Miriam his tutor had insisted he memorize the laws of YHWH. He led the celebration just as David the king had commanded. He was assisted by **Gad** and **Nathan** (his seer and his prophet) for the order of the worship was at the command of YHWH through His prophets. As the fragrance of the incense and burnt offerings arose, the Levitical musicians played their harps, lyres, and cymbals, the priests blew their trumpets, the choir sang the Psalms of David and Asaph, and the people all bowed in worship and shouted in praise.

After four hours of joyous, heartfelt worship, Hezekiah addressed the assembly. "Now that we have consecrated ourselves, come forward, those who have brought gifts and thank offerings to YHWH." He was amazed at the response, for the abundance of the freewill offerings was totally overwhelming.

In fact, the Levitical priests who had managed to purify themselves in time were too few to handle the huge influx of burnt offerings, peace offerings, and love offerings from the people. Their brothers the Levites who were not priests volunteered to assist them. Together, they pulled it off. The people feasted together with intense joy that evening, as had not been done before in their lifetimes.

But Hezekiah wasn't satisfied. It had happened so fast, that the people in the surrounding towns and farms had not had time to come. So he called for Isaiah and Alysa. "We were late, to begin with. Then it was all over so fast. Many of my people did not get to share in our joy."

"You were not late, O King. You were nearly a month early. From the time of the Exodus, Mars passed overhead during the Passover, so we always knew the right month. But the Earthquake in the days of King Uzziah changed everything. The Mars flyby no longer takes place in the month of Nisan. Now it comes early. That's because our solar year is longer. It no longer matches our lunar year. But if you add a month to our calendar, you will find that Nisan matches the seasons again. So we can have a second Passover at the beginning of spring where it belongs."

He was right. Hezekiah was astounded when he sat down and did the math. The resonance of the planets which had locked them into such consistent timing had already begun to unravel. Earth no longer orbited Sol in a precise 360 day solar year, nor did earth's moon make a precise 30 day month. Chronos no longer kept perfect time. They knew it, because the predicted catastrophes in 720 BC had not happened, even though Jupiter and Saturn were both lined up. Mars came near Earth too early.

Everything was out of sync. During the very close pass which had caused 'the Earthquake' in 750 BC, Mars had stolen energy from Venus and Earth, and had speeded up. Its 720 day orbit was now down to 719 1/2. Mars was still resonant, barely, but in 716 BC the infamous Mars flyby came in Adar instead of Nisan. On the other hand, Earth had slowed. Our perfect 360 day year was nearly 361. That extra day per year had shifted the seasons forward a month over the last 34 years. Our 360 day calendar had gotten behind, putting the Spring Feasts before springtime.

So Hezekiah inserted a 'Second Adar' month into the calendar and sent word throughout the land for everyone to assemble on the new Nisan 14th for another Passover celebration. He even invited the remnants of Israel who had not yet been deported. "O sons of Israel, return now to YHWH, the God of Abraham, that He may also return to those of you who have escaped the kings of Assyria. Do not be like your fathers, who were unfaithful to YHWH so that He made them a horror, as you see. Yield to YHWH. Come to the temple which He consecrated forever. Serve YHWH your God, that His burning anger may turn away from you and from your captive brothers. For YHWH is gracious and compassionate. He wants to show you mercy."

Sadly, Hoshea and most of his nobles, as well as most of the leaders of the tribes, were suspicious of Hezekiah's motives. They mocked his messengers. "Ha! He thinks his gods are better than ours! He doesn't know that it is our prayers to the Baals that have kept Mars from harming us. And he's trying to convert us? Next he'll want to take over the kingdom!" Even to the last, they were not repentant.

But not all the men of Israel were so arrogant. A few from Asher, Manasseh, Zebulun, and Issachar, and even a few peasants from Ephraim, eagerly brought their families to the temple in Jerusalem to worship. Logos was pleased, for even in judgment He desires mercy.

Jerusalem was abuzz with excitement. The people had experienced a taste of glory the previous month. Now they wanted all the land to experience it with them. So they cleansed, not just the temple, but the whole city. Every house was inspected. Every idol and Asherah pole, every pagan altar or shrine, was either smashed or burned in the Kidron Valley. The Levites and priests finished their own rites of purification, and then taught the people to purify themselves and their homes according to the law.

This month, they were on time. On the 14th of the month, every home invited as many guests as they could hold. They slew the Passover lamb and sprinkled its blood on the doorposts as the priests had told them. Then they ate the Passover together with their brothers from all of Judah and Israel.

As with every home in Jerusalem, the great hall in the palace was full to overflowing with those who had come to share the Passover with the king. But alas, the word began to circulate around the palace that many who had come from northern Israel had not purified themselves. They had not repented of their sins. They had not gotten rid of the leaven. Some had even had sexual relations with their wives that week. Tension began to build, and the joy was extinguished throughout the dining hall. A few even got sick, vomiting up their dinner. Some got angry.

King Hezekiah stood up and signalled for silence. "The Law of God says that this is supposed to be a day of joy and celebration! Let there be no condemnation against those who didn't understand how to prepare. YHWH is a good God, a God of mercy and compassion. He understands. He will always forgive our sins of ignorance, I know. Let us call upon Him now." He lifted his eyes and arms toward the heavens and cried out, "O YHWH, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. Pardon, we pray, the sin of ignorance of those who have not purified themselves according to the rules of the temple." He smiled and sat down. That was all it took. YHWH heard. He healed those who had gotten sick, and restored the joy to their celebration. Afterwards, the priests instructed the newcomers, and from then on they kept themselves pure. Thus they celebrated the Feast of Unleavened Bread with great joy, for seven days, exactly as commanded in the Law of Moses.

There had not been anything to compare with it in their lifetimes. Nobody wanted to go home! They certainly had plenty of food, for Hezekiah and the princes of Judah had contributed 2000 bulls and over 17,000 sheep, besides all the lambs and the freewill offerings that the people had brought. So they decided to celebrate another seven days. Nothing like this had occurred since the days of Solomon! It was during this time that Agur ben Jakeh presented what we know as the final two chapters of Proverbs. (Agur had compiled these previously unpublished proverbs of King Solomon. In them he spoke of Solomon as King Lemuel, 'Devoted to God'.) Thus there was great joy in Jerusalem. Every day, the priests made atonement for themselves and the people, and blessed the people. Everyone responded with songs, shouts, and loud praises to YHWH their God. Their prayers ascended like sweet-smelling incense to the Ark of the Covenant in the most holy place, where the Almighty is enthroned in heaven. *He too rejoiced.*

They had to get home. Their animals and chores awaited them. But who wants to return to mucking a donkey stall when you feel so-o-o-o clean? Some of them got together on a self-appointed mission. Why can't the entire land be as clean as Jerusalem? So groups of men ganged together to travel through other cities of Judah. They broke down the pagan altars and obelisks, cut down the Asherim, pulled down the pagan temples, burned the idols, and destroyed any traces of idolatry they found.

Strangely, without any knowledge of what the men of Judah were doing, the men of Israel who had come to the Feast got the same idea. But they had a bigger task ahead of them, because Israel was more heavily involved in idolatry than Judah had ever been. They traveled only in the dead of night, tearing down the pagan temples while the priests of Astarte and Baal were all asleep in their homes. They skipped the area right around Samaria; they knew they'd be caught and slain the first night. But they cleaned up quite a few villages in Ephraim and Manasseh before they were rounded up and slain. Sadly, their wives, children, and sympathetic friends were also hunted down and slain without mercy. Their goods were stolen and their estates confiscated and given to those who supported Astarte and the Baals. Within a month, not one soul who had gone down to the Feast with Hezekiah remained alive in Israel.

Thus it was a large group of men, women, and children who arrived in Sheol and washed in the stream at the same time. Logos welcomed them joyously, His face shining like the sun in its strength. After the warm greetings and introductions with their ancestors were past, Logos taught them about Himself and His ways, for they were mostly ignorant of the laws of YHWH as given by Moses. This took days (or eons – time moves differently in the heavenlies). Many questions came up, such as, "Lord, why, so soon after we repented and were cleansed, were we mercilessly slaughtered? It was horrible! We thought You would bless us for repenting and working to cleanse our land."

"Ahh, My child. I have blessed you. Greatly. Beyond your imagining. But My ways are not your ways. For I have devoted Israel to destruction. Only in mercy did I issue one last invitation to repent and be saved, that you be not swept away in the flood tide of Israel's sins. All you who have responded to My invitation are blessed forever to dwell with Me. But alas! Woe upon those who remain in Israel! For I have turned My back against it. They shall see such horrors as mankind has never seen before. Yes, even those drowned in the Flood and even those slain in the Earthquake will look down in horror to concede how blessed they are in comparison to Israel in her final days!"

Indeed, as they now peered down across their homeland, it was very dark. Violence ruled. Every man preyed upon his neighbor. Gross idolatry was accepted, even demanded. Immorality was the norm as well. Israel was Satan's playground, and there was no restraint. Everything good was despised. Every kind of evil filled the land. "Look no further!" Logos called them back to Himself. "They all have chosen darkness, so darkness they shall be given. Be grateful that you have to bear their sin no more."

In 716 BC at Sais (west of Tanis), Tefnakht I claimed the throne of Egypt. He began the 24th Dynasty. He rounded up the other local Pharaohs to fight Piye. He determined to be the strong Pharaoh Egypt needed to face the Nubian threat up south. Then in 714 BC the tragedy they all feared came to pass. Piye marched north from Napata with his mighty Nubian warriors and conquered Thebes and Karnak, bringing his 25th 'Nubian' Dynasty into Egypt. Piye installed his brother Shabaka as the high priest of Amun. The Nubians became devout worshippers of Amun.

After gaining control, Piye was kind to the Egyptians. He restored Osorkon III as a high priest of Amun. He also let Tefnakht continue ruling Sais, under his own overlord Ammeris the Nubian, beginning the 26th 'Saite' Dynasty.

Piye ruled at Thebes for eight years. He, Shabaka, and Ammeris at Sais, continued to consolidate Egypt under Nubian reign by making reluctant 'allies' of the Egyptian rulers: Tefnakht at Sais, Peftjauabast at Herakleopolis, Nimlot at Hermopolis, and Ahmose at Abydos. But you know how it is with these forced alliances; as soon as they get a chance, they will turn against their new masters.

The situation for Assyria was as chaotic as for Egypt. Shalmaneser V had proven to be weak. His general Sargon continued to lose annual battles with Merodach-baladan and the Chaldean princes of Babylonia. Disgusted with the whole thing, Shalmaneser finally went back to the Levant to reestablish his authority there. He again subdued Syria and Hamath, then moved south to reconquer Phoenicia and Philistia. Everywhere he went they quickly bowed, swore allegiance, and paid their tribute as if they cared, but why had they not been paying it for the previous five years?! He didn't realize it was because Hoshea had returned to Israel and made all those alliances against him.

CHAPTER 4 – THE DISPERSION OF ISRAEL

In 713 BC, Shalmaneser captured a messenger headed from Israel to Egypt, whom he tortured until he found the truth. Hoshea had made alliances with all the surrounding nations and had organized a form of ‘passive resistance’. He knew they were not strong enough to defeat Assyria in battle. But he had instructed all his allies to just ‘drag their feet’. “Be ready with your tribute, but don’t send it. Wait until Shalmaneser himself comes to collect it! He’s a weak king, tied up in squabbles with Babylon, and he may not come here for years!” Shalmaneser was furious. Now he knew why his flow of tribute had stopped. And after all the years Hoshea had been in his court swearing allegiance and begging for an army to retake the throne of Israel! Now to discover Hoshea turning his vassals against him, buying off his governors in his western provinces, and encouraging everyone, even Egypt, to rebel against him! Shaking with rage, Shalmaneser returned to Assyria to prepare for the showdown.

General Sargon II had just lost to Merodach-baladan in Babylon, again, followed by another major defeat against Babylon’s allies, the Elamites at Der. He was despondent and discouraged. From the historical records we conclude that Sargon was one of the greatest military commanders that ever lived. But we forget that Assyria only records its victories. Their historians would never embarrass their own king by taking note of his defeats. But Sargon had just had nine years of nothing but defeats. Or at best, partial and temporary victories on which he was never quite able to capitalize. You won’t find that in the history books, though they do admit that even after all Sargon’s attacks, Merodach-baladan was still in power and had gained the fear and respect of the entire civilized world!

Shalmaneser was frosted at being called weak. “Sargon, let’s join forces in the Levant. We’ll show the world who’s weak! You’re like a son to me. I made you co-regent because I intend for you to have the kingdom when I am gone. So you suffered a few defeats. I’ll show you how it’s done. Together, we can’t lose! I have confidence in you. Once you gain a little confidence in yourself, I bet you’ll begin to win every battle. You’ll be feared the world over.”

So their combined armies descended upon tiny Israel. In the spring of 712 BC they surrounded Samaria and began building siege works against it. By that fall they had the land locked up tight, and foolish King Hoshea was sealed up in Samaria like a mouse in a bottle.

Now where were all his allies? And what would become of his now infamous ‘passive resistance’? Hoshea tried everything. He wrote nice letters, sent tribute, promised allegiance, offered compromises (he was good at that). But all to no avail. King Shalmaneser was not interested in a compromise. Hoshea was the instigator of all the trouble he had been having, and Shalmaneser was going to teach him a lesson that the world would never forget!

Now Hoshea regretted not pursuing that alliance with Hezekiah. He had gone to him several times after that famous Passover of 716 BC. Hezekiah had readily agreed to the ‘passive resistance’, and swore he would not give Assyria one thin dime of tribute. He had kept his word, too. But as many times as Hoshea came calling, he could not get Hezekiah to agree to a military alliance. Judah had the best army in the Levant! Hoshea wanted Hezekiah to combine their two armies when the Assyrians came. But Hezekiah only answered, “Israel has become very wicked and is under YHWH’s judgment. I can not commit my army to help you unless you first repent and get right with God, and second clean out the idolatry and immorality in Israel. Why should my army be wiped out trying to defend you, when the very hand of God is against you? I do not want to be found to be fighting against God!” Hoshea had tried multiple times, and had even attempted some superficial reforms to convince Hezekiah of his sincerity, but he had still failed to get that military alliance.

Now he was too late. He ground his teeth in anger. His only consolation was that now Hezekiah would be wiped out, too, for the Assyrians had very long memories. It may take a few years, but in time they would certainly repay Hezekiah for stopping Judah’s flow of tribute, especially after his father, Ahaz, had submitted so wholeheartedly to Tiglath-pileser.

Still, he wrote letter after letter to Hezekiah, pleading for some kind of military intervention. Most of his letters did not get through the blockade, and the messengers were tortured and slain. But when one got through, Hezekiah only responded as before, “Repent, and return to YHWH. He won’t allow me to aid you. Only He can help you now.”

Sadly, Hoshea could not hear that word. His heart was hard and cold to God. He raged and swore, and ultimately sacrificed his firstborn son to the planetary gods on the wall of Samaria. The Assyrians didn’t care. They laughed at him as his son was dying. Then their own wizards reversed the curse, to make it bounce back against Israel.

Sargon was ecstatic. Finally, a real victory! And it was so easy! They hardly had to do any fighting at all; just slowly, methodically, surround the enemy and crush the life out of them. Sargon was learning. He realized that he had always been too impatient. Youth is like that. When you attack an enemy who is protected behind fortified walls, you had better be patient, or expect to lose a lot of men! No wonder Merodach-baladan had always beaten him back!

So, it might be a few years before Hoshea is starved out. Sargon (still impatient) decided to take advantage of the time. He absolutely hated waiting! Maintaining a siege is about as fun as watching paint dry. He took his half of the army and headed back to Babylon to try his new battle techniques on Merodach-baladan, leaving his beloved benefactor Shalmaneser V to finish the siege of Samaria.

As I said, Merodach-baladan had been having problems of his own. He had abused his allies. He had lied, cheated, and double-crossed them. He had made promises he had no intention of ever keeping. He had failed to send them military aid (such as when Assyria attacked Hoshea). Now, some had deserted him. Others had double-crossed him in return, or were conspiring together against him. After that last victory against Sargon, they had expected some rewards for their labors. When they didn't get it, many had packed up and gone home. So when Sargon's army returned suddenly to Babylon, Merodach-baladan was caught unprepared. He abandoned the great city of Babylon, and fled into the Chaldean swamplands.

Sargon was stunned. It had all happened so fast. After nine years of defeats, finally the gods were with him. He crowned himself king of Babylon in the late fall of 712 BC and spent a year establishing his power there. Then in early 710 BC he returned with his army to the Levant to see how the siege of Samaria was coming.

Again, the brilliant military genius that we have in our minds from the history books failed us. Sargon screwed up. He should not have left Babylon without first ensuring that Merodach-baladan was eliminated, permanently! Allowing him to escape with his army was a major tactical error, as we shall see. Merodach-baladan merely regained control over the southern Chaldean states of Babylonia and began preparing to return to Babylon itself one day.

Still, King Sargon II returned to the Levant in triumph, wearing the crown of the king of Babylon. He drove before him thousands of Chaldean captives, as was the Assyrian custom. But his joy was short-lived. From a distance, the siege of Samaria seemed to be holding just fine. The city and the palace were still bottled up tight. But when he reached the tents of the commanders, King Shalmaneser was not there. Sargon soon learned the sad tale.

Just after he had left with his half of the army, King Hoshea had tried to take advantage of his departure. Hoshea had amassed his army just inside the city gates, with orders to strike at midnight. The attack had been aimed for the tents of the kings and commanders, knowing that if they slew the leaders, the battle would be over.

It had nearly succeeded. Shalmaneser, Sargon's friend and benefactor, had died in the melee. So had his general and some of his favorite commanders. Only the bravery of the king's elite guard had stopped it from becoming a rout.

Sargon called the remnants of the elite guard before him. He honored them, promoting them all. Never let it be said that Sargon did not appreciate his brave soldiers! He appointed one of them, a huge bear of a man named Ulaf, to replace his favorite commanding general who had died.

Normally the Assyrians don't go in much for mourning the dead. But Sargon was deeply shaken by his loss, more than any ancient history account will admit.

History records a few months delay before Sargon moved into Samaria for the kill. But there was no need to delay. Hoshea's forces had been decimated in their ill-fated attack, leaving nothing left to defend the starving city. With the arrival of Sargon, they could have walked into Samaria whenever they wished. But Sargon was mourning. That two month delay was the time it took for his wrath against King Hoshea to finally overcome his despondency at losing Shalmaneser and his commanders.

General Ulaf came hesitantly to Sargon in his tent. "Sir? The Israelites are starving. We don't want them too weak, or the slaves we take might not survive the trip to Assyria. I think we should move in now. I'm ready."

King Sargon stood and shook off his moody lethargy. His heart had turned cold, but his eyes blazed with fire. "General Ulaf! You and I are of one mind. Attack at dawn. Show no mercy. Slay all who are too weak to travel. Take the maidens and all the plunder you wish. Bring Hoshea in chains before me. Take captive the strong young men and their wives. They will pay for the death of Shalmaneser!"

It was over almost before it began. King Hoshea had no resistance left. Samaria and all that was left of Israel fell before the Assyrian onslaught. Sargon's word was carried out. 27,290 of the strongest young men, together with their wives and little ones, were taken captive. All the rest were slain, except some peasants left to till the fields. The city of Samaria was made the capital of a new Assyrian province. The victorious General Ulaf was appointed as its new governor, to rule in the lavish palace originally built by Omri. The Babylonian captives, together with an equal number of Aramaeans which Shalmaneser had taken in Hamath on his way to Israel, were released to occupy the homes and farms of Israel and bring their increase to the new governor of Samaria. They are known in the Bible as **Samaritans**, and are still despised and hated by Israelis.

And the captives of Israel? They wearily began their march north, Hoshea dragging his chains behind him, all driven by the victorious Assyrian king, Sargon. He knew better than to just slay them. Men represent much labor, which equals much tribute for Assyria. That was why he left them their wives and little ones. They would work hard to protect them. But in his fierce anger he determined that they would never again rise against him. He ruthlessly split up the clans, leaving some in SW Anatolia at Halah by the Khabur River (the former territory of the Mitanni), others in SE Anatolia in the new provinces Tiglath-Pileser had taken from the Hittite kings, others in Urartu, others at Mt. Sahand near Lake Van, others in districts of Assyria, and others yet in Media to fill the homes and farms left by the Medes he had captured and brought into the Levant.

Thus the dispersion of Israel was complete, and the ten northern tribes of Israel were scattered among nations, even beyond the Euphrates. They became known as the Diaspora, and the 'ten lost tribes', unto this very day.

And King Hoshea? After all his plans for power and glory, after all his schemes, all his promises to the kings of the earth, all his alliances and counter-alliances – Hoshea was brought into the court in the grand palace of Calah at Nineveh. There he was made sport for the nobles. When they tired of him they put out his eyes and chained him to the back wall. He was given a fan, and spent the rest of his miserable days cooling the king on his throne. But did Hoshea ever repent? Did he even hear the warnings given by Hezekiah and all who warned before him? No. His spirit was cold and dead even while he lived. Logos' back was turned against him and against Israel so He could not hear their cries, just as He had promised in the Law of Moses.

And what of the ten tribes of Israel now scattered to the nations? They were despised, abused, and persecuted in every nation to which they had been taken. They were hated just like Israelites would later hate the Samaritans. Truly those who had celebrated the Passover in 716 BC were blessed to have been slain.

I know, it has been a big chore keeping track of Egypt's Pharaohs. But one duty of a historian is to fit his story into the context of the surrounding kings and the times of their reigns. Especially since so few seem to understand how the chaotic Third Intermediate Period (TIP) all fits together, I feel I must address it.

This is an especially confusing time. But as it turns out, Tefnakht I managed to tie it together a bit. By 712 BC, as Shalmaneser V and Sargon II were besieging Samaria, Tefnakht I at Sais had made secret military alliances with the two other Pharaohs of the north: Shoshenk IV at Tanis and Bubastis, and Iuput (son of Pedubast I) at Leontopolis. But up south, Piye was busy making alliances as well. He had proven himself aggressive and strong. Co-ruling with his brother Shabaka, he had extended Nubian influence over everything from Napata to Sais in the Nile Delta.

And he showed no signs of stopping there. He claimed to be the rightful ruler of all Egypt! He had thoroughly adopted the Amun cult at Thebes – so much so he had his soldiers cleanse and dedicate themselves to Amun before a battle. In addition to Osorkon III at Thebes (of the 22nd 'Libyan' Dynasty), Piye and Shabaka now had control over Ahmose of Abydos, Nimlot of Hermopolis, Peftjauabast at Herakleopolis, and Tefnakht of Sais, all 'cooperating' with them as allies (or more accurately, as vassals) by 711 BC.

With the aggressive Assyrians on their front doorstep in the Levant, the Pharaohs of the north did not like the Nubians biting their rear. Tefnakht decided it was time to implement his plan. He first slew Ammeris the Nubian, then led the three northern armies to Herakleopolis. King Peftjauabast and his army gladly joined their coalition. There they scored an initial victory against the Nubians holding the city. They marched on south to Hermopolis. Nimlot also was only too eager to double-cross his former master Piye. That's how it is with forced alliances.

Ahmose heard they were coming and got ready to join them in Abydos. But sadly, the coalition never made it that far. Before his death, Ammeris had discovered Tefnakht's plot and sent word to Piye. He mustered his forces and led them north, easily crushing the rebellious army at Abydos on his way. He killed King Ahmose. He had just concluded the battle and taken control of Abydos, when the coalition of northern kings came into sight along the river road. They had been marching double time, to reach Abydos before Piye, hoping to confront the Nubians with Ahmose by their side. It quickly became clear that they had failed. They were too late. Now they had no chance whatsoever of defeating Piye and his mighty Nubian warriors.

Tefnakht I was strong and brave, but he was not stupid. His five armies were strung out for ten miles down river, exhausted from days of marching. And there was Piye, waiting for him with a smug smile on his face, his army as fresh as daisies. It was time for a quick change of strategy.

So Tefnakht called a halt to the march, and gathered the five kings under him with their aides. Together they rode under banners of truce to meet with Piye. He graciously received them. He wanted them as allies, not enemies! He dictated the terms of peace. His generous terms allowed the northern kings to return to govern their own cities, but required that they swear to submit to Nubian rule over all Egypt and never attempt to muster their armies against him again. Piye was really quite pleasant about it all.

Sadly, bold Shoshenk IV mistook his pleasant attitude for weakness, and stood against him, wanting to hold out for more favorable terms. Without batting an eye, Piye waived his arm to his guards, and before they could utter another word, Shoshenk IV was slain. Needless to say, the other kings signed the surrender. Their armies were given food and water. After a few days rest the defeated armies trudged home, never having fought a single stroke.

Piye should have slain Tefnakht, too, for he had killed Ammeris. Instead, he merely deposed him and promoted his son, General Bakenranef, to take his place at Sais. With Shoshenk IV also dead, his son Shoshenk V ruled in his place at Tanis and Bubastis. By 710 BC when Hoshea was hauled off to Nineveh, Egypt had finally settled down, with the Nubian invaders supreme over Egypt. But as you can see, all of King Hoshea's grandiose plans for military alliances with Shoshenk IV and Osorkon III to defend the Levant against the Assyrians had been hopeless from the start. The power of the northern Pharaohs was broken.

But Piye gave them a lot of freedom. Perhaps he was a bit naïve. Or possibly he was just being nice. Some feel that he really believed all that hype about his worship of the sun god Amun, trusting that because Amun was on his side, he could never lose! Did he really think the kings of the north would keep their promises? *Ha! You know that at the first opportunity they will plot together for another attack against these arrogant, smug, black invaders at Thebes!*

CHAPTER 5 – GOOD KING HEZEKIAH

Hezekiah's intuition about Israel had proven correct. He was glad that he had never promised to help defend wicked Hoshea against the Assyrians. Israel was gone; completely, utterly gone. King Hezekiah knew that he also would have been wiped out if he had tried to interfere. However, he also had refused to pay tribute to the kings of Assyria, yet they had ignored him. Why? He had mustered his army. He was all ready to defend Judah if the Assyrians attacked, but they had never even glanced his way.

Then, barely two days after the Assyrians had left the Levant, the Philistines attacked Judah. They had expected Judah to be badly weakened by Assyria and vulnerable, and had been preparing for their surprise attack ever since the Assyrians had moved through Philistia. Of course, Judah was not weakened at all. The attackers were roundly defeated. They fled in shame back to Gaza and Gath.

Hezekiah called for Isaiah and Alysa. "Why did I not have to fight Assyria? Why did they not attack me? And why was my victory over the Philistines so easy?"

Isaiah just started to laugh, so Alysa responded, "Don't you even remember all that you did in the first five years of your rule? You started by slaying the idolatrous priests on the Mount of Olives, cleansing the temple of Solomon, and bringing all Judah together for the most glorious, uplifting worship in my lifetime. You then went romping through the land tearing down pagan altars and temples, slaying the pagan priests, and cutting down their Asherah poles. You even broke apart the bronze serpent, Nehushtan, when you discovered the people worshipping it."

Isaiah stopped his laughter long enough to add, "Did you not understand that YHWH protects you from Assyria when your heart is wholly His? Indeed, He has more than mere protection. He has a reward for you!"

"Reward? YHWH's protection is reward enough. He has made me very rich. I have need of nothing."

Isaiah was laughing again. It was starting to get on Hezekiah's nerves. "Al'right already! What's so funny?"

Isaiah nodded to Alysa. She smiled sweetly. "My dear King Hezekiah. Sometimes you are absolutely brilliant. And other times you are just clueless! How can we not laugh? Need of nothing? Indeed! A ruler must have a wife! A king must have an heir! This is the sixth year of your reign. You have neither! Have you no desire? *Would you allow the royal line of David to die out?*"

"Well, no, of course not. I'd love to have a wife. But I've been so busy... I've had no time to pick one."

"YHWH has already selected her. In fact, He created her especially for you. It's only up to you to accept her."

Ever the practical and efficient one, Hezekiah smiled his agreement. "Oh. That's great! I accept."

"Don't you even want to meet her before you decide?"

"Whatever for? YHWH has never given me anything but good. I entirely trust Him in this. Plan the wedding for next month. Let all Judah be invited."

Now the laughter exploded in the heavenlies as well. Logos could not contain His delight. "Did you see that?" He called to Gavriel. "Many have placed their trust in Me, but none so wholeheartedly as My son Hezekiah!"

So, as with Uzziah his great-grandfather, Hezekiah did not see his wife's face or know her name until he lifted the veil for his very first kiss at their wedding. And just as with Uzziah, his new wife was all that he could ever have hoped or dreamed. Truly, YHWH can be trusted to do all things well for those who love Him and keep His Law.

Her name was Hefzibah, meaning 'my delight is in her'. She truly fit her name! The joy of YHWH poured forth from her in everything she did. She was effervescent, enthusiastic, and eager to love and serve her new husband and everyone else around, as well as in her worship to YHWH. They married in 710 BC, four months after Israel's dispersion. By the spring of 708 BC, when King Hezekiah was 28, their first child was born; a son. A perfect heir. When they dedicated him to YHWH, they named him **Manasseh** ('cause to forget'), for Hezekiah said, "YHWH has caused us to forget the wicked rule of my father Ahaz, and has given us peace and joy on all sides."

In 706 BC, Kashta died. Piye rushed back to Napata to take over his father's throne. His brother Shabaka took his throne at Thebes, because Piye's two sons, Shebitku and Taharqa, were still too young to rule. Shabaka was strong and smart. He restored Osorkon III as high priest of Amun under himself. He assigned Pimay, a son of Shoshenk III, to be his puppet Pharaoh at Tanis. Iuput at Leontopolis and Shoshenk V at Bubastis were likewise forced to swear submission. Then he went to Sais to check on Bakenranef.

The feudal lords, furious that young Bakenranef had freed the peasants and annulled their debts, accused him of trying to start an insurrection. Shabaka had him burned at the stake, and restored Tefnakht I in his place.

Assyrian King Sargon II had found his stride. All it took was a few good wins under his belt, and all those defeats were forgotten. He spent those years winning victory after victory, barely going back to Assyria between campaigns. He was born to war, and now he wanted to do nothing else. So we finally see the Sargon of history: the greatest military genius in his generation. Although history records only his victories, yet put yourself back into 710 BC. The world had gotten out about his nine years of defeats. The world thought he was weak. After Shalmaneser's death, all his vassals tried to capitalize on Assyria's seeming weakness. Rebellion after rebellion sprang up for Sargon to quell. And quell them he did. By 704 BC there was not left a man in his far-flung empire who did not rightly fear him!

The first to rebel against him was King Ilu-bi'di of Hamath on the Orontes River. Sargon had hardly reached Assyria with the Israeli captives when word came of the rebellion. Ilu-bi'di had persuaded the kings of Arpad, Damascus, Phoenicia, and Philistia that now was the right time (710 BC) to throw off the Assyrian yoke.

Sargon was no longer hesitant and indecisive! The day he heard the news, he turned his forces around and marched for Hamath, determined to reach King Ilu-bi'di before his allies could join him. He was successful, easily overwhelming and scattering Ilu-bi'di's forces at Qarqar. He reestablished Assyrian control at Arpad, Hamath, Simyra, and Damascus, then immediately went southwest toward the sea. There he cruised slowly south along the Via Maris, crushing any resistance in his path through Phoenicia. King Lamanni of Ashdod put up a fight, but soon he was fleeing toward Egypt. All along the way, he spread the warning to prepare for the Assyrians. Pharaoh Shabaka gave King Lamanni refuge up south in Thebes.

King Hanno of Gaza heard Lamanni's warning. Afraid, he sent an urgent plea to Egypt for assistance. Shoshenk V also heard the warning. By the time he got Hanno's plea, he had already mobilized the four Egyptian armies of Tanis, Bubastis, Leontopolis, and Sais (mostly the same armies who had never gotten to fight Piye back in 712 BC). They marched north even as Sargon was attacking Gaza.

Once again victory was easy, and sweet. Sargon was beginning to really enjoy this! King Hanno was sent in chains back to Assyria. Sargon and his now invincible army continued on south. They met the Egyptian forces eighteen miles south of Gaza at the sleepy little seacoast town of Raphia (modern Rafah).

The four Egyptian armies were commanded by General Seveh. They formed a formidable force; well-trained and determined to defend their borders against the Assyrian invaders. For the first time since Samaria, Sargon began to have doubts. Then he recalled Shalmaneser's trust in him, "I believe in you, Sargon! Once you gain a little confidence in yourself, I bet you'll begin to win every battle! You will be feared the world over!" Again his anger rose as he remembered Hoshea's forces breaking out of Samaria and killing his friend and benefactor. *And these Egyptians are the very ones with whom Hoshea had conspired against him!*

Sargon's face hardened in resolve as he ordered his warriors into a full frontal assault. It was a bold move, some would say foolhardy, against these well-prepared Egyptians. Indeed, it seemed downright stupid at first, for the Egyptian archers were the best in the world. Sargon personally led the attack, inspiring his men with utter disregard for his own safety. With his chariot and two white horses, he charged through the hail of arrows. One horse was down. He cut it loose and continued with the other, right into the enemy line. With his men falling like flies all around him, their assault never faltered.

Now Sargon's chariot is on its side. A wheel is smashed, and the king is thrown onto the ground. A dozen Egyptian warriors surround him with their short swords. But Sargon comes up swinging, a fearless smile on his face and fire in his eyes. He runs directly toward his enemies, ignoring his own unprotected back. Slashing his way through them, he cuts his horse free with two swift strokes and mounts it bareback with a mighty leap. His white stallion raises up on his hind legs with an ear splitting whinny, nostrils flaring, pawing the air, as his master holds his sword high and shouts the battle cry.

The Egyptians were not used to such bravery against them. It reminded them of their ignoble defeat at Abydos. Suddenly fear and panic filled them. They turned to flee. Within minutes it was all over, and General Seveh was sounding retreat and hoisting the white flag of surrender.

Sargon was generous with Seveh. He knew of Egypt's defeat by the Nubians in the south, and frankly he never expected this much of an army left. He made Seveh swear to keep his forces south of the 'Brook of Egypt' (Wadi el'Arish), and told him, "Go back home. Protect your own country. I do not want Egypt. I only attacked you because you assisted in the rebellion of my vassals in the Levant. Never do that again, and I will leave Egypt in peace."

Then, flush with his unbroken string of victories, King Sargon returned to Samaria, to oversee rebuilding it as his capital city in the west, the seat of the province he now dubbed Samerina. His army, which had suffered more dead and injured than he knew, relaxed to tend its wounded and recover its strength.

For the third time, the Assyrians had ignored Judah. Hezekiah was awed, and humbled. He poured out his heart in gratefulness to YHWH. Isaiah and Alysa came to visit him again. "YHWH hears your prayers, and is pleased. It is appropriate to express your gratefulness to Sargon as well. He is just up in Samaria. Testify to him of the goodness of YHWH. God will go with you and bless your efforts."

Hearing the news of Sargon's recent victories, Hezekiah was tempted to fear. But then, "YHWH is my protection. Whom shall I fear? He is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid? I have placed my strength in Him. If He wants me to visit Sargon, I gladly do so!" Isaiah-Alysa was pleased. Logos shouted for joy at His son's growing faith.

So Hezekiah took a gift and traveled north to Samaria with his elite guard. Sargon received him in the grand hall of Omri's palace. After the usual interchange of formalities between visiting kings, Hezekiah got to the point.

"O mighty Sargon, your amazing victories against all the kings of Syria, Anatolia, Phoenicia, Philistia, Israel, and even Egypt have not escaped my notice. Truly, Assyria is foremost among the nations and you are the foremost of all the Assyrian kings. I wish to express my gratefulness that you have chosen to spare my small country. I wish to negotiate an alliance of peaceful trade along our borders."

Sargon was mystified. “Tell me about your nation. What cities? How many people? The size of your army? How long has your dynasty ruled? Who are your gods? Tell me of your history, everything.”

Hezekiah jumped at the chance, for he loved the history of Judah and the over 300 year reign of the house of David. He shared of the ancient holy city Jerusalem, the reigns of David and Solomon, and the great temple of Solomon. He told of YHWH, God of Israel, and how He cared for them when they were true to Him, but abandoned Israel when they forsook Him. “You conquered Samaria and deported Israel because they had forsaken the God of our fathers. But we in Judah have not forsaken Him. YHWH continues to be our protection each day!” Hezekiah waxed eloquent in his praise of YHWH, realizing this is why he had come.

Sargon let him talk. For two hours he barely said a word except to encourage him when he ran down. Supper time came. Sargon invited Hezekiah to eat beside him. He was intrigued by YHWH and Hezekiah’s obvious love for Him.

After supper, they sat around the great stone fireplace as Hezekiah continued to share. Finally Sargon reached out to touch Hezekiah’s shoulder. “Your God YHWH must be powerful indeed! Thank you for telling me about Him. Now I know why I didn’t...” he hesitated, but Hezekiah’s total openness with him had disarmed him. “...why I never even saw you on the southern border of Samaria! Your God put a shield about you! I never knew you were there. If I had known, I certainly would have attacked you. For it would have been very foolish of me to take my army back to Assyria, leaving behind an army as large as yours. Samerina would have been defenseless against you.”

“YHWH is not just my God, or the God of my fathers. He is also God of all the earth, for He made it and sustains it by the Word of His Power. The gods of all the other nations must ultimately bow to Him. I know that...”

“No, no, my friend. The gods of the Assyrians bow to no one!” Sargon interrupted and laughed good-naturedly. Hezekiah realized that he had gone too far, too fast. He suddenly discerned the nature of the battle here, and prayed that Sargon’s eyes would be opened.

In the heavenlies every eye was on him, both of angels and demons. Sargon had reached his time of decision. He was not drunk, though the evening wines had loosened him up a bit. For Hezekiah had quoted to him from the Proverbs of Solomon: “It is not for kings to drink wine, nor for rulers to desire strong drink, lest they become drunk, forget what is decreed, and pervert the rights of the poor.”

Sargon listened intently to Hezekiah, vowing, “If I did not have the gods of my fathers, I would want YHWH as my God, for I’ve never before heard of a god who loves his people; who cares for them, leads them, and gives them wisdom. My gods make me victorious in battle. But they are neither comfort to my soul nor guidance in my life.”

Suddenly an idea popped into Hezekiah’s head. “You know, we have prophets in Judah who tell us what YHWH wants. I can introduce you to...”

“No, no. Never mind that. We have prophets too, and wizards and soothsayers. You obviously know this YHWH very well. You tell me what He wants of me.”

Knowing he was no prophet, King Hezekiah was stuck. “Help, Lord! What do I say?” he prayed. Into his mind popped the obvious, “What is first and foremost on his mind and heart? Talk about that.”

“Uh, your battles... your recent glorious victories... was there never a time when you had doubts?” Hezekiah saw the brief nod of ascent and plunged on, trusting he was on the right track. “A time when you faced overwhelming odds, when death itself stared you in the face? A time when you were beaten down, then again, and then a third time, so you reckoned yourself as a dead man? Yet you stood up and fought on, to rise up and gain the victory?”

Sargon had shut his eyes, reliving the vivid memory of his recent battle at Raphia. Hezekiah saw it. Now he knew.

The Spirit filled him as he opened his mouth again. He shifted into first-person and prophesied, “I was with you then, for I love you! I covered you from forty arrows that had your name on them. I protected you from ten swords swinging toward your neck. I guarded your back while you cut your horse free. I glued you to his back when you leaped upon him to rise and claim your victory. Moreover, I gave you grace to treat the Egyptians kindly, and not push your advantage to their destruction, for I love them as well. Now I have brought you back to Samaria, and have sent my son Hezekiah to teach you of Me and My ways.”

Sargon was astounded. With sweat beading across his brow, he asked, “How did you know all this? It is as if you were there! Are you yourself a prophet?”

Hezekiah shook his head. “Certainly not. But if YHWH wishes to speak through me, who am I to restrain Him?”

Sargon bowed his head, and for a long moment there was silence. The angels crowded around to witness his moment of decision. But Satan, too, was there, yelling in his ear. He put it off. “YHWH your God is mighty indeed! I would learn more of Him and His ways. But not tonight. We both have much to do tomorrow. Let us retire,”

The next morning they signed a peace treaty between their two nations and Hezekiah left for home. His time of decision past, Sargon said no more about it. Though in his heart he longed for YHWH, yet he decided it was just not practical for a king of Assyria to worship another nation’s gods. What would he say to his people? His generals? His soldiers before whom he prays to the Assyrian gods before each battle? But all his life he treasured his evening with Hezekiah in his heart. Perhaps someday he will meet this unique God of Israel under better circumstances.

Sargon left to quell uprisings in Urartu as far north as Lake Urmiah. Then it was off to Anatolia to enforce his rule of the barbarians in Cappadocia. The following year it was back to Carchemish to once again subdue the remnants of the Hittite rebels there. Then it was farther north into Armenia. Then west to Que in eastern Cilicia.

While there, he heard news that Azuri, king of Ashdod, had rebelled. He sent his Tartan (second in command) to depose him and put on the throne someone who will pay him tribute. But the people of Ashdod rejected their new Assyrian puppet ruler. So Sargon himself came down and conquered Ashdod and Gath. He executed their leaders and deposed those rebellious Philistines to Assyria. He resettled the area with some captives he had taken from Anatolia, and installed his own military commanders Mitinti and Sillibel as the new kings of Ashdod and Gath.

When the dust there had settled, he headed up the hill toward Jerusalem. Hezekiah welcomed him, hoping to talk with him again about YHWH. But Sargon had made up his mind. "YHWH is great for you, and I am glad for the diversion. There is a peace here that I feel nowhere else. But my gods have worked for me and I will continue to serve them. However, I must say, if I am ever defeated in battle, I'll surely try calling on your YHWH,"

Once again, the Spirit of YHWH filled Hezekiah, and he prophesied, "No, O King, you will never again be defeated in battle, for My hand is with you and My love covers you. Yet if you will not accept My love, if you continue to give yourself to My adversary, My covering will eventually be removed. Then your life will be cut short, not in battle, but by a senseless, drunken fit of anger by one of your own friends. After you, your son will rule in your place."

Sargon heard the prophecy, but he only latched on to the parts he liked, such as never being defeated in battle, and his son ruling in his place after him. However, he did stop drinking so much, and tried to stay away from drunks. He went back to Nineveh, where he procured a large estate on the Tigris River at the foot of Mount Musri, north of the metropolis. There, with the wealth he was receiving in tribute, he began building a new palace. Then he began training his son, Sennacherib, to rule after him.

In 706 BC, the mistakes of his past returned to haunt him. Merodach-baladan teamed up with the Elamites to retake Babylon, and they declared their independence. *He should have slain him while he was weak. Now they have an almost invincible force and are holed up in the mightiest fortified city in the world.* Sargon's shoulders sagged with the news. Flashbacks of his nine long years of defeats flitted through his mind, and the panic began to rise. But then he remembered Hezekiah's prophecy. He will not be defeated in battle! He bowed his head and breathed a prayer. "O YHWH, God of Hezekiah, if You really love me like he said, if You are really covering me with Your love, then protect me now! I put my life in Your hands."

A shout of victory rang through the heavens, but at the same time, there was a scream of rage from the adversary. "That's not fair! He chose me! You tricked him with that bogus prophecy of Hezekiah's! He's no prophet! You can't cover Sargon with Your love! His choice was made for me long ago. You're cheating! Violating Your own word..."

It took him a while to run down, for when Satan gets angry (which seems to be much of the time) he gets talky. But finally he paused long enough for Logos to answer. "My beloved adversary, after all these years, you still do not understand. My love covers all, even those under My wrath. Even My judgment is given in love, in the hopes that some will repent and return to Me. You thought you were blessing your son Sargon with victories, yet just a tiny seed planted by my son Hezekiah, and now Sargon attributes all those victories to Me. He is learning to trust Me and give Me glory. Who knows? Perhaps he may yet repent, turn to Me, and be saved from the wrath to come. His choice is not made 'til it's made."

So Sargon gathered his army and marched to Babylon, confident that he could not be defeated. King Merodach-baladan was just as sure that no army under heaven could drive him out of that fortress. And he was prepared for a siege just as long as the hated Assyrians cared to make it.

But Sargon had learned a thing or two since his initial lessons with Shalmaneser. He was no longer so impetuous or impatient. He marched right past Babylon, waving and smiling to Merodach-baladan as he went by. Then he attacked the Elamites on their own turf, soundly defeating them, since much of their army was helping in the defense of Babylon. Sargon continued around all the city-states of the Chaldean princes, mopping up all the resistance in Babylon's back yard, conscripting warriors and gathering Elamite and Chaldean princes as he went.

Finally, with the subdued kings and princes and their soldiers in front, Sargon headed back up to Babylon. He put his captured enemies up against the wall, between his army and the great city. Now Sargon shouted up to King Merodach-baladan on the wall, "I had mercy on you, and allowed you to live when last I conquered Babylon. But you have rebelled against me. Therefore I have captured all your princes, your leaders, your mighty men, as you see here before you. So I give you a choice once again. Submit to me, and I will again have mercy, slaying only the rebels among you. All who submit I will send home to your wives and little ones, and will allow your own princes to rule over you under my authority. Resist me, and I will slay you all, one by one, beginning with those in front of me."

Of course they refused his offer, for Merodach-baladan knew he could win the conflict. But when Sargon began killing the Elamite and Chaldean princes in front of his combined armies on the walls, an outcry was raised from his own men. "Sir! Those are our brothers and sons! You've got to save them! You can't let him do that!"

Suddenly Merodach-baladan realized his defeat. You can't win a battle when your own people turn against you. He excused himself, gathered his elite guard, and snuck out the back door. So much for building coalitions with un-trustworthy, ungrateful people. Everyone hated him anyway. The only reason they had agreed to the coalition was that they hated Assyria even more. But Sargon had promised to treat them well. As soon as they found that Merodach-baladan had fled, they surrendered the city and hailed Sargon as their new king. Once more, victory was easy, and oh so sweet!

Sargon remained in Babylon for several years. He kept his promises to his captives. Those who refused to submit, he summarily slew. But those who vowed allegiance, he sent home with gifts, even restoring them to their previous places of authority and honoring them before their people.

These were the glory years of Assyria. Sargon's palace at Mount Musri was on schedule. Elam, the Chaldean states, the Medes, Syrians, Anatolians, Urartu, Scythians, and all the nations of the Levant – everyone was sending tribute. He assigned an army under the command of his Tartan and sent him all around the borders of his far-flung empire, ensuring that the fear of Assyria was on everyone's mind, and their tribute in their hands. Sargon settled down and took a wife for Sennacherib his heir: the beautiful and proud Princess Tashmetum-sharrat. Life was good.

One minor exchange during this time is of note. Prince Sennacherib came to his father one day, saying, "I've been going over the receipts. We are getting tribute from every nation and province in Asia Minor and the Levant, except Judah. Why are we getting no tribute from Hezekiah?"

"Now, son, relax. Hezekiah is my friend. You don't take tribute from your friends. Besides, his God is strong and would probably defeat us. So just forget it."

But Sennacherib could not forget. He ground his teeth in anger. *When my old man is gone, he'll have no friends! Then we'll see how strong is Hezekiah's God! I will get double tribute from Judah to make up for all my father gave away!*

Sadly, Sargon II got proud. He had so much potential! And he knew the truth! But in the end, he considered that it was by the power of his own might and the favor of the Assyrian gods that he had gained control over much of the civilized world. Thus he forgot YHWH and the prophecy Hezekiah had spoken for him. YHWH sadly withdrew His covering. Now when nations and provinces rebelled, he just sent his Tartan out after them. Sargon stayed behind, eating, drinking, and celebrating his many victories.

In early 704 BC, the palace at Mount Musri was nearly finished. He named it Dur-Sharrukin (House of Sargon). He sent his court there in advance, to plan a big celebration to his greatness and glory. That summer he would install himself as the first world-potentate on his glorious new throne, and dedicate his new palace to the gods of Assyria.

He never got to enjoy his new palace. He and the nobles of the land were partying one evening in Babylon, and they got into a drunken brawl. Before it was over, Sargon, the mightiest military ruler of ancient history, was stabbed by one of his closest friends. Liquor does that, you know.

Sargon fell to the floor, blood spurting from an artery. The brawl froze in mid-swing, and his friend screamed for a physician, but it was too late. The legendary Sargon, invincible in battle, feared and respected the world over, died there on the barroom floor, still in his prime of life, a senseless, needless, bloody tragedy.

Sennacherib was not there. He and Tashmetum-sharrat were celebrating the first birthday of their son and heir, Ashur-nadin-shumi. When they returned to the palace and heard the news of Sargon's death, Sennacherib was secretly glad. *His father was too soft, too merciful, too kind. Now the world will again learn to fear Assyria!*

But this one thing Sennacherib did for his father. He instructed the scribes and historians, "Write not that my father died at the hand of his friend. Instead, write that he was on campaign, engaging the... ah, say the Cimmerians to the far north. Say they were attacking his vassals the Urartu, whom he had come to protect. Write that he was slain in battle, a glorious battle, in which the Cimmerians were driven back and utterly defeated! That is how he would like to be remembered, for he was a great warrior. Nobody really knows what's going on with the barbarian Cimmerians anyway, so nobody will be able to contradict your story. Oh, and write that he granted me charge over the kingdom while he was gone."

Sennacherib took his father's crown and throne in a hurried ceremony the next day. But when they got to the part about crowning him 'the king of Assyria, the king of Babylon...' he interrupted, whipping out a little gold crownlet he had made for the occasion. "No. I am not the king of Babylon. I am the king of Assyria." he shouted, placing the crownlet on his infant son. "My son and heir, Prince Ashur-nadin-shumi, is now your king of Babylon!" Everyone laughed and thought, "How cute!" but nobody took him seriously. That infuriated him, for he was quite serious. This turned out to be a huge mistake. Sennacherib was young. He didn't realize that stupid has consequences. He was determined that the world would fear him more than his father, yet he was so concerned about training his baby to be a king and getting everyone to take the infant coronation seriously, that he let the kingdom slide.

Merodach-baladan started traveling the countryside once again, pointing out how soft the new Assyrian king was and inciting the Chaldeans and Elamites into renewed hatred of the Assyrians. "Sennacherib is crazy!" he swore. "Sargon was kind to you, but his son is a fool. He cares nothing for you or for the great land of your fathers. He cares for nothing but trying to make his baby into a king. Join me, and we shall drive him back up to Nineveh!"

So again the much-abused allies were snookered into joining forces with Merodach-baladan. They had friends inside Babylon. They entered the city by stealth and took over before Sennacherib even knew what happened. His army was out on patrols with the Tartan. He barely was able to escape with his family and his elite personal guard. He fled to the old palace at Calah to plan his revenge.

It took Sennacherib nine months to gather his forces and prepare an attack. He remembered how his father had done it, and made his plans accordingly. He first crushed the rebellious nearby cities of Kish and Cutha and took their leaders captive. Then he paraded them before the walls of Babylon, killing one each hour and proclaiming, “Thus shall be done to the one who rebels against me!”

The demoralized city was taken within the month and poor Merodach-baladan fled one more time, to regather his forces and try again later. He was blind in the spirit realm, and had no clue that the God of the Universe was against him and had never called him to be king. From his youth he was committed to the ways of the adversary.

Sennacherib was not so kind as his father. He tortured and slew all the rebellious leaders. Indeed, he tried to slay Merodach-baladan as well, but was unable to locate him among the marshes of the lower Tigris / Euphrates flood plain. So in rage he traveled through the Chaldean cities and towns, ruthlessly killing, raping, and plundering. He himself claimed to have taken 75 cities and 400 towns and hamlets. He placed a puppet ruler, a Babylonian nobleman by the name of Bel-ibni, in charge at the city of Babylon, and bitterly returned to Calah. Babylon was no longer a fun place for him. He planned to return only after his son was a bit older and actually ready to rule the great city.

It was no surprise that Bel-ibni turned out to be a better actor than a puppet king. His oath of allegiance fooled Sennacherib into thinking that he would remain loyal to Assyria. But secretly, he plotted to restore the kingdom to Merodach-baladan again. The ancient, noble Babylonians had hated those upstart Assyrians before, but Sennacherib now had truly earned their undying wrath. Bel-ibni sent false assurances of his submission to King Sennacherib. But in reality he invited Merodach-baladan to return to Babylon, which he gladly did in 702 BC.

Sennacherib was not really paying attention. His focus was now upon Judah. He remembered his vow to make the nations fear him, and it all started by teaching Hezekiah a lesson he could never forget! He sent a letter to Hezekiah. “I’m sure you heard how cruelly I treated the Babylonians when they rebelled against me. Well, the same will happen to you, if you do not submit. I hereby assign your tribute to be 2500 pounds of gold plus 25,000 pounds of silver. I will receive it by the end of this year, or I will come against Judah and take everything I please. My father had mercy, but his day is past. I will be doubly hard upon you to make up for all the years he did not collect our tribute.”

For the first time in his life, Hezekiah fell prey to fear. He had indeed heard of Sennacherib’s extreme cruelty. But there was just no way he could raise that huge burden of tribute! Why, it was more gold and silver than he had in the entire kingdom! He sent a message for Isaiah, asking if he should call on Egypt and Nubia for help against Assyria.

Isaiah was on an extended (three year) fast. Not a fast from food, but a fast from clothes and shoes! He had started that back in 705 BC when Sargon’s Tartan had come and conquered Ashdod and Gath. He responded to King Hezekiah’s message with a prophecy from YHWH: “Even as my servant Isaiah has gone naked and barefoot these three years as a sign against Egypt and Nubia, so the king of Assyria will chase away the warriors of Egypt and Nubia, naked and barefoot, to the total shame of Egypt. Then the inhabitants of the coastlands of the Levant will bewail their fate, for if the ones they trusted for help are so badly devastated, how much more shall they themselves be devastated by the king of Assyria?!”

I guess that’s a ‘no’, Hezekiah thought. *But Isaiah never said that I can’t at least warn the Egyptians.* So he sent four messages, one each to Tefnakht I at Sais, Pimay at Tanis, Shoshenk V at Bubastis, and Iuput of Leontopolis, to warn them about an Assyrian campaign in the Levant.

702 BC was a bad time for Egypt. Shabaka was ruling from Thebes with a rather heavy hand, acting as if Nubia already owned all of Egypt. He treated the many northern Pharaohs like his own children – like naughty children who needed to be kept in line and disciplined when they misbehaved. He established garrisons at Herakleopolis, Hermopolis, and Memphis, from which he kept a close eye on all those rebellious northern Pharaohs and city kings.

They plotted against him in secret, determined to drive him from Egypt. But secrets were impossible to hide from Shabaka. His spies and informers were everywhere. He knew their plans. As they gathered their armies to drive the Nubians back south, Shabaka sent a message to his brother Piye, who was still ruling at Napata. Piye could not leave Nubia, but he mustered his powerful army of huge Nubian warriors and sent them north toward Thebes.

Hezekiah’s messages reached Egypt too late. The four armies of the northern kings had already left for Thebes. When his couriers returned with the bad news, Hezekiah cried out, and then bit his tongue. He had been counting on assistance from the Egyptians more than he realized.

And that just happened to be the moment that Isaiah-Alysa showed up in his doorway, striding in unannounced (for he had given them free access to his throne anytime). Hezekiah was caught red-faced and ashamed. “Did you hear what my messengers just told me?” he asked meekly. “I sent them to Egypt to, ahh... warn the Pharaohs of the coming Assyrian threat.”

"I did not hear that," Isaiah growled. "But I heard the cry that escaped your lips as they delivered their message. Thus I understand that you placed your trust in Egypt even after my prophecy. YHWH is displeased. He had hoped that you could trust Him wholeheartedly."

"Well, I guess it doesn't really matter anymore, because the Egyptians aren't coming. They're all headed up south to battle the Nubians – that's what my messengers told me just before you came. So all I have left is to trust in YHWH."

"It certainly does matter! The Egyptians could all be on the moon and you might still be trusting them in your heart. But YHWH sees hearts. He wants your heart pure toward Him, for He loves you. So I assure you of this: the Egyptians will indeed come! Then you will have another opportunity to decide whether you will place your trust in them or in YHWH God of Israel. Choose wisely, O King!"

He turned to leave, but King Hezekiah called to him, "Wait! I am trying to trust YHWH, but I fear the Assyrians! King Sennacherib sent me a threatening letter demanding a huge tribute! Huge! I cannot possibly pay all he..."

Alysa interrupted the king. "Why do you care what he threatens or how much he demands? He is not your lord. Fear only YHWH. Obey Him, O King, and He will protect you from Sennacherib and his threats."

Then she too turned and walked out, arm in arm with Isaiah, like two star-struck lovers strolling from the palace without another care in the world.

The northern coalition of Pharaohs, led by Tefnakht I, reached Hermopolis. There they learned that Shabaka had gotten wind of their secret plans. He and Piye's warriors were already marching to meet them. They talked with Nimlot (king of Hermopolis), who was only too glad to break his alliance with Shabaka and join them against him. They all agreed that Hermopolis was as good a place as any to stage the big showdown. This time they would not be caught exhausted and all strung out along the river! So the four armies, plus the added recruits from Hermopolis and from King Peftjauabast of Herakleopolis, refreshed themselves and dug in to prepare for the Nubians.

The two Nubian armies arrived in 702 BC, confident in the righteousness of their cause and the blessing of Amun upon them. The coalition of the northern Pharaohs had prepared well, but after a siege of five months, their power was broken. They fled north to Herakleopolis, where they staged another battle, but again were soundly defeated. Iuput was killed. They fled again, scattering to Lisht, Dashur, the Faium, Memphis, and all across the Delta. Shabaka was persistent. Eventually the remnants were rounded up and brought to kneel and swear fealty before the Nubian monarch – except Tefnakht I and his personal guard. They had escaped clear back to an island near Sais, licking their wounds. Tefnakht I then wrote an eloquent appeal for a truce (which was basically a surrender).

Shabaka actually forgave all the rebellious Pharaohs and allowed them to return to their respective city-states, humbled, but still relatively free to rule in their own areas. Thus Shabaka and his 25th 'Nubian' Dynasty once again ruled supreme over the majority of Egypt.

Shabaka sent Piye's Nubian warriors back to Thebes. They needed to return to Napata right away. But Shabaka had a big problem. While returning the Pharaohs to their respective cities, he discovered one of the messages from Hezekiah warning of the Assyrian military campaign into the Levant. So Shabaka sternly admonished Shoshenk V (at Bubastis, where they had discovered the message), "You should be protecting our borders instead of fighting me. Notify the other kings of the north and get your armies back together. Let Assyria take the Levant, but at all costs they must never be permitted to gain a toehold in Egypt! I'll leave you half of my army. Combined with your four armies, it will be enough to prevent Sennacherib from crossing the Brook of Egypt. I'll leave my nephew Taharqa as your general, and each of you kings will answer to him. He will report back to me. If you are faithful in this, I will reward you. But if you try to double-cross me, I will punish you severely. Do you understand?"

Shoshenk V understood. He hated submitting to young Taharqa, who was barely twenty and had never before commanded an army, but he was grateful for the powerful Nubian warriors that Shabaka left. He obeyed, gathering the armies of the northern kings once again. (With Iuput's death, his son Shoshenk VI led the army of Leontopolis.) Once they were on the move toward Philistia, Shoshenk V understood why Shabaka had placed Taharqa in charge. He was gigantic! A head taller than the average Egyptian! He had a commanding presence, a regal air. The Nubian warriors all loved the young prince. They'd do anything for him, even gladly give their lives for him. The others saw it too, and soon, to everyone's surprise, the five armies were moving together as one under Taharqa.

Shoshenk V pondered from his chariot as he watched them march. How did Shabaka do that? How did he take armies that had so recently been fighting each other to the death, and weld them together into an effective fighting unit? He had just commanded, and expected to be obeyed. Was he just naïve? Or was that the mark of a great leader, that he expected the very best of those he led?

Regardless of how he did it, it worked. Shoshenk V knew they could turn back the Assyrians. They reached the Brook of Egypt, which Shabaka had said to defend at all costs. There they refreshed themselves and waited, for Sennacherib had not yet arrived.

Sennacherib waited, preparing, until the end of the year (703 BC). When he did not receive King Hezekiah's tribute (as he expected, for he knew it was way more than the king of Judah could bear), he resolutely headed toward the Levant.

He had prepared all year for this campaign. It would wrap up a lot of loose ends, besides making an example of Hezekiah. *His father Sargon had been too generous. Too soft. Too friendly and easy going with those he conquered. Sennacherib will show the world how Assyria is to be feared!*

King Sennacherib traveled rapidly through his vassal provinces in Syria and Hamath, for they had remained in submission to Assyria. He reached the west coast at Arvad, where he was well-received and given the tribute due. This was repeated as he headed south along the coastline though Byblos, down to Sidon.

But alas, King Luli of Sidon had not only rebelled, he had taken his family and fled the country. Sennacherib quickly subdued and cruelly plundered the cities of Sidon, placed his own puppet ruler over them, and assigned an even greater tribute burden than before.

Sennacherib's harshness had its desired effect, as he found continuing south along the coastline. The kings eagerly paid their tribute and submitted, hoping to save their cities from such a fate. No one could stop the mighty Assyrian juggernaut. Ammon, Moab, and Edom sent their tribute from afar, even before the Assyrians reached them.

Now, don't forget the Egyptian armies, waiting at the Brook of Egypt (Wadi el'Arish). Remember what I told you about young commanders' impetuosity and impatience? Sargon learned the lesson the hard way. Young Taharqa was about to learn it, too. He quickly decided that sitting there watching the stream flow by was no fun. He took out King Hezekiah's message and read it over again. Then he called the four Egyptian kings together. "Hezekiah wants to stop the Assyrians as much as we do. We've got time. Let's head on up toward Jerusalem and see if he wants to combine his armies with ours."

Since he was in charge, they did just that. They moved up the coast. At Ashkelon, King Tsidqa had heard the news from the north and had mustered his fine army. He was eager for any help he could get against the Assyrians. But Ashdod and Gath, on the other hand, had been conquered by Sargon in 705 BC. Their kings Sillibel and Mitinti were faithful to Assyria, so Taharqa just passed between them.

They reached Eltekeh, a small village on the wadi that leads through the Valley of Aijalon and on up to Jerusalem. There they left the four Egyptian armies to rest, while Taharqa led his half-army of Nubian warriors upland. Their first stop was at Ekron, where Taharqa discovered King Padi to be an Assyrian sympathizer. Padi had been established by Sargon, and had been regularly sending tribute. His citizens hated him, so he was easily deposed by Taharqa's warriors and taken in chains up to Jerusalem. There Taharqa asked for an audience with King Hezekiah.

Hezekiah got the message, "The Egyptian and Nubian kings are here to see you, O King. They desire to form an alliance with you against the Assyrian threat."

Isaiah's prophecy flashed across his mind. He had been warned that he would have a second temptation to trust in Egypt. But he remembered the earlier prophecy. Pictures of Isaiah – no, of Egypt and Nubia! – fleeing naked and barefoot before the forces of Assyria swam through his mind. He knew what he must do. He prayed, "Thank you, YHWH, for giving me those warnings through Isaiah and Alysia. I am determined! I will put my trust in You and only You. I will not join my armies with the kings of Egypt and Nubia, no matter how much they try to tempt me." As he went to the throne room to receive his guests, the heavenly host cheered at his victory of faith!

As expected, young Taharqa tried to get him to commit his army with theirs. Hezekiah responded, "I am on your side, and I wish you well, for I hate the Assyrians as much as you. But no. My protection is from YHWH my God, the one true God over all the earth. For the moment, He has not permitted me to join my army with yours. But I will certainly remain in prayer for you, and will bring my army down to your aid the very moment my God permits it."

"What kind of a compromise is that?" Gavriel asked Logos. "Is he going to trust You, or is he going to try to talk You into using the arm of the flesh?"

Logos gave a big sigh. "I've prepared him. I've worked with him. I've given him every warning. But no. You're right. He's hedging his bets. He still fears Assyria more than Me. We'll keep interceding. He may yet determine to rest his faith fully in Me."

"What shall we do to teach him to trust You?"

"We shall surround him with his enemies, even up to his very gates, until he finally realizes that he has no one left to trust but Me."

"Good!" Taharqa responded. "Then we will expect you there if we get ourselves in trouble. We have brought you King Padi of Ekron. Keep him in your dungeon, for he's an Assyrian puppet and he would stab us in the back. All the rest of Philistia is on our side except Gath and Ashdod. We must now get back to Eltekeh, for I hear that Sennacherib has reached Joppa. We must be ready for him."

After he left, King Hezekiah gave a speech at the gate. "Be strong and courageous!" he commanded. "Do not fear or be dismayed because of the king of Assyria, or because of the multitude of his army, for He that is with us is greater than they that are with him. He has nothing but the arm of flesh. But we have with us YHWH Elohim, the living and true God of all the earth! He will help us and fight for us!" Thus he encouraged the people. But he prepared as well. He strengthened the walls and towers. He made sure the fortified cities on his western border were ready. He made uncountable weapons and shields. He blocked off the springs of water in all the surrounding areas, saying, "Why should the Assyrians come and find abundant water?" He determined to trust God, but not presume upon Him.

But Jerusalem itself was vulnerable. Its primary water supply, the ancient Gihon Spring, was just outside the city gates. Hezekiah wasted no time. He put great stone slabs over the spring so it could not be reached from outside the walls. He put hundreds of men to work carving a tunnel through the bedrock into the city, now called the tunnel of Siloam. The boring of the tunnel was completed at break-neck speed by workers cutting from both ends at the same time, in a wondrous feat of engineering, meeting precisely at the middle. He made an underground reservoir at the end of the tunnel. From there, the water finally flowed into a lovely pool in the city, now known as the Pool of Siloam.

Logos shook His head. “Still hedging his bets. My son thinks he is just being prudent, but I see his heart. He trusts more in his preparations than he does in Me. Worse, he is becoming proud of his accomplishments. But he will have a pure heart toward Me before the year is out. I know his heart and will keep up the pressure until he does.”

Hezekiah was visibly shaken when he got finally the news from Joppa. Sennacherib had already besieged the great city and conquered it, and all the surrounding towns as well: Bene-barak, Azor, and Bethdagon. Then he had gone down to Eltekeh and taken it without even a fight! *Where are the Egyptians? Taharqa said they were camped at Eltekeh!* Now the Assyrians were coming upland toward Jerusalem. It seemed nothing could stop them!

Hezekiah became more and more terrified as he heard each day's news of Sennacherib's progress. City after city fell easily before him, in a steady march toward Jerusalem. Gibbethon, Gezer, Timnah, Azekah, and Beth-shemesh, strongly fortified cities, bowed to the Assyrian juggernaut. *But why had he skipped Ekron? And where was Taharqa?* Hezekiah didn't know. Not knowing terrified him.

But we know! This was where young Taharqa made his mistake. He figured that Sennacherib would come up the valley to the first strongly fortified city, Ekron, find out that the city (with Taharqa's help) had rebelled against him and deposed his King Padi, and attack the city. Being a shrewd commander, Taharqa had gathered all his armies there and placed them in hiding, so when the Assyrians attacked, they could jump out from hiding and overwhelm the surprised attackers. But puppet King Padi of Ekron had been faithfully paying his tribute. Sennacherib had no desire to attack a city that paid its dues. He didn't know Padi had been deposed. He went around the city, leaving Taharqa and his hidden troops scratching their heads.

Hezekiah realized he was still trusting in the Egyptians. Now that they seemed to have dropped off the face of the planet, he felt naked before the Assyrians. Yes, his army was mustered and ready, but they were as frightened as he. He knew they didn't have a chance. He cried out to YHWH but got no answer. He called for Isaiah and Alysa but they couldn't be found either. *Where are they when he needs them? What had they said about Egyptians on the moon?*

Each day, the reports got worse. Libnah capitulated without a fight. And Ashkelon, mighty Ashkelon! King Tsidqa had been banking on the Egyptians to help him, but they never returned. His walls were breached, his fine army slaughtered, his city plundered, and an Assyrian puppet government set up in his place. Tsidqa and his nobles were chained and deported to Assyria. Hezekiah was terrified! He cried; prayed; beseeched the heavens! But they were as brass. Hezekiah was alone in his agony.

Now the Assyrians turned back up the main highway toward Ekron. Taharqa was ready. Finally it was time to put his plan into action. But no. As he came to Gath, King Sennacherib turned right, past Libnah toward Lachish. The other kings wanted to rush out of hiding and attack his rear, but Taharqa said no, they would lose the element of surprise. He was a bit pigheaded (as young commanders often are) and was determined to see his own plan through. He knew that Sennacherib would soon find out about the deposed King Padi. He settled back again to wait.

Hezekiah didn't know any of that. All he knew was that an invincible Assyrian army was now besieging Lachish, the last of the mighty cities along Judah's borders which he had worked so hard to fortify to protect Jerusalem and the rest of Judah. He panicked. He frantically ordered his men to collect all the gold and silver they could find, both in his own palace and in the great temple of Solomon. They even cut off the gold from the doors and stripped the gold from the furnishings. It wasn't enough, but it would have to do. It was all the gold in the city (except for a small amount Hezekiah secretly set aside for himself for emergencies). He sent it to Sennacherib with the message, “I have sinned, O King! Please forgive me! Here is my gift. It is all my gold and silver. Withdraw from me, I pray, and whatever else you impose upon me, I will bear.” Hezekiah wept as he saw it going toward Lachish, for he already regretted his own lack of faith. He cried out to God for mercy.

Again Logos was disgusted with him. “What good does Hezekiah think that will do? Does he think he can buy My protection with gold stolen from My house? His lips call to Me, but his actions belie his words. Yet he shall learn to trust Me, for he is My son.”

King Sennacherib sent a brief response to Hezekiah: “The tribute you gave is much too little, and much too late. You will pay the penalty of all who rebel against me, and more also, for you gave nothing to my father.”

Knowing it is usually better to fight with words than swords, Hezekiah quickly penned a thoughtful answer. “Your father Sargon was my friend. He trusted me, and I did him no wrong. He learned that our God YHWH is strong to protect us. Why now have you turned against me? If you come against us, you shall surely be defeated, for our God has sent the mighty armies of the Egyptians to aid us. You may take all the cities of Philistia, but if you try to take Jerusalem, the Holy City, you shall fail.”

Sennacherib was just finishing the siegeworks around Lachish. So he sent his Tartan (second in command) along with half his army up the hill toward Jerusalem. One of his chief officers, whom I shall call Rabshakeh ('chief officer'), came near the city gates and waved Hezekiah's letter to the people on top of the wall. "Tell Hezekiah," he shouted in Hebrew, "that the great king, Sennacherib king of Assyria, says, 'What is this confidence you have? On whom do you rely that you have rebelled against me? You rely on Egypt? That stalk of crushed reed? Ha! If a man leans on it, it will pierce his hand! So is Pharaoh king of Egypt, and any who rely on him. Or do you rely on YHWH your God? Don't you know that Hezekiah has torn down His altars and worship centers to leave only a single altar in Jerusalem? That is why YHWH Himself told me to come against this land to destroy it. For I have YHWH's approval to come against Judah.'" He continued to blather on like that.

Two scribes on the wall, Eliakim and Shebna, looked at each other in deep concern. Rabshakeh was clearly lying, but the people might believe him and turn against Hezekiah. Eliakim shouted down to Rabshakeh, "Please, sir. Speak to us in Aramaic [Syrian], for we understand it. But don't use Hebrew in the hearing of the people on the wall. The common people can't understand such things."

Rabshakeh laughed. "Has my master sent me only to you and your master, and not to these on the wall who are doomed to eat their own dung and drink their own urine?"

So he shouted out in Hebrew even louder than before, "Hear, O you people, what Sennacherib the great king of Assyria has to say to you! 'Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you from my hand. Nor let Hezekiah make you trust in YHWH. Has any one of the gods of the nations been able to deliver them from my hand? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Arvad, Byblos, Sidon, or Joppa? Even Israel's God YHWH could not deliver Samaria from my hand! So why should He deliver Jerusalem from my hand? Therefore, make your peace with me. Come out of the city. Surrender, you and your families. I will take you away from here to a good land, like your own land. A land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey, that you may live and not die.'"

And all that time, as Rabshakeh talked, laughed, and mocked the men of Judah, the Tartan was busy with his army laying siegeworks against Jerusalem. He worked like he had done this a hundred times before – perhaps he had. The Assyrians, in their arrogant confidence, believed they only needed half their army to conquer the ancient city of Jerusalem. Nothing in the world could stop them.

The people on the wall remained silent as they had been commanded. Many of them still had their trust in YHWH, especially the army commanders there. But Eliakim and Shebna were mortified. They tore their clothes in despair as they went to pass the word to King Hezekiah.

Hezekiah likewise tore his clothes in anguish as he heard the message. He commanded everyone in the palace to clothe himself only in sackcloth. "Go!" he told Eliakim. "Find Isaiah, at all costs! Say to him, 'This is the day of distress, rebuke, and rejection. Children have come to birth but there is no strength to deliver. Intercede for us! Perhaps your God will hear the words of Rabshakeh, which his master has sent to reproach the living God, and will rebuke him.'"

Then, clothed in torn sackcloth, with ashes upon his head, King Hezekiah left the palace. He did not take the king's secret passageway to the temple. He trudged the streets like a commoner, entering the temple courtyard like any other peasant. There he threw himself down in front of the altar of burnt offering, prostrating himself in the agony of his soul from noon until evening.

We must leave Hezekiah there and return to Taharqa. He was still hiding with his armies in Ekron, but he was getting impatient. As much as he wanted to remain in ambush, he finally began to realize that he had screwed up. All the other cities of the Levant were being conquered by Sennacherib, yet he still had left Ekron alone. But then Taharqa heard the big news that the Assyrian forces were divided; half still at Lachish, and half sent up to Jerusalem. This was his chance to draw Sennacherib into his ambush. Besides, the king of Libnah had surrendered to Assyria too quickly – he needed to be punished!

So Taharqa left the Egyptian armies hidden in Ekron and took his Nubian half-army up to Libnah (just north of Lachish). They welcomed him into the city. Finally they had a defense against the Assyrians! But the first thing Taharqa did is to execute the cowardly king of Libnah. "You have one of the strongest cities in the Levant. Why did you give in to Sennacherib so quickly? You are not fit to be king. I shall appoint one of your servants to be king in your place. The least of them is braver than you!"

Taharqa then quickly organized the Libnites to work with his Nubians to defend the city against the attack he knew was coming. Sure enough, he had finally caught the attention of Sennacherib. Now the king of Assyria knew where the Egyptians were. He left a small force to man the siegeworks at Lachish and brought his main force to attack Libnah. Taharqa just laughed at him. The Assyrians were no match for his Nubians! Every time they attacked, their losses were five or ten times his! At this rate, within the week their mighty army will be in shambles.

Having finally met his match, Sennacherib called off the attacks and sent for help from his Tartan at Jerusalem. As the Assyrians packed up to leave Jerusalem, Rabshakeh wrote a long letter to Hezekiah, putting in writing all the taunts he had been shouting to the people on the wall and mocking Hezekiah and YHWH. He warned him that the Assyrians would be back, as soon as they disposed of the Egyptians at Libnah, which wouldn't take long.

Still clothed in sackcloth, Hezekiah trudged back to the temple with Rabshakeh's letter. Now he too knew where the Egyptians were. They were not on the moon. They were right next door! He was sorely tempted to root for them, to pray for them, to beseech YHWH to make good use of the Egyptians to deliver him from the Assyrians. *The Assyrians are so scared they're massing all their forces. If only the Egyptians would prevail and the Assyrians would be sent away from the Levant in defeat!*

Logos and the heavenly host watched intently above the city as Hezekiah trudged to the temple. Their focus was broken as Satan butted in. "Ha! You see, I've won already! After all this, he still doesn't trust You. He is bound and determined to put his trust in his gold, or in the Egyptian armies. He'll never really trust You! Take away his money, or send the Egyptian armies home, and he will just find something else to trust. His walls, or his own army. This is why You can't win. You're just Spirit. He can't touch, taste, or feel You. You're no help in times of trouble. You are..."

"Shut up and listen!" Logos commanded, stunning the angels with His abruptness. Hezekiah fell prostrate in front of the altar of burnt offering, with Rabshakeh's letter spread out on the dirt before him. In the agony of his soul he prayed, "O YHWH, King of heaven and earth, God of Israel, who is enthroned above the heavens, even above the highest angels! You are the only God. You are over all the kingdoms of the earth, for You made heaven and earth. I worship You. I place my trust in You. Now hear, I pray, what the king of Assyria has been saying about You, and see here what Rabshakeh has written about You. For they have blasphemed the holy name of YHWH and poured out reproach against the living God of Israel. Truly, the kings of Assyria have devastated the nations and conquered their people and their lands. They have crushed their gods, and cast them into the fire, for they were not gods at all, but only wood or stone, the work of men's hands. So now, O YHWH our God, deliver us by Your great power, we pray, so all the kingdoms of the earth will know that You are God, the true God of all the earth, and You alone!"

There was a holy hush in the heavenlies. Satan slunk off in defeat and a broad smile warmed the brightly glowing face of the Almighty. "He did it," Logos said quietly. "He did it. He chose to trust Me. Not a word of complaint. Not a word about Egypt. Not a word to request more gold or silver to give the Assyrians. Not a word about strength for his armies or for the walls of his fortress!" Logos stood tall, thrust His arms high, and shouted, "He did it, Father! Did You hear him? He trusts Us! No longer caring for himself, he is only concerned for the honor of Our holy name!" Finally a great shout arose from the throats of a zillion watching angels, as the magnitude of the victory became clear. "My son! O My son! I knew you could do it! O my beloved son Hezekiah!" Beside Himself with joy, Logos went dancing about the heavenlies with the angelic host. Satan was astounded, as it was beyond his comprehension.

Hezekiah heard the commotion, only faintly, for he dwelt in a different realm. But he could sense the joy, the peace. He entered into the victory. He left the letter there spread out before the altar, and returned to his palace. "It is done," he told his court simply. "YHWH has heard. And He has given us the victory. Praise His holy name forever!" He ordered his military commanders on the wall to stand down. The army of Judah would not need to fight today.

Satan howled in rage. He was so close! He was sure that Hezekiah had only chosen to trust YHWH because the Egyptians showed up and the Assyrians left Jerusalem. He vowed, "I will not lose this trophy! Hezekiah won't be so quick to trust YHWH when the Egyptians are destroyed and the Assyrians return!" He assigned all his demons to it.

Finally Taharqa had them right where he wanted them. This time they will be defeated, once for all. Now, to draw them into his ambush! He waited until the Assyrian forces (now combined into one army) were nearly upon Libnah, then, in a brilliant move calculated for maximum effect, he sent his Nubians fleeing out the back gate toward Ekron. "Run like wild men! Make it look like you have panicked," he told them. "Run all the way down to Ekron. Draw the Assyrians into our ambush. Don't turn to fight until our Egyptian forces there rise up out of hiding to join you!"

It was a good plan, for the Nubians, besides being great warriors, are superb actors. They ran like the wind, arms flailing, even dropping weapons and shields behind them. The Assyrians were snookered. Laughing scornfully, they skirted Libnah and gave chase.

Sadly, the four Egyptian armies waiting in ambush at Ekron were snookered as well. They saw the brave Nubian forces running in panic down the hill toward the city, with the entire Assyrian army in full chase behind them, and they all joined the panic. Directly disobeying Taharqa's command to remain concealed until the Assyrians were upon them, they burst from hiding to flee the city, heading back down the valley toward Eltekeh. "No! No!" screamed Taharqa. "Turn and fight, you fools! We have the victory!" But try to tell that to 200,000 panicked, fleeing men! They rushed down the hill, discarding all their armor, weapons, boots, and even their clothing along the way. By the time they reached the sea they were defenseless, naked, and barefoot, exactly as Isaiah had prophesied.

They were quickly surrounded by the Assyrians. But Sennacherib and his men were having laughing fits. They had not had this much fun in a long time, and were in a good mood. Sennacherib told the five embarrassed kings to bow before him. After a spate of well-deserved mocking, he told them, "If you have any real men among you, send them back up the hill to gather your clothes and weapons. Then dress yourselves so you don't bring shame upon your ancestors, and return to Egypt. I give you that in exchange for the entertainment you have given me. Only never cross the Brook of Egypt again, or you shall die."

What else could Taharqa do? He gave his word, and the Assyrians left them to gather and sort out their stuff. After a few days, they returned to Egypt, trying desperately to restore a little dignity to their bearing. They consoled themselves that even though they hadn't been able to help anyone in the Levant, at least they had accomplished their primary mission, to keep the Assyrians out of Egypt.

Hezekiah soon heard the tragic news that the Egyptians had been routed. He remembered Isaiah's prophecy. Satan fought, swore, screamed, and pouted, but all Hezekiah said was, "I am sorry for them. I'm sure they did their best. But our trust is not in the Egyptians. It is in YHWH, God of Hosts. He shall yet deliver us!" Every time he said it, waves of peace, grace, and faith flowed from above. His entire kingdom was encouraged by his attitude.

Now a message came from Isaiah-Alysa. "This is what YHWH God of Israel says: 'Because you have prayed to Me about Sennacherib, and given the honor to My holy name, I have heard your prayer. Therefore I pronounce this curse against Assyria: "She despised and mocked you, O virgin daughter of Zion. She shook her head and berated you, O daughter of Jerusalem. But against whom did her reproach blaspheme? And against whom did she raise her voice? Against the Holy One of Israel! Have you not heard? It was I who did it! Long ago I planned it. Now I have brought it to pass, that he would turn those fortified cities into heaps of ruin. That is why their warriors were short of strength. That is why they were dismayed and put to shame. But I know you, Sennacherib! I know your sitting down, your going out, your coming in, and your raging against Me! Your arrogance has reached My ears. Therefore I will put My hook in your nose, and My bridle in your lips, and will turn you back the way you came. For I have sworn that you shall not come into My Holy City, nor shoot an arrow into it, nor throw up a mound against it. But by the way you came, so shall you return home. For I shall defend this city, to save it for My name's sake, and for My servant David's sake." Thus the survivors of Judah shall take root, and bear fruit.' The zeal of YHWH of hosts shall perform this."

What an encouragement! It came at just the right time. Hezekiah felt a surge of peace and joy such as he had not felt since that first threatening letter from Sennacherib. He lay the message beside his bed. *He would sleep well tonight.*

But Satan was determined that he would not. He went raging to Logos. "Of course he says that he trusts You, with the Assyrians gone. But let him still say he trusts You with Sennacherib attacking Jerusalem! Let him say it while the siegeworks are built high against the walls, while the arrows are raining down, while the walls are battered and broken, and while the Assyrians are flooding through the breach! Then, and only then, will I concede that You have truly won the love and trust of Your son Hezekiah."

"I cannot allow that, for I have already given My Word through Isaiah-Alysa that none of that will happen."

"Then give me permission to gather the Assyrians around the city, to see if he still fears them. And let me bring Mars closer than usual, to see if he fears that. Also, grant me permission to harm his body, for I know that in his fear and pain he will surely curse You to Your face!"

Logos paused, stroking the pure white beard over His chin. In His great love for His son, He wanted to allow him no more pain than absolutely necessary for his perfecting. But the Great Controversy was not yet settled. Logos knew that King Hezekiah's choice was made, unalterably fixed in eternity with the Father. But the gathered heavenly host, angels and demons alike, didn't yet know that. They needed to see that His Plan of the Ages was truly working and His Bride was truly maturing into the perfection and beauty of holiness as the Father had ordained.

Satan saw His hesitation and pounced on it. "Aha! You don't dare! You expect your son to trust You, but You don't yet trust him! You are afraid! You are afraid he will fail You and You will have to start all over again, as You have so many times before. I'd say Your grand victory celebration the other day was a bit premature!"

"I am willing to bet that he will fail my little test. *In fact, I will wager my entire career on it!* If he passes, I vow to hang up my adversary badge and take up knitting. But if he fails and succumbs to fear, or curses You and turns to the physicians, then You have to... You have to..." He wanted to just have Logos bow down to him and acknowledge his victory. He has always longed for Logos to worship him as the god of this cosmos. But he knew Logos would never go for it. That would break YHWH's eternal Word and the universe would cease to exist. So instead, Satan finished, "...to grant me the perpetual right to harm Your Bride without first having to get Your permission!"

A gasp went through the heavenly host. Satan suddenly realized how bold had been his wager. But Logos didn't bat an eye. "If he fails, I give you the right to harm My Bride without My permission, only you may not take her life. But if he passes your test, I want something more substantial than just your promise to hang up your adversary badge, for I know that you do not keep your promises. So instead, *if he passes your test, I get to take away your toys.* You will no longer be able to use Mars, Venus, or any of the other planets to torment My precious ones. I shall permanently move them all farther from Earth, beyond your control."

Now Satan was the one hesitating! He loved his toys. He delighted in the torment he caused with them, and the fear and worship he gained through them. *But wait... could Logos even pull that off? Satan and his host were nearly as strong as the angelic host. Whatever they pushed aside, he could turn around and push right back. Ah... why worry? He will simply see to it that Hezekiah does not pass his test. It will be so painful, so terrifying, that no one on earth could ever pass it!* "Done!" he agreed, jutting out his chin as he stalked off to prepare.

You see, Satan had a plan. He'd been working at it ever since October 30, 752 BC when Venus had first battled Mars, causing the great Earthquake. He'd gotten them to interact every ten years since then. Their orbits were now distorted almost beyond resonance – they weren't even coming near Earth anymore. But they were finally lined up for what he wanted! On March 1st, Satan intended to slingshot Mars around Venus toward Earth. *Maybe he could cause Mars to collide and wipe out all life on Earth! Then if he did fail with Hezekiah, it wouldn't matter, as he would no longer need his toys.* Satan grinned. At least the earthquakes ought to exceed those of the Earthquake of 750 BC. It would throw both Mars and Venus into sharp new catastrophic orbits. And most importantly, it would certainly frighten old Hezekiah into howling hysterics.

The people were not ready for this. In 701 BC Jupiter was in Virgo and Saturn in Libra – not the traditionally dangerous Aquarius or Leo. And it was a **Jubilee**, when Venus was nearby, normally pulling Mars farther from Earth. In addition, Earth had lagged Mars by three weeks during the October flyby. It wasn't even close! So nobody expected Mars to be dangerous on the outbound flyby in March. Even the astrologers had relaxed a bit and begun to hope that the worst was past. All their calculations said Mars would cross Earth's orbit a full three weeks before Earth got there. They didn't realize how badly its orbit had been distorted. Satan laughed at their ignorance.

Mars approached Venus. Satan double-checked the lineup – it was perfect. On March 1 shortly before sunrise, Satan gave Mars the final push to slingshot around Venus. Mars swung around to an exact intercept course with Earth. It was perfect! Satan and his host shouted a mighty cheer! (The Babylonian Magi saw and wrote about this close encounter, though it could not be seen in Israel.)

The Assyrians had been busy mopping up at Ekron and Libnah, and hadn't finished the siege at Lachish. When they awoke that morning, before Mars rose, Satan revealed his plan to their high priest of Baal, who immediately told Sennacherib. "Baal has turned toward Earth. But do not fear him! He hears your prayers. He has turned for your sake. You must bring all your armies around Jerusalem before you sleep tonight, or you will fail in your quest. For this is the night that Mars will come close to aid you."

"Aid me? How close? What will Baal do for me?"

"Very close! But do not fear. His earthquakes will bring down the walls of Jerusalem for you, if you are there."

That was good enough for superstitious Sennacherib. He left Libnah and Lachish immediately, and soon his armies were beginning to surround the Holy City. It was pretty clear they intended to attack the next morning. Hezekiah was praying, recalling God's promise.

At 9 AM, the terrifying silhouette of Mars began to rise over the eastern hills. It rushed at them, eating up the sun.

It was aiming right toward them, growing larger by the minute! This was all new. The people were petrified. Even their astrologers were stunned. They didn't know what to expect, and not knowing was the worst. The hills around Jerusalem lit up. Static sparkled from every rock and bush. The earth began to writhe and undulate. Thunder and lightning crashed continuously all around the city.

The terrified Judeans came crying to Hezekiah, but he boldly encouraged them. "Be of good cheer! YHWH will fight for us! He promised through Isaiah that they won't be able to send so much as an arrow into the city! And as for their false god Mars, do not fear it! YHWH who created the cosmos only brings Mars close to distress the Assyrians!"

Logos beamed with delight. His son was doing well. But Satan had just begun to fight. Over the years he had gotten very good at this. Besides, he had Logos' permission to test Hezekiah. This day will be a dilly!

Satan had one more task. He was not going to forget it. Part of his test was to assault Hezekiah's body, painfully. He pondered how best to do it. *Broken leg? Infection? Nah. It has to be something that will add to his fear and cause him to curse God. A coronary! Very painful. Easy to cause under such conditions. And it certainly will add to Hezekiah's fear!* Satan routed the static streaming from Hezekiah's golden throne right through his heart muscle, to interfere with the normal electric pulses pacing his heart.

Satan laughed. *The old fool should have known better than to sit on a gold-plated throne during a close Mars flyby!* But as I said, nobody expected this to be a dangerous year. Hezekiah's heart muscle began to fibrillate badly, causing excruciating pain in his chest. He gasped for breath.

Now to put the icing on the cake. Satan had thought of everything. He planted fear in Isaiah and Alysa and urged them to rush to Hezekiah's throne room. The intense fear was foreign to them, and they bowed in prayer instead, but Logos was not answering. So they hurried to Hezekiah's side. It didn't take a lot of discernment to see what had happened. "I'm sorry, O King. It's been a fearful morning, hasn't it. You've had a massive coronary. There's nothing we can do. Give us your last words to set your house in order, for you shall not survive the week." Alysa was very sympathetic. Isaiah kept praying, but there was still no response from the heavenlies.

The doctors came. They laid the king on a mat behind the throne and ran their tests. Alysa rubbed Hezekiah's chest, while the doctors finally nodded their heads at her diagnosis and left, one by one.

But Isaiah was upset. Something was very wrong here. Why could he not hear the voice of YHWH? He left the great room and walked into the middle court where the elders and advisors usually work. They were all in the great room, so their desks were empty. Coming in the far door was a blind woman who looked to be 80 years old.

Tapping with her white cane, she rushed up to Isaiah, dodging tables. “I am Jerusha, the widow of Uzziah the king,” she claimed. “I am come down from Ramah because I’ve seen a critical battle in the heavenlies right now. I want to be near my king to witness his mighty victory.”

“I’m sorry, old woman. You are too late,” Isaiah said gently. (Remember, ‘old woman’ was a respectful term in those days, honoring to the elderly.) “Hezekiah just had a bad coronary. He’s dying. Alysa and I have been praying, but YHWH has said nothing to us about it.”

“Mmm... Yes, he is dying. I see that. But now he has a choice to make, does he not? Let us intercede that he choose wisely.” They bowed to pray together.

Hezekiah did indeed have a choice to make. The stage was all set, and the heavenly host, angels and demons alike, were staring intently down to that mat behind the throne. With the Assyrian army surrounding Jerusalem, Mars on a collision course with Earth, the ground shaking so hard people’s dentures were flying out, thunder and lightning exploding continuously, static sparkling over everything, the intense pain, like a two ton weight on his chest, his breath coming in quick gasps that seemed to get no oxygen into his bloodstream, and his vision dimming with a dirty herd of demons demanding that he give up, curse God, and die – King Hezekiah did indeed have a choice to make! What is he going to do? *Alysa is no help. She’s just sobbing quietly, still rubbing my heart, her eyes closed in tears. Isaiah is gone. How could he leave me at a time like this? Manasseh, my heir, is out there watching the show. I’m not sure what I would tell him anyway; he’s only seven. My scribes and advisors are here, but what can I do besides remind them where I put my will? Curse God and die. Curse God and die. Curse God and... Why in heaven’s name does that stupid phrase keep ringing in my brain?*

Hezekiah turned away from all his advisors and friends and stared at the rough bricks on the wall. With his tears flowing profusely, he slowly and deliberately began to pray. “O YHWH Elohim, God of Israel, my God, the One in whom I put my trust. Remember now, I beseech You, how I have walked before You in the integrity of my heart and done what is right in Your sight all the days of my life. I have honored Your holy name before all the people. I have been zealous to guard Your reputation before the nations. Yet for all that, I have gotten proud, and have placed my trust in people or in things instead of in You alone. For that I repent. My sins, my self-centeredness and faithlessness, are ever before me. Cleanse me now, by the blood of the lamb. Prepare me to live forever with You. For though You slay me, yet shall I trust You. And though I die in agony, yet I know that in You I even now have perfect healing.”

Then he relaxed and turned back toward Alysa. “You may dry your tears, my dear. It is finished. I’m ready to die, or ready to live, or ready to do whatever YHWH my King asks of me, for I am His, and I know He loves me.”

Jerusha grabbed Isaiah with a fierce grip that startled him. “Isaiah! Do you see it? We have the victory! Hezekiah has chosen the high road, the way of faith! The demons flee. The earth is saved!”

“Uh... No, I don’t see a thing. The earth is saved? What in the world are you looking at, anyway?”

“Oh, you don’t need to see. Just go tell Hezekiah, ‘Thus says YHWH, the God of your father David, “I have heard your prayer and seen your tears. Now behold, I will heal you. On the third day, you will be well enough to walk into the temple. In addition, I will add fifteen years to your life. Moreover, I will deliver you and this city from the power of Assyria, for I will defend Jerusalem, My Holy City, for My own name’s sake and for My servant David’s sake.”’”

“Okay, but... why don’t you just come tell him...”

“Hurry! Run! Before his body dies!” Isaiah ran. “And put a poultice of mashed figs on his chest to restore the heart muscles,” Jerusha called as Isaiah raced down the aisles and through the door to the great hall.

Realizing he had lost his wager, Satan quickly changed plans and tried to slay Hezekiah. But Isaiah was just in time. At the Word of YHWH, Satan slunk away in defeat. *All the observing angels were dancing and celebrating with Logos through the heavenlies. They weren’t watching him. Maybe he lost the battle, but he could still win the war. Satan and his host zipped up to his beloved Mars to confirm the collision. Logos said He would move all his toys farther from Earth, but He hasn’t yet. This could be his last chance.*

Recalculating the new course of Mars, Satan screamed in delight! It was aimed right at Israel, to impact in less than six hours! He left to find Logos to crow about his victory, then returned. He was not stupid. Too many times before, he had stopped to celebrate before the victory was actually accomplished. Now he totally focused on the task at hand. *He must guide Mars all the way in until...*

“Begone, Satan!” Michael the archangel bellowed in a thunderous roar. “You have lost your wager! You have no more authority over this planet! Release it this instant or you shall find yourself bound in the pit this very day!” His sword drawn high over his head, it was clear Michael meant business.

Satan backed away, suddenly frightened of this shining angel who had been created a lesser being than himself. “No need to get so testy,” he whined. “I’m all finished here. You’ll see. I won’t need Mars any more. For it shall collide with Earth and destroy all life!”

Satan fled, taking his demons with him, to watch the catastrophe from afar. *Surely all the angels of the heavenly host cannot undo what he had accomplished. He watched the angels scatter at Michael’s command, frantic, like ants when a giant has stepped onto their ant hill. There was no way, no way in heaven, they could ever recover in time.*

Isaiah passed along Jerusha's message, really the Word of YHWH, to Hezekiah. Then he got busy rubbing the poultice of figs over his king's chest. He should have thought of that. Figs are unusually high in potassium, which absorbs right through the skin and can quickly restore regular heart function. Hezekiah's pale blue skin slowly regained its normal reddish olive color. The frantic panting stopped, and Hezekiah gulped deep breaths of life-giving air, returning strength to his muscles.

Hezekiah smiled at Isaiah. Now it seemed like he might live, but he knew the law. "Thank you for your generous prophecy. But since it is a prophecy of good, it must be tested before it can be accepted, according to the law. What is the proof? What is the sign that YHWH will heal me, so I can walk to the temple on the third day?"

Alysa laughed. Now she knew her king would recover with no mental impairment. Before Isaiah could answer, Alysa blurted out blithely, "It is good, O King! You choose the proof. Shall the shadow on the royal sundial jump forward ten degrees, or jump backward ten degrees?"

"Ha! That's easy. It's March. Only in the October flybys does the shadow go back. In March flybys it always goes forward if it moves at all. So this time, let it jump back ten degrees. Then all the earth shall know that YHWH has worked a mighty miracle on my behalf!"

Isaiah stared, astounded. His wife was laughing light-heartedly and hugging the king. He had indeed asked a difficult sign! *Can YHWH even do that?* It had not moved that far since the Flood, when earth's crust spun so wildly, or since the long day of Joshua, when the crust broke free to float backwards. And it had never moved backwards on a March flyby, not in recorded history. Isaiah left and retired to his 'king's prophet' apartment. There he prayed for YHWH to vindicate His Word through Alysa.

Michael had duplicated Satan's shirt-tail calculations to find that he was exactly correct. Mars was on a perfect interception course toward Earth. That would cause the extinction of all life, leaving him unable to protect the Bride. Therefore, Mars must be moved. But how? All the heavenly host were not now sufficient to accelerate Mars forward into its proper orbit in time to miss Earth, and there was no planet in front to help pull it forward.

But Venus was behind. Mars had already past it, but its moon, Mercury, was circling around. *With a little help it might get there soon enough to help pull Mars back.* A risky gamble, but it seemed the only way. He gave the orders.

Hezekiah was better. He was carried upstairs to his own bed and propped up to see out the windows. Mars was just setting below the Western Sea at 5 PM. Normally, its face was black, but now Mars was a brilliant, growing crescent. It was as large as anyone had ever seen it and still getting larger. But Hezekiah refused to entertain fear. Instead, he put his total trust in YHWH. He rejoiced and worshiped.

That evening at 6 PM, as the shadow was getting long on Hezekiah's sundial, Mars reached its closest approach. Hezekiah was expecting this, so he was watching closely. There was a sharp jolt as the grounded crustal plates broke free of the sub-crust mantle and began skating across the subterranean ocean, driven by huge geomagnetic, electrostatic, and gravitational forces between Earth and Mars.

"It's happening!" Hezekiah squealed, pointing out his window. "Look! Look!" Within only twenty minutes, the shadow on his sundial drifted backwards ten degrees (net gain of an hour), before the crust again grounded with a rumble. Though still quite weak, Hezekiah was giddy with glee. *He had seen it! Never again could he doubt the power and glory of YHWH his God!* He put his astronomers to work calculating what that huge crustal shift would mean for Judah and how far they would be from the new equator.

His beloved wife Hefzibah tended him that night. He was able to relax and sleep peacefully, though for others it was a long and terrifying night. Mars' closest approach in March used to be at midnight on the far side of Earth, but the timing was off. This night, Mars rose again at 9 PM (which was now 8 PM due to the gain of the hour). It was now huge, full, and bright, and stayed that way all night. It seemed to hang right over Earth instead of moving quickly past as in a normal flyby. At least it was slowly receding.

Then at midnight (which was now 11 PM), a powerful arc, the infamous 'sword of YHWH', leapt back from its magneto-tail to rake the land, plowing right through the ranks of the Assyrians preparing for their dawn assault!

At 6 AM Mars set, over 160,000 miles away and slowly getting farther. Its magneto-tail could no longer reach them. The danger had passed. Hezekiah awoke at sunrise, 7 AM. (His sundial didn't need resetting, but all the clocks that hadn't been set back read 8 AM.) His servants told him about the devastation of the Assyrians. Their iron armor had attracted the electrical discharge from Mars, leaving the city untouched, but slaying 185,000 Assyrian soldiers!

The earthquakes had been bad. Jerusalem had many old stone houses which could not withstand the shocks and had collapsed. But the good news – first, all the major structures, the palace, temple, and city walls, survived just fine, as they had been designed to withstand such huge earthquakes; and second, most of the people of the city had been on the walls watching the spectacular display all night, and thus survived when their homes collapsed. Few in Judah or Jerusalem were injured and none had died. King Hezekiah praised YHWH at the news.

About then, another report came to Hezekiah. "O King, live forever! Sennacherib king of Assyria is at the city gate. He desires audience with you, O King."

"Oh, no!" Hezekiah said. "I can't let him see me like this! I'm too weak. I can't even stand without feeling faint. He just wants to discover our weaknesses and injuries."

Hefzibah readily agreed, but Alysa did not. “Not so, O King. If you will meet with King Sennacherib, YHWH will be honored. For His great power is made perfect in your weakness. As you humble yourself, YHWH’s mighty name will be revered among the nations.”

Hezekiah closed his eyes and bit his lip. How much more must he be humbled? But he knew deep down that Alysa was right. “Okay. I’m still too weak to properly sit on my throne, and I would just look silly with you guys trying to prop me up. So if I’m going to humble myself, I may as well go all the way. Bring Sennacherib into my bedroom.”

So the mighty king of Assyria was led into Hezekiah’s bedroom. It took a minute for them both to get over the embarrassment. After a few awkward starts and clearing his throat, Sennacherib managed to voice his condolences, “I am truly sorry to hear of your sickness, Hezekiah. I hope you get well soon. You have been a worthy adversary...”

“Aw... belay that! I’m not your adversary! When did I ever attack you? I would much rather be your friend and ally, as I was with your father Sargon.”

“That’s not what I meant, Hezekiah. It is... well, it’s your God! I’ve never seen anything like it! My priest swore that Mars would fight for us, but your God... He... I’ve never seen anything like it! He was everywhere! I should never have attacked you. Now half my men are dead and the rest are terrified of you. We didn’t expect Mars so near, so we didn’t take precautions. My men still had their armor on, and... well... we won’t make that mistake again! We’re heading home. I want you to know that. As soon as we bury our dead and recover our strength. I would be most grateful if you would not attack us while we pack up, for you would certainly overwhelm us. I swear that, as long as I am king of Assyria, we shall never again attack Judah.”

“Thank you for coming to tell me. You are free to leave. I would never hit a man while he is down.”

“My men have brought your gift, all of it. I must return it, for it belongs to your God and has become a curse to me. Please accept it with my apologies. Pray for me, I beg you, that His curse be lifted.” He hesitated only a moment before continuing, his face turning a bit red. “I... uh... have added a small gift of my own, to assure you of my sincerity. Just 500 pounds of gold and 5000 of silver.”

Hezekiah smiled. This was turning out better than he thought. “I accept, my friend. Thank you. I will pray for you as you ask.” He glanced at Alysa. She nodded but kept mum. No Assyrian king wants a prophecy from a woman. She was hoping for Hezekiah to tell him about YHWH, but he missed it. “I, uh... also have something I must return to you. I did not capture him. The Egyptians captured him and brought him to me after taking Ekron. I kept him safe for you.” He told his servants to dress King Padi in his royal robes and bring him. He was glad that he had never abused him like kings often do to captured kings.

Sennacherib stood to go. “Thank you, Hezekiah. Good luck! I hope you get well soon!” He turned away.

But Alysa knew the conversation wasn’t finished. “Wait, O King. Live forever! My king Hezekiah is well already, though still weak. Yesterday he suffered a fatal heart attack. He was teetering on death’s door. His skin was blue-gray, his pulse raced, his breath came in gasps, smelling of death. Then he humbled himself...”

She stopped, for Hezekiah had finally caught on. “Yes, I humbled myself before our God, YHWH, and He granted me fifteen more years, and said that I will be strong enough to worship in His temple day after tomorrow. I invite you to join me. Though you would not be permitted in the inner court, I would stand with you in the court of the nations. I want to introduce you to YHWH our God.”

A broad smile crossed King Sennacherib’s face. “I was hoping you would ask. I would love to see this God of yours up close. I’ve never seen anything like it!”

“Meet me here this Sabbath, by 10 AM. I will be well, and will personally walk with you to the temple.”

That day was a flurry of activity at the temple, as the gold that Hezekiah had taken was restored; door knobs, furnishings, dishes and utensils; it was all there from what King Sennacherib had returned. And at the same time, Hezekiah ordered that medicines and supplies – anything they needed – be taken out to the stricken Assyrian army. No king was more generous to his attackers.

That evening Mars rose again, well before sunset when it should have been on the opposite side of Earth. It had changed phase, just a bit, but was still nearly ‘full’. It had definitely crossed Earth’s orbit, but it was on a much closer trajectory than on any previous flyby. It was nearly as big as when it had set! This was unprecedented. Previously Mars would always shrink into the distance within one day after a flyby. Let me describe the intricate course Mars had been threading during this flyby. [See diagram, page 313.]

When Mars had swung around Venus toward Earth, it had pulled Venus out of resonance. When Michael had directed his angels to rush Mercury into the fray, Mars had grabbed the tiny planet to hurl it away from Venus on its own. The trajectory of Mars (which is twice as massive) didn’t change as much, but it was enough. Astrologers in many nations had seen the flyby in their darkened sun-mirrors. Mercury had ‘saved the Earth’, pulling back on Mars and thus re-aiming its course to miss Earth. From that day Mercury has been worshiped among the nations as the healer. Thus Mars flew behind Earth, far closer than normal for an ‘off year’ flyby, crossing our orbit after Earth had passed by. At ten times the mass of Mars, Earth has lots of pull. But this time it yanked Mars the opposite way. Instead of pulling Mars back into its resonant orbit, it bent Mars’ orbit the opposite direction, to slingshot around the night side of Earth for the first time ever.

That slingshot effect stole energy from Earth, slowing Earth down to nearly a 365 day year and speeding Mars up to a 688 day year (near what they are today). Earth pulled Mars into a more-circular orbit, which no longer crossed orbits with any other planet. Mercury sailed off on its own, eventually achieving a zippy 82 day orbit around Sol (near what it is today). The resonance of the planets unraveled. The scene was spectacular in the extreme. For the first time the Red Planet remained immense and near 'full' for several nights after the flyby, until Earth released its grip. It was described by the ancients as a golden orb blazing like the sun as it hung so enormous and menacing in the sky.

Only one thing they still had to fear: its moons! Mars' previous orbit had reached the asteroid belt. It had picked up rocks both large (like Phobos and Deimos) and small. As it passed, Earth reeled in a small rock – only about one by two miles across. It began a death spiral to the ground.

"Shall we stop it?" Michael asked.

"No," Logos responded. "That much I have left for Satan. For he has occasion against the Mycenaean peoples for their gross idolatry and immorality."

Almost immediately Satan was there. "Did I just hear my name being taken in vain?" he called.

"Not at all, my beloved adversary. I have a gift for you. Though you have lost the use of the major planets in accord with the terms of our agreement, yet I give you one small asteroid-moon to do with as you choose. It is your consolation prize, for the valiant effort you made in testing My son Hezekiah. Use it wisely, as it may be your last for a long time. And no, you do not have permission to use it to harm any against whom you have no occasion."

"Valiant effort? Consolation prize? Huh! What are You trying to pull? You don't give consolation prizes."

"Actually I do. Though finding something you will appreciate that doesn't violate My nature is difficult. But it is certainly within My nature to express gratefulness to any who benefit Me, as you have."

"I? Benefit You? You're crazy! I threw everything I had against You and against Your blessed son! I still can't believe I failed! After that, I really ought to hang up my adversary badge and take up knitting!"

"I agree. Yet you have made a fine adversary and I am grateful. I cannot countenance evil. However, it is in being exposed to and tempted by evil that My Bride is tested. She needs to be proven! All the universe is watching to see if My Plan of the Ages will succeed or fail. It is at the heart of the Great Controversy, whether in the long run your ways or My ways will prove the best. This day you tempted My son to the ultimate extreme of human endurance, yet he chose My good and rejected your evil. Now there is no longer any doubt in the eyes of the angelic host that My Plan of the Ages shall succeed. I thank you."

"Bah! Then I refuse. I will have nothing more to do with evil. Why should I help You?"

"My beloved Lucifer! I am so delighted to hear it! You really are willing to give up evil to acknowledge My ways of righteousness? I gladly accept your repentance! Come learn of Me! I will teach you..."

"No! You... You... [The word he wanted to use just wouldn't come out, or none of the alternates he picked, so he just went on.] I despise Your ways of righteousness. And I am not repenting. I just won't tempt Your Bride with evil anymore, that's all I meant."

Logos nodded, a slight smile playing at the corners of His lips. "Good! Good! Thank you! Now that your testing is finished, my son Hezekiah shall flourish abundantly, without any further downward pull of evil."

"Wait a minute! You can't have it both ways! Do You want me to continue the temptations of your Bride, or do You not? And don't try to trick me!"

"I don't trick, and I cannot lie. I do want you to test, to tempt My Bride, My son, all My servants, for they must be tested to be purified. And I desperately do not want you to test them, for I grieve for them! Every pain, every anguish, falls upon Me. You've no idea the agony I went through as you nearly stopped the heart of my son Hezekiah!"

Satan just stood there with his mouth half open. So Logos continued, "Now, do you want my little gift, or shall I let it splash harmlessly into the sea?"

Satan took it. He was appalled, furious at the magnitude of his loss. It was entirely his own choice to use it to wipe out the wicked Mycenaean culture. He had occasion! He brought the rock in a blazing arc over the Peloponnesian Peninsula. The intense heat set everything on fire and left the countryside bare and desolate. 90% of the Mycenaeans died. Their ancient culture never recovered, and many of their towns remain charred rock to this day. Once again the angels were awed that Satan would choose so readily to do the will of Logos while trying to do the exact opposite.

Isaiah-Alysa's communion with Logos was restored. They wanted to know, "Why could we not reach You, Lord? When Hezekiah needed Your Word the most, why did our prayers seem shunted off to Never-Never-Land?"

"My beloved, I am always with you. I always hear your prayers. But Hezekiah was being tested. He is My son! The most severe test of all for a son is when the Father's voice cannot be heard, the life-giving Word is cut off, and the Revelatory Spirit hides His face. I had to withdraw from you then. You would have negated the results of his test."

"Oh... Did he pass the test?"

"Yes! My son has humbled himself before Me. He trusts Me like none other before him. He is perfect, in body, soul, and spirit – perfect in faith. I am very pleased."

Sabbath morning arrived. Though feeling stronger each day, Hezekiah was still weak. Yet he had assurance from the Word of YHWH through Isaiah (and Jerusha) that he would be well enough to go worship in the temple. Besides, he had promised Sennacherib. So he willed his body out of bed and forced himself to eat a little breakfast.

The expected report came, “King Sennacherib is at the gate with a few of his officers and guards.”

“Let them in. I’m ready.” Hezekiah stood up, surprising himself that he didn’t faint and keel over. Walking slowly, he made it to the throne room and greeted Sennacherib. Suddenly a surge of strength flowed through him as he quoted from Psalm 122: “I was glad when they said unto me, let us go up to the house of YHWH, to give thanks to His holy name!” He threw his shoulders back like the great king he was, and strode off with King Sennacherib toward Solomon’s temple. He was completely well, and knew it.

When they reached the temple, which was but a short walk through the king’s secret passageway, the priests welcomed them in. Hezekiah had not asked for entrance for the Assyrians, for he knew they were not permitted beyond the court of the nations. But the priests must have forgotten. Perhaps YHWH made them forget, or blinded their eyes. They quickly ushered them all right up to the front, where the king always stood, showing Sennacherib the same honor as King Hezekiah himself.

The worship was glorious. During the sacrifices, the smoke and incense seemed to brighten into the Shekina Glory of God. His presence was felt even more strongly as the priests sang the Hallel, accompanied by the musicians. Psalms were sung with the people all lustily joining in, and Hezekiah was delighted to see Sennacherib getting into it as well, humming along with them.

But as the high priest brought the exhortation, which was on personal holiness this time, Hezekiah could see that Sennacherib was pricked in the heart. Tears ran down his cheeks. Assyrian kings don’t cry – at least, not in front of anyone. But Sennacherib didn’t even hide it. Hezekiah was almost glad when the priest finally pronounced the Aaronic Benediction and they returned to the palace.

All during the noon meal and late into the afternoon Sennacherib plied Hezekiah with questions. But finally, he stood to leave. “This day has been most instructive and beneficial, truly a delight. I’ve never seen anything like it. Judah is blessed to have such a fascinating – and good – God. But I must go. My people expect me to worship our gods with them on the day of the sun. And especially after what has happened to them, I dare not disappoint them.”

“O King,” Hezekiah stood to face him. “Their gods are defeated. That is because they are not gods at all, but just passing planets, or carvings of wood or stone, or castings of gold or silver. Surely your people can see that now! Teach them about YHWH, and His Sabbaths.”

After a whole day of enthusiastic eagerness, now King Sennacherib began to back-pedal. “Oh, I couldn’t do that. At least, not right away. They are confused and hurting enough already. But I will certainly tell everyone how sick you were, and about your amazing recovery!” He thanked his host and made a hurried exit.

As he promised, Sennacherib did tell everyone about Hezekiah’s sickness and miraculous healing. All the rest of that year, the kings of surrounding nations sent get-well cards and gifts. Some gifts were quite substantial, since everyone was grateful that the aggressive Assyrians had finally been given their comeuppance. King Hezekiah and all Judah became rich. Never was a land so blessed by God.

Satan was miffed that any nation should be so blessed. Again and again he came to Logos for permission to ‘test’ the people of Judah (now that he knew how it hurt Logos). But Logos just grinned and responded, “My son Hezekiah is perfect in every way. He needs no further testing now.”

Toward the end of that year, another in a long line of delegations from the kings of the nations came calling at Hezekiah’s palace, bringing gifts and condolences for his sickness. This group came from far-off Babylon, where Assyrian puppet King Bel-ibni was sending submissive-sounding letters to Calah, as King Merodach-baladan was actually on the throne. King Hezekiah received the rather lavish gift and read the accompanying letter. After the usual fluff about being sorry that he had been sick, happy that he was well, and delighted at his victory over the Assyrians, King Merodach-baladan got down to business.

“As you may have heard, the Assyrians claim Babylon. But like you, I and the Chaldean princes of the land do not want Sennacherib ruling over us. We don’t like paying his tribute or bowing to his gods. He thinks Assyria has some right to our land, but the proud and ancient kingdom of Babylon was strong long before Assyria even existed! Just like you, we believe that we should have the right to rule our own country as we see fit. Now that you, O mighty King Hezekiah, have shown the world that Assyria can be defeated, we would be most honored if you would join with us and all free nations of the world in an alliance against the wicked Assyrian’s aggression.”

The letter went on like that for several pages, praising Hezekiah’s wisdom and power. It detailed how such an alliance would save the world, and all the kings of the nations would be so grateful to him. Yes, there was a lot of butter in there, as letters to kings are apt to have. Now, Hezekiah understood that his defeat of Assyria was not due to his own wisdom or power, but it was still nice to be appreciated. He entertained the delegation royally that night. The next morning he sat down to write a careful answer to Merodach-baladan, agreeing with his proposed alliance. Then, before sending the delegation home, he showed them though his palace, his treasures, his defenses, his armor and weapons, everything.

Satan came laughing to Logos. “I thought You said Your son was perfect in every way. He is weak! Look how easily he fell to my temptations to pride. It exposes how foolish and self-consumed he is! Besides, he completely failed in converting Sennacherib to You. He is not worthy to be Your son. You ought to let me destroy him!”

Logos’ eyes were wet with tears. But He patiently answered Satan. “Hezekiah did as I led him. Sennacherib’s choice to reject Me was his own. I am sorry for him, for he chose you, not really realizing all the suffering that will entail. But Hezekiah is not My son because he is worthy. He is My son because that is what I made him to be. I would no more let you destroy him than I would let my angels destroy you when you fell to the temptation to pride. You, too, were perfect in every way. I am glad to hear you finally acknowledge that pride results in becoming foolish and self-consumed. However, you were not weak. You were the mightiest of My creation! Can you not now cut My son a little slack here? Yes, he became proud. But I shall teach him. I shall work with him, until he learns from whom his strength and wisdom comes. What about you, My beloved Lucifer? How long will it be before you learn, before you are able to bow to Me and acknowledge where your...”

But at the reminder of his original name, Satan fled in anger and pride. *Foolish indeed! How dare Logos call him such names! And he had every right to be self-consumed. He was the greatest of all the creation! Everyone else ought to worship him!* He determined to stop coming to Logos at all. Logos seemed to have a shrewd way of turning his own words against him. He went off to see what he could do to ensure that Sennacherib remained fully his.

That delegation from Babylon was disguised as simple traders traveling through Assyria on the King’s Highway beside the Euphrates. They had nearly reached Babylon. Satan quickly alerted some Assyrian custom’s officials and inspired them to be more thorough than usual. They found Hezekiah’s letter, and a copy of Merodach-baladan’s letter that King Hezekiah had signed. This was treason! They brought the delegation before King Sennacherib.

It didn’t take a whole lot for Satan to inflame the heart of Sennacherib with rage. This, after all Hezekiah had said about holding nothing against him! Well, his God YHWH may be protecting him, but He is surely not protecting Merodach-baladan! King Sennacherib burned the letters and executed the entire Babylonian delegation. The next year his restored army marched to Babylon once again.

And again, Merodach-baladan was caught unprepared. He had been busy sending letters and making alliances, but his own military forces were in disarray. Many of his oft-abused commanders hated him and were ready to stab him in the back, and he didn’t have time to call for his allies to come to his aid. He fled to Elam, badly injuring himself with his own sword in his haste. Logos wondered that he could suffer so much and still not learn any wisdom.

The traitor Bel-ibni was deposed and taken to Assyria in disgrace. He lived in a dungeon in Calah the rest of his life. Sennacherib crowned his own son, Ashur-nadin-shumi, as the king of Babylon in his place. He had been wanting to do this for a long time, anyway. He had been rigorously training his son for this ever since he was a toddler! It was now 700 BC and ‘the kid’ was nearly twelve.

Egypt’s embarrassing defeat at Eltekeh in 702 BC had humbled the proud Pharaohs of the Nile Delta. Tefnakht I, the one who had started the rebellion against Piye, came home in disgrace. He was later slain by his own officers. His next living son, Tefnakht II, was still too young to rule in his place, so his officers fought each other until 695 BC when Tefnakht II could take over as the governor of Sais. He was weak, and never accomplished much of anything. Pimay never recovered from the assault upon his pride. Though he ruled at Tanis for four more years, he never amounted to a hill of beans. Shoshenk VI came over from Leontopolis and took over for him at Tanis in 698 BC. Pimay’s nephew, Shoshenk V, ruled at Bubastis for thirty more years, but again, what did he accomplish? Nothing. He died a broken, beaten man. So Shoshenk VI essentially had control over Egypt’s entire Nile Delta, though most of the time he still ruled from the big palace at Leontopolis that his father Iuput built. Up at Thebes, Osorkon III was getting old and weak. The campaign to the Levant had left him broken in spirit. His son Takelot III was too young, so like the others, he achieved nothing more for his people.

Taharqa had gone back to work with his uncle Shabaka at Thebes. He was hailed as a great hero, as he had taken some of the credit for sending the Assyrians back to their own country in defeat, and of course conveniently failed to elaborate on his own defeat at Eltekeh. Only his older brother Shebitku (who was next in line for the throne at Thebes) got the full story. He shook his head at Taharqa. “They should have killed you all! Assyrians are the most ruthless warriors on the planet! I don’t know why they let you go. Perhaps it was because I showed deference to King Sargon the last time he was in the Levant.”

“You did what?!” Their uncle Shabaka overheard.

“Sorry uncle. I know that it exceeded my authority. But Sargon had won every battle from Babylon down through Philistia. I didn’t want any offenses making him angry at us! You gave refuge in Egypt to King Lamanni of Ashdod when he was fleeing from Sargon. Do you remember now? Well, I ordered my guards to extradite him back to Sargon. I sent a respectful letter along with them, honoring Sargon for his exploits and thanking him for enforcing the peace.”

“I had forgotten all about Lamanni.”

“I know. But I’ll bet the Assyrians never attacked Egypt because of what I did. Don’t you think I will make a good Pharaoh after you pass on?”

Shabaka, now getting old and tired, had to agree.

Old Shabaka passed on in 698 BC, and Shebitku took over at Thebes. As far as we know, he did indeed make a good Pharaoh there. He allowed his little brother Taharqa, the hero who had kept the Assyrians out of Egypt, a good deal of authority in a kind of a co-regency for six years. Of course they both remained under the authority of their illustrious father Piye, who still ruled at Napata.

The next year Takelot III, son of Osorkon III, was given a kind of co-regency as ruling high priest of Amun with his aged father at Thebes until his father's death in 692 BC.

These two co-regencies were the last in ancient Egypt. But we still have one last co-regency in Judah. In 696 BC, Hezekiah crowned his son **Manasseh** to rule with him. Now, why would a smart king like Hezekiah crown his son to be his co-regent at the tender age of twelve? Hezekiah's heart attack and intimate flirt with death had profoundly changed him. It was more than just being acutely aware of his mortality. He now had a bigger vision. He discovered that even being the king of Judah was but a small thing, compared to knowing YHWH and walking in His ways.

The change came about like this. After the delegation from Babylon had left the palace, YHWH had sent Isaiah to Hezekiah. "Who were those men who just left? Where did they come from?" He sounded vexed.

"Just ambassadors from Merodach-baladan of Babylon. He sent me a large gift, for he wanted me to agree to join the confederation of free nations who are going to stand up to any further Assyrian aggression. It's just not right that Assyria should walk over nation after nation. They have their own country. They must learn to be content with it."

"We'll let YHWH decide on the boundaries for Assyria. What did you show the Babylonians?"

"Oh, I was very open and honest with them. If we are going to have an alliance of free nations, we've got to be..."

"What have they seen in your palace?"

"Uh, everything. All my treasures, my weapons, my fortifications, my armed forces. There is nothing that I tried to hide from them. I was very open and..."

"That is foolish, O King. After all you've been through, you still haven't learned that your strength is not in your wealth or your military forces. The kings of the earth will use that information against you. YHWH says that the days are coming when all that you have shown them shall be carried away to Babylon, and some of your own sons shall also be taken in exile, to serve at the palace at Babylon."

Hezekiah bowed his head in repentance. "O YHWH, forgive me!" He prayed out loud. "I allowed myself to get proud again. I'm sorry. *Teach me Your ways.* Teach me to remain humble and teachable before Your face always, for I love You, YHWH my King!"

The watching heavenly host were awed. Again, Logos shouted the victory to the Father in eternity, proclaiming to all the universe, "My son has done it! His choice, now doubled, is set forever!" Logos then whispered to Isaiah, who passed it right on to Hezekiah: "YHWH is pleased with your humble response, O King. He accepts your repentance and forgives you. And He will answer your request, for He loves to teach you! He offers you three choices. Do you wish to be taught through the loss of your kingdom, your authority? Or do you choose to lose your mental facilities? To go senile? Or third, do you choose to lose your physical strength? To be sickly?"

Hezekiah pondered that. *What a choice!* "Can I not learn from YHWH without losing something?"

"Yes, you can learn many things about YHWH without losing anything at all. But He has chosen you to be His son. He wants you to know more than just things about Him. He wants you to know Him – to know His wisdom and character; to learn His ways. Anyone can learn statistics about Him. Anyone can make lists of all He has done and all He can do. From the time of our travail in Egypt the children of Israel have known His mighty acts. Yet their bodies fell in the wilderness. But Moses was a son in His house. Moses learned His ways. Moses spoke with Him face to face as to a friend. Look all that he lost! First his wealth and power as the next Pharaoh in Egypt, then forty years in Midian tending sheep and another forty in the wilderness tending the children of Israel! O King, YHWH has chosen you as a son in this generation. There is no way to become a son in His house without losing some things in this earthly realm, for His house is of the heavenly realm. Would you not rather lose a few trivial things of this earth to gain the riches of a son in the highest heaven?"

"Yes, now that you put it that way. But let God choose, for I want to be His son, whatever the cost."

"No, O King. He has given you the choice."

Hezekiah stopped to consider. "If I lose my kingdom, the lesson will be lost, for the whole point is for me to learn to remain humble even when I am honored as the king. And if I lose my mind, how can I teach others what I have learned? So if I must choose one, I pick the third choice. I would rather be strong in spirit and weak or sick in body."

Isaiah nodded. "You have made a wise choice. YHWH will honor it. He vows that you shall indeed learn all that He has to teach you, for you are His son, and He loves you. And that prophecy about Judah being exiled to Babylon? Well, YHWH is so pleased with you that He has postponed it. It will not come to pass until one of your descendants turns away from Him to serve the gods of the nations."

So from that day forth King Hezekiah grew weak and sickly in body, even as he grew mighty in spirit. Some said he had just gotten up too soon after his coronary, but he saw it as the hand of God upon him.

The kingdom of Judah prospered abundantly, now growing in power and influence among the surrounding nations. Even as Hezekiah grew weak, his kingdom grew strong. Hezekiah walked slowly, with a cane, though he was only 32. But his mind was sharper than a tack, and he remained feared and respected the world over. The people of Judah all loved him, and served him faithfully. Thus he was able to accomplish many great public works for them during his reign.

But in 696 BC, very aware of his weakness, he crowned his son Manasseh co-regent and set him on his throne. Hezekiah no longer needed the glory of sitting on a throne. Manasseh was a good boy. Hezekiah was very conscious of that prophecy about Judah being exiled to Babylon after one of his descendants turned away from YHWH, but it certainly wouldn't be Manasseh! Not if he could help it. He worked with him constantly, teaching him the wisdom and character he had gained over the years.

Yes, Manasseh was a good boy. He was quick to learn, obedient, respectful, and eager to please. He ought to make a fine king. Hefzibah, His godly mother, had trained him well, and now Hezekiah guided him in wisdom and all the kingly graces as he turned over the various aspects of the kingdom into his son's enthusiastic hands. Though only twelve, Manasseh became his arms and legs as Hezekiah grew weaker. Never was a father more pleased with his son. Everyone in Judah was delighted with him.

And while Manasseh took over more and more of the affairs of the kingdom, his weakened father grew strong in spirit. With the decision of Hezekiah to learn the ways of God, Isaiah-Alysa was loosed to prophesy marvelous and encouraging poems of the incomparable greatness of God and his promises to His afflicted ones. Poems such as:

"Comfort, O comfort ye My people, says your God. Speak kindly to Jerusalem. Call out to her, that her warfare is ended. Her iniquity has been removed. She has already received from God double for all her sins. The voice of one calls out, 'Clear the way for YHWH in the wilderness! Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God! Let every valley be lifted up and every mountain be made low. Let the rough ground become a plain, and the rugged hills a fertile valley. Then the glory of YHWH will be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of YHWH has spoken it.' ... All flesh is like grass, and its beauty like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of YHWH blows upon it. Yes, the grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God abides forever... Behold, YHWH our God will come with power and might, bringing His reward with Him. As a shepherd He shall lead His flock. In His arms He will gather the lambs and carry them near His heart. He will gently lead the nursing ewes into green pastures." (From Isaiah 40.)

Hezekiah memorized each poem and prophecy as it came to him. Then he meditated on it until the next one.

We now have all these prophecies in the book of Isaiah, only because of the carefulness of King Hezekiah to gather them together. He kept his scribes busy transcribing them, writing out the verbal ones, binding them together into booklets, and making copies to distribute. I would love to quote them all for you, but there are just too many. So I will limit myself to just a few of Hezekiah's favorites, such as:

"Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from YHWH! The justice due me escapes the notice of my God!?' Do you not know? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, YHWH, almighty Creator of the Universe, never falls asleep. He never even gets tired. His understanding is inscrutable. His wisdom is beyond us. He gives strength to the weary, and power to the weak. Youths may grow weary, and vigorous men stumble badly, yet those who wait for YHWH will renew their strength. They will mount up with wings like eagles. They will run and not get tired. They will walk and not faint."

Many of them were prophecies of the coming Messiah. These delighted Hezekiah no end: "Behold, My Servant, whom I fully support; My chosen one in whom My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him. He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry out, nor raise His voice in the street. A bruised reed He will not break, nor extinguish a weakly smoldering wick. Instead, He will faithfully dispense justice. He won't be disheartened until He has established justice on the earth, until even the far-off coastlands wait expectantly for His Law. For thus says YHWH Elohim, who created the heavens and stretched out the stars, who spread out the earth and its offspring, who gives breath to the people on it, and Spirit to those who walk in it, 'I am YHWH! I have called You to be My Righteousness! I will also hold You by the hand and watch over You. For I make You a covenant to My people and a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to release prisoners from the dungeon, to free those who dwell in darkness. I am YHWH! That is My name! I will not give My glory to another or My praise to graven images.'" (From Isaiah 42.)

"For the Spirit of YHWH Elohim is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to bring good news to the afflicted. YHWH has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted; to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners; to proclaim the favorable year of YHWH and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort those who mourn in Zion by giving them a garland of grace instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a fainting spirit! So they will be called oaks of righteousness planted by YHWH Himself, so He may be glorified in them. Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, restore the past devastations, and repair the ruined cities, the desolations of many generations. Aliens will pasture your flocks and foreigners will be your farmers, but you shall be called priests of YHWH, ministers of our God! You will eat the wealth of nations, and everlasting joy will fill your house!" (From Isaiah 61.)

Many were prophecies of the nations, conveying God's judgment or His blessing depending on how they have treated His people. Others were just prophecies of Judah, and Jerusalem, the Holy City. Yet others were prophecies of the regathering of Israel with Judah into one nation, to fulfill their original purpose, such as in Isaiah 49:

"Listen to Me, O islands, and pay attention, you far-off nations. YHWH called me from the womb; He named me Israel from my mother's body. He has made my mouth like a sharp sword, concealed in the shadow of His hand. He made me like a sharp arrow, concealed in His quiver. Then He said to me, 'You, Israel, are My servant in whom I will show My glory!' But I answered, 'I fear You have toiled in vain, for I have spent my strength in vanity and futility. Now I shall receive only judgment; the justice due me from YHWH.' YHWH laughed and responded, 'Not so! For I formed you from the womb to be My servant! I shall bring back Jacob, regather Israel, and make you one nation again, so you shall be glorious in My sight. But it is such a small thing for Me to restore the devastated tribes of Jacob and Israel. So I will also make you as a light to the nations, so My great salvation may reach to the ends of the earth!'"

But Hezekiah's 'most favorite' prophecies were those that spoke of Messiah's coming Kingdom: "...the former troubles are forgotten; they are hid from My sight. For behold, I renew the heavens and the earth, so the former things will no longer be remembered. Be glad and rejoice in what I create! I create Jerusalem for rejoicing, and her people for gladness. I also will rejoice in Jerusalem, and be glad in My people. No longer will be heard in her the voice of weeping, or the sound of crying. No longer will there be in her one who dies in infancy, or a man who does not live out his full days. For even the youth shall reach the age of one hundred! If he does not, he will be thought accursed. So My people shall build homes and live in them! They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit! Never again shall they build only for another to inhabit, or plant only for another to steal the harvest. As the lifetime of a tree, so shall be the lifespan of My people. My chosen ones shall wear out the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity, for they are the children of those blessed by YHWH, including their descendants for many generations. Then before they even call on Me, I will answer. I will respond to them while they are still speaking. The wolf and the lamb shall graze together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox, but dust shall be the serpent's food. Then they shall do no evil and cause no harm in all My holy mountain, says YHWH!" (Isaiah 65)

Oh! Did Hezekiah live in those prophecies! In them, he learned YHWH's ways, how He thinks, what He loves and what He hates, to become the son YHWH always wanted. Thus injustice and evil were banished from the kingdom of Judah, and during the fifteen extra years YHWH granted Hezekiah, peace and righteousness reigned. It was a little slice of heaven on earth! The people rejoiced.

Isaiah was now 86 and his wife Alysa 76. Never was a prophet so well-appreciated in his own time. They were second in power and honor to the king himself. All the people of the land loved and respected them. Isaiah couldn't understand that, for Logos had commanded him to "Render the hearts of My people insensitive, their ears dull, their eyes dim, lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and repent, and be healed." But the people were anything but insensitive!

So Isaiah-Alysa questioned YHWH about that. Logos reminded him of the general insensitivity to His Word during the times of Kings Ahaz, Hoshea, Pekah, and even good King Jotham. Then He said, "I left you Hezekiah My son to encourage you, to prepare you for the tough times ahead. His son Manasseh will try your soul."

"Manasseh? You've got to be kidding! Manasseh is a good boy. He is respectful, obedient, sincere, faithful..."

"I don't kid. You look at the outside. I see the heart. Manasseh's heart is anything but sincere. Warn Hezekiah, for he is blind to his son's hard heart and callous spirit."

Hezekiah's reaction was about the same as Isaiah's. He couldn't conceive of his son having a hard heart. Manasseh was always so quick, so eager to obey. Alysa was the only one who seemed to sense something wrong. "YHWH questioned his sincerity. Is it possible that he is eager to please you and to appear as righteous before the people, yet has no real love for YHWH in his heart?"

"Well, let's ask him." Hezekiah was determined to get to the bottom of this. They called for Manasseh. Hezekiah took the lead. "My son, you have been king with me for two years now. I and all the people of Judah appreciate your reign. Now that you're fourteen, I want to know how you feel about it all. Do you like being king? Do you love the people of the kingdom? Do you love me, and the way I've taught you to rule? Do you love Hefzibah and the way she's taught you to conduct yourself? Do you love YHWH? Do you love our worship of Him and dependence upon his Word? Do you love YHWH's wisdom and His ways? And do you love His prophets, like Isaiah and Alysa here?"

Manasseh brightened up with his most winning and friendly smile. "Of course Dad! Everything you said and more! YHWH has given me a good life. The best life a boy could ever have. I'm grateful to Him, and to you all as well. I'm determined to pursue it and make the most of it. I will be the best king I can be. I determine to bring honor to your name and to YHWH's too, bless His holy name forever!"

There was nothing wrong with that answer. Hezekiah turned to Isaiah with an 'I told you so!' look on his face. But Alysa was still suspicious. "Manasseh, we're very glad to hear your confession. YHWH will honor you always, if you will keep it. But you said something that I would really like to have explained. You told your dad, 'Everything you said, and more.' What did you mean by the, 'and more?'"

Manasseh gave a courteous bow. “Yes, Ma’am. I love wisdom! I want to be the best king I can be! I want to learn everything my parents have to teach me, everything you and Isaiah have to teach me, and more! For example, I’ve been studying the writings of Micah. He was a prophet from before my father’s reign. I want to learn everything that God has ever spoken through all His prophets.”

Now Isaiah got suspicious. “Yes. Micah of the School of Prophets. What are you learning from his writings?”

“Oh! It’s been thrilling! Do you have an hour? Back in the times of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, Hoshea, and Pekah, Micah was prophesying the destruction and exile of both Israel and Judah. He said things like, ‘YHWH is coming to tread on the high places of the earth. The mountains will melt and the valleys will split, like wax before the fire, like water rushing downhill, for the rebellion of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel. For what is the rebellion of Jacob if not Samaria? And what is the high place of Judah if not Jerusalem? So I will make Samaria a heap of ruins... all her idols will be smashed, her wealth will be burned, and her statues will be desolate. That’s why I lament and wail. That’s why I go barefoot, naked, lamenting like jackals and mourning like ostriches. For her wound is incurable. And now it has even come to Judah. It has reached the gates of My people and on into Jerusalem. Her leaders pronounce judgment for a bribe. Her priests teach for a price. Her prophets divine for money. Yet they invoke the name of YHWH, saying, ‘YHWH is in our midst! Calamity shall not come upon us!’ Therefore, on account of you, Zion will become a plowed field, Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of Solomon’s glorious temple will become just another mound in a gloomy forest.’

“But guess what? When wicked old King Ahaz died and my father took over the throne of Judah, Micah changed his tune. He began prophesying good for us. He said, ‘It will come about in the last days...’ that’s now – the days of me and my father! ‘That the mountain of YHWH’s holy temple will be established as the chief of the mountains. It will be raised above the hills and the peoples will stream to it. Indeed many nations will say, ‘Come! Let us go up to the mountain of YHWH, to the temple of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us His ways, and that we may walk in His paths!’ For from Zion will go forth His Law, even the Word of YHWH from Jerusalem. He will judge between many peoples. He will render just decisions for mighty and distant nations. Then they will hammer their swords into plowshares and turn their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they train for war. Every man will sit under his vine or his fig tree, with no one to make them afraid. For the mouth of YHWH of Hosts has declared it!’ Isn’t that thrilling! That is for now! My dad’s godly rule changed everything! He concludes, ‘As for us, we will walk in the name of YHWH our God forever and ever.’ That’s us right now! My rule will be one of total peace and prosperity!’

Isaiah and Alysa looked at each other. On the one hand, Manasseh’s studies, and his remarkable memory of what he studied, was commendable. But they were suspicious. What was he missing?

Manasseh saw their hesitation and gushed on. “In that day, declares YHWH, I will assemble the lame and gather the outcasts, all those whom I’ve afflicted. I will make the lame a remnant, and the outcasts a strong nation. And I, YHWH, will rule over them from now on forever! And as for you, you watchtower of My flock, you descendant of the daughter of Zion, unto you it will come. Yes, to you the former dominion, the kingdom of David, will come to the daughter of Jerusalem!’ Isn’t that just totally cool! The kingdom of Solomon, Micah calls it the ‘former dominion’, will return during my reign!” Manasseh was hopping up and down with glee.

Isaiah did not share his joy. He bowed his head and closed his eyes. “Uh, Manasseh, maybe you’d better study that some more. I don’t have as good a memory as you, and I don’t recall exactly, but it seemed to me when I read Micah’s work that he was talking about Messiah there. And I think he said it wouldn’t be fulfilled until after the exile.”

Suddenly the Spirit reminded him, and he began to quote, “Writhe in pain, and labor to give birth, O daughter of Zion. Now you will leave the Holy City, dwell in the fields, and go down in exile to Babylon. But from there you will be rescued; there YHWH will redeem you from the hand of your enemies. For they do not know the thoughts of YHWH; they do not understand His purpose. He has only gathered them together like sheaves to the threshing floor. So arise, and thresh, daughter of Zion.”

Manasseh’s enthusiasm wasn’t dimmed in the slightest. “Yes! He is talking about Messiah! Don’t you remember? He says, ‘As for you Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, yet from you One will go forth for Me to be a ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from ages past. For He will wait until the daughter of Zion has given birth. Then the remnant of His brethren will return to the sons of Israel. And He will arise and shepherd His flock in the strength of YHWH, in the majesty of the name of YHWH His God! He will be honored to the ends of the earth, for this One shall be our peace.’

“Don’t you see it? *I am the One!* My mother is the daughter of Zion who has given birth, to me! Don’t you know I was born in Ephrathah? And the exile has already happened – it’s when Israel was conquered by Assyria! Remember what Micah said, ‘When the Assyrian invades our land and tramples our citadels, then He will raise against them seven shepherds, and eight officers, and they will shepherd the land of Assyria with the sword, even the land of Nimrod at its gates. And He...’ that’s the One, the Messiah, ‘He will deliver us from the Assyrians!’ Don’t you see? I am destined to rise up in power and deliver Israel from the Assyrians! I’m the one who will be their peace!”

Isaiah-Alysa was stunned. *This fourteen-year-old has a god complex, thinking he's Messiah?* "So, let me get this straight. You were born in Ephrathah, and your 'goings forth are from ages past'. So how old does that make you?"

"Oh, don't get technical on me. He doesn't mean that literally. All that means is that I am of the line of David and Solomon, the line of Abraham, the line of righteous Heber. That is certainly ages past."

"And what about the exile of Judah to Babylon?"

"Again, figurative. Judah represents all of Israel. Israel was exiled by the Assyrians to many other nations besides Assyria. They went to Anatolia, Hamath, Urartu, Media, I'm sure that some of them went to Babylon as well. He just says Babylon, because that's about the farthest they went. When I conquer Assyria to end the exile and start the reign of peace and prosperity, it just means that I will bring them back from all the nations, even as far off as Babylon."

Alysa responded softly. "Manasseh, what else have you been studying, besides Micah's prophecies?" She sounded tired, and maybe a little fearful.

"Oh, many things. If I am to be a great king, as the prophecies say, I must know... I must understand the nations, their customs, and their gods. I've only just begun, really, for I've been having so much fun with Micah's prophecies. But I've also briefly looked into the Assyrian gods which Ahaz, my grandfather, worshiped. I think I'll study them in depth as soon as I finish with Micah. But you don't need to worry about me. I won't fall prey to ever worshipping them. I just need to know about them so I will be able to defeat them. Oh, and don't forget, I've been studying your and Isaiah's writings as well. They are wonderful! I've memorized large portions of them, like, 'A Redeemer will come to Zion, to those who turn from their transgressions in Jacob, declares YHWH. This is My covenant with you: My Spirit which is upon you, and My Words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from you, or from your sons, or from your son's sons, from now on forever, declares YHWH. So arise and shine! For your light has come!' Did you get that? It is for right now! Like it already happened! 'Your light has come! The glory of YHWH has risen upon you. For behold, darkness will cover the earth...' that is certainly true now! '... and deep darkness the peoples. But YHWH will rise upon you! And nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising! So lift up your eyes round about, and see! They all gather together, they come to you, your sons come from afar...' See! That is my regathering of Israel from exile! '... and your daughters will be carried in your arms. Then you will see and be radiant. Your heart will rejoice! The abundance of the sea will be turned to you. The wealth of nations will come to you. They will bring you gold and silver, and will bear good news of the praises of God. I shall glorify My temple in the name of the Holy One of Israel who has glorified you!'" (Isaiah 59, 60.)

Isaiah shook his head sadly. Now it all became clear. "Continue your studies, my boy. But I urge you to skip the studies of the foreign gods and really concentrate on the Word of YHWH through Moses and YHWH's prophets. You've done well, so far. And you're starting to put it all together. But I believe you've misunderstood the parts about the Messiah. You are young; quick to latch on to parts you like. But I know that Messiah will not come in your lifetime, for YHWH showed me that one of your dad's descendants will turn away from Him, and then Judah will be exiled to Babylon. I hope that the one who turns away is not you, but be warned. Go study my commission again. I was sent to 'render the hearts of My people insensitive, their ears dull, their eyes dim...' Don't ever let yourself become like that. Ask YHWH to show you His truth."

"Oh, yes, Isaiah. I sure will. Thank you for the warning. I'll be more cautious. Sure, I know that I'm not the great Messiah, the one you said would be born of a virgin and named Immanuel, whom you described as the 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, and Prince of Peace'. Oh, how I love those prophecies you wrote! But I would be awfully arrogant to claim to be Him. He is God!

"But the Messiah must have an earthly counterpart, a human representative. Just like you said, 'A throne will be established in righteousness, and a judge from the house of David will sit there in faithfulness.' So I am the human representative, the type of Messiah in my generation, for I am of the house of David and I rule in righteousness and faithfulness. I am Messiah's representative here on earth. Many of His final prophecies will be fulfilled in my rule! The greatest ones!" Manasseh bounced up and down, clapping his hands. "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not keep quiet, until her righteousness shines like the sun, and her salvation like a burning torch! The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings of the earth your glory!" (Isaiah 62)

This discussion went on for several more hours, but I'm going to leave it there, as it really went no further than that. Isaiah-Alysa tried again and again, but young Manasseh was amazing. He knew the prophecies of Isaiah and Micah. He had a phenomenal memory! But he had concocted this grand scheme which pointed them all to himself and the glorious reign he was planning for Israel and Judah.

What was worse, Hezekiah bought it, too. "I'm really proud of you, my son! Your mother has taught you very well! I didn't realize that you knew all those prophecies of Micah and Isaiah-Alysa. As long as you stick with the Word of YHWH, you can't ever go wrong. I will be delighted if YHWH uses you to bring forth His Kingdom of righteousness and to restore the sons of Israel to the land. God bless you, and make His face to shine upon you and give you peace, as you continue to humbly serve Him."

"Thank you father, I will!" Manasseh jumped up and scurried off, just as enthusiastic as ever.

Suddenly even Hezekiah had a twinge of doubt. What was it that Isaiah had said... “Anyone can know the acts of YHWH. But if you want to know His ways, you have to lose something ...”? Hezekiah had already discovered that. In his own weakness and suffering, he had drawn close to YHWH. He had seen His power and glory. He was learning His ways through suffering. But his son Manasseh had never suffered a day in his life. He was a good boy. He had never even suffered a spanking. He was learning the neat things that God can do, but he had no clue of God’s ways.

“Pray for his suffering. Release him to God for discipline. Pray that God will bring him to the end of himself and will humble him. Whatever it costs, it’s worth it to know YHWH.”

The message was clear in Hezekiah’s mind. He heard it and knew it was from God. He wrestled with it, but could not quite allow himself to pray for suffering for his own son. He was a good boy! Why should he need discipline? What if YHWH put some terrible injury or deformity on him because of his own father’s prayer? Hezekiah couldn’t stand the thought. He trusted YHWH. But not that much!

Ashur-nadin-shumi, son of Sennacherib, was far too young to make a good king. The advisors his father placed around him were all ‘yes men’, little more than glorified baby-sitters. So the Elamites easily captured Babylon and killed the Assyrian boy-king. They crowned a nobleman named Nergal-ushezib as the king of Babylon in 694 BC.

King Sennacherib was furious. He attacked in the fall of 693 BC. In a fierce battle near Nippur the Assyrians defeated and captured Nergal-ushezib. He was taunted and abused as Assyrians are wont to do, and exiled to Calah. Sennacherib remained in Babylon for a full year, cleaning out the rebels and avenging his son’s death. Before he left, he appointed Chaldean prince Mushezib-Marduk as a puppet ruler in the place of his slain son.

When Manasseh heard the news, he was grieved for Babylon. When he got a little older, he vowed, he would put an end to Assyria’s vile aggression and become a savior for Babylon, and all the nations.

In 692 BC, Osorkon III died at Thebes, at the age of 79. His oldest son Takelot III had been co-regent with him for the last six years, so he tried to struggle on by himself for a while. But Takelot III had neither the intelligence nor the inclination to rule. So he bowed out, and his capable little brother Rudamun became ruling high priest of Amun.

Then in 690 BC the legendary Nubian king Piye died at Napata after a 30 year reign. Shebitku and Taharqa were crushed at their father’s death. They ordered a period of mourning all over Egypt. Then, in a grand ceremony at the royal city of Memphis, Taharqa was crowned as the next King-Pharaoh of the Nubians. He hurried up to Napata to take Piye’s place. Taharqa ruled there for six years. Then his older brother Shebitku died in 684 BC, and he had to rush back down north to take over for him in Thebes.

By 690 BC, ten years after that last catastrophic flyby of Mars in 701 BC, all the planets had pretty much settled down into their new orbits. Babylon, China, Egypt, Greece and the nations of the Levant were recalculating their calendars due to the change from a 360 day to a 365 day year. Before, such changes had always been a very big deal; everyone needed to know when Mars would next become destructive. But for ten years now, Mars had not shown his face, nor Venus, nor Mercury. Even the planetary giants were no longer coming so close. The world’s astronomers and astrologers finally realized that the resonant system which had locked the planets into their deadly elliptical orbits had unraveled. Chronos was no longer keeping time. Not only had Earth’s day, month, and year changed, but all the planets had changed. Their orbits were more circular, slower, closer to the plane of the ecliptic. They settled into new stable orbital bands (stable with respect to each other, but all together slowly spiraling toward Sol in accord with the well-known laws of celestial mechanics and thermodynamics).

The huge magnetic and static fields protecting Earth had already noticeably decayed. With each close pass of Mars, Earth’s magnetic field had been recharged up to about 30,000 gauss at the equator. With no recharging, it was now exponentially decaying. Within 2500 years, it would be down to half a gauss. That is not strong enough to protect mankind from the harmful radiation from space which causes cell mutations. This results in more cancers, inbreeding/birth defects, and a weakened immune system.

Satan of course desperately tried to get his ‘toys’ back. *He was the god of this world! He had been given authority over the planets!* In spite of his lost wager with Logos, he did everything in his power to regain control of Venus or Mars. But he simply wasn’t strong enough. He could push or pull all he wanted, but when he tired, the planet would return to its stable orbital band. He raged and swore, and even threatened to make Sol go nova, but in the end, he had to give up. The Word of Logos held fast; every atom, every particle in the universe defied him to break it. Just like the incredible amount of energy required to move an electron from one shell to another in an atom, the energy required to move a planet from one stable orbit to the next turned out to be impossibly huge. He finally had to give up.

In 689 BC, the Chaldean king Mushezib-Marduk (who had been appointed by Sennacherib) revolted. That was the last straw. Sennacherib was totally fed up with those stubborn, rebellious Babylonians. He didn’t mess around. He swept down with his invincible army, tortured to death King Mushezib-Marduk and every one of his officers, commanders, advisors, and friends, wiped out his army, and then proceeded to level the city and cast its rubble into the sea. He even diverted the Euphrates River so that it flowed completely over where the great city had once been. Mighty Babylon was gone. The few who escaped fled to other towns to tell the tale and bemoan their fate.

CHAPTER 8 – KING MANASSEH

All this time, young Manasseh was ruling Judah with his weakened father, good King Hezekiah. Their kingdom was incredibly blessed, with peace and prosperity across the land. Righteousness prevailed. Justice ruled. Idolatry was banned. The worship of YHWH through the God-ordained Levitical Priesthood was conducted in strict accord with His laws. King Hezekiah understood YHWH's ways! He knew that righteousness exalts a nation, while immorality and idolatry tear it down. He knew that the nation is blessed whose God is YHWH. (Things I wish our leaders in America knew!) Satan found that he could not touch Judah. Even sickness and poverty were held at bay.

Each year, Logos gave Hezekiah a reminder to pray for suffering for his son Manasseh, so he would learn to call on YHWH and hate evil. But Hezekiah kept putting it off. *Nobody else was suffering in his kingdom; why must his son? Manasseh was such a good boy!*

Manasseh continued his studies. Now he knew nearly all the writings of Moses and the prophets by heart, not to mention all the Psalms and most of the works of Solomon. Manasseh was an amazing king! Always kind, considerate, and wise beyond his years. He was determined he would be like King Solomon in all his wisdom and the power and glory of his kingdom, yet like King David in his love for YHWH and his people, and he already had a pretty good jump on both! But of course he would never stoop to the immorality of either. He determined to be faithful to his wife-to-be all his life, just like his father was to Hefzibah his mother. In all his vast knowledge of the Scriptures, he strung together all the best passages and claimed them for himself. *His kingdom will surely be the greatest kingdom the world has ever known!*

Though he remembered the warnings of Isaiah-Alysa, Manasseh still studied all the gods of the nations. Not to worship them, of course. Just to understand them so he could help the nations forsake them and come to YHWH. In his dream world, everyone would come to love YHWH, so nations would never go to war again. He discovered that all the gods of the nations were based on the same things: the planets that had so recently terrorized their lives. "This is the time that Messiah will come!" he excitedly told Isaiah-Alysa. "He has chosen me to be His spokesman, for I know what all nations are longing to hear: the planetary gods who have brought such fear and catastrophe to their lives are gone, to trouble them no more! Now only YHWH exists, to love them, heal all their pain and suffering, bless their lives, and restore them to Himself! Don't you see it? Now is the time! I am the one! God has raised me up for such a time as this!"

Isaiah held his head in his hands, praying, while Alysa repeated, again, "Manasseh, you have studied God's deeds but you still don't know His ways. Beseech God, that your eyes and ears be opened, or all is lost!"

Of course Manasseh knew that to be hogwash. He had a brilliant, analytical mind and an almost perfect memory. At the age now of 21, he knew more than any before him about the ways of God! *My eyes are not dull*, he thought. *My ears hear everything that YHWH is saying through His prophets, and I understand it! I've got it all together! Isaiah is just a doddering old man, kindly, but getting a little senile. And sentimental Alysa? Ha! What do women know anyway!* Thus Manasseh ignored their warnings.

Those fifteen additional years that YHWH promised to Hezekiah were nearly up. He was ready to go, and eagerly looking forward to meeting his Maker face to face.

Hezekiah had one more important task before he died. He must find a wife, a godly wife, for his son and heir. But when he broached the subject, for the first time in his life Manasseh refused him. "Please, father. Don't get me a wife. And don't let Isaiah find me one either. I studied the lives of Kings David and Solomon. Most of the major problems they had were because of their wives! If my kingdom will be greater than David's or Solomon's, I've got to take steps to never let a woman drag me down. I've decided to remain celibate, at least until I'm 40. I plan to rule for sixty years, so that will still give me plenty of time to breed an heir to carry on the line of David. But I will never allow wicked women to influence my life like David and Solomon did."

"Uh, son... what about your mother? Has she not been good to you – influenced your life for good? A good wife can do the same. Your mother has blessed me all my life."

"Well, sure. But there are no other women like my mom. And I just can't take the chance of getting one like, well, like a Jezebel or an Athaliah – or a Delilah!"

"That is why I offered to help you pick one."

"No, thank you, Dad. I've already decided. I will have nothing to do with women until my kingdom is firmly established and I have taken my proper place among the great kings of the earth."

"No, son. That's backwards. You need a good wife now, while you are yet weak and humble, so she can stand beside you to help you in your weakness and support you as you become great. Then when you are great you'll still appreciate her. If you wait until you're great to take a wife, in your pride you'll select some haughty, self-centered princess who will marry you for your power and wealth, and will have no clue how to actually support you."

"Aw, Dad! Quit twisting my arm! We've already been through this. You don't understand! I've got it figured out. I've studied the past kings of Israel and Judah, so I know!"

Thus, toward the end of 687 BC, Hezekiah died quietly in his sleep, his body and soul perfected and ready to meet his Maker, but with his last tasks on earth still left undone. He never found Manasseh a wife, nor gave God permission to discipline his son.

Manasseh ordered a month of mourning throughout the land. King Hezekiah was buried in highest honors with the kings of Judah in Jerusalem. Kings of the surrounding nations all sent their condolences along with delegations bearing rich gifts, for Hezekiah was greatly loved.

And from the very first delegation from a foreign king, all of Manasseh's grand theories about having the perfect kingdom went flying out the window. For Manasseh had never been tested. He had never even faced evil, much less stood against it. He had never suffered the consequences of bad choices or stupid decisions. He had been living in a bubble of his father's making. All his lofty ideals collapsed the first time a foreign king offered him a matched set of solid gold idols and his daughter to 'add to his harem'. Manasseh was a good boy, obedient, respectful, kind, and considerate. He could no more say 'no' to such a powerful potentate than he could slap him in the face!

So he bowed to express his gratefulness, giving due honor to each visiting lord. He knew how to honor them, for he had studied their ways and he understood their gods. He decided to tell them all about YHWH – later. For now, he set up their gods in prominent places on his palace shelves to really make them feel at home.

And the princesses! Each one was more lovely, more seductive, more eager to please him and give him pleasure than the last! In his head, Manasseh knew it was wrong. He knew all the trouble it had gotten King Solomon into, for he had studied him at length and determined to pattern his rule after him – except for the princesses. But the seductive spirit quickly overwhelmed his head knowledge. He had no idea the pull of sensuality could be so strong. He was inflamed with passions beyond his control. Soon he was regularly sleeping with each of his new princesses.

Like a snowball rolling down hill, Manasseh gathered momentum with each visiting delegation. By the end of his first year as sole king, he had doubled his father's gold and silver, he had idols and carved images on every shelf in the palace, and he had six pregnant concubines in his harem. This from the good son who was so determined to have the perfect kingdom. He knew so much! But he didn't know God. He was indeed a good son! But he wasn't godly.

As with Solomon, his concubines and alliances with the surrounding nations turned his heart away from following YHWH. By the second year of his reign, he was rebuilding the idolatrous worship centers that his father had been so diligent to get rid of on every hill and under every green tree. He made altars for all the Baals, set up the carved Asherim, and worshiped all the host of heaven along with his new concubines and their fathers. By his third year, he had put pagan altars in the temple of Solomon. By his fourth year, he had rebuilt the horrid idols of Chemosh, disposed of his many unwanted infants by sending them through the fires to Molech, and sunk to degrading depths with every form of witchcraft and moral perversion.

Isaiah-Alysa had retired after King Hezekiah had died, but YHWH urged him to make one last prophecy. At the age of 97 Isaiah was moving slowly, but he made it to the palace and awaited his turn. All day he waited. Manasseh was ashamed and didn't want to see him. But at the end of the day after everyone else had gone, Isaiah and Alysa looked like they were going to sleep right there on the hard courtroom floor, so he relented. He left his throne and walked to the wall where they were sitting. "Hello, Isaiah and Alysa. You've come to reprimand me, I suppose. God knows I deserve it. I tried so hard! But I guess I'm no better than Solomon. At least I understand him better now!" He rambled on for a while, half apologetic, and half trying to justify himself, but Isaiah and Alysa just kept silent.

After he finally ran down, Isaiah began. "O King, live forever. We do not reprimand you. That is God's job. We just want to tell you what will happen, so you will learn wisdom. Every young person makes mistakes early in life. Wisdom is discovering that everything has its appropriate consequence, and learning to choose things with good consequences rather than things with bad consequences."

"Okay, what are my consequences?" Manasseh sighed, rather relieved that Isaiah was not going to give him the harsh tongue-lashing he knew he deserved.

"First, just so you will know this is the Word of YHWH, for only YHWH can foretell the future, King Sennacherib will be assassinated by his own sons, and his youngest son Esarhaddon will take the throne. When that happens, know that Assyria will come against you, and YHWH will give them power over you. From that time on, you will pay tribute to Assyria, and send your wealth, your labors, and your people as slaves to Nineveh. Then when your riches are gone, when poverty and sickness stalks the land, you yourself will be taken away to Babylon with a leather thong on your nose and bronze chains on your legs."

Manasseh had expected a reprimand, but this was totally overwhelming. He was a good boy! He'd never had a discipline in his life. He'd never suffered so much as an upset stomach before. Now he was stunned. The silence lengthened while Manasseh's face flushed and then turned cold. Finally, "I don't believe you. God would never be so cruel to me. You're just trying to scare me. But your so-called 'prophecy' is a lie. It can't come true! Babylon is gone! Sennacherib totally destroyed it!" His anger rising, Manasseh shouted, "Babylon is no more, you ignoramus! So just go peddle your lying prophecies somewhere else! I never want to see your faces again."

Manasseh turned and strode off. But as he went, Alysa called out to him entreatingly, "Manasseh, remember the Word of God which you memorized. 'A throne will be established in righteousness...' If you now repent, Assyria will have no power over you. As you become righteous, you will gain power over them, to deliver Israel from their cruel hand." But Manasseh only hurried out of earshot.

Now any restraint that Manasseh had held was erased in his fury. He swiftly sunk to such moral corruption that I dare not attempt to describe it, except to affirm the truth of Holy Scripture that Manasseh misled Judah to do more evil than all the nations God had displaced before them. God, the angels, why, even the devils were shocked at how quickly Manasseh plumbed the depths of wickedness and moral depravity. The floodgates were opened wide, and paganism swept in from all sides. The Law of God seemed to be forgotten. All that was good was now despised, and the people boasted in what should have been their shame. The nation groaned under the weight of her sins. The righteous in Judah hid themselves and cried out to God.

Logos heard their cries. He summoned Satan into His presence. "My beloved adversary, I see you have decided to test my Bride with evil, after all. I was getting concerned that you would not. You waited long enough! Manasseh certainly needed the testing, didn't he! I thank you."

"Oh nuts!" (That was the worst epithet that Satan had discovered was always available in the presence of Logos.) "You are so devious! I thought I was hurting You, and now You thank me? What sort of a sadist are You, anyway?"

"No, no. I'm not a sadist at all. I merely see through the suffering to the glory that is yet to be revealed. I'm willing to face the pain to receive My perfected Bride. I hate the evil, and the pain that results, but if that is what it takes, so be it. Thank you for..."

"Your perfected Bride indeed! I'll admit that You won Hezekiah, but I have his son Manasseh. He will never be perfected! He is totally mine! I will 'perfect' him in evil!"

"We'll see. You have My permission to harm him, only you may not take his life. Choose wisely the tools you will use, for according to My prophecy through Isaiah-Alysa he will..." But at this point Satan fled from Logos. He had the permission he needed. He would make good use of it! He didn't want to hear any further conditions, especially the tools Logos wanted him to use. *He will pick his own tools. And he will pick the most unlikely tools he can find, just to cause any prophecies of Isaiah-Alysa to fail.*

Satan spent months searching the land for the least likely one to bring down Manasseh. He was in no hurry. He enjoyed toying with him as he tempted him into all sorts of new moral perversions. *Manasseh was like a dream come true. He fell for every one, just like leading a lamb to the slaughter. Perfected Bride indeed! He was so naïve! This one would become a perfected son of Satan himself.*

Satan finally selected Esarhaddon to become his chief tormentor, the architect of Manasseh's downfall. There is no way in Sheol that Isaiah could have predicted that, as Esarhaddon wasn't even a king or a military man. In fact, he was a good boy, just like Manasseh had been! *Even Logos could never have guessed him.* Satan had experience with the good old boys. He knew how to bring them down.

Esarhaddon was the youngest son of Sennacherib and his lovely second wife, Syrian Queen Naqi'a. Sennacherib's first queen, Tashmetum-sharrat, had grown resentful and bitter. Her jealousy spilled over to her sons, Adrammelech and Sharezer. Their oldest brother (crown prince Ashurnadin-shumi) had died, so they expected to rule after their father. But Queen Tashmetum-sharrat was arrogant and cold. Sennacherib had grown to hate her. Naqi'a was his true love. Satan figured he could use that to his advantage.

Next, to pick the location. Not just any city would do. Satan wanted to make sure that whatever prophecy Isaiah had given Manasseh could never come to pass, so he had to pick a city that was most unlikely. Babylon! Of course! It was not only most unlikely, it was utterly impossible, as it was completely gone! Nobody could have guessed that!

Now, this would be his masterpiece! Esarhaddon was a good boy. He had a strong sense of fairness. Satan could use that to his advantage, too. Satan first inspired one of his own, an old witch who had taken a job in Sennacherib's court as an oracle. She came to the court one morning when Naqi'a was there with her son Esarhaddon. "I see by the power of the gods..." The witch was very good at this, but I don't want to bore you with her lengthy incantations, "...that the spirit of the great city of Babylon lies troubled under the Euphrates. A curse rests upon Nineveh for what Sennacherib has done. Marduk will not be at peace, and the Euphrates will not cease to flood Assyria each year, until the walls of mighty Babylon are restored and the Esagila is rebuilt with Marduk's temple!"

The Euphrates River had always overflowed its banks every year, though it seldom flooded the city, for they had dug channels and built dikes. But it happened that ever since Sennacherib had wiped out Babylon, the floods had seemed a little worse than usual. Satan magnified that in their minds for a bit, then he inspired his witch to point her bony finger directly at young Esarhaddon. "There he is!" she cackled. "There is the one! Esarhaddon is his name! He has been appointed by the gods to restore the walls of Babylon and to rebuild the Esagila and Marduk's temple! Only this will finally break the curse over Assyria!"

Esarhaddon was quite delighted with this prophecy. It appealed to his sense of fairness. He asked his father for command of the army, to go down and begin rebuilding Babylon immediately. Sennacherib actually agreed. *You don't argue with the oracle!* Besides, Esarhaddon was his favorite son. So he appointed him Assyria's crown prince (that means his successor to the throne), and authorized him to take the army to Babylon and begin the project.

But Adrammelech and Sharezer (Sennacherib's sons from his chief queen, Tashmetum-sharrat) were furious! This could cost them their throne! So before Esarhaddon could even take command of Assyria's army, they plotted against him and tried to kill him. But Naqi'a discerned their intentions and warned him to flee for his life.

Esarhaddon ended up in Anatolia, on the outer fringe of the empire, waiting for Sennacherib to deal with his half-brothers. *Surely they would accept their father's decision.* Over the next year, some of Sennacherib's forces who were loyal to him joined him there, but even more remained at Nineveh and seemed loyal to Adrammelech and Sharezer.

Early in 681 BC when King Sennacherib tried to regain control from his rebellious sons, they plotted against him and staged a coup d'état. The remainder of the military took their side. *They were the rightful successors to the throne!* They slew Sennacherib as he worshiped in the temple of Nisroch his god, and took over the empire.

This caused a lot of turmoil. Many people had heard the oracle, and everyone knew that King Sennacherib had appointed Esarhaddon as the crown prince. They formed a secret opposition party, which got word to Esarhaddon urging him to come back to Assyria without delay. "The prophecy must be fulfilled! You must become king, and you must rebuild Babylon or the curse will remain."

Esarhaddon agreed. In an amazingly swift march, he brought his loyal men into Nineveh and attacked his half-brothers. But their spies within Esarhaddon's camp had warned them just in time, so for six weeks there was a vicious and bloody civil war.

Satan loved it. For him, the more blood and gore the better! But in the end, he had the Euphrates flood Nineveh again, badly this time. He filled the land with superstition that the curse could only be lifted by Esarhaddon. With the people now on his side, his half-brothers Sharezer and Adrammelech were forced to flee to Urartu.

Esarhaddon ruthlessly executed their followers and all their families. Then immediately, before even receiving his crown, he ordered Babylon rebuilt. All the people were with him on that one! Within two years they had the river back in its channel, the rubble cleared away, the Esagila temple complex rebuilt, and the altars, statues, shrines, and cult priests of the Assyrian gods restored as before.

Then, in a move calculated to placate both the gods and all those widespread superstitions, Esarhaddon staged his coronation at the Esagila, between the temple of Marduk and Lake Abzu where Enki (Marduk's father) supposedly dwelt. Enki was the god of the waters, so the curse on the Euphrates would be lifted. During the dedication of the Esagila complex to the gods, Esarhaddon was crowned king of Assyria and Babylon. He swore to finish rebuilding Babylon, and spend a third of each year ruling there.

Manasseh heard the news in 680 BC. He had banked his rebellion against the Word of YHWH through Isaiah on the fact that Babylon didn't exist. But now the first half of old Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled and Babylon was being rebuilt! *By the new King Esarhaddon!* It had all happened with stunning swiftness! Manasseh was terrified. Now he had a choice to make. Angels and demons watched.

Manasseh called for Isaiah. Alysa came too, leading him, for 100-year-old Isaiah was feeble, hard of hearing, and nearly blind. "Remember that prophecy you made to me about Esarhaddon and Babylon?" Manasseh began.

"O King, live forever!" Isaiah responded. "Yes, I do remember. Now all is in place for it to be fulfilled. But do you remember what Alysa said as you were walking off?"

He didn't, so Alysa repeated it, adding, "Like your father, you were born and raised to know YHWH. You know His Word. You memorized it. Thus you know that a kingdom is established in righteousness and truth. All the things that Isaiah said would happen to you, falling under the power of Esarhaddon, the poverty and sickness, your capture and ultimate exile to Babylon, will not happen if you repent now, today, and return to YHWH."

"Huh. Repent? Whatever does that mean?"

Isaiah took over, leaning heavily on his staff, clouded eyes staring into space. "It means turning around, O King. You've been pursuing the gods of the nations, which are not gods at all. And you've been worshiping the planets, which as you know have moved away from Earth and will never trouble Earth again. You don't need to placate them to keep them away. Now it is time to turn around. Get rid of all the false gods from the land. Cleanse the land, so you can serve and fear YHWH only, for He created you, and your life and times are in His loving hands." He smiled.

The time of decision had come. The Word had never been more clear to Manasseh. He knew. He understood. The angels respectfully awaited his decision. But Satan does not patiently wait. He screamed in Manasseh's ear, "The planetary gods only moved away because you served them so wholeheartedly! They love you! You! Above all the kings of the earth! You have given perfect service to Astarte and the Baals! They have rewarded you! The earth is safe now because of your dedication to the planetary gods! Don't now turn against them, or they may return! Don't listen to the old man. He's just a fearful, blind fool. Look how feeble and sickly he is! His God doesn't care for him. Kill him, and see if his God protects him. His God is powerless before you. In you is the true spirit of the gods!"

So Michael responded with Truth in the other ear, for lies can only be countered with truth. "YHWH loves you, Manasseh. He created you, and strengthened you, and made you king over His people Judah. But YHWH hates your idolatry and immorality. You must give them up to receive the blessings YHWH has in store for you."

Manasseh was accustomed to heeding the voice of Satan. Plus, he didn't like that voice in his other ear, telling him to give up his immorality! *What would he do with all his princesses? He loved their seductive allure, the sensual dances, and the wild midnight romps he had with them. Give all that up? Never!* He made his choice. "Guards! Saw Isaiah in two. We shall see if YHWH will protect him!"

Alysa gave a high-pitched shriek and pleaded, “My lord the king! What has Isaiah ever done against you? He’s been your friend! He has encouraged you, taught you, given you words of righteousness and truth! Can you not let him end his days in peace?”

“Get away from him, or you shall share his fate! I have nothing against Isaiah, except only this: he has prophesied against me and my gods! So now we shall see whose gods are more powerful! If YHWH his God saves him from my hand, then He is the true God and I will worship Him. But if YHWH cannot save him from my hand, he shall die, and I will likewise slay all who still put their trust in YHWH!”

So six burly guards took old Isaiah, stretched him out on a pair of tables, and sawed him in two. Satan ground his teeth in satisfaction and gathered his commanders around to drink the blood. Alysa fled the palace and spread the word across the land, warning faithful believers in YHWH that a horrible persecution had begun. For, once Isaiah was slain, Satan’s wrath against true believers flooded in and overflowed Manasseh’s soul. He gave the orders.

Believers were captured and executed. History records that for a period of two years, public executions continued nearly every day. Blood ran red and deep in the land of Judah. True faith was nearly stamped out. First to be attacked were the Schools of Prophets and Prophetesses. Any too old to flee were rounded up and slain, including even faithful Alysa, Miriam, and Uziah’s widow Jerusha, who at the age of 117 still led the Sisters there.

Logos welcomed them all into Sheol with great joy, where they celebrated His abundant Life and victory over evil. But Satan came too, boasting of his triumph over Manasseh. Logos wouldn’t let him interfere with the party. He cut him short, saying, “Begone, Satan! You think you have won over Manasseh, but I swear to you that the seed of My holy Word within him shall not be denied. My Word is powerful, sharper than a sword. It will bear fruit at the proper time. You shall see it, Satan, and despair.”

Then, gathering the heavenly host, He lovingly taught them, pointing out the holy seed deep within the heart of Manasseh. “You see! That bright spot, now covered over with so many dark and bloody deeds. He hid My Word in his heart! With the help of My precious son Isaiah-Alysa here, he understood it. He believed it. He received it into himself. Though a zillion demons cloud his mind, blind his eyes, and torment his soul, yet My Word will not return to Me without accomplishing that for which I sent it!”

He turned to Isaiah-Alysa. “I thank you for remaining faithful to My Word until death. Though much suffering remains for him before it becomes evident, you have achieved a great victory, and have brought salvation to My servant Manasseh and to all of Judah as a result.”

Michael the archangel dared to question Logos, “My Lord? What of Manasseh’s freewill choice?”

Logos laughed out loud, and Satan, who was still hiding at the fringes of the party hoping to learn more, shuddered at that laugh. He could not understand how Manasseh, after such a clear-cut choice, could ever again escape his clutches. So he strained his ears to hear as Logos explained to the group, “You see only Manasseh’s freewill choice, made with a clear understanding, without coercion. But I see his heart. Manasseh has never suffered discipline. He has never been tested. He has seen the consequences of righteousness, for he saw the rich blessings upon Judah throughout his father’s reign. But in his immaturity, he has no comprehension of the consequences of evil. He still thinks that he is invincible and that My blessings can never cease. But let him now experience the full consequences of the choices he so naïvely made, and I swear he will turn again to reconsider the Word I planted within his heart.” Satan fled. He had heard enough.

Full consequences...? Satan did not want to risk any chance of losing Manasseh, or Judah. *Huh. So he must stop their torment!* It irked him, for it is not his way. Of what use is owning them, if he cannot torment and kill them? His greatest delight is drinking the blood of those who serve him. If it was just Manasseh, he would simply let him go and torment his people. But as with all nations, the ruler represents, or ‘covers’, his people. Whatever Satan does to one, must touch the other, too. The result is, just because of the perverse hatred Satan had for Logos, and his intense desire to do the opposite of what he thought Logos wanted, both Manasseh and Judah continued to be blessed. Satan shifted back to his ‘kill ’em with kindness’ tactic he had used so many years ago with Abraham.

Using a vast amount of forced labor from each Assyrian province, including the Levant, mighty Babylon was soon complete. It became a thriving metropolis. Esarhaddon was a strong and energetic king. He had already begun the military campaigns for which Assyria is famous. By 679 BC he had defeated all that remained of the Chaldean princes who had challenged his authority in Babylon. In 676 BC he defeated rebellious King Teushpa, the arrogant new ruler of the Cimmerians. He drove them out west into northern Anatolia (where they conquered the Phrygians and stole their land). Esarhaddon campaigned that fall through the Urartu and Zagros mountains, to subdue the rebellious Mannaeans, Scythians, and Medes.

It was during this time that Manasseh exposed a small twinge of goodness from deep within his soul. Haruz, one of the refugees from Zebulun who had fled to Judah when the Assyrians had conquered Israel, arrived in Jerusalem. He and his family had left everything behind, so now they were destitute. Manasseh saw Haruz going from shop to shop through the city, frantically looking for work. There were a lot of refugees in Jerusalem looking for work. Why Manasseh should take a fancy to Haruz, he didn’t know, but it happened. He offered him a job in the palace, “just until you get settled here among us,” he said.

Haruz jumped at the chance. “My lord the king! That is so gracious and kind of you! You have my undying loyalty and gratitude. What would you have me do?”

“Well, what do you like to do? What can you do best? If you’re going to work for me, it may as well be something you enjoy – something you’re good at.”

Haruz stood tall. “Up in Zebulun, O King, I was a chef. I owned a small restaurant. I love to cook.”

A smile spread across Manasseh’s face. Now he knew why the gods had led him to Haruz. “What a coincidence! I need a good male chef! I love to eat the exotic foods from northern Israel! You have found your way into my heart already. You may start today. Come! I will introduce you to my kitchen staff. You have no competition from them, for not a one of them knows the proper use of good spices! I have a small extra room – I want you to sleep at my palace until you can afford your own place.”

“Yes, my lord the king! Thank you so much! What shall I tell my family?”

“Your family? Oh... uh... Tell me about them.”

“Well, there is my wife, Haley. She was injured as we fled the Assyrians, so she is now an invalid. Then I have a daughter, Meshullemeth (‘Rewarding’). She takes care of her mother and I. She is a real jewel! So patient and kind! I guess all parents are proud of their kids. I also have four fine sons, but the Assyrians took them and their precious families to God only knows where. I haven’t heard from them since that day. I pray constantly for them.”

Manasseh was truly touched. Why he should have been moved by this one tale of woe when there were so many refugees from Israel who were in even worse trouble, he didn’t know. “Bring them to the palace tonight. I want to meet them. If all you say is true, I believe I can find a small apartment at the palace for you all to stay. I will find work for them, also. Even your invalid wife will have something she can do for me. Clerical work, perhaps. I will pay you all well. You’ll soon be able to afford your own place.”

The interview at the palace that night confirmed all that Haruz had said and more. Manasseh found them a sweet little apartment, and by the very next day he was enjoying tastier food! Haley was good at writing and filing historical notes. She began to get all of Manasseh’s papers in order. And Meshullemeth! ‘Jewel’ was the understatement of the year. She was loving, talented, and always smiling, even after all the trouble she’d seen. She took good care of her parents, worked hard, and still had time for encouraging words or deeds of kindness to everyone around her.

At first Manasseh offered Meshullemeth menial work – kitchen maid, serving, cleaning. But everything she did was done so well, so efficiently and thoroughly, and with such enthusiasm – Manasseh enjoyed having her around, and soon was assigning service of a more personal nature.

Manasseh’s growing attraction for Meshullemeth was ridiculous, of course. He already had twenty princesses, daughters of the kings of the surrounding nations, each one more alluringly beautiful (read: ‘seductive’) than she. But one day Manasseh was sitting on his throne with a half dozen princesses lolling about in various stages of undress trying to arouse his interest in a dance, some music, some delicacy, or some other sensual thing. And suddenly he detested the entire charade. There was Meshullemeth, cleaning the great room as he had commanded her, a light in her eyes, a smile on her face, a song on her lips, and a dance in her step. She wasn’t doing it to impress him or entice him. She was doing it just because that was her. Grateful, glad to be alive, and eager to serve.

Manasseh’s eyes were opened to a modest inner beauty that exceeded the outward seductiveness of his princesses. Suddenly he realized why he had never been inclined to choose any of his princesses as his chief wife – his queen. He had fathered many babies (most sacrificed to Molech), but so far had no heir, and no queen. He stood up from his throne. Now that he had a true basis for comparison, he realized that his princesses were air-heads, lovely sex-pots with fluff for brains, and jealous, proud, self-centered, lazy gossips, next to the jewel now working for him.

So that evening King Manasseh called Haruz aside. After complimenting him on another excellent dinner, seasoned with the spices that Manasseh had come to love, he got to the point. “Haruz, my friend, you were correct when you spoke of your daughter as a real jewel. Why then is she not married?”

“Alas, my king. She was betrothed when she was small, but the young man was killed fighting the Assyrians. Please, don’t tell her. She never knew him – never knew she was betrothed, for we did not want to trouble her until time for the wedding. Now she has no one, but she is happy, for she was expecting no one. She will not trouble you, O King, nor compete with your princesses. She is content to serve you and to take care of her parents, now that we seem to have no sons left.”

“Ah... my friend. How are you doing financially?”

“Very well, my king. I have nearly enough to afford my own place. We have taken advantage of your hospitality here at the palace for long enough.”

“I’m not sure I can let you go. What if I officially appoint you as my head chef, and designate your apartment as the permanent quarters of my head chef and his family? Of course, I’ll have to double your salary. And I’ll give you a year’s bonus, in advance. So, what do you think?”

Haruz’ eyes got big. But he was no dummy. “You are too kind, O King! I would love to serve as your head chef, and I would be most grateful for your gifts. But what would you require of me, I pray? Surely a king of your great stature does not desire a common maid like my daughter?”

“Common maid? Have you looked at my princesses? Every one of them the daughter of a king, yet every one lazier, more haughty, and more self-centered than the last. Fools! Your daughter stands head and shoulders above them all, a royal queen already, though never a princess. Yes, I ask your permission to court Meshullemeth!”

Haruz was stunned. He was never expecting this! But what could he do? Manasseh’s word was law. “My lord the king! Her mother and I are honored. But I would warn you. She is strong of character! She will not take kindly to being just another of many in your harem. She does not tolerate being in a circle of gossipy, jealous women! If you ask her, she is liable to turn her back and flee from you.”

Manasseh laughed. “True, true! Well said, my friend! Thank you for being forthright with me. I swear, if she flees from me, I will not force her. She is a prize worth working for, worth sacrificing for. I would be willing to give up all my other princesses for her!”

Bold words, I know, for a young man who has already plumbed the depths of depravity with his princesses. But as I said, there was just a spark of goodness deep within. Satan didn’t know it was there. Thus Satan was utterly shocked when Manasseh divorced all his princesses and locked them up in a monastery, every last one.

Satan quickly inspired Manasseh’s chief advisors to come to him. “Your Majesty! Live forever! You can’t just divorce them! They are the daughters of the kings of the nations! What if their fathers hear about it? They will attack you! You just can’t do it!”

“King Solomon divorced all of his princesses. As I read his story, not a single king ever attacked him for it. So stop fretting. As long as I provide and care for them, they’ll be happy. Their fathers won’t attack me as long as they know I’ve got them locked up in my harem.”

The watching angelic host gave a cheer! Out of many wrong choices, Manasseh had made one good one. A small step, but at least it was a step in the right direction. Some of them had begun to give up hope on Manasseh, even after what Logos had told them.

So King Manasseh shifted to his best behavior. To win a jewel, you must behave like a gem. He continued to assign Meshullemeth tasks close by, working in the same room with him or attending himself. But, true to his word, he did not push her. One day Meshullemeth was working in the area where the princesses had often danced for the king and played around his throne. Manasseh could see she was curious. “Yes, my dear? I see a question in your mind. Please, have no fear of asking me.”

“Oh, no, my lord the king. I would never pry into the king’s affairs. I am just glad to serve you.”

“Ask. I would have you be at peace with me. You want to ask about those princesses who used to play here?”

Meshullemeth stopped what she was doing and looked into the king’s face. He smiled at her. She saw the love there, just as if he had written it in a letter. Suddenly it all became plain to her. She almost turned and ran! She didn’t even like this lustful, perverse man she served. She feared him! She served him wholeheartedly because she was that kind of person. But she no more desired his attentions than a fly wants to relax upon a spider’s web.

She curtsied. She had been given a command by the king and she must respond. “Yes, my lord the king. Live forever!” She thought fast. *She could not afford to get this question wrong.* “I’ve observed the changes around here – your princesses are gone, and instead you’ve brought me close to you though you know I am not a princess. I only wanted to ask if perhaps you have changed gods? For in the past, I know that you served all the gods of the nations whose princesses you loved. Have you now, O King, decided to forsake all those other gods, and serve only YHWH, as I and my parents do?”

Her question was brilliantly phrased. It had its desired effect, turning attention away from herself, toward her God YHWH. Manasseh wasn’t expecting that. *So, she and her family served YHWH?* He hadn’t known, and it startled him into some serious thinking. It was pretty obvious that he had not yet forsaken the gods of the nations – their idols still cluttered every shelf and corner in the palace.

But was he willing? Manasseh knew that he loved her – he was willing to give up all his princesses for her! But all their gods, too? He imagined the palace without all those idols and images. Then he imagined going throughout Jerusalem and getting rid of all the cult worship centers, their priests, their altars, Baal images, and Asherah poles. Then he pictured having to do that all over Judah. And all the pagan priests he had hired. The guards he had ordered to round up and slay all believers in YHWH. The prophets of YHWH and their families he had slain. What would he do about them? The implications became overwhelming. Desperate to hold him, Satan flooded his soul with the impossibilities of his situation.

But Michael was there too, for this was a critical time of decision. He gently reminded Manasseh of Isaiah and Alysa’s prophecies, and of the Word of YHWH he had memorized in his younger days. He reminded him of his original commitments, his goal of a perfect kingdom of righteousness, better than Solomon’s. Meshullemeth was worth it! A treasure beyond price! Michael insisted it was not too late to repent and restore the kingdom to YHWH!

Meshullemeth saw the king’s indecision. She realized that she had come near the throne for just such a time as this. Now she must decide. *Is she willing to risk her life, to give herself to this awful man, on the slim chance that it may save Judah from idolatry?* It was an easy decision for her, for her life was not her own. She belonged to YHWH. She knelt in peace before the king and awaited his answer.

The battle in the heavenlies was fierce. Satan shouted lies and moral perversion in one ear while Michael kept boldly speaking Truth in the other. But Satan had overplayed his hand toying with his son. Manasseh had grown disgusted with all the moral filth he'd been wallowing in. He was truly attracted to the clean, inner beauty of this pure woman kneeling quietly before him. So he made his decision. "Yes, my dear. I love you! I gave up all my other princesses for you. I now swear to give up all their gods too, if you will consent to be my queen."

Still kneeling, Meshullemeth looked up into the king's face again. "I'll consent to be your queen, to love and serve you all my days, and to bear your sons and daughters..." she flashed him her most beautiful smile, "when I see the gods of the nations gone and YHWH alone exalted in Judah as He was during the righteous reign of Hezekiah, your honored father."

Manasseh stood and placed his hands on her shoulders, returning her smile. "Agreed! My dear, begin planning our wedding. By the time we marry, the idols will be gone and YHWH alone will be exalted in Judah. I swear it!"

Satan was appalled! But when, amid the angel's cheers, he went whining to Logos, he was only reminded, "I told you that My Word hidden within him cannot be denied. You may trick King Manasseh into lusting after your false pleasures for a time, but his true love shall ultimately be for Me and My ways – and My precious ones."

Furious, Satan rushed off to do damage control. Everything he had tried seemed to have backfired! His 'kill 'em with kindness' tactic was a miserable failure – now he remembered... it was a failure with Abraham and Keturah, too. *Here he had occasion against Manasseh and all Judah, but he'd been allowing YHWH's blessings to flood the land for years. That must come to a screeching halt! Now!* However, Satan's tool of choice, Esarhaddon, was still off in a far northeastern province of his empire, dealing with Scythians from Urartu. Satan ground his teeth. He knew how to get the Assyrians back to the Levant! He inspired his slaves in Phoenicia to rebel. They didn't have a chance against Assyria, as anyone with half a brain would know, but Satan decided to sacrifice them to bring Esarhaddon.

He had better work fast. Manasseh was ridding the land of idols! Satan couldn't believe it! He screamed and pouted and cried foul, but Logos just smiled and said, "I told you he was Mine. Is it My fault if you chose to bless him when you could have been afflicting him? Now that he has repented, you no longer have occasion against him."

"No, Logos, no! Not so! Not so! Look at all the idolatry remaining in the land! I still have time!"

"You are looking at the idols, but I am looking at the heart. Manasseh has chosen righteousness in his heart. Your plot to bring Esarhaddon into the Levant to torment Manasseh has already failed."

Satan frantically tried every trick in the book, but finally he had to admit that Logos was correct. The evil king of Sidon, Abdi-Milkutti, continued to thumb his nose at Assyria, but Esarhaddon ignored him. So the blessings of YHWH continue to roll across the land, especially at the palace. For Manasseh had kept his promise. Most of the idolatry and witchcraft had been cleansed from the land of Judah, and what little remained was driven underground. Manasseh issued an official apology to the families of the slain believers, granting them compensation from the royal treasury (which had plenty, since the land was so prosperous). He reinstated the Levitical priesthood and restored the regular keeping of the Sabbath and all the laws of Moses which he had memorized when he was young.

Thus the land rejoiced when they gathered for the royal wedding of King Manasseh and Queen Meshullemeth. The people loved their new queen! In an amazing turn-around, the land that was so recently drowning in shame suddenly recognized and came to love the true beauty of a pure heart. It never ceased to boggle Satan's mind to see how quickly a repentant king improved the hearts of his people. Oh, those who really belonged to him hadn't changed – but they went 'underground', to bide their time in secret until the tide flowed the other way.

Now, I won't say that the king and his new bride didn't have their struggles. It is difficult for a woman to fully love a man whose heart has already been shredded by other lovers. And it is even more difficult for a man to love his bride gently and purely when he so recently was immersed in such seductive perversions. But they both worked at it. Logos saw, and was pleased. He blessed their first few years together, and in 676 BC Meshullemeth joyfully bore Manasseh a son, a royal heir named **Amon** ('Faithful'). For King Manasseh affirmed, "Though I was faithless, yet YHWH ever remains faithful. Bless His holy name!"

Logos responded by sending **Hilkiah**, a young priest from nearby Anathoth, to the king's court. He arrived, hat in hand and head bowed before the king. "O King! Live forever! YHWH has sent me to tell you that He is pleased with your reforms so far, and... well... uh..." he hesitated, obviously embarrassed and very new at this. "He asks you to accept me, uh... appoint me as your 'king's prophet' – uh, you know... Your replacement for Isaiah."

"You?" Manasseh was understandably a bit skeptical. "How long have you been a prophet, Hilkiah?"

"Actually, Your Majesty. I... I didn't even know I was a prophet until... until He, uh, God told me... this."

"What were you before you came here?"

Hilkiah looked up and smiled. "I am a Levite, Your Majesty, of the house of Eleazar. Meshullam my father was a high priest, son of Zadok the high priest. I also have been studying for the priesthood. I honestly had no desire to be a prophet, much less the king's prophet, until today."

“Do you have a wife? a family?”

“No sir. Well, not yet sir. I am betrothed to a girl from Bethel, but I was going to wait to marry her until I finished my studies and started my work as a priest.”

Manasseh liked him already. *This one will be a splendid improvement over Isaiah. He is young and timid, and will be easy to control.* He rubbed his hands together, grinning. “So don’t just stand there, young man. Isaiah’s apartment lies waiting. Go get your girl and marry her, for I won’t have a ‘king’s prophet’ who isn’t married. Then bring all your stuff and take over your duties. I’ll pay you well. You will be my spiritual advisor for every decision I make. I look forward to receiving the Word of YHWH through you. Oh, and you can still finish your studies to become a priest. Anathoth is close enough. I’ll probably only need you here half-time. Thank you for coming, Hilkiah.”

Satan came to Logos to get permission to test Manasseh. “Yes, by all means, test him!” Logos said, “His heart is still not wholly Mine. All his life he has needed discipline! It was your choice to bless him instead. When his father’s covering was removed you could have tormented or even killed him. Now that he has repented you have no more occasion. So test him, but you may not harm his body.”

Finally Satan was able to interest King Esarhaddon in the Levant. He went over the books, and found that while Philistia, Samerina, Moab, Ammon, Edom, and the rest of Phoenicia had been paying tribute, both Sidon and Judah had not. That was enough reason to begin a campaign into the Levant. In early 675 BC he struck Sidon in a lightning raid. He beheaded rebellious King Abdi-Milkutti and took the leaders and nobles of the city in chains, replacing them with captives from other places. Then, with his Sidonian captives in tow, he headed on through the rest of the Levant, collecting tribute as he went.

He reached Judah in 674 BC. King Manasseh received him graciously, entertaining him in grand style. But when Esarhaddon got down to the matter of tribute, Manasseh balked. “Tribute? What tribute? My father Hezekiah never paid you tribute! Sure, I sent laborers to help you rebuild Babylon as you asked. And I’ll continue to support your control over your vassal nations in the Levant, but only as a free and independent nation, not as a tributary or vassal!”

Esarhaddon’s eyes narrowed. He was very good at this. “Don’t you think you’d better count the cost before saying that you will give me no tribute? Look at what happened to Samaria! And at what just happened to Sidon! I swear it will cost you much more to avoid paying me tribute than the small amount I am demanding!”

Manasseh leaned forward, eyeball to eyeball with the Assyrian king. “Perhaps you, sir, are the one who should count the cost! Remember what happened to your father Sennacherib when he tried to collect tribute from my father Hezekiah! Our God YHWH is strong to defend us!”

King Esarhaddon was not easily bluffed. “Bah! The gods have fled. Mars, Venus... they come close no more! I’ll admit that Mars hit a lucky strike for you on my father’s army. But now you have no war-god to fight for you, and my army is ten times stronger than yours! Consider well!”

“I do have a God who will defend us. His name is YHWH, Creator and Ruler of the Universe. However, I do not wish war with Assyria. So... I’ll tell you what. I have a prophet of YHWH who lives here at the palace. I’ll call for him. Whatever he tells me, I swear that is what I shall do.”

Manasseh was pretty confident he could get young Hilkiah to promise YHWH’s support. He sure didn’t want to pay all that tribute every year. When Hilkiah entered with Holya, his new bride of two months, Manasseh greeted them and explained the situation. “This is King Esarhaddon, the great king of Assyria and commander of the armies which have filled the nations with fear and trembling. He wants to subdue us as well, and force us to pay tribute. But I told him that YHWH our God would defend us. Prophesy now to us the Word of YHWH. What will YHWH do for us? And what will He have me do?”

Hilkiah bowed. “Give me an hour, O King. I will return with the Word of YHWH.” They quickly left for their prayer room, where they poured out the request before YHWH. Hilkiah was nearly sweating blood. He knew this was a crucial time. With Assyria’s army filling the land, Judah could be crushed without YHWH’s guidance.

But his wife sweetly encouraged him. “My beloved, YHWH has brought us to the palace just for such a time. Relax and trust Him. When you open your mouth to speak He will speak through you, I know.”

“But honey! I seem to be hearing Him say that we must submit and pay the tribute! That will be such a burden, and Manasseh will hate me! Don’t you remember how much he used to persecute the believers? He killed Isaiah! And he might kill us, too, if he gets angry!”

Holya paused, also in prayer. Then, looking up lovingly at her new husband, she smiled and said, “I’d rather die with you than pervert the Word of YHWH through you. Say only whatever YHWH tells you.”

They returned to the king. “I have the Word of YHWH for you, O King. He will not defend you if you muster your armies against Assyria. He wants you to submit to King Esarhaddon, and to pay all the tribute he demands. He said that He already told you that through Isaiah and Alysa!”

King Manasseh was stunned. He thought he had this youngster under his thumb. “But... but... Alysa said that if I repented, none of that would happen to me! I repented! I really did! I now serve only YHWH!”

Hilkiah stood tall. “Yes, you repented, a little late. After submerging the land under the blood of YHWH’s saints. Assyria is the rod of God to punish you!”

What else could Manasseh do? He gathered the tribute and sent the smirking King Esarhaddon off with a promise for the same amount each year. It made a big ding in his treasury, but he was wealthy, so he swallowed his pride and submitted to Assyria. This was but his first step in a long process of humbling that YHWH had in store for him.

Speaking of pride, Esarhaddon became filled with the sense of his own greatness. *All the kings of the earth have bowed to him... except Egypt!* After sending a platoon back to Assyria with all the plunder he'd collected, he left Judah and headed south to see what he could do about that.

Taharqa had anticipated him. Knowing Assyria was campaigning in the Levant, he again gathered the armies of the northern Pharaohs to await Esarhaddon at Ashkelon. Taharqa remembered his lesson from his defeat at Eltekeh. He went to meet King Esarhaddon as the Assyrian army flowed onto the Via Maris from the hills of Judah.

After the polite banter that kings must do when they meet, Taharqa said kindly, "I have not interfered with your control of the Levant, and now you may not interfere with my control over Egypt and the Sinai. That is the agreement I had with Sennacherib your father, and that is what I insist upon now. My armies are behind me to enforce it."

Esarhaddon laughed. "The way I heard the story, my father had your armies fleeing down the hill, naked and barefoot, squealing like rats from a sinking ship!"

Taharqa's face, being black, did not reveal the blush. A head taller and nearly twice the weight of Esarhaddon, he was an imposing figure indeed. "You know how those stories grow with the telling. The fact is, that I scarcely lost a man. My armies are now stronger than ever. The mere sight of them will cause your army to tremble in their boots!" He waved a hand. At the prearranged signal, his big black warriors revealed themselves suddenly from behind the walls of Ashkelon. It was a stunning sight.

Esarhaddon was no fool. He saw the shudder of his commanders, and heard the gasps of the men behind him. Taharqa had played his hand well. The psychological impact had already won the victory. "My father was an astute king. I concur with his judgment. If you will return to Egypt and leave the Levant to me, I will return to Assyria. There need be no blood shed between us."

"Agreed, O King!" Taharqa nodded smugly.

So Taharqa headed back to Thebes, and the Assyrians returned to Nineveh. Esarhaddon was a bit humbled by the encounter, but he was also enraged at being outfoxed by Taharqa. He swore to his gods that Egypt would pay. *Next time he will be better prepared. Egypt was giving aid to the rebels in the Levant. He will put an end to it!*

Tefnakht II had ruled at Sais from 695 to 688 BC, when Nekauba took over. He ruled until 672 BC. But they were both weak and accomplished nothing for Egypt.

King Esarhaddon finally had his army ready to attack Egypt in 672 BC. As he left, he instructed his oldest, Crown Prince Sin-iddin-apla, on how to rule in his absence and what to do if he doesn't return alive, as kings must do when they go to war. He kissed his beautiful wife Ashur-hamat good-bye and went out to take command of the Assyrian army. But he was not gone one week when a fast rider from Nineveh overtook the camp. The palace nobles had staged a coup d'état! Both the queen mother Tashmetum-sharrat and the crown prince Sin-iddin-apla had been slain!

Esarhaddon rushed back to Nineveh to deal with the situation. He rounded up the rebellious nobles. They were tortured and slain. Peace was restored. But who now could he trust to govern while he was gone? He delayed his Egypt campaign for a year while he worked out a deal with the Governors of Media. They will govern at Calah while he is gone. If he doesn't return, they will guarantee that his younger sons, Assurbanipal and Shamash-shum-ukin, are crowned over Assyria and Babylon respectively.

Finally, in 671 BC, King Esarhaddon was ready again. He swept across Syria to Arvad, then headed down the Phoenician and Philistine coasts, meeting only minor resistance in Tyre and Ashkelon. But he refused to wait. This time, he would not give Taharqa a chance to gather his armies! So he left a few of his soldiers to deal with the problems and pressed on, stocking up on water at Raphia and crossing the Sinai wilderness toward the Nile Delta with the help of a fleet of Arab camels he commandeered.

His amazingly rapid forced march caught the Egyptians napping. Esarhaddon struck deep into northern Egypt, thrusting all the way to Memphis, the royal city at the head of the Nile Delta. Taharqa was too late to defend the city. He and his Nubian warriors were badly beaten on the marshes approaching Memphis. They fled back to Thebes.

Esarhaddon cruelly bound the nobles of Memphis and deported them to Assyria as slaves. Among them was nearly the entire royal family of Taharqa! He established puppet rulers to govern the various Nomes of the Delta. He knew he couldn't use Assyrians for this task. The proud Egyptians would never submit to them. Instead, he found native Egyptians who were submissive to him, such as young Necho I, whom he made his chief Pharaoh over the entire Delta, ruling from Sais. King Esarhaddon returned triumphantly to Nineveh with the new title 'King of Egypt, Pathros, and Nubia' added to his many other titles. He had gained great wealth from his plunder of Memphis.

He'd hardly reached Nineveh when he got news that Taharqa, furious that his family had been captured, had swept back down into Memphis and retaken the royal city. But Esarhaddon couldn't leave Nineveh. He had more rebellious nobles on his hands. The plots against him were far worse than he knew. So, while dealing with them, he hurriedly sent his best general, Sha-Nabu-shu, back to Egypt to oust Taharqa again before he got established.

It was 669 BC before Esarhaddon got order restored in Assyria and was able to return to the Levant. He had every confidence in his general, but you know kings. They have to go see for themselves. He was in no hurry. He went down the coast, collecting his tribute from Arvad, Byblos, Sidon, Tyre, and the wealthy cities of Philistia. He'll take his due from the Judean highlands on the way back. But after Esarhaddon crossed the Sinai wilderness, he learned that his General Sha-Nabu-shu had failed! Egypt was not at all subdued. Taharqa, who had now matured into the foremost military genius of his era, had outfoxed him!

Taharqa had quickly gone throughout the Delta and established military strongholds in each city, led by the best of his Nubian warriors. The native governors which Esarhaddon had put over each Nome were now submitted to Taharqa, and kept in line by his Nubian commanders. And he had a system of rapid communication between the cities so no matter where the Assyrians attacked, he could get military reinforcements there in two days.

Not realizing the extent of Egypt's preparations, King Esarhaddon attacked Heliopolis, at the head of the Delta. His mighty army quickly overwhelmed the city, and in two days he moved on toward Memphis. But surprise! Taharqa was waiting for him. He would not be caught napping at Memphis a second time. The road to Memphis was filled with mighty Nubians and several Libyan Dynasty armies besides. It was an utter rout. The Assyrians fought bravely, but Taharqa surrounded them, fighting on four fronts at once. Their losses and injuries were stunning. Even King Esarhaddon was gravely injured. Assyrians don't like to lose, but even they have limits. He sounded the retreat.

Taharqa would never have to fight Esarhaddon again, for sure! He gallantly withdrew his four armies and waited while the king's wounds were dressed. Then he came to parley. "Our agreement was that I would allow you the Levant and you would leave Egypt alone. You failed to keep your promise, and you've suffered for it. So I will relieve you of the burden of all the loot you plundered from Heliopolis and the cities of the Levant. In addition, I have General Sha-Nabu-shu and the remnants of his army. I will trade them for my family and all the captives you took from Memphis. Then you may go home in peace. But never enter Egypt again, or I won't be so generous."

Esarhaddon, now truly humbled and fearful for his life, agreed. "Thank you for releasing my armies. I swear I shall never again try to conquer Egypt. You are a better military commander than I." It was the hardest thing he'd ever said.

So the Assyrians returned to the Levant, decimated and bearing their wounded. Esarhaddon was furious that he had lost all the tribute he had so recently collected. But he still had Judah and his other vassals in the highlands. Manasseh was still too rich! Esarhaddon determined to demand double tribute from Judah, to help make up for his losses. Learning humility is hard for Assyrian kings!

Esarhaddon, badly wounded and being carried on an oxcart, did not want to be seen, so he sent his Tartan in to talk to Manasseh. He, of course, balked at the demand for double tribute. "Why, that is every ounce of gold I have left in my entire kingdom! You've already bled me dry! I can't afford it! We have an agreement! Where is Esarhaddon? I want to talk to him directly. I've been loyal! I paid my dues! He can't abuse his subjects like this!"

Manasseh glanced at Hilkiah, who was shaking his head with lips tight. He could get no help there. The Tartan insisted on going with Manasseh out to the parapet, where they could see over the wall. He lifted his arm for a signal, and the Assyrian troops formed up in rank upon rank across the valley. Yes, the Tartan had been there when Taharqa had done that to the Assyrians at Ashkelon. So he knew the psychological impact it would have. King Manasseh couldn't see their wounded or missing – all he saw was a sea of shields, spears, and swords held high. The Tartan then gave another command. The troops formed into battalions and began to circle the city. What could Manasseh do? He caved, and gathered the full amount of tribute demanded.

After the Assyrians left, he called Hilkiah on the carpet. "Why? Why? What have I done to deserve this? I got rid of the idols! I serve YHWH every Sabbath!"

"Do you trust in YHWH only when you are rich? Your gold is of no value to Him. He wants your heart. He wants to test you, to see if you will trust Him in feast or famine."

"Hezekiah never had to give up all his gold!"

"Your father had to give up more than you know. He was tested even unto the death! Your testing, so far, is as nothing, yet already you are complaining."

Logos was disappointed. Manasseh was not doing well in the testing, not at all. Neither was Esarhaddon. Though they had both been humbled, yet their human pride quickly reasserted itself as they lashed out in anger at all those around them. Instead of crying out to God, seeking His face, His wisdom, they cursed Him in their hearts.

Esarhaddon felt every pebble on the long road toward Assyria. He yelled in pain and rage whenever the oxcart hit a bump. He took out his wrath on every vassal state along the way, Edom, Moab, Ammon, Samerina, Damascus, Hamath, Aleppo, Arpad, Carchemish, Haran... But alas, he had never learned the ancient wisdom that, "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a vexed spirit dries up the bones." He died in Haran, now wealthy beyond belief, but in abject poverty before his Maker.

The news of his death caused a bit of a crisis in Nineveh, as both of his sons were still minors. But Queen Naqi'a, now the queen mother, took over, ensuring that the Median chiefs kept their promise.

At first, Naqi'a was the real power behind the Assyrian throne. Her grandson Ashurbanipal was crowned king in the early spring, 668 BC. His brother Shamash-shum-ukin was crowned king of Babylon that fall. Naqi'a, working closely with her daughter-in-law Queen Ashur-hamat (Esarhaddon's widow), succeeded in holding the empire together and assuring the smooth transfer of power.

Ashurbanipal was the youngest of Esarhaddon's six sons. He had never really expected to be the king. But the crown prince Sin-iddin-apla and his mother the proud Queen Tashmetum-sharrat had been killed by the noble's uprising in 672 BC. Three other brothers had disappeared – probably killed as well. So he and Shamash-shum-ukin were the last of the royal sons.

Perhaps because Ashurbanipal had never expected to rule, he actually made a pretty good king. He was the best educated of all the Assyrian kings. He loved, not so much charging around the empire winning battles, as reading, writing, poetry, craftsmanship, mathematics, astronomy, and astrology. His passion was compiling histories of the nations and gathering books into his now-famous library.

However, Ashurbanipal could not permit his father's murder by the Egyptians to go unpunished. He did not know that Taharqa had treated Esarhaddon and his army honorably and sent him off with an agreement to come no farther south than Philistia. All he knew is that his dad was dead from wounds he got in the battle with Taharqa.

Ashurbanipal was too young and inexperienced to lead an army into battle. So he promoted Sha-Nabu-shu, his father's best general, to his Tartan, and commanded him to go and avenge his father's death.

With fierce and single-minded determination, the new Tartan set off in 667 BC toward Egypt. He was the right choice. He knew Egypt. He'd been there. His men traveled light and fast, intending no other purpose than to avenge King Esarhaddon's death. They swept through Syria and the Levant without stopping. They reached Egypt in record time. Taharqa was once again caught napping. General Sha-Nabu-shu pierced through their defenses clear to Memphis. Again Taharqa was forced to flee to Thebes, wounded, with his army in disarray.

General Sha-Nabu-shu wasted no time. All of Taharqa's kings, governors, and nobles were sent in chains back to Nineveh. Only Necho I from Sais was able to convince the Tartan of his loyalty. He was appointed Pharaoh of Egypt and allowed to rule at Memphis. Osorkon IV was installed as ruling high priest of Amun at Bubastis and Tanis.

Taharqa's wounds were serious. Finally realizing his mortality, he left Mentuemhet ruling at Thebes (more like a mayor than a Pharaoh) and rode south to Napata to recover. There he trained his cousin Tanutamun to rule for him. In 665 BC he appointed Tanutamun as his co-regent and heir and sent him north to take over at Thebes.

Tanutamun found the situation at Thebes different from what he expected. Mayor Mentuemhet was a strong leader and a well-respected prophet of Amun. His first wife was the granddaughter of the legendary Piye. Under him, the priests of Amun at Thebes had grown very strong. But with no army of their own, they had no chance against the Assyrian army, none whatever, so Mayor Mentuemhet had simply surrendered Thebes to General Sha-Nabu-shu.

Tanutamun immediately took charge, slaying the Assyrian garrison and restoring the valiant mayor. Then he sent for Taharqa and asked him to bring all the warriors he could muster. Taharqa arrived back in Thebes with his army in early 664 BC. By then, the main Assyrian army had returned to Nineveh, so the Nubians were easily able to reconquer all of Egypt, including Memphis, and drive out the remaining Assyrians. Once again, the Nubian Dynasty reigned supreme in Egypt.

Sadly, Taharqa was wounded again. He did not survive. He had ruled Egypt from Thebes for 26 years. Tanutamun wasn't as gallant as Taharqa. He mercilessly executed every Egyptian noble who had served the Assyrians, including poor Necho I. Tanutamun proclaimed himself the Pharaoh over all of Egypt in 664 BC.

Well, you know about how long that lasted! That was the second time Taharqa had recaptured Memphis as soon as the Assyrian army was gone. The day he heard the news, Ashurbanipal mustered his army to retaliate, again. In fierce anger, he decided to personally lead the army. This time he will do a thorough job! All along the way to Egypt he conscripted entire armies from his vassal states.

This was another step in Manasseh's humbling process. He was given no choice. His tribute this year was to bring his army and fight with the Assyrians against Egypt. That irked him no end. He railed against YHWH for treating him so poorly. *Hezekiah never had to join his enemies to fight against his friends! It's just not fair!* Logos shook His head sadly. "When will he ever learn to just trust Me?"

By the time Ashurbanipal reached Egypt, his combined army (led by the kings of 15 nations) was invincible. He cruised through Egypt, plundering and slaying in his fury. Tanutamun was horrified at the overwhelming size of the Assyrian army. When Ashurbanipal conquered Memphis, the big Nubian warriors fled for their lives. Ashurbanipal didn't even wait to set up a new government. He wanted revenge! He chased the Nubians past Thebes, all the way up to Syene (Aswan), eradicating Nubian power in Egypt. Tanutamun fled home to Napata, where he died in 657 BC. The 25th 'Nubian' Dynasty vanished from Egypt. And yet Ashurbanipal's anger was not pacified. He returned to Thebes in a vicious rage. He plundered it and burned it to the ground. The damage he inflicted was appalling. Every Nubian still in the city, whether man, woman, or child, was slain without mercy. Finally, his desire for revenge satisfied, he returned to Memphis to set up a government.

Tanutamun had killed Necho I, Esarhaddon's choice of Pharaoh. Looking for a replacement, Ashurbanipal found his young son, Psamtik I. They hit it off from the start. Psamtik was bright, energetic, handsome, and respectful. Ashurbanipal appointed him as Necho's successor, in a magnificent coronation with the other Egyptian nobles all present. He gave a big speech, concluding, "I've had it right up to here with Egypt and all her bickering Pharaohs! Your own lack of unity allowed the Nubians to take control. Egypt was once a great nation! I'm going to give you a chance to be great once again. I've driven the Nubians out. I've destroyed Thebes, their home base. Today I've given you a good man as your new Pharaoh, Psamtik son of Necho. He'll serve you well, if you will only follow him. Be sure to eliminate from Egypt all traces of Nubian influence and keep a strong defense force up south to prevent their return. I wish you well. Now, I'm going back to Nineveh. Psamtik, don't let these jealous city-kings get the best of you. Feel free to call on me if you ever need help."

Then, in a move that astounded everyone in the palace, Assyrian and Egyptian alike, Ashurbanipal ordered his army to withdraw from Egypt, leaving only five garrisons to protect his new Pharaoh. Following Ashurbanipal's advice, Psamtik I restored Thebes with native Egyptian troops and priests of Amun. Within only a few years he had established himself as 'the' Pharaoh, over all Egypt. His 26th 'Saite' Dynasty (the last native Egyptian dynasty) thus put an end to the chaotic Third Intermediate Period. Ashurbanipal had chosen well. With his support, Psamtik became a great Pharaoh. He ruled for an amazing 54 years, ever grateful to Assyria. He erased all traces of Nubian rule. He unified Egypt and restored her prosperity.

664 BC thus marks a major historical milepost. With the planetary gods threatening Earth no more, and with the end of Egypt's confusing Third Intermediate Period, the chronology of historical events settles down. From here on out, most of what you read in your ancient-history books is nearly correct. Your traditional dates of events actually begin to line up with each other from nation to nation. This is a good thing, for it means I will not have to spend so much time correcting chronology blunders from the past. Now I can stick to my real passion – telling the story of God's Plan of the Ages from His perspective: His unfathomable love toward His chosen people Israel.

Manasseh returned to Judah properly humbled. He had never met a man like this Ashurbanipal. He was young, but seemed to have wisdom far beyond his years. Look at his treatment of the Egyptians and the Nubians. One minute he was cruel in violent hatred against the Nubian invaders, but the next minute he was caring and considerate of the Egyptians. When Ashurbanipal released his vassals in the Levant from their military service, he told Manasseh, "You have served me well. I am grateful. I ask no tribute at all next year, and I will reduce it by one-half after that. Go in peace and prosper. I wish you well."

Manasseh could not understand that. Why should King Ashurbanipal be good to him? He was the enemy! It made no sense. *He figured Ashurbanipal to be weak. Or maybe he didn't really care about maintaining his empire so far from Nineveh. He had given the Egyptians their freedom. They were paying no tribute at all. Perhaps Judah could gain her freedom as well.* That thought delighted Manasseh.

The first two years, Judah prospered. Not having to pay any tribute to Assyria was a huge boost to her economy. Manasseh started getting proud again. By the third year (661 BC) when his 'half' tribute fell due, he was strongly tempted to just not pay it and see what happened. Hilkiah told him. "O King, live forever! Hear the Word of YHWH. 'Ashurbanipal does not demand too much. Submit to him, as I have commanded you, and it will be well with you. Do you not think I can return to you ten times as much if your actions please Me? You must learn not to place your trust in riches, nor in kings, but in Me alone. Your prosperity and safety lie only in Me. You must learn to give it all up in your heart, and depend only upon Me.'"

So, begrudgingly, King Manasseh paid the tribute. He wanted to see if he (and Judah) would be as wealthy next year when the tribute came due again. But the following year, he counted all his assets to discover he was not richer. He was poorer! He called Hilkiah back on the carpet. "You said YHWH could give me ten times as much if I paid the tribute. Here it is that time again, and I am poorer!"

"O King, I said you must learn to give it up in your heart and trust YHWH. You haven't given it up if you are still counting every penny to see if you got richer. YHWH will provide. Pay the tribute. Better yet, pay even more tribute than what Ashurbanipal demands. YHWH cannot bless you financially if you are still putting your trust in riches."

I'm sorry. Manasseh couldn't do it. He paid the tribute for a few more years, begrudging every penny, and every time he counted his money he had less than before. Finally he lost his temper at Hilkiah. "You're fired! You lied to me! I paid that tribute, every year, just like you told me, and YHWH has not blessed me at all! I have no gold left, and precious little silver! If this keeps up I'll soon be begging on the streets of Jerusalem! Pack your bags and get out of my palace! I never want to see you again!"

So Hilkiah returned to Anathoth and to the priesthood, with his wife Holya and their two lovely daughters. Now the palace was devoid of the Word of YHWH. Satan's temptations became very strong – old temptations, which Manasseh thought he had conquered. He started going in to see his princesses again. Soon the nights of wild parties and sex orgies began anew. With the princesses came their idols. Within a year they were again turning up all over the palace. Poor Queen Meshullemeth was horrified! She tried to guard their twenty-year-old son, Amon, but then she discovered that his father was bringing him in to the royal harem to participate in their orgies!

Crushed, Meshullemeth fled the palace, to hunt down Hilkiah and Holya. She pled with them for help. They sadly informed her, “Manasseh is being tested. Amon, too. Pray that they will pass the test. Pray that God will do whatever it takes, even taking their lives, to bring them back to Himself. Give them up into the hands of YHWH, for if they wind up in the hands of the adversary they will be destroyed, and possibly all Judah with them.”

So godly Meshullemeth spent her days in Hilkiah’s home fasting and interceding for her husband and son, as well as helping to babysit their darling little daughters. There, she found peace. But with her gone, the immorality and idolatry going on at the palace became worse than ever, and young Amon was loving every minute of it.

It was 656 BC. The time rolled around for Manasseh to pay his tribute to Ashurbanipal again. But Hilkiah was not around to badger him, so he refused to send it. Instead, he gathered together all the idols of his princesses and prayed to them, vowing that if they treated him better than YHWH had been treating him the past few years he would serve them forever. Then he began preparing for an attack from Assyria. He figured that Ashurbanipal would probably not bother to come all the way to the Levant just for him, but he might. Either way, he would be ready.

Ashurbanipal waited for two years, sending polite little reminders with his ambassadors who went to collect the tribute. But in 654 BC, he had to conclude that Manasseh had rebelled. He was sad, for he had reduced his tribute to a low level that should have encouraged him and allowed him to prosper. But he had an empire to manage, and the rebellion of Judah could quickly spread throughout the Levant. So he mustered his army and began his campaign.

Hilkiah, who was no longer welcome in the palace, sent Manasseh a letter. It said, “Because you have done these abominations, behaving more wickedly than the Amorites who lived here before you, and have made My people to sin with your idols, therefore, thus says YHWH God of Israel, ‘Behold, I am bringing such calamity upon Jerusalem and Judah that whoever hears of it, both his ears shall tingle. And I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria, and measure her with the plumb bob of the house of Ahab, for you have done more wickedly than he! Thus I will turn Jerusalem upside down and wipe her as one wipes a dish. I will abandon My inheritance, and deliver the remnant into the hand of their enemies. They shall become plunder to the king of Assyria because they have done such great evil, for they have been provoking Me to anger ever since their fathers left Egypt.’”

Manasseh read Hilkiah’s letter. Then he read it again. “Hmm... more wicked than the Amorites? More wicked than Ahab? That’s a lie. I’m not that bad! Ashurbanipal wouldn’t do that to me. He’s good to me. This whole letter is a lie.” Thus he forgot Ashurbanipal’s sense of rightness – how he had treated the Egyptians and the Nubians.

Manasseh heard news of the Assyrian army on the march toward the Levant. His own army was ready to meet them. The ancient walls of Jerusalem were strong. But he had one more thing he must do to prepare for the showdown with Ashurbanipal. He built altars to Chemosh on the city walls, in full view of their enemies. You see, for the last two years he had been having lots of babies with his princesses. But he had no love for them. They were at best an inconvenience, and during a time of war they became a nuisance. But sacrificing his sons on the wall when the Assyrians came would have a powerful impact. And it may cause the gods he had chosen to favor his defense.

So as Ashurbanipal set up around the city and prepared for the siege, King Manasseh began the bloody ritual. He laughed to see the Assyrians cringe in horror. Immediately a letter came from King Ashurbanipal. “Stop the senseless slaughter of your babies! I know that your God does not permit human sacrifice! It is just wrong, and I hate it too! Further, it will do you no good whatever, for I must do what I came to do, regardless. Either you pay all the back tribute that you owe, or I must punish your rebellion, so the surrounding nations will not follow your example and destroy the peace in my empire.”

Alas, Manasseh misinterpreted the letter. “See! I have put the fear of Chemosh in him, and turned his stomach. He has no guts for attacking me while I am sacrificing my babies.” So he gathered his baby daughters – the Assyrians were too far off to see the difference – and sacrificed them after his sons. The Assyrians were disgusted and outraged.

Now, with all his own babies born in the last two years slain, Manasseh looked around for more. He was drunk with the blood of his own wickedness. Satan urged him on, even as he invited his generals to join him in drinking the blood of the slain. Soon Manasseh was rounding up all the babies born in Jerusalem over the last two years. Thus he kept the sacrifices going for weeks, until all of Jerusalem was stained with the blood of the innocents.

Ashurbanipal had planned to simply besiege Jerusalem until its starving citizens demanded that their king pay his tribute. Then he would leave, with nobody harmed, no walls broken, and no damage done. But now he could see, by the sacrifices on the wall, that was not going to work. So he changed tactics. His fierce anger rose against Manasseh, as his sense of rightness had been violated. He ordered the city gates battered down and the city plundered.

The Assyrians were very good at this. But once loosed, the soldiers were unrestrained. They easily overwhelmed Manasseh’s defenses, wiped out his army, slew his nobles and any who dared stand up to them, and pillaged the city, ravishing the pretty girls and taking whatever suited their fancy. By the time Ashurbanipal called them off, the city was ‘wiped clean, like a dish’, for there was nothing left to steal. They found King Manasseh prostrate before his idols, screaming incoherently at them for his tragic loss.

The soldiers came back out laughing, staggering under the weight of their booty. With them were thousands of captured slaves. Among them came Manasseh, chains around his ankles and a leather thong tied to a ring in his nose. He was presented to King Ashurbanipal, who shook his head sadly. "Why?" he asked. "Why did you rebel against me? You know the Assyrian penalty for rebellion!"

"I thought my gods would protect me, O King. Besides, I didn't think you'd do it! I thought you liked me! You said you wanted me to prosper!"

"So I did. And so you would have prospered, if only you had paid the small tribute that I asked. But why did you rebel against YHWH your God?"

"Huh? What do you know about that?"

"I know He expects you to deal rightly and keep your promises. And I know He doesn't permit human sacrifice! I fear YHWH your God, Manasseh! I would have been afraid to attack if I thought you were being faithful to Him. Only when I saw you sacrificing your babies on the wall, I knew that you had forsaken Him so I was safe to attack."

Thus Manasseh was led by the leather thong to Assyria, where he was abused to the entertainment of the nobles of Ashurbanipal's court. He was deeply humbled, but still took a perverse delight in the fact that Isaiah's prophecy had not come true, for Isaiah had said, "...when your riches are gone, when poverty and sickness stalks the land, you will be captured and taken to Babylon with a leather thong on your nose and chains on your legs."

But Satan was not done yet. He didn't know Isaiah's prophecy, but whatever it was, he was quite certain it could NOT have mentioned Babylon, which hadn't even existed at the time. So he had a diversion planned. After Ashurbanipal had left for the Levant, the Elamites under King Urtaku had attacked Babylon. Shamash-shum-ukin had sent word to his brother at Calah requesting urgent aid, but only now did the frantic message reach him. Ashurbanipal immediately stopped the abuse and rushed his army down to Babylon, bringing Manasseh with him. There he savagely put down the Elamite rebellion and killed their King Urtaku. Then, because he couldn't bear to watch his own nobles tormenting Manasseh any more, he gave him to his brother. Thus the prophecy was fulfilled. After some more torment by the palace nobles, Shamash-shum-ukin put Manasseh in the deepest, darkest dungeon below the palace in Babylon, and left him there to rot.

Finally Manasseh had reached the bottom. He had nowhere to look but up. Now that he had a lot of free time on his hands, he began to evaluate how he had spent his life. He recalled the idealism of his early days. *His kingdom was going to be better than David's, or Solomon's.* He had memorized God's laws. He knew the Scriptures and the chronicles of his people. He had it all figured out, where David or Solomon had gone wrong. *He would do it better.*

He had an unusually good memory. Now that he was humbled, he began to review in his mind all the mistakes he had made; the wickedness; the self-centered pleasures; the hedonism; the idolatry; the abuse of his princesses; killing the helpless babies without a care for their mother's anguished cries; he had even killed Isaiah! *How could he have done all that?* The process of repentance began.

The devastation in Jerusalem left by Ashurbanipal's soldiers was staggering. However, there were many things to be thankful for. First, **Amon** was not harmed. In fact, Ashurbanipal had installed him on the throne of Judah in place of his father. But more importantly, the Assyrians had not harmed the rest of Judah, including the country home of Hilkiah where Queen Meshullemeth was hiding.

So when the Assyrians left, the good citizens of all the surrounding cities and villages streamed into Jerusalem to aid their stricken brothers and sisters. Along with them, Hilkiah, Holya, and Meshullemeth hurried back to the palace to begin the restoration and to help Amon.

Amon was only 22. He was suffering a severe case of shell-shock. He was not ready to be a king. He was just a party-boy! His dad's wild orgies had badly damaged him, and he just could not handle the devastation all around. All his life he had lived with that mythical silver spoon in his mouth. Like his dad, he had never seen much suffering. To even glimpse such death and destruction all around sent him running to his bedroom with the willies.

Hilkiah came to his rescue with a good stern prophecy. "Amon! You are not the sole king! You are co-regent, for your father is still alive and he certainly will return. YHWH is punishing his waywardness, but he will repent and be restored. Likewise you also shall be punished, or even slain, unless you cease your profligate ways and return to YHWH and His Law. Your mother and I will help you, but you must choose to obey. Only then will your kingdom be established in justice and righteousness."

Surprisingly, pliable young Amon heard and heeded. The appalling swiftness and completeness of the assault had knocked a little sense into him. He ruled well in his father's absence, though only with Queen Meshullemeth and Hilkiah close by, guiding him.

Manasseh's princesses had been taken as slaves by the Assyrian soldiers, except three who were visibly pregnant. Meshullemeth was kind to them. She explained what had happened to Manasseh, and gave them a choice: remain in the devastated city as widows, or return to their homeland. All three chose the latter, so Meshullemeth gave them gifts and a guard escorted them and their idols back home.

With that taken care of, the temptation for Amon was gone from the palace, so he was able to concentrate on the slow restoration process. Within two years, the city was nearly back to normal. Except now, the pagan idols and altars had been removed and the city cleansed.

Every day, Hilkiah would remind Amon, “Your grandfather Hezekiah prospered because he trusted only in YHWH. Your father was dragged off by the Assyrians because he sacrificed to the pagan gods of his princesses. You have to make a choice. Will you be like your father? Or your grandfather?” And Amon would always answer, “I will be like Hezekiah!” So, at least for a time, he was. Logos rejoiced, and Judah began to prosper once again.

By the summer of 652 BC, Manasseh had been in the dungeon in Babylon for two years. He’d been doing a lot of praying. His prayers have been combined and summarized in the Apocrypha as *The Prayer of Manasseh*. It starts with praise to YHWH and acknowledgement of the goodness of all His ways, followed by confession of his many sins and a heartfelt supplication for pardon. I’ll quote a small part of the ending: “Do not destroy me with my transgressions. Do not be angry with me forever or store up evil against me. Do not condemn me to the depths of the earth. For You, O YHWH, are the God of those who repent, and in me will You manifest Your goodness. For, unworthy as I am, You will save me by Your great mercy. So I will praise You and tell the honor of Your name all the days of my life.”

“You will notice how his prayers have changed.” Logos taught His angelic host (with Satan secretly listening in). “Manasseh no longer prays about things of earth, his health, relief from the pain, his family, his wealth, his kingdom. No, for finally he has truly humbled himself. Now he is concerned for the honor of My name, and that My character be displayed in him, My goodness, My mercy. He calls Me ‘the God of those who repent’. I like that. For that is truly who I am. How can I not save him?”

“Humbug!” Satan butted in. (He would love to use a more vile word but had just discovered that ‘humbug’ was the worst he could vocalize in the presence of The Holy.) “He loves me and my ways. He curses You to Your face. He rages against You at the slightest provocation. After You let him fall, he swore a blue streak all the way to Babylon.”

“You need not remind Me, My beloved accuser. Every oath from his lips was a lash across My back. But you have to cut him a little slack, here. Every child growing up undisciplined will cry out in shock when he first receives a little testing. Manasseh grew up experiencing nothing but the blessings of his father’s goodness. You had plenty of opportunity to test him, but no. For many years you chose to let the blessings stand and never tempt him with evil.

“Since he was such a ‘good boy’, I could not punish him, so he grew up knowing no pain at all. Not even a spanking. No disappointments or discomfort. When you finally changed your tactics and tempted him with evil, of course he was overwhelmed. Of course he cursed Me when the consequences of his evil fell upon him. He knew from whom his blessings had come, but he couldn’t understand why they had ceased. Now he understands! And he curses Me no longer. Thank you for your help in maturing him.”

“You’ll not thank me when he dies down in that dark dungeon! For no one will ever hear his cries down there. No one will come to save him. You know that no one has ever escaped from an Assyrian dungeon.”

Logos grinned at Satan. “Is that a challenge?”

“No, of course not!” Satan backpedaled. “I know You can just send a big earthquake, break down the walls, destroy the city, and get him out. But nobody is going to let him out. They’ve forgotten him. And it’s for sure nobody is ever going to restore him to his kingdom like Hilkiah promised Amon. Your prophecies have failed! First your prophecy from Isaiah, which was way off, and now this! Don’t You know that when Your prophecies fail, You must concede the victory to me? Or else admit that Your Word is broken, thus consigning Your Creation to oblivion!”

“Ahh... that prophecy from Isaiah. You never actually heard it, did you. For it has been totally fulfilled to the letter, precisely as I gave it to Isaiah.”

“No way! That’s a baldfaced lie! You could never have guessed I would choose Esarhaddon as my tool of testing! He wasn’t even in line for the kingdom! And You could certainly never guess I’d use Babylon as the final location of my torment, for it didn’t even exist then!”

“I cannot lie, Satan. But you are correct that I cannot guess your choices. You still seem to harbor a fundamental misunderstanding of who I am. You compete with Me as if you could replace Me, as if you were equal to Me, or better. But someday you will understand that I am inherently different from you and all the heavenly host. For I am one with My Father in eternity. This is your proof, for although I could not possibly have guessed what you would choose, yet the Holy Spirit of Father YHWH in eternity tells me all I need to know about the future. My Father knew, for He sees all events throughout time as if they were right now.”

That explanation was perfectly clear. You and I can understand it. But Satan’s proud heart was darkened. He left the holy Presence in anger, sure that there was some trick involved. So Logos called after him, “Satan! I don’t use deceit or trickery! Those are your ways! Do not impute them to Me!” Satan did not answer. He still could not even accept that Logos could read his thoughts. He fled.

Logos turned to the heavenly multitude looking on. “Now do you understand why I no longer permit Satan in My throne room? Why, though I still love him, I can no longer call him Lucifer? Why My wrath abides upon him? Why I told you he has already hardened his heart beyond repentance? Even the least of you would have understood that explanation of who I am and bowed to Me as God Almighty expressed into this space-time realm. But Satan cannot hear; cannot receive My explanations or proofs. He still thinks I prophesy by trickery or by manipulations of future events, for those are the methods he has chosen. Time shall reveal the fallacy and foolishness of his ways.”

CHAPTER 10 – MANASSEH’S RESTORATION

King Ashurbanipal had been busy dealing with the rebellious Elamites for the last two years. But his older brother Shamash-shum-ukin had been humiliated. *He got himself into trouble and his little brother came to bail him out. His brother defeated his enemies. His brother directed the major building projects of Babylon. His brother had the big army, and went across the land on military campaigns. His brother gave him a portion of the tribute he collected. His brother even sent the defeated king Manasseh to keep in his dungeon.* “I get no respect!” he raged. “I am the older brother here. I want my own army. I want to defend my own city; to fight my own battles, collect my own tribute, and take my own captives to throw in my dungeon.”

Thus, King Shamash-shum-ukin conspired with some Chaldean princes to declare Babylonian independence, in the fall of 652 BC. He wrote a letter to King Assurbanipal, venting his angry feelings. He informed his brother, “You are only the king of Nineveh. I am the king of Babylon! I’m raising my own army, so I’ll collect my own tribute from now on. And I don’t want your conquered kings cluttering up my dungeon!” With the letter, he sent King Manasseh, still in chains and with that ring still in his nose.

Assurbanipal laughed when he read the letter. “Ha! It seems my foolish, dim-witted brother has gotten too big for his britches. I guess we’ll have to visit Babylon and teach him a lesson before he hurts himself.”

Then he stared down at Manasseh, now a pitiful, filthy wreck of a man, and his laughter faded. “My friend, I guess you’ve already learned your lesson, haven’t you. Guards! Take this man. Break off the chains from his ankles. Take care when you cut the ring off his nose, that you do not tear his flesh. Then bathe and feed him, trim his matted hair, dress his sores, and when he has healed, dress him in royal purple and return him to me looking like the king he is.”

It took a long time, for Manasseh had running sores over most of his body from the shackles, the filth, the rats, and the vermin in the dungeon. But Assurbanipal was patient; his brother’s issues could wait. He sent an answer to his brother in Babylon, saying, “The omens are not right for me to visit you right now, my dear brother. But I swear the gods do not favor your independence. Prepare your army well, for in due time I shall come to teach you why it is best for you to remain obedient to me.”

Months later, King Manasseh, dressed in royal apparel, was brought before King Assurbanipal. Now he looked good, his regal head held high and a spring in his step, now every inch a king again. Assurbanipal smiled, and invited him right up on the dais to sit beside him. “Well, well, my friend. Tell me what you have learned from the dungeon.”

Manasseh bowed humbly. “I learned to honor and fear you, O King. I learned to pay you tribute. You keep your promises and have the power to do whatever you wish.”

“No, no, not that. Everyone fears me and pays tribute. Tell me what you have learned about your God, YHWH, the one you failed to serve in Judah.”

There was a long moment of silence. Then, softly, Manasseh repeated, “I learned to honor and fear Him. And to pay Him tribute, too – the worship due His holy name. For He keeps His promises, and He has the power to do whatever He wishes even more than you, O King.”

The smile broadened across King Assurbanipal’s face. “And what about His laws? Will you still sacrifice your babies on the walls of Jerusalem?”

An involuntary shudder coursed through Manasseh’s body and tears came to his eyes. “Do not further torment me by reminding me of my shame, O King. Indeed I filled Jerusalem with the blood of the innocents. I was tortured by that memory every day I spent in the dungeon. But even worse was the way I trusted in those bloodthirsty gods to save my kingdom. I can’t believe I was so foolish. Never again will I trust any god but YHWH.”

“I’m glad to hear you say it. For as long as you keep that promise, and pay the small amount of tribute I demand, I vow never to attack you again. For I too fear a God who keeps His promises and who punishes those who do not. That is why I am always careful to keep my promises. Now, I have one more promise to keep.” He paused, thinking.

“Yes, Your Royal Highness?”

“Your God YHWH has been coming to me in my sleep. Three times, I have had this dream. He says to me, ‘Restore Manasseh to his kingdom.’ I say back to Him, ‘I don’t have Manasseh. I gave him to my brother.’ He says back to me, ‘I will bring him to you.’ I say back to him, ‘If You bring him to me, I will restore him to his kingdom.’ I didn’t think it was possible. No Assyrian ever frees a captured king from his dungeon! But impossible though it may be, here you are. So now I must keep my promise.”

Thus Assurbanipal sent Manasseh off with a chariot and two white horses, some gold and jewels, an entourage and royal bodyguard, and a letter of command that he be restored as king, or Judah would face the wrath of Assyria.

Shortly after Manasseh left for the Levant, Assurbanipal mustered his army and went to Babylon to deal with his rebellious brother. There his army surrounded the city and starved Shamash-shum-ukin back into submission. It didn’t take long, for his brother was a weak, foolish king.

Manasseh rode thoughtfully toward Judah, not sure of the reception he might receive. Jerusalem would not be the same, he knew. He had seen the devastation before being hauled away. *What about his people? How many survived? Will they hate him? Can they ever forgive him?* He clutched Assurbanipal’s letter. Then with determination he stuffed it back in his pocket and prayed, “No, Lord YHWH! I will not put my trust in this letter. I will trust only in You!”

As he expected, Manasseh's return caused a big stir in Jerusalem. Rarely has there been such division among the people. Some welcomed him home, saying, "It's a miracle! Never before has Assyria returned a conquered king to his kingdom! It's a sign from YHWH that he's been forgiven!" But others were just as vehement. "No! Can't you see the Assyrian chariot and guards? He has become an Assyrian sympathizer! There is no way we could let him be our king!" Still others cried out, "Away with him! He is the murderer of our babies! Execute him on the spot!" They were joined by those saying, "Yes, execute him. He led us into idolatry and immorality, not just once, but twice! We're finally getting Jerusalem cleaned up from his sins!"

Manasseh waited patiently. Finally they restored some semblance of order in the mob and allowed Manasseh to enter the gates and move slowly into the great hall. Amon greeted his father. He was less enthusiastic than Manasseh had hoped, but more than he had feared. Amon struggled to quiet the crowd. The great hall was more packed than he could ever remember. He raised his arms for silence but many kept shouting. No one could hear him. Manasseh turned to Amon, "Where is Hilkiah? He can bring order. The people trust him."

"Actually, no. They don't. After you banished him, he went back to Anathoth to enter the priesthood. But even the priests don't trust him. They think he failed in his duties here as the king's prophet, allowing you to fall into idolatry and sacrifice all the babies, even though you fired him before that. They had to have someone to blame. Some of the priests in Anathoth even tried to kill him. If his father had not been high priest, they might have!"

"Please, son. Just call for Hilkiah anyway. I need him by my side when I say what I have to say."

As they waited for Hilkiah, Amon introduced his father to his wife of less than a year. "Her name is Jedidah. She is wonderful! Hilkiah and Holya brought her to me – she is Hilkiah's niece. Hilkiah says it is not good for a king to be single, because the temptations are too great. He's right. Jedidah has helped me settle down and get serious about my kingdom. Isn't she lovely? And she loves YHWH and knows the law almost as well as you do, Dad."

After chatting with Jedidah awhile, Manasseh agreed. "Welcome into the family, my dear! Thank you for being such a good influence on my son. May you be blessed with many godly children."

By the time they got Hilkiah and Holya there, the crowd had quieted down. Amon again raised his arms and spoke. "My father was taken from us in shame and in chains, yet he has returned in royal robes and a chariot with white horses. We do not know how these changes transpired. We must not judge him before we have heard his story."

He sat down, and Manasseh stood up before the crowd. A hush settled over the crowd, as they strained to hear.

"I am no longer fit to be your king, I know," Manasseh began, and a murmur swept through the hall. "You know Hilkiah, here. YHWH sent him to be my 'king's prophet'. Like Isaiah before him, Hilkiah faithfully informed me when I turned away from YHWH, and warned me exactly what would happen if I wouldn't repent. But I didn't like to hear it, so I fired him. Then I did whatever I pleased; evil, horrible things, breaking YHWH's laws and sacrificing to the gods of the nations. Of course everything that he and Isaiah prophesied fell upon me, for YHWH always keeps His Word." Manasseh went on to tell the whole story; his capture, torture, and anguish in the dark dungeon for two years; then his repentance and renewed faith; and finally his release and return home, as I have just told you.

At 56 years old, Manasseh was still a handsome and strong figure, and a great orator, but he humbly bowed his regal head before the people. "As I said, I am no longer fit to be your king. I am happy that you crowned my son as co-regent in my absence. I trust that he has served you well. But now that I am back, we must make a decision. I have a letter from King Assurbanipal in my hand, in which he commands you to accept me back as your king or face the wrath of Assyria. But King Assurbanipal is not your Lord. I am not your Lord, nor is Amon. Only YHWH is our Lord.

"So I asked Hilkiah to come and prophesy the Word of YHWH to us. In the past, I treated him cruelly. I wouldn't be surprised if he prophesied against me and told you to toss me in the dungeon and throw away the key. So be it. I swear I will do whatever YHWH tells me through him."

The crowd was stunned at that. It didn't sound like the Manasseh they knew. Hilkiah pleaded for a little time, and fled to the 'king's prophet' apartment with Holya to pray.

The crowd was restless while he was gone. A man called out, "We don't want either you or your son as king over us! Kings are supposed to protect us!" A woman followed with, "We can never forgive you for what you did to our babies! For who can bring our babies back?" And another shouted, "Away with the house of David! Let us choose a new king from among ourselves!" The angry criticisms and jeers continued to escalate. Manasseh just hung his head in humble silence, waiting for Hilkiah's return.

But when Hilkiah stepped back up on the dais before the king, the crowd quickly grew silent. *They want to hear, and they will hold Manasseh to his vow to obey the prophet.* "I must admit, I was angry with Manasseh for firing me, and for leaving Jerusalem vulnerable to destruction by his disobedience. I would try not to show it, but I would take secret delight in saying that YHWH wants you to toss him in the dungeon or execute him for his crimes. However, that is not what YHWH told us." He glanced over and got a nod from Holya before continuing. "Here is what YHWH said, 'Restore Manasseh as the sole king of Judah under Me. While his son did a commendable job in his father's absence, Amon is not yet ready to be king.'"

“What?” Amon jumped up. “You told me I would be co-regent! You can’t just get rid of me like that!”

The hubbub began anew, with the angry shouts of a still-divided people. It was close to becoming an unruly mob again. Young Hilkiah, filled with the Spirit of YHWH, bellowed out with a voice he didn’t know he had, “Silence! Silence! YHWH is still speaking through me! How dare you interrupt with your vulgar shouts?!”

The people shut up in mid-shout, so Hilkiah was able to continue. “Amon, YHWH promised to show you through me what He needs to teach you. If you will learn it well, in humility and patience, you will be given the kingdom at the proper time. Then you will make a great king, and the house of David will be established through you and your descendants. But I swear that if you are impatient; if you try to take the kingdom now; if you refuse the Word of YHWH to you; your reign will not last beyond two years.”

Then Hilkiah turned back to the people. It was amazing how they’d quieted down. Even those who had criticized him, now recognized that he had the Word of YHWH. He spoke with an authority they had not seen in him before. “Bloodguiltiness yet abides over Jerusalem, for Manasseh flooded the entire city with the blood of the innocents.” Some cries and sobs of mothers swept through the crowd, for their pain and grief ran exceedingly deep.

“But I swear to you...” the cries died out as if chopped off with a knife. “...that the bloodguiltiness is not because of Manasseh, for he has repented and has been forgiven by YHWH, and my father the high priest has sacrificed the lamb and has made atonement for his sin. No! The guilt remains only because you have hung on to your bitterness and wrath and refused to forgive.

“If you will now forgive Manasseh and accept him again as your king, I swear to you that the land will be cleansed of the bloodguiltiness and will become fruitful once again.”

Hilkiah motioned to his wife to stand up beside him. “While we prayed, YHWH gave Holya a vision. I want her to describe it to you in her own words.”

Her voice was not as loud as her husband’s. The crowd got very quiet trying to hear. “I was taken to the heavenlies, to a realm much brighter and more colorful than this. It was a green meadow, filled with flowers, with a sparkling stream running through and gardens and orchards all around. It was filled with people of all kinds, but near me were hundreds of little children. They were laughing, playing, running – even little infants could run and dance in this realm. A shining man was among them, playing with them, holding and loving them. He looked up at me to say, ‘These are the innocents. They shall never know terror or pain again, for I protect them. They shall grow up to know and love Me and serve in My Kingdom forever.’ The vision faded. I knew without any doubt that the shining man was Logos, Word of YHWH, God of Israel.”

Her voice choked up with emotion. Hilkiah continued for her. “Your babies are forever in the heavenlies with YHWH. But He has new babies to give you. He wants you to be fruitful and multiply. He loves babies more than you! I urge you, give up the bitterness against Manasseh. *If you will forgive him, each of you mothers who lost a baby at his hand will get another from YHWH by this time next year.*”

There was a long moment of stunned silence. In that moment the crowd was transformed. It was no longer divided. Cries of “I forgive!” and “God forgive my anger and bitterness!” rang out. Then a strong voice began the chant, “Long live the king!” and it soon was picked up by nearly everyone present.

Thus was Manasseh’s kingdom restored to him. He ruled humbly, and justly, with Hilkiah and Holya often at his side. It took time, for such deep wounds are difficult to heal, but in time the people learned to love and trust him. The remainder of his reign (which was long) was in peace. Prosperity again returned to Judah.

King Assurbanipal kept his promise, and Assyria did not trouble the Levant again as long as he lived. Manasseh also kept his promise, to pay the tribute that Assurbanipal required, surprised at how easy it was to pay now that he no longer placed his love or trust in riches.

And YHWH kept His promise, too. Many babies were born the next year, and in the years to come. Jerusalem again rang with the joyful shouts of children. Manasseh’s holocaust of the innocents slowly faded from memory.

Of course, not all were able to forgive and forget. Some of the priestly line at Anathoth never forgave Hilkiah, and worked to block him from becoming the high priest after his father. But God showed His approval of His prophet / priest by blessing him and Holya with a son – after three daughters! They named him **Jeremiah**, meaning ‘YHWH will restore or exalt’, because they saw the land of Judah restored and their king exalted anew.

Jeremiah was born in 648 BC, the same year another very special son was given. Amon never really handled his demotion very well. He was still the crown prince, and everyone treated him with respect and all, but once you get the taste of being king it is pretty tough to give it up. YHWH worked with him. Hilkiah and Holya worked with him, teaching him the ways of YHWH and why he needed to humble himself before he could be exalted. YHWH blessed him, too. One of these special blessings was a son whom they named **Josiah** (‘YHWH Supporters’).

But in the end, Amon rejected YHWH’s teaching. He preferred to hang on to his bitterness at being so unfairly treated. So Logos gave Satan permission to afflict him, as only Satan loves to do. But Satan refused! “Why should I test your Bride any longer? That might just drive Amon to You! I will cover him and protect him from any pain until he has learned to love evil. Then I will destroy him!”

CHAPTER 11 – KINGS AMON AND JOSIAH

Hilkiah and Holya no longer lived at the palace, for there were many duties for one next in line to be the high priest. Though a few priests at Anathoth still hated and distrusted him, Hilkiah had achieved a grudging stalemate with them, and had entered into the regular rotation of the temple services. But one day, he returned to the palace, bringing his wife and their baby son Jeremiah. “O King Manasseh, live forever!” They bowed respectfully to the king. “I have two warnings from YHWH for you.”

Manasseh humbly urged him to speak, for he had come to love the Word of YHWH in his old age. Hilkiah smiled. There was a time when Manasseh knew the Word of YHWH in his head, but could not receive it in his heart. Now continually his heart was full and satisfied with the Word of YHWH, much like a thirsty plant is satisfied with live-giving water. “The first is,” Hilkiah told him, “though most in Judah are now back to worshiping YHWH God of Israel, yet you have not destroyed all the pagan altars and worship centers scattered over the hills of Judah. Some people are trying to use them to worship YHWH! That is unacceptable to Him. You had those altars built, in your younger days, and you are responsible to tear them down.”

“Wait a minute. I didn’t build pagan altars anywhere outside the city, only in Jerusalem. And all of those I have torn down. I’m quite sure of it.”

“Though you are technically correct, YHWH still holds you responsible for their spread throughout Judah. Before your exile to Babylon you encouraged idolatry to flourish. So in God’s eyes, they’re your altars. Deal with it.”

“Secondly, Amon your son is not responding well to the teaching of YHWH. He needs some discipline, O King. Restraint! It was you who encouraged him into idolatry and immorality in the first place. Now you are being too tolerant of his waywardness. God loves the new humility He finds in you, O King, but humility cannot be an excuse to be tolerant or lazy. You must be bold to confront evil wherever you find it. Even if it is found in your own son.”

Manasseh heard, and he promised to do something. So Hilkiah took his wife and son to visit Amon and Jedidah. She was nursing her baby Josiah, who was nearly the same age as Jeremiah, so the two mothers chatted and nursed together while the men conferred in the next room.

“Amon. You have great potential here. Next in line to be king, a godly wife, and already a beautiful perfect heir! But you must learn to guard your heart. Bitterness against your father is dragging you down. Manasseh did not take the kingdom from you. YHWH restored it to him, after he learned his lessons. But he went through hell and back to learn them! Do not follow his path, for I swear that YHWH won’t be so forgiving of you. If you take his path of idolatry and immorality, YHWH will take your life, for you had the chance to learn from your father’s tragedies and did not.”

Amon’s response was lukewarm, at best, for his heart was not right with God. He surely knew about God, but had no love for Him. Yet he heard, and as he ushered them out he assured Hilkiah that he would heed the warning. But in the end, he preferred to nurse his bitterness.

Did King Manasseh ever discipline his son? How do you discipline a married 28-year-old? Oh, he spoke to him about it, but in the end nothing happened. Amon swore he was worshiping YHWH. And he promised to remove the pagan altars across the land and ensure that only YHWH was worshiped. But in his heart he was angry with YHWH for taking the kingdom from him and giving it back to his father. And in his bitterness, he had become angry with his father as well. So instead of removing them he protected the pagan altars throughout Judah, and encouraged the people of Judah to ‘worship YHWH’ on them.

Manasseh had ten golden years with Meshullemeth his wife after his restoration. In 641 BC he died peacefully, at the age of 67, 55 years after he had begun to reign with his father. But though his reign ended in righteousness and peace, most of us remember him only by his earlier days of idolatry, because of what happened right after his passing.

Amon his son was crowned king in his place. But right off the bat he dishonored his father by having him buried, not among the tombs of the kings of Judah, but in the herb garden of Uzza, the palace chef. Then he banished Hilkiah and Holya, and all his father’s other godly counselors, from Jerusalem. He replaced them with pagan counselors, wizards, astrologers, and priests of pagan gods. He hired all the out-of-work servants of Baal and Astarte to go back to the pagan worship centers which he had never destroyed, to renew idolatry across the land. He publicly blasphemed YHWH, God of Israel, and swore he would get even for the way he had lost his kingdom. When his palace servants politely reminded him of the terrible tragedy that had befallen his father, he pointed to the carved Asherim still standing in some pagan worship centers of Judah. “Those Asherah poles were carved by my father. Yet he was blessed and he lived out his days in peace. I will serve them just like my father did.” Thus he rejected the lessons Hilkiah had tried so hard to teach him.

His servants put up with him for two years. But then, fearing a repeat of the horror when Assurbanipal had come and ‘wiped Jerusalem like a dish’, they conspired against him in the palace. Led by Uzza the chef, the kitchen staff rose up against Amon and slew him as he sat down to dine.

They quickly tried to reassure Jedidah that she and her children were safe with them, but she ran screaming for the guards, who came with a group of Amon’s friends and captured the conspirators. Sadly, they tried and executed them. But the people considered Uzza their hero. They buried Amon in the lowly herb garden next to his father. Then they immortalized Uzza by burying him beside the two kings. It is known as the ‘Garden of Uzza’ to this day.

Amon's powerful advisors and nobles, led by Arnie, his chief bodyguard, saw that with the king's death their status was in jeopardy. So they quickly moved to protect their interests. Though Josiah was only eight years old, he was the oldest heir in the house of David. So they crowned him king, knowing it would be easy to control the youngster.

In King Josiah's name, Arnie's men continued Amon's practice of banning from Jerusalem anyone intolerant of pagan priests and their idols. But they went even further. They rounded up all the copies of the laws of YHWH and had them burned. Then, one by one, they cooked up false charges against each of those in the palace or the temple service who still served YHWH, and had them tried and executed. They filled the palace and the temple with idols. They tortured and killed old Meshullam the high priest and his second son, Shallum, as well as many others of the priests of YHWH. But Shallum's older brother, Hilkiah, that prophet/priest who had stood so firm against them all his life, they could not find. They tore through Anathoth in a rage, torturing anyone who might have known where he went and nearly destroying the city just to find him, for he was next in line to be high priest and they well knew his hatred for their idolatry! But Hilkiah and Holya, and their eight-year-old son Jeremiah, were nowhere to be found.

Jedidah, the godly queen mother, suffered an 'accident'. She died when she 'fell' off the parapet of the palace one dark night. Her other children just 'disappeared'. Their bodies were later found in a shallow mass grave with the bodies of others who had been sacrificed to Baal on the Mount of Olives. Thus within three months young Josiah was all alone, king in name only, while the land of Judah was ruled behind the scenes by big burly Arnie, Amon's old wizards and advisors, and the nobles and pagan priests who supported them.

They never found Hilkiah. He had been warned by his young son Jeremiah, who had come to his father with a horrified look on his face and said, "Dad, the king is dead! Evil men are now coming to kill us also! We must flee!"

Hilkiah had believed his son, while the other priests at Anathoth had not. So they were all slain, and only Hilkiah and his family survived of all the priests true to YHWH. They traveled to the country, where they found refuge at the farmhouse of Isaiah's son Shearjashub, who was 97 years old at the time.

Those were dark days for Judah. YHWH's temple was run by the high priests of Baal. Any priest who objected was slain. Idolatry filled the land. Days were filled with wild and riotous living; evenings spent in drunkenness; nights alive with temple prostitutes. The righteous hid themselves. The Word of YHWH was lost in Judah, as no true prophets or priests of YHWH remained alive within miles of Jerusalem. Young Josiah was kept entertained on his golden throne while his advisors plotted ways to entrench their power. *But his naiveté will not last forever.*

Josiah had received eight years of training from his godly mother, Jedidah. That, of course, was easily undone. They hired a nanny from among the ranks of the pagan priesthood. She loved to excite Josiah with stories of past glories of the planetary gods and the way they ruled the earth with their swords of lightning, rain mixed with fire, and terrible earthquakes which they sent to collapse their enemy's walls. He loved the stories, though for him they were naught but fantasy as neither he nor his nanny had ever actually seen such things.

When Josiah was twelve, they initiated him into the pagan ceremonies. But alas, they were a bit too eager. His stomach was turned by the bloody sacrifice. His face paled. He puked all over the floor, and then ran from the pagan worship center in horror. From then on, he refused to go back, no matter how they cajoled or enticed him.

So Arnie had to figure out a Plan B. That turned out to be Zebidah, the cute twelve-year-old daughter of Pedaiah of the town of Arumah. Now, Pedaiah had actually been a priest of YHWH, although he had been quick to shift his allegiances when he saw which way the tide was flowing. His daughter was a darling dishwater blonde air-head who cared nothing for heaven or hell, only for playing all day, thanks to her indulgent parents. But she was enthusiastic in her play, as anyone without a worldly care is apt to be. Young Josiah was entranced! So Zebidah became Josiah's best friend as they played together for more than a year.

In late 635 BC, Arnie came to Josiah as he and Zebidah played beside the throne. He had grown to really love this young man who was his ticket to power. He almost hated to do this, but Zebidah was already blossoming into a young woman. It was time to implement Plan B.

Smiling, Arnie called, "O King, live forever!" Josiah obediently climbed up on his golden throne as he was taught. Arnie gallantly went through the typical routine, "Your greatness and magnificence is as the stars of the heavens, and your radiance as the sun in its strength! To you, and you only, does the nation bow and seek wisdom. Mighty kings from far-off lands eagerly come to you for counsel..." and so on. Arnie could see Josiah becoming bored with the charade. He was growing up. Their fantasy land could not keep him satisfied much longer.

So he continued, his smile fading to a concerned look. "O King, as your friend and advisor, I always tell you when it is time for important things to be done. You are a man now, and Zebidah is no longer just a little girl; she is a woman. A king must have a wife, or he would never be able to understand the common man, who takes a wife to bear his children. I brought Zebidah to you to become your wife. She will love and care for you all your days, I swear, and will bear and nurse your sons as your mother did for you. It would never do for a king to be without an heir! Look at her. See how her body is changing so she can nurse your babies? It's time for you and Zebidah to marry."

The kids didn't see any problem with that. They didn't even know what marriage is. The royal wedding was just another grand charade to them, which they played with all the enthusiasm and joy possible in ones so young. The only difference between this and earlier charades was, when it was all over, Zebidah didn't have to 'go home'. Instead, Arnie brought her into Josiah's big bedroom and instructed him that she would 'sleep with him' from now on, the rest of his life. "That is what married people do."

That sounded like great fun. More time for play! The bed was certainly large enough. So they romped together awhile until, exhausted, they fell asleep, still in their day clothes. That went on for a week or so, until Arnie brought them each a lovely set of pajamas; silky, frilly, and sensual. He told them that on hot summer nights, it is much easier to get a good night's sleep if they help each other into their 'night clothes' before they climb into bed.

Well, you know where that can lead. In two months Zebidah was pregnant, and Arnie and the nanny were kept busy explaining all the things a young mother needs to know. Their baby was born by the end of 634 BC.

It was a difficult birth. The baby was injured and badly deformed as it passed through Zebidah's immature birth canal. Of course the parents wanted to keep him anyway. He was their first! They named him Johanan, and Zebidah eagerly went to work trying to nurse him even before she recovered enough to get out of bed.

But Arnie knew better. He smothered the baby that night while the kids slept. The next morning, he wore a long sad face, and helped them through the burial and the grieving process. But all the while he was glad that was over, and hoped he wouldn't have to go through it again.

Alas, young, fertile Zebidah was pregnant again within another few months. She went into labor around the end of 633 BC. She and Josiah were only fifteen.

King Josiah told the physicians that he'd have their heads if they injured the new baby on the way out. Again, it was a very tough and exhausting delivery. Josiah could no longer bear to hear Zebidah's screams. He left her. When he returned, his wife was dead. But they had managed to save their baby. He was a perfect, beautiful boy! Josiah named him **Eliakim**: 'God will establish' my kingdom. He now had an heir. But he grieved for his best friend Zebidah.

Ashurbanipal had enjoyed a long and prosperous reign of 36 years. Under him, Assyria reached the peak of its power and glory. This had truly been the golden age of the Assyrian Empire. He had treated the nations of the world with firmness, but fairness. As a result, the entire civilized world prospered. But he was old. In 633 BC he crowned his son, Ashur-etil-ilani, as his co-regent and retired to his summer palace. There he died in 627 BC. Ashur-etil-ilani turned out to be a weak and foolish king, resulting in a power struggle between him and the palace nobles.

Arnie was disgusted with Zebidah for dying on him. She, with her now thoroughly pagan father, was to draw King Josiah into full support of their idolatry. But now he needed to find someone else. Fortunately he had plenty to choose from. His power over the land was absolute.

He picked Hamutal, a daughter of Jeremiah of Libnah. She had been drafted into the pool of temple prostitutes, but she and her father had balked. Arnie calculated that by making her queen instead, he could kill two birds with one stone. Now both Jeremiah of Libnah and Hamutal would be in his back pocket the rest of their lives.

So in 632 BC, Josiah and Hamutal were married. Both were sixteen, though she was six months older. Hamutal happily helped to care for Eliakim, her first real baby doll. And by the next year, she had a son of her own, whom they named **Shallum**, 'Recompense'. For Josiah told Hamutal, "Now I am recompensed for the loss of my wife Zebidah."

The death of baby Johanan, then the death of Zebidah during the birth of his second son Eliakim, had profoundly changed Josiah. When he was young, whatever Arnie said was true. It had to be true – all his advisors, counselors, wizards, and wise nobles had agreed with him. But it had not been true. Those deaths were not what Arnie had promised when he had married Zebidah. He had promised she would always love him and raise his babies. Even after his wedding with Hamutal, the ache of his loss lingered.

Blonde Zebidah had been lots of fun, but her brains had been like tangled noodles. Hamutal was different. She was serious, smart, compassionate, and a good communicator. Josiah was hurting, and needed a true friend. Hamutal was perfect, although Arnie hadn't known that. So after their wedding, Hamutal kindly talked him through his grief, loved his son Eliakim as if he were her own, and wisely de-emphasized the physical intimacy. She would rather be a queen than a temple prostitute! She determined to be the best, most loving and supportive queen ever.

So for the first time in his life the fun and games that had filled Josiah's days give way to some serious talk. Hamutal insisted, "Talk to me. Tell me all that is troubling you. Just the sharing of it will help to ease the pain. I'll help you bear it. I won't be upset with you, I promise! I'll understand. I'll love you all the more when I learn to know your heart."

Josiah wasn't used to this. During his two years with Zebidah, he had never had a single serious conversation. Everything had been met with giggles and jokes. "I don't know, Hamutal. I just miss her, and it hurts."

"The death of someone you love always leaves a terrible emptiness. No one else can ever fill it, either. I can try, but I'm not her. But I can help you move on. I can help to fill your life with new things, so the pain of her loss will fade back into the mists of the past. Look what she left you! What a precious and perfect baby! Your own son! He is growing ... here, you hold him. Look! He smiles at you!"

Josiah took his little son. Hamutal continued, “You see, he is a little glimpse of Zebidah! She is gone, but not totally gone, for you can look at him and still see her in his eyes, in his smile! You can thank the gods for your two years with Zebidah, and for this precious reminder that she left you.”

“Y...yes.” Josiah was feeling overwhelmed. “But... uh, Arnie lied to me.” He was finally able to blurt it out.

“Yeah, I know. Arnie lies about everything. He’s just like my dad. I see ‘em plotting together... Ha! They think you don’t know – that you can’t understand. What twits! I’m glad you’re not like them, Josiah.”

“He... lies about everything?”

“Well, sure! Name one thing he didn’t lie about.”

“Well... Uh... He made me the king...”

“No he didn’t. You’re Amon’s son. As soon as Amon died, you automatically became the king.”

“He supports me, and trains me to be a good king...”

“Not a chance. He supports himself. He pretends to support you, but his training is only a trick, to convince you to support his own agenda. He and his cronies are actually ruling the land, using you as his ticket to power.”

“But...” It began to dawn on Josiah that Hamutal was exactly correct. “What can I do?”

“What can you do? Do whatever you darn well please. You are the king! You can order their heads chopped off, and they’ll be gone, just like that!”

“They? I thought we were just talking about Arnie.”

“Oh, he’s just the front man, Josiah. All those ancient wizards and nobles, and their priests. They’re all in on it, too. First-class dorks. Dweebs every one.”

“What about your dad? You said he was plotting with Arnie. Don’t you love your dad? Mine is dead.”

Hamutal had to stop and think. “Love him? Well, yeah. I guess so. It’s nice to have a dad who takes care of you. At least he didn’t make me be a temple prostitute! But he still lies. He pretends to believe in the gods and worship them, but I see through all that. It’s all an act! He tells me stories of how the gods used to come near and torment those who didn’t worship them with big earthquakes and lightning strikes. It’s all balderdash of course, and he knows it. But if you’re a priest of Baal, you’ve got to pretend to believe that baloney or the other priests will toss you out.”

“Yeah, after my dad ‘n mom died, Arnie got me a nanny who told me all those stories, too. I never really believed ‘em either, though the stories were lots of fun.” Now Josiah began to really open up. “I was only eight when Mom died, but I still remember what she told me about YHWH. She said YHWH is the one true God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth. She told me all those other gods are false.”

“YHWH? Huh. I heard that name...” Hamutal stopped to think. She pointed, “That temple... I remember my dad saying it was built by Solomon as a temple to YHWH many years ago. But I figure that, well... YHWH must have died. At least He’s not in His temple anymore, that’s for sure.”

“My mom told me that YHWH is Spirit, and that He can never die. She said that when we worship Him, he protects us from all those false gods and their earthquakes and lightning and stuff. She told me about my great-grandpa, good King Hezekiah. He worshiped YHWH, so when Mars came past it saved him by sending its lightning to kill the Assyrians camped around Jerusalem! That’s my favorite story! I asked my mom to tell it over and over again.”

“Wait a minute. She said the planetary gods were false. But then Mars came by and saved Hezekiah? That doesn’t make any sense. Sounds like Mars was the true god there!”

“Oh! You’re right. I never thought that... I don’t know! We need to ask someone. Maybe the scribes have recorded it in the history of Judah. I’d like to find the truth.”

“Me too. But you can bet Arnie and his cronies aren’t going to tell us the truth. Because if YHWH is real and his gods are false, he’s gonna be in a heap o’ trouble! You’re the king! We’d better be careful who we ask.” She stopped, then she gave Josiah a big grin and leaned over to kiss him on the nose. “You see now how talking about things helps to ease the pain of your loss? I’ll bet once we get involved in searching out which gods are true and which are false, the wounds in your soul will heal and you’ll be happy again.”

Hamutal was correct. Josiah had to admit that during their conversation he had totally forgotten about Zebidah and her death. So they plotted together to secretly search out Judah’s history, to discover the gods of their ancestors. The more they worked at it, the more Josiah’s pain receded into the past. By the time baby Shallum came along, Josiah was actually glad that Zebidah had died, or he never would have met Hamutal. For he had come to love and trust her totally. If ever any couple were ‘soul mates’ it was Josiah and Hamutal. They opened up and bonded their hearts together beyond what many young couples ever know. Logos was pleased, and decided to aid their search.

Arnie had made it tough on them. He and his cronies had worked hard to get rid of all written records of the great things that YHWH had done for Judah in the past. The history books, the books of God’s Law, the chronicles of past godly kings – all were burned. The palace was clean of anything about YHWH. Most of those who had known Him had fled. Any remaining had been silenced, or slain.

But there were clues, and the young couple worked hard to put them together. Finding out more about this YHWH became a passion with them both. Sorting out the truth from the many lies was far more exciting than the foolish games Josiah used to play with Zebidah. And from that day forth, Josiah no longer trusted Arnie.

In 629 BC, King Ashur-etil-ilani of Assyria was slain by his own General Sin-shumu-lishir in the ongoing power struggle between him and all the other contenders to the throne. He tried to take the throne, but Ashur-etil-ilani's next younger brother Sin-shar-ishkun exposed the plot and made himself king instead. His reign was filled with more palace plots and internal strife. His younger brother Ashur-uballit II fought him for the throne. The glorious empire of Ashurbanipal began falling apart from internal feuding. Down in Babylon, Ashurbanipal's older brother Shamash-shum-ukin remained a weak and foolish king. Assyria could not afford another rebellion in Babylon, so after Sin-shar-ishkun secured his throne, he ordered his most loyal general, Nabopolassar, to go down there and take over the military. That ought to keep his nearly senile uncle Shamash-shum-ukin out of trouble. Or so he hoped.

Let's pause for a quick review of the Pharaohs in Egypt. The 23rd 'Libyan Anarchy' Dynasty ended in 720 BC when warlord Shoshenk was slain. The 25th 'Nubian' Dynasty ended with Tanutamun's death at Napata in 657 BC. The 21st Dynasty was pretty well gone by 740 BC, as the 22nd 'Libyan' Dynasty had merged or taken over to control most of Egypt – Osorkon IV at Tanis and Bubastis, Rudamun at Thebes, and Pedubast II at Leontopolis. Pedubast ruled for 25 years from 661 BC, followed by Osorkon V ruling for 9 years from 637 BC, and then followed by Psammus ruling for 10 years from 629 BC. The Libyan Dynasty ended with his death in 620 BC. In the 26th 'Saite' Dynasty, Psamtik I, son of Necho I, was appointed by Ashurbanipal in 664 BC. He gradually gained control over all the other Pharaohs. He unified Egypt and ruled well, for an amazing 54 years.

So, we have reached 628 BC, the 12th year since Josiah became king. He and Hamutal were now twenty, older and wiser. They had just gotten their first big break in their search for the truth about YHWH. It happened like this.

They had given up talking to the palace staff. No one would say a word to them about YHWH, for fear of losing his head. Arnie's wizards had put the fear of his gods on everyone. So they started taking picnics together on sunny Sabbaths, leaving the palace in their effort to meet others. But the guards (whom they secretly referred to as 'Arnie's Goon Squad') stayed close, always listening, and always pushing others away, "Just for your protection, of course!"

Then in spring, they planned a picnic on the other side of Jerusalem. As they walked through the city, they stopped to give alms to a lame beggar at the gate to the now neglected and abused temple of Solomon. "Thank you, O my most gracious king!" he bowed. Then he added, "But why does the king come to the temple gate? Do you not know of the king's secret entrance?" Arnie's Goon Squad quickly moved in. "How dare you speak so casually to the king? Another word and I'll have your head!"

So that was that. But Josiah and Hamutal had heard, and that evening they began their search.

It took a long time. The passageway really was a secret! Josiah finally found it when he was standing on a parapet of the palace studying the masonry between him and the temple. "Hamutal! Look how thick that wall is. You could never see it from down below, but from up here, it looks like it might be hollow. Maybe the passage is in the wall."

So they estimated about where it intersected the palace, and went down to investigate. Surely it had to come to the hallway that ran past the king's bedroom, but no. The hall just dead-ended. They spent half a night there searching the wall for clues while the palace was asleep, but it was too dark and their lamps too dim. So the next Sabbath, they arose early in the morning. Josiah got his best polished brass mirror and took it out to the grand entry where the sunrise streamed in the windows. He made sure nobody was looking, then put the mirror in the sunlight and aimed it right down the hallway.

It was perfect. Hamutal stayed at the end of the hall, frantically searching for clues. When anyone came by, Josiah would simply turn the mirror slightly to look into it, as if he were playing with it, or admiring himself. When the hall began to get too busy, Josiah returned the mirror to his room, and went down to find Hamutal. "Did you see anything?" he asked excitedly.

"You bet! There are finger marks up in that left corner. I'm sure that people have been pushing on it. But we'll have to wait until after nightfall." So at midnight they returned, with their lamps shuttered to shine only forward.

They found the stone with the fingerprints, but it seemed solid. They pushed and pulled, and cursed a bit. "Darn! I'm sure I saw finger-stains right here. It looked like someone has been pushing on this stone. A lot."

Josiah was thinking. "The masonry on this wall is solid. There is no door in the wall. Therefore, the entire wall must move. It's got to be really heavy! If this is the latch that locks it in place, the weight of the wall probably has it jammed. I'll try to slide the wall to the right, while you push on the stone."

They pushed with all their strength. Nothing. "Okay, so I guessed wrong. I'll try sliding it to the left." They tried again, and with a slight thump, the wall was free to move. Startled, Josiah let go. The wall slid quietly all the way to the right, leaving the hallway completely open. They quickly stepped in and took hold of a brass handle on the edge of the sliding wall, pulling it quietly shut again. With the same slight thump, it locked shut. They breathed a sigh of relief. They had not been seen. Now they could explore the passageway at their leisure.

"Wait!" Hamutal gave a gasp. "What if there's no latch on this side?" They searched, and found none. *Of course the king would not want any possibility of an enemy using the secret passage to enter the palace. There is no help for it now.* They would have to return by the city streets.

But the passageway itself was a treasure trove! They spent hours searching the walls, learning of past kings and priests. They found a list of the high priests of YHWH. Just what they were searching for! "Aaron, Eleazar, Phinehas, Abishua..." They quickly scanned to the end, "...Azariah, Urijah, Amariah, Hoshai, Ahitub, Merai, Zadok, Meshullam..." The list stopped, leaving space for more.

They wrote out the names, then hurried through the rest of the passage, out another locking wall like the first, and into the king's worship chamber in the inner court of the temple. Dawn was nigh. They will be missed. They must get back to the palace. They rushed out, ran across the court of Israel and the court of the nations, and escaped out the main gate. The temple prostitutes never awoke.

There was the old lame beggar. Did he live here by the gate? But few others were up at this hour. Josiah stopped to grasp his hand. "Thank you for telling me about the secret passageway!" He pressed a generous gift into the beggar's palm; everything he had at the time; and they hurried on.

They got to the palace right after the changing of the guard. Good. His wife's arm firmly in his, and her head on his shoulder, Josiah walked up to the guards. "Couldn't sleep," he yawned. "We went out to watch the sunrise from the Mount of Olives."

"Oh? Why didn't the guards go with you? They have their orders! You could be assaulted!"

King Josiah laughed. "Ha! Those guards you relieved? They were sleeping. I didn't have the heart to wake them." The guards' eyes got big, but they strolled on by and into the palace, then quickly returned to their bedroom before Arnie or his servants came to call them for breakfast.

"Do you realize I'm the king here, yet I'm treated like a prisoner in my own palace?" Josiah exclaimed. "We've got to find someone we can trust!"

"What about that lame beggar? I'm not sure how he knew, but he sure gave us the clue we needed."

"Why not?" So next Sabbath they planned their picnic on the far side of town again, and flipped a silver coin into the beggar's cup with a cheery, "God be with you!" And the next, and the next. Arnie's Goon Squad got bored of the routine. So they made other comments to him, but kept it casual. The guards began to lose their suspicions. Then one Sabbath, Hamutal mused out loud, "Honey, I wonder if our physicians could help this poor man? The coin we drop in his cup each week isn't helping him much."

"What a wonderful idea, my dear. Guards! Take this man, clean him up, and bring him to the palace. Send him to my personal physicians. I want a report on what they can do for him." It worked. The next time they saw the beggar, he lay in the palace infirmary after an operation on his legs. They came to chat, and learned that his name was Martin, and he had been a server in Solomon's temple!

Still avoiding direct questions as to their quest, they encouraged Martin to talk about his past. Sure enough, he mentioned Zadok and Meshullam, his bosses during his time of service in the temple. "What happened to them?" Hamutal casually asked.

Martin looked at them strangely, lowering his voice to a whisper. "You really don't know?"

"I don't know a lot of things, old man." Josiah used the term of honor for the elderly. Martin was only 47 but he seemed awfully old to Josiah. "I was just a boy when they made me the king here. They've deliberately tried to hide everything from me. Please, tell us!"

So, the cat was out of the bag. But the beggar seemed to understand the situation already. "Too dangerous now; too many people; the walls have ears. Wait until I can walk. Then I will tell you..." Then he saw a nurse coming near. He instantly changed subjects, "...after my fall, my legs healed so crooked I couldn't even walk. I could do nothing but beg. But your doctors are wonderful. They re-broke my legs and set them correctly. Within the month I will be learning to walk all over again. How can I ever thank you?"

It was difficult to be so close and still have to wait, after their years of searching. But the stakes were high. If Arnie or his Goon Squad discovered their quest, Arnie would certainly take it as a threat to his power and may well kill them and declare himself king. So they waited. It was more than three months before Martin could walk. Then after the bones healed, he had therapy. Finally that fall, they managed to get completely alone with him up on a high parapet of the palace. "Now, tell us! We're dying to know! Whatever happened to Zadok and Meshullam?"

Martin paused, with that same strange look. "Zadok died of old age, a great man, honored and loved by all. Meshullam his son became high priest in his place. Don't you remember him? He was my boss back then."

"No. My father never took me to the temple. After he died, Arnie sure never let me go. How could I know him?"

"Meshullam was killed, under your orders! His second son Shallum was also killed, along with many other priests of YHWH. I was just a temple assistant, so they didn't kill me, but they smashed my legs and threatened to kill me!"

"I thought... I thought you said you fell..."

"That is what I need your nurses and doctors to think. If they learn I was there at the massacre of YHWH's priests, my life isn't worth a plugged nickel!"

"What did you mean, 'under my orders'?"

"Right after you became king, Arnie's guards came to Anathoth, where all the priests lived with their families, and commanded them to line up, in the name of King Josiah! Any who confessed to faith in YHWH were slain without mercy, one by one, beginning with Meshullam."

“Oh-my-god! Why?” Josiah had begun to figure out why, but he wanted Martin to confirm it.

“Well, I suspected you were a bit young to be giving orders like that. I figured that it was your prime minister, Arnie, who was manipulating you behind the scenes.”

“Well, did any of YHWH’s priests survive? We were hoping to talk to one of them about YHWH.”

Martin shook his head sadly. “None that were there. But Shallum’s older brother Hilkiah wasn’t there. He was king’s prophet when your grandfather Manasseh was king, and was in line to be high priest. They tortured us to make us tell where he was, but no one knew. No one has heard from him since. I really don’t know if he’s still alive or not. Probably not. Arnie’s thugs were determined to find him.”

There was a minute of silence, as it became apparent to Josiah and Hamutal the sheer magnitude of the evil that now ruled the land. “All this time, I thought I was king...” Josiah said softly. Shock and horror distorted his face.

His wife reached out with a hug. “You are the king!” she encouraged. “You just need to decide what to do.”

“What can we do? If there are no priests of YHWH left, there is no one who can tell us if YHWH is the true God and Arnie’s gods are false. Maybe Arnie’s right, and my mother just didn’t know.”

“I can tell you...” Martin said gently.

“You? You’re not a priest. You’re just an...” Josiah was going to say ‘old beggar’ but he bit his tongue.

“I know. I’m nobody. But I still know and love YHWH. I’m not a scholar. I can’t decipher the Law or the Prophets. I can’t explain all the sacrifices or the Feasts. But I know YHWH. He is the one true God, the God of your ancestors, the Almighty, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, just like your mother taught you when you were little.”

“How do you know what my mother taught me?”

“Because I knew Jedidah. Her father was a close friend of my boss, Meshullam. His son Hilkiah, the next in line to be high priest, arranged your dad’s marriage to Jedidah. She was one of the most godly women I knew! I’m sure she taught you about YHWH from the time you were a baby.”

At that moment, a bond of trust was forged between them. They now knew, without any doubt, that Martin was telling the truth about YHWH. It all fit. All of Arnie’s gods were false, unspeakably evil. The massacre of the priests, the destruction of all the books on the laws of YHWH and the history of Judah, the neglect of the temple of YHWH, and the rule of fear which prevented anyone in the kingdom from telling them about YHWH... it all fit.

“They’re monsters! Arnie, his Goon Squad, the wizards and nobles who rule the palace – they’re all evil monsters! Josiah! You’re the king! You’ve got to set the country free!”

Now the immensity of his task overwhelmed him. “Hamutal, it’s not just the palace. They control everything. Their thugs and spies are everywhere, all over Jerusalem. And the pagan priests of Arnie’s gods are spread across all the land. They have altars to Baal and those lewd carved Asherah poles on top of every hill. I’ve seen...”

“I have a suggestion,” Martin interrupted. “Their hold on the nation is not so tight as you may think. It sounds like you’ve been kinda ensconced at the palace. But many in Judah, and even in Jerusalem, are still true to YHWH. They’ve hidden themselves because of the persecution, but I assure you, they will come forth as soon as they see their king taking a stand for YHWH.”

“Yeah, right,” Josiah responded. “A very brief stand, before I, and you, and our babies, are...” He was looking at his precious Hamutal, and he decided not to finish his sentence. But they all knew what he meant.

“I’m not saying it will be easy, but you certainly don’t need to give Arnie a chance to kill your family. Have you heard of General Able? He is still in command of the army. He was appointed by your grandfather Manasseh after he had repented and returned from Babylon. He too is a godly man, who loves YHWH. He has done nothing so far, because he’s very loyal and honors the king. But he’s only waiting on you to give the word. I know, for he told me.”

So that night Josiah and Hamutal had a long talk in the privacy of their bedroom. They decided to trust Martin on everything. He’d said General Able was a godly man, so they determined to trust him, too, though they knew they staked their lives on it. They realized this was a battle to the death. One side or the other must leave no survivors. So finally, just before going to sleep, they prayed, “YHWH, God of our ancestors, the almighty Creator of the heavens and the earth, we put our trust in You as the only true God. We reject the gods of Arnie and his wizards and nobles. They have slain all Your priests, burned Your laws, and have tried to extinguish the knowledge of You from Judah. If You can hear our prayer, please give us wisdom. We will do whatever You direct, even if it costs our lives.”

“If I can hear their prayer, indeed!” Logos laughed heartily. “Theirs is the kind of prayer I love to hear!”

Satan was not there. He saw what was going on, and was busy trying to turn their search for YHWH and His wisdom into a bitter vendetta against Arnie and his henchmen. He didn’t really care who was killed; he could always raise up more, and he loved the blood and gore. But just in case Josiah won, he needed to gain control over him through his anger and bitterness. However, Josiah wasn’t buying it.

Instead, Logos came to Josiah in his dreams that night. In the morning, he knew what to do. “Hamutal! I had a long and vivid dream last night. I think it was an answer to our prayer. It gave me some ideas. You pray for me today. I’m going to try to arrange a talk with General Able.”

When Josiah came to his throne that morning, dressed in his royal robes, he whistled and sang as he often did, for he had enjoyed a happy childhood. His prime minister Arnie was there, along with others who attended to his needs. They were always kind to him and he was friendly to them in return. They had been that way for twelve years. In a reminiscing mood, Josiah smiled at Arnie. "You've been awfully good to me all these years. You've guided me – you've taken all the burden off me. But you know, I am twenty now. I ought to start taking more responsibility, don't you think? Tell me, what do I need to know to be a good king, to protect my people from attack by invaders?"

Arnie was used to this. Kids ask lots of questions. "Well, you need to know how strong and high your walls are, and if they are in good repair. You need to know about the other fortified cities around Jerusalem, which help to defend us if an enemy army should attack. You need to know that we have a good and powerful army, and to make sure our army is supplied with armor and weapons. I've taken care of all that, but if you want, I'll tell you all about our military defenses. I'm pretty proud of them. We've kept Judah safe and prosperous all these years."

"Yes! I'd love that! Tell me about it!" Josiah expressed eager interest as Arnie talked. When he ran down, Josiah responded with admiration. "That's fascinating! I had no idea so many people were working to keep us safe. This General Able you spoke of; is he a good man? Reliable?"

"Absolutely, Your Majesty! A little gruff, perhaps; he is a powerful warrior, after all!" He laughed. "He'd probably scare you! He's huge! Like a grizzly bear. But he's as loyal as they come. He'll protect us to the death."

It was time to spring the trap. "Arnie? I won't be scared, not if you say he's loyal. I'd really like to meet him. And his commanders, too. I'll bet I could learn a lot about our defenses from them. I want to personally thank them for their service to Judah." Josiah was careful to put on just the right mixture of eager interest and casual naïveté.

It worked. Arnie never suspected a thing. He quickly invited General Able and his commanders to the palace. It turned out to be a rather large group, for they brought their captains and aides as well. Josiah didn't have to feign enthusiasm in greeting them and welcoming them before his throne. "I have ordered my servants to prepare a feast for you, in thanks for your fine service to our nation. But while it is being prepared, I want you to educate me on the state of Judah's defenses. All of you, come with me into the conference room where we can talk..."

"Oh, but, Your Majesty!" Arnie interrupted him. "The conference room is far too small. We should remain out here in the great hall so we can all be together."

Josiah looked petulant. "Arnie! I may be young, but I'm not stupid! Would I discuss our nation's defenses out here, where enemy ears might hear?"

Arnie tried to object again but Josiah didn't wait for an answer. He quickly led the group into the conference room, which he knew to be soundproofed for just such occasions as this. Of course they couldn't all fit, even standing side by side. "General Able, please. You pick the ones you trust the most; the ones you would stake your life on. Those are the ones I really want to meet and hear from. The rest can wait out in the great hall until dinner time."

So the general counted the chairs and then selected his sixteen closest officers. He shooed the rest out, including some of Arnie's Goon Squad who seemed determined to listen in. When they complained, "Hey! We must remain to protect the king!" Josiah quickly responded. "Oh, get out. Arnie swore to me that General Able and his men are absolutely loyal." So they left; what else could they do? The general shut the soundproof door behind them.

When they were all seated around the conference table, Josiah reiterated. "General Able, look at each man around this table. Do you trust each of them with your life?"

The general complied, studying each face. "Yes, Your Majesty. Absolutely. These are my finest."

"Very good. Then let us discuss military strategy. I too place my life in your hands, all of your hands. Tell me, General Able, how you plan to deal with the present dire threat to Judah and to my kingdom?"

The general hesitated. "Your Majesty... as far as I know, there is no immanent military threat to Judah or to your kingdom. We're at peace. What do you have in mind?"

Josiah half stood, so his head was level with the huge seated general. He remained there, eyeball to eyeball, for a full minute. Neither flinched. "Sir!" Josiah put steel in his voice. "You are a believer in YHWH!" It was not a question.

For a moment, Josiah almost thought he might deny it. Then the big general opened his hands palms up and admitted. "Yes, Your Majesty. I am indeed, as are all of these my best commanders, and many of my soldiers as well. But I swear that makes us no less loyal to you and to Judah. We will defend you to the death!"

Josiah sat back and smiled. His dream last night had given him a safe way of meeting with General Able. Now he knew Martin was right about him. "I, too, am a believer in YHWH. So is Queen Hamutal. He has answered our prayers to enable me to talk with you without Arnie's Goon Squad listening in. For Arnie and all his wizards and nobles, in fact nearly everyone in the palace, hate YHWH. They have slain His priests, turned His temple into a brothel, burned His laws and destroyed all our historical records, and made the people afraid to even talk about Him. So... now tell me, General, what do you plan to do about this immanent threat to Judah and to my kingdom?"

A broad smile crept across the old general's weathered face. "Now I understand." He nodded.

The general looked around the table at his men. "But Your Highness? How did you know that all my men would trust YHWH? One could have been a spy. Believers have been driven underground. Arnie has spies everywhere."

"Easy." Josiah was almost giggly with delight. "If you place your trust in YHWH, you would not trust your life with anyone who didn't. Am I not correct?"

"You are indeed correct, my king." He grinned. "Now, as to your first question, I admit, I don't have any plan to deal with this threat of which you speak. It's not my job to determine the policy, O King. That is your job. My job is simply to carry out your policy. I'll do whatever you say."

"Ah ha! Martin was correct. You are very loyal indeed. He said you were only waiting for me to ask." He smiled.

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Okay. Here is my policy." Josiah leaned forward, the smile gone and the steel back in his voice. "I want every servant of my father Amon's pagan gods slain beginning with Arnie and his wizards, nobles, counselors, and thugs. I want the idols pulled off the shelves and smashed or burned. I want the pagan priests slain and their bones burned upon their own altars. I want their altars broken down, their Asherah poles and wooden idols burned, and their pagan temples razed to the ground. I want the idols of gold or silver ground to dust and scattered over the graves of all who sacrificed to them." His voice was low, but the intensity of it penetrated to the heart of every man present.

"That is my policy, General." Josiah sat back and took a deep breath. "How you implement it is up to you. My life is in your hands. Tell me what you want me to do."

There was a stunned silence as the magnitude of the task sank in. But General Able had not been appointed head of the army of Judah for nothing. He leaned back and nodded. "I have my orders, O King. I shall carry them out. Do you have a secure place where you can hide when the onslaught comes? The palace won't be safe when I attack."

"Yes. My family and I will hide in the secret passageway to Solomon's temple. The secret door is very strong."

"I'm sure Arnie knows about that place, my lord."

"But I can jam it from the far side. He won't be able to open it. It's impossible to open unless you first nudge the wall to the left. I will just jam it from moving left."

"It is good, O King. When I am prepared for the attack, I will first send you a message via Martin, the lame beggar whom you befriended."

"You know Martin?"

General Able chuckled. "Of course, Your Majesty. It was I who sent him to the temple gate to try to gain your trust. But telling you about the secret passage so you could see Israel's true history was his own idea."

Now it was Josiah's turn to be stunned. His mouth opened, but nothing came out.

"I knew it was a long shot, my lord. But I'd been praying for you since your birth. I had tried three times to get one of my men into the palace, but Arnie is very suspicious of newcomers. Every one of them was discovered and slain when they tried to contact you. Finally I realized I would have to wait for you to come out. But when you did, you were always surrounded by 'Arnie's Goon Squad', as you so aptly put it. So I sent a cripple to appeal to your youthful generosity. I just couldn't believe that you were as bad as those thugs operating in your name made you out to be."

"Wow! It seems YHWH is answering your prayers as well as mine! We'll be ready when Martin comes. Now, General, we have one hour before dinner time. Tell me all about Judah's defenses. If Arnie asks what we discussed, I must be able to rattle enthusiastically on about things that won't arouse his suspicion. You know how suspicious he is! I want to give you every possible element of surprise."

So the meeting, and the dinner afterwards, went exactly as Josiah had hoped. Afterward, Arnie spent an hour gently grilling Josiah about the meeting, but never got a clue as to what really went on.

The day of General Able's planned attack on the palace, Martin had invited himself over for lunch, as he often did. But when the call came for the noon meal, he whispered, "The assault is at high noon, while the nobles are sitting down to dine. We must flee now!" They were all ready. Martin went with them, to help them jam the stone door. They heard the commotion, heard banging and cursing at the door, heard the screams of the slain, but saw nothing. The noises ceased. Hamutal gently nursed baby Shallum while Josiah played soccer in the long hall with Eliakim. They had brought food and water, and bedding to spend the night. Nothing could reach them here.

Time passed slowly. The stone walls grew silent. There was no light in the passage save the tiny oil lanterns they kept burning. There was no clock save the natural sleep / eat rhythms of their children. To pass the time, Martin told them everything he knew about YHWH, which admittedly wasn't a whole lot. Finally they heard the triple tap signal on the stone wall, and General Able's deep voice calling out, "O King Josiah! Live forever! Your palace is secure!"

Martin unblocked the big stone door and helped to open it. They came out into a palace already cleaned of all the blood and bodies, with the general's trusted men firmly in control. The idols were already cleared from the shelves. "Are all of Arnie's men dead?" Josiah just had to ask.

"As you commanded." The general bowed. "But the people are anxious for you, my lord! They're afraid that I've slain you as well, and that I intend to steal the kingdom. Will you please talk to them? Reassure them that I acted only at your command?"

“Of course! Invite them all into the great judgment hall. I’ll get my royal robes and meet them on my throne.”

There was a big commotion as Josiah entered the great hall with Hamutal and their two sons. But the general was prepared so it could not get out of hand. Josiah made his way to the throne, where he sat with his wife and sons behind him. When the hubbub had quieted a bit, he stood and raised his arm for silence. “Prime Minister Arnie and his goons conspired against me and against YHWH our God. On my orders, General Able took care of the matter. The threat is past. Thank you for your concern for my safety. I and my family are quite well thank you. I hereby appoint Martin as my new prime minister, for his services in warning me of the danger and helping me to escape it. He, along with General Able and his brave soldiers, saved my life! General, I congratulate you! I am most grateful.”

With the palace secured, General Able began to go through Jerusalem, clearing out the idolatry just as Josiah had commanded. He took his time and was thorough. Block by block, he captured, cleared out, and held. Few tried to fight him; he had the might of the entire military behind him. Some made their stand and were slain. Many fled, to try to reestablish their paganism elsewhere. He didn’t care. *In time he will get there, too.* In three months, early 627 BC, Jerusalem was nearly free of idolatry.

The good general didn’t stop. Now he moved across the Judean countryside, from town to town and through every fortified city, doing the same as he had done in Jerusalem. It took nearly two years of continuous military operations. He moved methodically and made it a clean sweep.

Now the pagan priests were fleeing to Israel, into the cities and towns of Ephraim, Samaria, Jezreel, and Galilee, even as far away as Naphtali. So King Josiah appealed to the Assyrian governor in Samaria (capital of their new province of Samerina). “Live forever, O King! I have no dispute with you or with your people or your gods. As you have left us alone, so we will leave you and your gods alone. But I do have a dispute with some of my own people who rebelled against me and against YHWH our God, to serve the false gods that you conquered when you first came here. Some have fled to Samerina to take refuge from my wrath. Please grant me leave to hunt these rebels down and remove them from Samerina, so your land will remain pure for your own people and your gods.”

It was a pretty good speech, for such a young king. The Assyrians agreed and gave their permission. So General Able was permitted to methodically march throughout the land of Israel like he had the land of Judah. It took four more years, but in the end, the thoroughness of General Able paid off. Every one of the pagan priests from Judah was hunted down and slain, and their bones burned on their altars. All their altars were torn down. Their Asherah poles and wooden idols were burned and their molten idols were ground up and sprinkled on their graves.

CHAPTER 12 – KING JOSIAH, AND JEREMIAH

We must go back to Shamash-shum-ukin of Babylon, who was so foolish that Assyrian King Sin-shar-ishkun had sent his best general, Nabopolassar, to keep him out of trouble. While General Able was still cleansing Jerusalem, venerable King Ashurbanipal had died. So he could no longer protect his older brother.

A year of caring for that doddering old fool was more than General Nabopolassar could take. He assassinated King Shamash-shum-ukin in 627 BC and declared himself king of Babylon. King Sin-shar-ishkun could do nothing about it. Nabopolassar had half the army! By the next year, many at Sippar, Nippur and Uruk had joined his rebellion. It soon appeared that after all these years, Babylonia might finally break the yoke of Assyrian domination. Assyria’s power was on the decline, never to recover.

That same year, the 13th year of Josiah’s reign, we look in on the small country home of Shearjashub. He had passed on to glory, but his sons still maintained the hiding place for Hilkiah, Holya, and their children. Their three older daughters were now grown, married, and gone. But **Jeremiah** (21), Azariah (19), and ‘baby’ Gemariah (8) were still with the family. Ever since the massacre of the priests at Anathoth, they had remained in hiding. The boys were tired of it. They wanted to go back to Anathoth to complete their training for the priesthood. And now that their grandfather Meshullam was dead, they hoped to get their father anointed as the next high priest. But Hilkiah had insisted that they all wait until he heard from YHWH.

When will it ever end? Jeremiah took to wearing a plain brown robe and going on walks in the forest. He was there one day when he spotted a man dressed in white, sitting on a rock. Jeremiah snuck up closer, for he was curious. He looked like he might be a priest – possibly a pagan priest; they’d been everywhere, fleeing the army in Jerusalem. But Jeremiah had never seen a pagan priest with such pure white clothes. He felt drawn to the man.

Jeremiah’s curiosity overcame his fear. He decided to have a talk with him. His disguise was good. He thought up a fake name and hometown. He couldn’t afford to give away his father’s hiding place. He sauntered up, hoping to find out as much as he could from this stranger.

But before he could even open his mouth to give his made-up name, the stranger called, “Hello, Jeremiah son of Hilkiah. Welcome! Come, sit on this rock beside Me. We have much to talk about.”

His first thought was to flee. *How did this Stranger know his name? And his father’s name? Had He stumbled on their hiding place? What else did He know?* The Stranger was studying him as if to read his thoughts. He smiled, “Yes, my son. I know all about you. Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. Before you were born I consecrated you. Now I appoint you as My prophet to the nations.”

His face burning, Jeremiah obeyed and came to sit on the rock. His nearness to this shining man seemed to run like liquid fire through his veins. Head bowed low, he finally managed to squeak, “Alas, Lord YHWH! I can’t be Your prophet. I don’t know how to talk. I’m just a youth.”

The Stranger smiled, raising His eyebrows in pleasure at being identified so quickly. “Oh, don’t say you’re just a youth. In Me you have the wisdom of the ages behind you. Everywhere I send you, you shall go. All that I command you, you shall speak. Don’t fear those who persecute you, for I am with you, to deliver you.” As He was saying, ‘I am with you,’ His hand reached out to touch Jeremiah’s lips. He continued, “Behold, now I have put My Word in your mouth. This day I have appointed you above nations and kingdoms. I give you authority to pluck up, break down, overthrow, and destroy, or to plant and rebuild.”

Jeremiah was overwhelmed. He had no strength or breath. So Logos pointed to a rock beyond him and asked, “What do you see, lying there beside that rock?”

Relaxing at the distraction, Jeremiah picked it up. It was only a dry, dead stick. He was about to say so, when it sprouted leaves, then blossoms, and then almonds! Just like Aaron’s rod that budded! “Wow! Look! It’s a branch from an almond tree, and it’s still living!”

Logos laughed. It was a delightful, friendly laugh, that finally set Jeremiah’s heart at ease. “You’ve seen well. For it represents My Word, which I am watching over. It shall accomplish all My good pleasure.” Now he pointed to the sky, which until this moment had been clear and sunny. Instantly dark clouds boiled up like a giant thunderstorm bearing down on them. “What see you there, my friend?”

Jeremiah was tempted to run for home, but somehow, being next to this Stranger had a calming effect. “I see dark clouds streaming up from the north, like a fiercely boiling pot. A bad storm is coming!”

“Once again, you have seen well. You are a magnificent prophet! For out of the north the evil will break forth like a storm, upon all the inhabitants of the land. I am calling the kings of the north to come and set their thrones at the entrance to Jerusalem, at its walls round about, and against all the cities of Judah. Thus I pronounce My judgments on them for their wickedness. For they have forsaken Me and have sacrificed to other gods, and have worshiped the works of their own hands. Therefore arise, My prophet! Speak to them all that I command you. Never be frightened or dismayed before them, lest I arise in My wrath and give you something to be dismayed about! Now, behold, I have made you as a fortified city, as a pillar of iron, as walls of bronze against the land, and against its kings, princes, priests, and people. They will fight against you, but will not harm you, for I am always with you to deliver you.”

At that, the bright Stranger vanished with a radiant smile, leaving Jeremiah breathless and gasping.

Jeremiah glanced back up at the sky. The dark clouds were gone; the sky was clear and sunny again. He looked down at the stick in his hand. It still had the almonds on it. *He had proof.* He ran to tell his dad.

But when he got home, branch held high, his father already knew. “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of YHWH lasts forever,” he quoted. “I saw you as you met the Lord, and as He put His Word in your mouth. He also met with me. He poured oil upon my head and anointed me as high priest for Judah. Our time here is over. Now we return to Anathoth. A new day has dawned.”

So they thanked the sons of Shearjashub and set off for their old home. Anathoth had been a wonderful place to grow up. It had been filled with priests who ministered at the temple of Solomon in nearby Jerusalem, as well as all those who served them, so it had always been a close-knit, friendly town. With Hilkiah’s status as the next-in-line to be the high priest, Jeremiah’s childhood had been happy. The massacre of the priests had been traumatic, but it was past. Hilkiah was excited. He determined to restore the priesthood and cleanse the temple. This was what he lived for! It had been a long wait, but now the faithful service of YHWH will once again be honored in the land!

Alas, it was not to be. When Hilkiah reached his father’s home, he found strangers, squatters, living there. When he questioned them, they dragged him and his family before the city council. There they learned that not just the priests, but all believers in YHWH had been purged from the city. Now the pagan priests and servants of Baal who had fled Jerusalem owned the entire town.

They flogged Hilkiah and his family and threw them into their ‘jail’, a small windowless basement with a single barred entry. There they could hear the city elders discuss what to do with them. One man wanted to put them to death the next morning, but another wanted to enslave them, taking Holya (who was still very lovely) for himself. Other, even more cruel suggestions raged back and forth.

Finally their chief priest, Baal-Gad, made the decision. “We will put the older two boys to work. They are strong. Their parents and the toddler will remain in the jail. If the boys work well, then their parents will be fed and cared for. If the boys work poorly their parents will suffer. If they try to escape their parents will be slain. I have spoken!”

So it was. Jeremiah and Azariah were put to hard labor, moving rocks, repairing walls, building houses, hauling water, chopping wood. Of course they worked hard. They were rewarded with extra food, which they were allowed to take to their folks and pass through the bars of the jail.

But the jail was an unhealthy place; dark, damp, and filled with mold and rats. Jeremiah and Azariah appealed to Baal-Gad, “Your honor! We have worked hard! You promised that my parents would be well cared for, but they languish in that dark hole! And my little brother is sick!”

“You’re just trying to stage a breakout!”

“No! We swear it! If you allow them to live in a regular house, we will not try to escape with them.”

“You swear by whom?”

“We swear by YHWH our God.”

A sly smile spread over the face of the idolatrous priest. He knew the sacredness of such an oath! “I accept your promise. If you break it, your parents will be slain before your eyes, and then your eyes will be put out.” He gave orders to bring Hilkiah and Holya out of the jail and be given rooms in a house. As they settled into their routine, they all found themselves virtual slaves, but at least they got to live together and spend their evenings in the house.

Several years went by. Jeremiah chaffed at the delay, but he kept repeating to himself the promise YHWH had given him, “They will fight against you, but will not harm you, for I am with you to deliver you!” Then he would pray, “I trust You, YHWH. I do not understand why we are enslaved here in Anathoth, but I believe Your Word.”

“What do you think, Michael? Do I, or do I not have a real gem in Jeremiah? He has suffered great indignity and abuse, he has been treated worse than a dog, and he has been forced to work as a slave for these two years, yet he still trusts My Word and refuses to doubt. I love it!”

“Yes, my Lord. I agree. I think it’s time to finish the test.” Michael and Logos nodded to each other.

The winter solstice arrived. The pagan priests followed the ancient traditions that stem from the time of Dumuzi and his mother, Ishtar. They cut a tall green fir from the forest to represent Dumuzi. They nailed a base on it so it wouldn’t fall over, and set it up in the middle of town, next to their lewd carved Asherah pole representing Ishtar. Then they decorated it with thin strands of silver and gold and a gold star on top, so it glittered and sparkled in the sun. They celebrated a solemn feast, at which they offered them food, danced around them, bowed down to them, uttered secret incantations, and prayed to the planetary gods, requesting an end to winter and the restoration of the spring greenery. It was just like they had always done.

Jeremiah and Azariah had been very good. The pagan priests had relaxed, trusting that they would keep their vow. So they were permitted to come to the feast. But at the climax of the feast, right when the chief priest, Baal-Gad, was about to slay the rooster and drink its blood, Jeremiah stood up to shout, “Hear what YHWH says to you, O house of Israel! Do not learn the ways of the nations, and do not fear the planets as the nations fear them. For these customs of the pagans are a delusion. Look at them. They are just trees cut from the forest. A craftsman carves one into a lewd idol. The other you decorate with silver and gold. You nail on wooden bases so they won’t fall. Then you dance around them and bow down as if they were gods.

“They are more like a scarecrows in a cucumber field. They cannot speak. They must be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not fear them, for they can do you no harm, but neither can they do you any good. All you who worship them are stupid and foolish. But YHWH is the true God! He is the living God, the everlasting King! At His wrath the earth quakes, the lightning flashes, the walls fall, palaces crumble! The nations cannot endure His indignation! It is He who made the earth by His power, who established the world by His wisdom, who stretched out the heavens by His understanding. When He utters His voice, a tumult of waters fills the heavens. He causes the clouds to ascend from the end of the earth. He mixes the lightning with the rain, and brings the mighty winds from His storehouse.”

Baal-Gad wanted to shut him up, but he and his men seemed frozen. Jeremiah’s words pierced to their hearts. He went on, “Before YHWH, every man is stupid, devoid of knowledge. Even the leaders, the shepherds of My flock, have become stupid – blind, ignorant, and hard of hearing – for they have not sought YHWH. Therefore they have not prospered, and all the flock is scattered.

“Oh you men of Jerusalem! You citizens of Judah! Hear the Word of YHWH! Behold, I made a covenant with you. I swore, ‘Cursed is the man who does not heed the words of My covenant which I commanded your forefathers on the day that I brought them out of the iron furnace of Egypt. But blessed is the man who heeds My voice, and actually does as I commanded you. For these obedient ones will be My people, and I will be their God.’

“After that YHWH said to me, ‘A conspiracy has been hatched by the men of Judah and the citizens of Jerusalem! They have agreed together to forsake the God of Israel, and have turned back to serve the gods of the nations which were here before them. They have forsaken My covenant which I made with their fathers. Therefore, I am bringing disaster upon them which they will not be able to escape! Though they cry to Me, I will not listen to them. So they will cry to the gods to whom they burn incense, but they surely will not save them in the time of their disaster. For your gods are as many as your cities, O Judah, and as numerous as the streets of Jerusalem are the altars you have shamefully set up to burn incense to Baal. Therefore do not pray for this people, nor lift up a cry on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to Me in the middle of their disaster. For what right does My beloved have to remain in My house, when she has so many abominations? Can the flesh of her sacrificial animals forestall disaster, so she can yet rejoice?’ YHWH called you a green olive tree, lovely of form, with luscious fruit. But now with the noise of a tumult He has kindled a raging fire in His tree. For YHWH has shown me your vile deeds and pronounced evil against you, for all the evil you have done to provoke Him by offering up sacrifices to Baal. I was like a lamb to the slaughter as you plotted against me to cut off the true priesthood from the earth.”

Jeremiah had been prophesying loudly in the center of the gathering. His words flowed in an unstoppable torrent. Everyone in the town could hear. These were all Judeans, most of them from Jerusalem. Though during the times of Manasseh and Amon they had turned away from YHWH to the planetary gods, they still knew of Him. So Jeremiah's prophecy pierced through right into their souls, stinging like a bee, bringing guilt and conviction.

Finally they could stand it no more. They rushed upon Jeremiah and pulled him to the ground, shouting, "Do not prophesy any more in the name of YHWH, or you shall die at our hand this very day!"

Jeremiah only shouted all the louder from the ground, "O YHWH, God of Hosts, who judges righteously, who discerns the innermost decisions and motivations of each heart, take now Your just and perfect vengeance upon them! For unto You I have committed my cause!"

"One more word of prophecy like that, and you shall die! You, your two brothers, and your parents too!"

"I swore to you that I would not try to escape, and I have kept my vow. But now I also swear to you that I will speak whatever prophecy YHWH puts in my mouth, and you cannot stop me or slay me, for He Himself has promised to be with me and to deliver me!"

Logos laughed. "The test is over. Jeremiah My beloved has believed Me, even to the death. He has chosen to speak My Word, even though it costs his life and the lives of his entire family. Now I shall arise, to deliver him!"

The men of Anathoth bound Jeremiah tightly. Then they bound his brothers and his parents, and set them all near their pagan altar. The chief priest, Baal-Gad, shouted to the people, "If YHWH is God let Him deliver them, for we shall sacrifice them to Baal this very hour. Then all will know that Baal is still god, though he graciously moved Mars away. Prepare the altar. We shall slay his father first, then his brothers, before his eyes. Then we shall gouge out his eyes before we slit his throat. However, I reserve his mother for myself, in payment for my services."

So they bound Hilkiah to the horns of the altar. Azariah was struggling. He was very strong, and it took four men to hold him down. Baal-Gad didn't care. From deep within he felt an urgency to get this done, now, fast! He uttered the terrible incantation and raised the stone knife high.

"Now what do you have to say, you old fool?" He leered at Hilkiah, savoring his moment of triumph.

"Not I, but YHWH God of Hosts has this to say. 'Behold, I am about to punish them! Their young men will die by the sword. Their children will die by famine. Not even a remnant will be left to them, for I will bring disaster upon the men of Anathoth in this the year of their punishment.'" Jeremiah shouted, "Amen! Amen!" Azariah's struggles got loud. The high priest's anger flared at the distractions.

As I said, General Able had been methodically moving through all the cities and villages of Judah. When he had finished cleansing Jerusalem he had headed south, through Bethlehem, Tekoa, Hebron, and on down the ridge of the Judean hills. He had swept the land clean, and had stationed guards along the perimeter to prevent any of the idolatrous priests from circling around behind him to escape. His method was to come upon a town suddenly from all sides at once, so none could get away. When he had reached the Negev, he had turned back north through all the cities of the plain to the Western Sea. Thus the land of Judah and Simeon had been thoroughly cleansed of idolatry. Even the cities of the Philistines under Judah's control had been covered. Now after two years (the end of 626 BC) General Able was back up past Jerusalem to the towns in the territory of Benjamin just to the north.

It happened that he reached the small town of Anathoth just as they were celebrating their winter solstice. He could see what was going on, and he quickly realized he had a large gathering of pagan priests here. So he kept his army hidden until they encircled the town. Then they swept down upon it suddenly in full force, swords held high.

The big commotion caused by Azariah's struggling intruded into the high priest's consciousness. Knife still suspended above Hilkiah's heart, Baal-Gad turned his head to glance at the struggling boy. But his anger at the interruption of his ceremony was replaced by horror, as he saw that the noise was not coming from the boy. He had grown quiet, yet the ground under them vibrated with the thunder of a million running feet! Now a great cry rang out as General Able's army appeared all around like a black tsunami crashing down upon them.

The next moments were utter confusion. Satan was screaming in his ear, "Kill him! Kill him now! You've got to kill them all before your enemy reaches you!" But in his sudden panic, Baal-Gad had dropped his stone knife. Fear overwhelmed him and he turned to flee. But everywhere he turned he saw soldiers! "O Baal! Save me! I have served you with my whole heart and soul! Save me I pray!"

"I will only save you if you kill Hilkiah and Jeremiah!" Satan screamed in answer.

So Baal-Gad dropped to his knees beside the altar, searching for his stone knife. And there on his knees he met the business end of General Able's sword, as every pagan priest was quickly slain.

"How many men in this city are still true to YHWH?" General Able queried Hilkiah as he untied him from the altar. His men had everyone in the town rounded up and were awaiting their orders.

"None, sir. Only my wife and I and my three boys, as you see us tied here before the altar. All the rest are pagan priests and servants of Baal who took over the town after the massacre of the priests of YHWH."

General Able was shocked at that. Anathoth had been a godly town, filled with priests and servants of YHWH. He questioned others to verify the story. Then he ordered them all slain, preserving only the innocents in accord with the prophecy of Jeremiah. As Josiah had commanded, they burned the bones of the priests on their own altars, tore down the altars, burned the wooden idols, the fir tree cut for Dumuzi, and the Asherah pole, razed the pagan temple, and buried all the townspeople in a mass grave in a nearby valley. Then they ground the gold and silver idols to powder and scattered it over the grave. General Able and his men were very methodical and thorough.

When the town was cleansed, the general turned it over to Hilkiah. "I put the innocents in your charge. Be fruitful and multiply. Fill Anathoth with the servants of YHWH, as it once was. I must go, for I have other towns to cleanse."

Hilkiah and Holya thanked him and saw him off. They adopted all the innocents, 70 boys and 55 girls the age of 19 or under, nearly all from the Levitical lines of Ithamar or Eleazar. Then Hilkiah and his sons began restoring the town. Hilkiah and Holya's three daughters also came back to Anathoth with their families to help with 'the kids'. But more than anyone else, it was Jeremiah and Azariah who made it all a success. They built a school to re-educate the innocents in the laws and ways of YHWH and the service of the temple. With their hard labors, careful tutoring, and godly example of love and understanding, they brought the innocents from the service of Satan into the service of YHWH. Logos was very pleased with them all.

Four years passed. Those 70 boys of Anathoth began to grow up. They learned to love their new father, Hilkiah, and his God, YHWH. They studied hard, looking forward to serving in YHWH's temple 'someday'. That 'someday' would come sooner than anyone could imagine.

The man with the shining robe came again to Jeremiah. "Go now to Jerusalem. Bring the rod that budded. Show it to the king. I now appoint you as king's prophet to Josiah, for he has obeyed My voice. He delights Me!"

Jeremiah ran to his parents. "Dad! Mom! YHWH wants me to go to Jerusalem and be king's prophet to Josiah! He said He'll tell me what to say."

"Are you sure? We still need you here..." Hilkiah remembered how hard it was for Manasseh to accept him as king's prophet, because of his youth. *King's prophet is a very responsible position. Higher even than king's counselor. No king wants a kid with peach fuzz on his chin as king's prophet.* "You're sure that was YHWH, son? You're only 26. You don't even have a respectable beard yet."

Jeremiah laughed. "I love you, Dad! You come up with the most interesting observations. And I know you need me here. But I don't think YHWH judges by the length of my beard! Besides, if He sends me to Jerusalem, He will certainly care for you here without me."

Wasting no time, Jeremiah ran all the way to Jerusalem. He reached the palace a little out of breath and requested audience with King Josiah. A crowd already filled the great hall. General Able was in front, kneeling before the king. Josiah held up his scepter, and bade him rise and report. "Your Majesty! Live forever! I have completed the mission which you commanded me. I and my men have cleansed the lands not only of Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin, but also throughout the Assyrian province of Samaria up to Phoenicia and Zobah. None of Judah's pagan priests are left alive in all the land. We burned their bones on their altars, tore down their altars, burned their Asherah poles and wooden idols, razed their temples, and ground their molten images to powder which we sprinkled on their graves, just as you commanded me six years ago, O King."

The great hall froze. Everyone was stunned, in awe. Then it was like a breath of fresh air swept through the room as the people began to clap and cheer! It was several minutes before the applause died down enough for the king to be heard. Finally he raised his arms for silence and cried out, "Well done! Oh, well done, my faithful general! Arise! Every one of your men shall not fail to receive his reward! You and your captains shall all feast with me tonight in celebration of the restoration of the kingdom!"

Then King Josiah took an unprecedented step off the dais and threw his arms around the big, gruff old general. It was rather like a teddy bear reaching up to hug a grizzly bear. Again, the applause and shouts of joy filled the great hall. It was pretty loud, but it couldn't match the mighty cry of victory from the angels of the heavens in glory.

Why, he did not yet know, but at this point Jeremiah was led to step forward and kneel before the king. "O King! Live forever!" he cried out loudly, for he could barely be heard about the tumult.

"And who are you?" Josiah demanded, a little irked that anyone would be so bold. When Jeremiah introduced himself as, "Jeremiah son of Hilkiah son of Meshullam son of Zadok, high priest of YHWH..." Josiah interrupted him. "Wait..." He stepped back up on the dais, and raised his hands again for silence. "You said you are a son of Hilkiah? son of Meshullam? I have been trying to find them for six years, ever since I read Meshullam's name on the wall of the temple hallway. He was the high priest before Arnie killed him. Did your father escape?"

Jeremiah smiled. Clearly YHWH had prepared the way for him. "Yes, Your Majesty. Four years ago General Able cleansed Anathoth and restored it to my father, Hilkiah. He is now training priests and servants of the temple of YHWH there. He is nearly ready to begin the service of the temple once again." Jeremiah hesitated only briefly, but as the king was smiling, he plunged on. "YHWH sent me here to be... Uh... He told me that... Well, I humbly ask that you appoint me to be king's prophet for this generation. And YHWH has a message for you."

Josiah's eyebrows raised in question and he glanced at Hamutal beside him. Jeremiah was about their same age. He seemed awfully young to make a wise, capable king's prophet. "Okay. If your message is truly from YHWH, I want to hear it. We are learning to love YHWH, though we don't know Him very well yet. Speak His message."

"YHWH delights in you before the heavenly host, for your obedience has won a lasting victory there as well as here in this realm. He shall reward you, and General Able, and all Judah, with blessings beyond your imaginings. He says to open the gates of the temple of Solomon. Call for my father Hilkiah to cleanse it and rededicate it as a temple of YHWH. When it is restored, you will find in it a Treasure of Inestimable Value, given to you and all the people."

"It is a good prophecy. I shall do it. But in accord with the ancient custom to test prophecies of good by asking a sign, I shall believe it when I discover your 'Treasure of Inestimable Value' in the temple. That is the sign I ask. Then, after I find it, I shall appoint you king's prophet."

"It is good, O King," Jeremiah bowed and turned to go, his message delivered. But Martin, Josiah's prime minister, leaned over and whispered to his king. Josiah nodded and called for Jeremiah to return. "You and your father shall feast with us this night. For surely you also have a share in our victory. Remain here with me. I will send a runner for your father. Martin tells me Anathoth is not far."

Thus Hilkiah left his wife and daughters in charge of the kids, to join the grand celebration in the dining hall. And what a party it was! Tales of glory and valor abounded from General Able and his captains. When it was Hilkiah's turn, he told his whole hair-raising story, complete with his lying bound on the pagan altar, knife poised above his heart, before YHWH's deliverance through General Able.

It was a very satisfying night. Full of food and just a tad tipsy from the copious wine, King Josiah laughingly called out, "Now, young Jeremiah son of Hilkiah. It is your turn. You wanted to become king's prophet, so prophesy to us already. Speak to us the Word of YHWH."

Jeremiah was appalled. He had prepared nothing to say! But he must obey the king's command. He stood before the multitude. "O King! Live forever! Command me to speak and I will obey, for I serve and honor you. But I cannot command YHWH to speak through me, for He is far greater than I. I can only speak what He gives me, when He chooses, nothing more, nothing less." He sat down.

The room was startled. That almost sounded like a slap in the king's face. But King Josiah was jovial. He took it good-naturedly. "Okay. Fair enough. But I am learning that YHWH is a God who answers prayer, for He has answered mine. Therefore I pray now..." He looked up to the ceiling. "O YHWH, if Jeremiah is Your choice to be my king's prophet, give him a prophecy for us all right now, that we may test him, to see if he really is sent from You."

"Kinda bold, isn't he?" Michael commented to Logos. "And just a bit arrogant, when he is filled with wine? Do You think You should even answer?"

Logos laughed uproariously, enjoying the party more than anyone else could possibly imagine. "*Bold, I like!* Far better than fearful and cowardly. And is it really arrogance for a king to command or demand? I made him the king. He doesn't really know Me or My character yet, but he is learning to be king. Let him order Me around! Let him test Me! How can he get to know Me if he doesn't test Me?"

Jeremiah again stood, his eyes closed and his mouth shut. The room got very quiet. His eyes still closed, he began to speak, softly at first. "Lord YHWH, it was You who told me to go down to the house of the king of Judah and speak Your Word. You touched my lips, and said, 'Behold, I have put My Word in your mouth.' So as I open my mouth before these Your people, speak through me, I pray." He opened his eyes. "Hear the Word of YHWH, O you king of Judah who sits on David's throne. And hear Wisdom, you and your servants and all your people who enter your gates." The Spirit filled him and he prophesied, "Do justice. Love righteousness. Deliver the one who was robbed from the power of his oppressor. Do not forget the orphan or the widow. Do not mistreat the poor, the oppressed, the stranger, or the alien among you. Do no violence, nor shed innocent blood in this place. For if indeed you will perform this thing, then kings will enter the gates of this palace, and your sons will sit in David's place on his throne, riding in chariots with fine horses, even the king himself and his servants. But if you will not obey these words, I swear by Myself, declares YHWH, that this lovely palace will become a desolation, yes, even the house of Judah a horror among the nations. For you, O house of Judah, are beautiful to Me beyond words, like the peaceful meadows of Gilead, or the snow-capped summit of Lebanon. Yet if you will not obey, I will make you like a wilderness of uninhabited cities; I will set the destroyers against you; they will cut down your choice cedars and burn them on the fire. Then many nations will come and ask, 'Why has YHWH done thus to this great city?' and they will answer, 'Because they forsook the covenant of YHWH their God, and bowed down to other gods and served them.'" Jeremiah stopped abruptly and sat down.

The dining hall was very quiet. The prophecy was not really a criticism, it was just a warning. But it certainly was not the happy commendation Josiah expected. "Is that it?" he asked. "I thought you said that YHWH was delighted with my obedience?"

"I did, for YHWH said it! But your obedience today does not guarantee your blessing tomorrow."

Hilkiah spoke up. "Your Majesty, you merely cleansed the land of idolatry. That's outward. Now Jeremiah says to us, 'Cleanse the inside, our hearts. Learn to love YHWH, His Word, His ways of justice, righteousness, kindness...'"

“But I don’t know YHWH’s ways! I don’t have His Word, His covenant, or His laws! I don’t even know the history of our people! Arnie had all the books burned! How can I love YHWH when I don’t know Him? That’s why I called for you, Hilkiah. You are a priest of YHWH, the first I’ve been able to find. I want to hire you to teach me about YHWH. And teach all my people. I want you to reopen the temple. Cleanse it. Restore the service to YHWH there. For how can I learn of YHWH if I cannot participate in the service of worship to His name?”

Hilkiah bowed. “I will be happy to teach you all I know, O King. I know the history of our people. I know YHWH and His laws. I am your servant. Your timing is perfect, for I am even now ready to come with my young helpers to restore the service of the temple for all the people. YHWH has anointed me as high priest and commissioned me to do just that. But in the end, it will be YHWH Himself, by His Word and His covenant, who will be your teacher.”

King Josiah looked back and forth between Jeremiah and Hilkiah. It was pretty obvious. “I will appoint you as king’s prophet, Hilkiah. Your son Jeremiah can assist you, and help in repairing the temple.”

Hilkiah sighed. “I was appointed king’s prophet to King Manasseh, but YHWH hasn’t...” he began.

“I know!” Josiah interrupted. “You’ve got experience. And the wisdom. And with all you know about YHWH and His laws, you’ll make a perfect king’s prophet.”

“No, Your Majesty. You don’t understand. I can know all the history of the universe but it’s all in the past. The king’s prophet must speak the Word of YHWH to you for the present, and for the future! If YHWH chooses me for king’s prophet, He surely will give me that Word, but if He chooses my son, who am I to argue with the Almighty?” He paused, but then a thought came to him. “Jeremiah, tell the king about your meeting with YHWH.”

So Jeremiah told his story. Everyone was duly intrigued and impressed. Of course they all wanted to see that stick that sprouted and grew almonds, so he pulled it out and passed it around. “Look closely at it, O King. It is YHWH’s confirmation of His choice of me as king’s prophet.”

Josiah looked at the rod and wrinkled his nose. “It’s just the branch of an almond tree. That is no proof. You could have picked it off the tree as you came in the door.”

“Where is the nearest tree with ripe almonds on it at this time of year?” Hilkiah asked dryly.

But Josiah sniffed and waved him off. “I stand by my original judgment. I’ll believe Jeremiah’s prophecy and appoint him as king’s prophet only after that ‘Treasure of Inestimable Value’ is found in the temple, and not before. Tomorrow you can begin to cleanse the temple. Hurry! For I want to find that treasure!” The party went on long into the night, but Jeremiah and Hilkiah said no more.

CHAPTER 13 – TEMPLE IS RESTORED, NAHUM

As King Josiah had ordered, Hilkiah took Jeremiah, **Shaphan** the scribe, and a few others to the temple the next morning to begin the task of restoring and purifying it. First they had to waken the temple prostitutes living there and try to shoo them out. They had been using the temple as a brothel at night and sleeping in the holy places during the day. It took them until noon to pack and clear out, so Hilkiah and his crew could begin their inspection.

Alas, it was worse than they had thought. The temple had been sorely vandalized and neglected. All the gold and silver had been stolen. The temple furniture was missing except for the bronze laver and altar of burnt offering. (They were in a corner.) The heavy veil to the most holy place was on the floor being used as a carpet. The walls and floors were crumbling and the roof had partially caved in. A stench of perfume, incense, and unwashed bodies filled the air. But most significantly, the Ark of the Covenant was gone. Instead, the temple was filled with idols, Asherim, pagan altars, and shrines to the planets. Hilkiah wept as he saw it. All day he cried, as he searched the chaos for anything left of the glorious worship he had known there.

Toward evening, Hilkiah came out of the temple and walked around it to inspect the outside. He was shocked to find many pagan priests and their families hiding in the priest’s quarters. *Why were they still there? General Able had said he had cleansed the city of all the pagan priests.*

Shaphan and Hilkiah hurried back to Josiah to report. The king called General Able on the carpet. “What in heaven’s name is going on in the temple? You reported Jerusalem cleansed of idolatry!”

“Yes, O King! The priests there said they were Levites, servants of YHWH, in charge of the temple. Since I am a man of war and unclean, I was not permitted inside.”

“And you believed them?”

General Able hung his head. “Yes, Your Majesty. I had to. They showed me proof. They are Levites.”

“They lied to you! They may be Levites, but they are apostate! Are there any other places where you did this? Other temples that were just too ‘holy’ for you to enter?”

“No. But I found more Levites at the temple at Bethel.”

“Bethel? You know that’s a pagan temple! It’s been a pagan temple ever since the time of King Jeroboam! How could you let them deceive you?”

“Your Majesty! Please believe me! I talked at length with the priests there. They are true Levites! True priests of YHWH! They didn’t try to keep me out. They showed me the temple, and their homes. There are no idols there. Jeroboam’s old altar is split in two, with ashes pouring out of each side. They have not been using it. They were hiding there from the pagan priests of your father Amon.”

“Were there any other cities where you found people who claimed to be Levites, priests of YHWH?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. All the Levitical cities of Judah still had Levites, and many of Israel as well. I didn’t harm them. I merely interrogated them to be sure they were faithful.”

Josiah thought about that for a bit. General Able had been trustworthy, except for the idolatry he had left at the temple in Jerusalem and possibly Bethel. But the king had to be sure. “Hilkiah! You have YHWH’s wisdom. Go with General Able and his men to the temple. Help him judge between the people there. Slay all those priests who have sacrificed or burned incense to Ashtoreth, Baal, the sun, the moon, or the host of heaven. But for the others you find there... judge them. If they were trapped into idolatry and carried along unwillingly... if they are repentant... or if you find they have remained true to YHWH... bring them to me. Then do the same at Bethel and any other cities where you found Levites. Bring all the true Levites here until the temple is cleansed.”

Jeremiah spoke up. “Your Majesty. From what I saw, it will require a lot of money to fix the temple. So as long as Hilkiah and Shaphan are touring the country with General Able, let them take up an offering for that purpose. Also, have them circle through all the other cities first, leaving Bethel, and then finally the temple in Jerusalem, last.”

“Who asked you? I never appointed you as my advisor.” King Josiah somehow had taken offense at him.

“Nevertheless, what he spoke is a Word from YHWH,” Hilkiah retorted. “You would do well to listen.”

King Josiah looked back and forth between the two, suddenly realizing the wisdom of it. “Okay,” he agreed, grudgingly. “If you say so, Hilkiah. For I know that you have the Word of YHWH.”

So a guard was put around the temple to keep the pagan priests from escaping, while General Able took Hilkiah along the same circuit he had made before. The general had indeed done a very thorough job; they found no more idolatrous priests, but they did find many Levites, both of the priesthood and the other orders of temple service.

In each city, they assigned those belonging to the order of security guard (known as ‘keepers of the temple gates’) the task of collecting an offering from the people in the area. They ordered all the Levites faithful to YHWH to then report to King Josiah and give him the people’s offerings for repairing the temple.

When they got to Bethel, Hilkiah learned that General Able had been exactly correct. He rejoiced to find so many Levites who had remained faithful. “General,” he called. “After finding all the idols and prostitutes in the temple, King Josiah was not sure that he could trust you anymore. Let’s change that. Don’t change anything here until we get him to come and see for himself that all you said is true.”

So they arranged for King Josiah to personally visit Bethel. He talked with the Levites there. He inspected the old altar of Jeroboam, which had split open and lay unused just as the general had said. He saw the cleanliness of all the people there; not one idol was found among them. He walked around the town; even found the cemetery and inspected it. “General,” he finally had to admit. “I was wrong to distrust you. You have done your job well. All we have to deal with here is Jeroboam’s altar. Dig up some bones from the cemetery and burn them on it to defile it. Then pull down its stones and crush them to powder, so not a trace remains. Oh, and those splinters of wood from the Asherah poles we found? Gather and burn them, too.”

His men quickly obeyed. As they were digging up the bones from the cemetery, King Josiah asked, “What is this special monument I see?”

The elders of Bethel responded, “That is the grave of the prophet **Shemaiah**, who came from Judah and prophesied against Jeroboam while he was burning incense on this altar. He prophesied about you, O King. He said that the altar would split apart like that, and you would come and do exactly what you have just commanded your servants to do. That grave beside it is the prophet from Samaria who foretold Shemaiah’s death.”

“Well, we certainly don’t want to disturb them. In that case, whose bones are we digging up?”

“Those graves where you are digging are the false priests who sacrificed on this altar. Shemaiah prophesied that they would be dug up and burned on their own altar, just as you are doing.”

When they had finished at Bethel, Josiah had another idea. “General Able, what about Samaria?”

“I did not go into the city itself, Your Highness. I did not want to trouble the Assyrian rulers. They have been good to us in letting us deal with the false priests throughout the rest of the land of Israel.”

“Well, it doesn’t hurt to ask. I’d like to make it a clean sweep, here.” So Josiah once again went to the Assyrian governor of Samaria. He gave another great speech, like the first, except this time he specifically asked permission to cleanse the false priests out of the city of Samaria. They had no problem with that at all. In fact, they were somewhat relieved that King Josiah had come in friendship. They didn’t want to call for help from Assyria. They had seen the size and strength of General Able’s army!

So as before, they slaughtered the pagan priests on their own altars, burned their bones, tore down the altars, and destroyed their idols. Finally they returned to Jerusalem.

Hundreds of people, whole families, lived in the priest’s quarters behind the temple. Hilkiah interviewed and prayed about each one. When he finally returned to King Josiah to report, he was awed by what he had found.

“O King! Live forever! General Able was right, even here at the temple in Jerusalem. I have talked to each one, and carefully discerned his heart. They are all Levites, true servants of YHWH, and our brothers. They are unclean, for they had gotten swept up into idolatry and some pagan practices, yet they have all repented. I believe YHWH is telling me that we should forgive them and allow them to purify themselves and return to the service of the temple.”

“You told me that the temple was filled with idols and prostitutes. They just know they’re surrounded and are trying to trick you into letting them go.”

Hilkiah bowed. “Question them yourself, O King. All the time that we were gone, they were cleaning out the idols. You should see the pile at the gate to the court of the nations! And they have all the golden furnishings for the temple, which they protected from the pagan priesthood. They’ve also got the gold utensils, the altar of incense, the Table of showbread, the golden lampstand, and even the Ark of the Covenant, with the solid gold Mercy Seat on it! Old **Zephaniah** told me they’ve got them hidden safely away in a deep underground grotto made by Solomon.”

Josiah’s eyes opened wide. He sank to his knees in awe. “It is the Treasure of Inestimable Value,” he whispered. “It is what Jeremiah prophesied. He was right. I must appoint him as king’s prophet. Quickly, get Jeremiah,” he ordered. So Jeremiah was brought over from the temple where he had been working. “I repent!” Josiah said to him. “I was wrong about you! You are called to be king’s prophet! The Treasure of Inestimable Value has just been found in the temple, as you prophesied – the proof I had requested.”

Jeremiah bowed. “On the contrary, Your Majesty. The treasure has not yet been found. What the priests have found so far is nothing in comparison to the treasure that remains hidden.” He turned and walked away.

Josiah shook his head in anger. “I do not understand that man! First he is so eager to be appointed king’s prophet, and then when I call him, he walks out on me! Are prophets always so temperamental?”

Hilkiah laughed. “No, Your Majesty. He’s young. He will learn. But he has a deep sense of what is truly right, and he knows it will not be right until you see that treasure with your own eyes and touch it with your own hands.”

“What in the world could it be? What could be more valuable than the Ark of the Covenant?”

“No clues, Your Majesty. YHWH has not told me.”

“No matter. I know now it will be found. The Levitical security guards have brought me all the people’s offerings. It’s a lot! They have given me a strict accounting of it all. It came from Manasseh and Ephraim and all the remnant of Israel as well as from all the cities of Judah and Benjamin. I am overwhelmed! These Levites are really trustworthy! Go back to the temple. I’ll send Shaphan over with it.”

When Hilkiah returned to the temple, he had another surprise awaiting him. The Levites there had opened up a box they had hidden away with the temple furnishings. It was an old offering box. In it were at least a year’s worth of contributions from Jerusalem. When Shaphan came in with the people’s recent offerings, Hilkiah found that he had more than enough to fully restore the temple.

So he told them the good news. “I have decided, and the king has agreed, that you Levites shall all be forgiven. Your service to YHWH and to all Judah shall be restored, for you were faithful to hide these important treasures from the pagan priests and return them to the temple. Now, remain faithful as we cleanse the temple, and cleanse yourselves, so you can all serve YHWH once again.”

It was as if a great burden had been lifted; like a dark cloud had been blown away. Some wept. Some laughed and sang. Their wives and little ones danced for joy. The elders gathered around Hilkiah, blessing him and vowing to serve him, and YHWH, obediently. Their spokesman, old Zephaniah son of Maaseiah, was on his knees praising God. Hilkiah knew he had made the right decision.

So they hired the workmen, craftsmen, carpenters, and builders. Never had there been a more willing workforce. Hilkiah gave them money to buy materials. They didn’t even want pay for their labors. But Hilkiah insisted; “Every workman is worth his hire. Yet if you wish to contribute a tenth back as an offering to YHWH, He will bless you.”

King Josiah was so impressed with the workmen that he relieved Shaphan of the burden of keeping track of all the money. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “They are all honest and faithful. They’re giving back even more than a tithe of their wages!” Thus YHWH blessed the project.

Two months of feverish activity went by. The workmen finished up, and were all given generous bonuses for their fine work. The Levites were busy purifying everything, and themselves. The heavy veil to the most holy place was laundered and re-hung. Hilkiah called everyone together and prayed to consecrate the temple for the service of YHWH. “Now, lead me to that underground grotto where lie the furnishings of the temple, for we are ready to install them once again!” he called triumphantly.

Standing beside him, King Josiah jumped up and down with glee! “Yes!” he shouted. “Put the Ark of the Covenant into the most holy place of the temple of Solomon son of David, where it belongs. It shall be a burden upon your shoulders no longer. Now you, and we, and all Israel can worship YHWH here once again.”

Now the Levites began backpedaling. Old Zephaniah hung his head, saying there was no underground grotto. That was just a hoax. Everyone was stunned. Hilkiah was angry! King Josiah was simply furious at being misled! He ordered Zephaniah and the elders who had stood with him beaten with 20 lashes and tossed into the dungeon.

About midnight, young Jeremiah came to the dungeon. He washed and sterilized their wounds, bandaged them up, and gave them food and water. "I drugged the guards. They should not awaken until morning. Come with me." He led them out into the city.

They traveled north through the dark streets. The city was unusually silent. Not even a dog barked to note their passing. When they reached the north wall, they turned right, into a narrow alley. The trailing Levite elders said not a word. They came to a solid wall at the end of the ally and Jeremiah stopped facing it, head bowed in prayer.

The elders nodded to each other. Zephaniah reached past Jeremiah and pushed an odd brick just under the cap of the wall. The wall slowly slid back. A ramp leading downward faced them. Jeremiah lit a single lantern and they silently started down. Deep underground they found the secret grotto, filled with the treasures of the temple. The priests knew exactly what to do. Without a word they paired up, inserted the carrying poles into their rings, and headed back toward the temple with their precious cargo. Young Jeremiah and old Zephaniah were last. Their lot was to bear the Ark of the Covenant, with its solid gold Mercy Seat. Not a word was spoken as they covered it with a rough brown tarp and slid in the carrying poles.

When they reached the alley, they closed the wall entry securely behind them. No one must know of the presence of this grotto! Again, the silence in the city was profound as they returned to the temple. Logos was covering them, protecting His secrets.

By morning the furnishings were all in the temple. Jeremiah awoke his father, whispering, "Come and see!" The tears flowed freely in Hilkiah's eyes when he saw the furnishings in their proper place. When he got to the most holy place and saw the Ark, he knelt and cried like a baby. His son knelt with him, followed by old Zephaniah and the other elders who had been beaten the night before. "Why didn't you tell me?" Hilkiah cried. "Why did you say it was just a hoax? We shouldn't have beaten you. Our anger was wrong! If we had only known..."

"No one else can know of the secret grotto," the chief priest began. "I should have made that clear when I first told you. We deserved to be beaten for my mistake. It won't happen again. We may need that secret grotto again some day. We can tell you and Jeremiah of all the secret security measures that Solomon built into the temple, though it seems that YHWH must have already told Jeremiah. But you must tell no one else. No one. Not even the king."

"Agreed," Hilkiah said. Jeremiah nodded. They turned to leave the most holy place. But Jeremiah said, "Wait. The Treasure of Inestimable Value."

"Yes," old Zephaniah answered. "We found it last night and brought it into the temple." He showed them dozens of bags of money now stashed under the big altar.

They pulled some out and opened them. It was tens of millions of dollars in gold and silver, temple offerings from years past. "Praise YHWH! Finally!" Hilkiah was relieved. "Take it to the temple storeroom." He commanded.

After the others were gone, Jeremiah looked at Hilkiah and Zephaniah. "That's not it," he whispered.

Hilkiah was getting frustrated with him. "What do you mean, that's not it?! If it's not the temple furnishings; not the Ark; not the offerings or all this gold; then what is it?"

Jeremiah closed his eyes. After a lengthy silence, he answered, "Put the poles into the rings for the Mercy Seat and lift it off the Ark. The treasure is inside."

"Only an anointed high priest can do that!" Zephaniah exclaimed. "I am not qualified. Though I was elected as the chief priest, and asked to be the spokesman for the other Levites, yet I have never been anointed as high priest."

"I am anointed as the high priest," Hilkiah said softly. "By YHWH Himself. He came to me as a man, anointed my head, and called me His chosen."

Zephaniah bowed. "I did not know. It is good, for you were to be high priest after Meshullam your father died. Under your anointing, you alone have the authority to open the Ark. I await your command." So they prayed for YHWH's protection, then reverently lifted the Mercy Seat from the Ark. Inside were twelve big scrolls and the stone tablets of the law which Moses had put in at Mount Sinai.

"There is the treasure." Jeremiah pointed at the scrolls. They were very ancient. Hilkiah carefully took them out. Then they replaced the Mercy Seat.

The scrolls were covered in thin red leather, rough, like porpoise skin. Hilkiah scanned the titles. "The five books of Moses, the Law of YHWH!" He whistled. "Also here are the books of Joshua, the Judges, Samuel, the Chronicles of Israel's Kings, the Psalms, the Proverbs of Solomon, and these last four are the books of the Prophets of YHWH." He was stunned. "Why, this is everything that Arnie burned!"

"It's the answer to Josiah's prayers," Jeremiah breathed. "That's why it's such a treasure." He was still whispering.

They came out of the temple and found Shaphan. "Here, we found these in the temple," Hilkiah said gently. He showed him the twelve scrolls. Shaphan's eyes grew wide with wonder as he read off the titles. Hilkiah gave him the biggest scroll, the five books of Moses. "Here. Take it to the king. It is the answer to his prayer for YHWH's Law." Shaphan clutched it to his chest and hurried out.

King Josiah was still fuming that the Levite elders had snookered him. *'Treasure of Inestimable Value' from the temple, indeed!* They had now finished cleaning out the temple, and he had nothing but a bunch of elders in his dungeon for lying to him about the treasures of the temple. *He was right not to appoint Jeremiah as king's prophet.*

Josiah was seated on his throne. His beloved Queen Hamutal sat beside him. Shaphan entered and bowed low. "O King, live forever! Everything you commanded your servants regarding the temple is complete. The workmen and their supervisors have been paid. The temple has been cleansed and is now ready for consecration."

"Yes, go on." Josiah knew him all too well.

"Jeremiah let the elders out of the dungeon..."

"He did what? Without my command?" King Josiah half stood, ready to be angry. But he was intrigued by that smile that remained on his scribe's face.

"Yes Your Majesty. The elders left with Jeremiah. Together they found 30 bags of gold and silver..."

"The treasure! I knew it! The Treasure of Inestimable..."

"...and they restored all the articles of furniture to the temple, including the gold Ark of the Covenant..."

Josiah leaped up. "It's the treasure! Jeremiah was right! I owe him an apology! That is the 'Treasure of Inestimable Value, for me and all people' just as he prophesied!" But Shaphan just stood there, smiling. "Well, is there more? Go on. Go on. Wait! What's that you're holding?"

Shaphan looked down to the big scroll still clutched to his chest, as if surprised to find something there. "Oh. Yes. Hilkiah gave me a book." He handed it to the king, who abruptly plopped back down on his throne.

Slowly, reverently, Josiah opened the red leather cover and read the title. "It's the five books of Moses!"

"Yes. YHWH's Law. We also found all the books of the Judges, Kings, Chronicles, Psalms, Prophets, everything."

Hamutal gasped. Josiah let out an involuntary cry that ended in a sob. He handed the book back to Shaphan, then covered his face with his hands to hide the tears. "*The Treasure of Inestimable Value*," he whispered. "The value of everything else can be calculated. But this! This is the treasure beyond price!" His voice was high-pitched with emotion. "YHWH is pleased with me! He has restored His Word! May His holy name be praised forever and ever!"

Shaphan stood there, eyes closed in worship and tears in rivers down his cheeks. He jumped at Josiah's order: "Well? Don't just stand there. Read it to me!"

"All of it, Your Majesty? It's a very big book."

"What can be more important?" Hamutal said softly.

So he read, as Josiah and Hamutal listened intently. Others came to listen too: Zephaniah, Hilkiah, Jeremiah... but no one interrupted the scribe. At dinner time they took the book to the dining hall and he continued reading. Finally toward nightfall Shaphan reached the place where Moses repeated the covenant just before his death, with the blessings for keeping it and the curses for disobeying.

King Josiah could take no more. He had been weeping silently but now he began to wail and sob. He reached up to the hook on his royal robe and tore it off him, crying, "Alas! Great is the wrath of YHWH which is poured out against me and against Judah, for we have failed to observe the laws of YHWH – failed to do all that He commanded in His book!" He fell on his face on the floor of the dining hall. "Go, Hilkiah! Inquire of YHWH for me concerning the words of His book. What can I – what must I do?"

For a while there was silence, except for the sound of Josiah's weeping. Then Hilkiah responded softly, "I am very sorry, Your Majesty. I am not the king's prophet. YHWH has not given me His Word for you at this time."

"Oh, yes. That's right. Hey Jeremiah! I apologize. I was wrong. I hereby appoint you as king's prophet, effective immediately. Inquire of YHWH for me now!"

"I accept your appointment, O King. Thank you. But it came too late. I also do not have the Word of YHWH for you – at least not right now. I too am very sorry."

Josiah looked up in surprise, rubbing his red eyes with his fist. "Then who does? Shaphan? Zephaniah? Ahicam? Achbor? I've got to have someone interpret it! Now!"

"What about **Huldah**, the widow of Hilkiah's brother Shallum," old Zephaniah said. "She's a prophetess."

"A woman?!" Josiah snorted. "Has it come to that?!" Then he checked himself. "I'm sorry, YHWH. As Hilkiah told me, You may speak through whomever You choose. Go now all of you! Inquire of YHWH for me!"

They ran back to find Huldah. She was glad to see them. "Yes, I have the Word of YHWH for King Josiah. Tell him this is what YHWH says. 'Behold, I am bringing evil on this place and on its inhabitants, even all the curses written in My book which has been read to you, because My people have forsaken Me and have burned incense to other gods and sacrificed to them and committed the abominations against which I warned them, to provoke Me to anger with all the works of their hands. Therefore My wrath will be poured out upon this place, and not be quenched.'

"But to you, O King Josiah, because your heart remains tender, because you wept, tore off your robe, and humbled yourself before Me when you heard My Word, so to you I have granted mercy. I have heard your prayers. Behold, I grant that your days shall be lived out in peace. You shall not see the evil that I shall bring upon this place and its inhabitants. But I swear that though you remain perfect before Me all your days, if your son does not follow in your ways to do what is right he shall quickly be cut off."

They brought the prophecy back to the king. He was encouraged. He called for all the people of Judah to gather together at the temple courtyard the next Sabbath. They came and stood before him while he loudly read them YHWH's book of the law, with the blessings and cursings.

The sun had nearly set when he finished reading the scroll. Many of the listeners were no longer standing; some were even lying down. But Josiah ordered them all to stand back up. He, too, was tired – he had been leaning on the temple Pillar called Yakeen. But now he stood tall and swore a covenant with YHWH, to walk with Him, keep His commandments, and carry out all the words of the law which he had just finished reading. Then he made all the people swear to abide by the covenant. “Heaven and earth bears witness to the covenant we have just sworn. This day the temple services shall begin, just as commanded in YHWH’s holy book. My scribes shall make copies of this book for the Levites to use, for this is the highest law in my kingdom. Now, you may all return to your homes. But don’t forget what we read about Passover. In three months, on the 14th of Nisan, come to the temple for seven days. Eat the Passover and feast with unleavened bread. All of you are invited to come. Bring your offerings, and your families. No one shall leave hungry.”

Passover, 621 BC. They had been idolaters, but over half the people actually came. I won’t go into all the details, partly to protect the innocent. They were very new at this and made some rather glaring errors. But they celebrated with all their hearts, feasting together with dancing and singing before YHWH. They rejoiced more than at any Passover since Hezekiah’s famous Passover of 716 BC. Logos rejoiced with them, for He loves to celebrate the Feasts more than anyone else in the universe. From then on, throughout his reign, King Josiah kept all the Feasts as commanded in the law. True to His word, Logos gave them peace on all sides. They remained prosperous and blessed. All who still held idolatry in their hearts were silenced. Satan’s temptations were blocked by the king’s vow.

Let’s catch up on Assyria. Sin-shar-ishkun had turned out to be a lousy king. He just couldn’t win. His squabbles with his younger brother were part of it. Then his general Nabopolassar, who had turned traitor and made himself king of Babylon, tried to take over his forces at Nippur. He nearly succeeded! In 624 BC he tried again at Uruk and did succeed! Sin-shar-ishkun came and recaptured it, but then had to leave to quell another rebellion at Der. He got no respect! In 623 BC he decided to resolve the rebellion in Babylon once for all. He brought his full army down from Nineveh, intending to wipe out Nabopolassar and his half-army. But no sooner had he left Nineveh than his older brother Ashur-etil-ilani tried to usurp his throne. He had to leave Babylon and return to quell the rebellions in his own backyard. It was a tough life. He began to take out his frustrations by trying to exterminate the Yawists, again.

The Assyrian Empire had been racing downhill ever since Sargon and his son Sennacherib rejected YHWH after Hezekiah witnessed to them. Jonah’s re-born church in Nineveh fled from the fierce persecution. Some of them, of course, wound up in Israel and Judah. In 621 BC, a few months after the Passover, **Nahum** arrived in Jerusalem.

King Josiah, of course, was interested in this Assyrian intruder. He ordered him to stand before the king’s court and present his business.

“My name is Nahum. My family is from Al-kosh in Assyria. That is a suburb of Nineveh. We are Yawists. We had to leave Nineveh because persecution of the Yawists has gotten intolerable. I know that Nineveh will soon be destroyed. So I and my family have come to Jerusalem because of our great love for YHWH and His people.”

That didn’t make sense to Josiah. “How do you know Nineveh will be destroyed? And how did you, a heathen Assyrian, ever come to know YHWH?”

“I’ll answer your second question first, Your Majesty. Israel’s prophet Jonah came to Nineveh many years ago. He taught us about YHWH. My parents and grandparents grew up knowing Him. They were greatly persecuted, but their faith grew strong, as has my faith and love for YHWH. YHWH talks to me and gives me visions. I ‘see’ things.

“Thus the answer to your first question. I have ‘seen’ the destruction of Nineveh. Here. This is an exact copy of a prophecy I gave them just before I left.”

Josiah read it. It was directed at the Assyrian kings who were persecuting the Yawists. “A jealous and avenging God is YHWH! He takes vengeance on His adversaries and reserves wrath for His enemies. Though slow to anger, He is great in power, and will by no means leave the wicked unpunished. Mountains quake and hills dissolve because of Him! Indeed the whole earth and all its inhabitants are in turmoil because of His presence! Who can stand before His indignation? Who can endure His fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, like the lightning striking down to crush the rock. YHWH is good. A safe stronghold in the day of trouble for those who put their trust in Him. But with an overflowing flood He will make a complete end to Nineveh, and will pursue her to her doom, for she persecuted His saints.” The poem continued on, decrying the wickedness of the Assyrian Empire and decreeing its overthrow and final ruin. He even compared Nineveh to Ashurbanipal’s total destruction of Thebes in 664 BC.

Josiah handed the prophecy back to Nahum. He was impressed, but he still had questions. He had read the story of Jonah, for it was there among the Prophets in one of the scrolls found in the temple. “I know about Jonah,” he said. “But he was a false prophet. He prophesied the destruction of Nineveh over 150 years ago. But it never happened.”

Nahum was a bit indignant. “Jonah was a true prophet of YHWH. Look at the fruit of his ministry! His church lasted for 150 years in Nineveh, and has now spread all over the world. But don’t tell me his prophecy has failed, any more than this prophecy of mine. It hasn’t happened yet, but it will, just as sure as YHWH is God! For though it may be delayed by prayer and repentance, God’s Word never fails. Just be thankful when the disaster is delayed.”

“Okay, okay! No need to get uptight. I believe you. Your answers ring true to me. I have but one more question before I can approve your stay here. Why did you choose Judah? You mentioned that the Yawists are now spread all over the world. So why not some other place?”

“O King, I am a ‘seer’ prophet, as I said. I want to bring my family to the best place, where they will be safe, where we can flourish. I have ‘seen’ that for the next ten or twelve years, Judah is the best place on earth to raise my family.”

Josiah was immediately interested. “Please, Nahum. Tell me what you see about Judah. And what will happen after that ten or twelve years.”

Nahum smiled. “You, O King, well know what I see about Judah, for you have brought it about! I see thick, high walls surrounding your country, keeping evil at bay. Within those walls, I see green gardens flourishing, lit by the sunlight and watered by the rains from the highest heavens. I see peace and prosperity abounding, love and joy covering the land like a blanket, with not a single idol in the land to insert its hatred and fear. And yet I see dark clouds rolling up to the wall, and a sword of prophecy, hanging by a thread above the land. After ten or twelve years, Your Majesty, I see the walls begin to crumble, and the sword ready to drop.”

King Josiah was a little lost by the flowery language. “Uh... what is that sword of prophecy?”

“Haven’t you already been given a prophecy of Judah’s destruction? I know you have.”

Josiah instantly remembered Huldah’s prophecy. She had prophesied, ... *Therefore My wrath will be poured out upon this place and not be quenched.* “But she said it would not happen in my lifetime!”

“Thus your life is the thread by which the sword is hanging, Your Majesty – held up by repentance. It is a thin thread, for many have not joined in your repentance. Is Huldah a false prophet just because her prophecy was delayed by your repentance? No. It shall come to pass after your death, just as the prophecy of Jonah will come to pass after his death, delayed by the Assyrian’s repentance.”

King Josiah couldn’t deny Nahum’s identity with his people. He welcomed him and other refugees from Jonah’s church into Judah. He gathered them all in his courtroom to officially legalize their Israeli status. Though Assyrian, the king realized that they were Israelite at heart.

620 BC was the end of the Third Intermediate Period of Egypt, for it was the end of the Libyan Dynasty at Tanis, Bubastis, and Leontopolis. Now only the ‘Saite’ Dynasty remained, currently headed by Psamtik I as appointed by Ashurbanipal to be the successor to Necho I. Pharaoh Psamtik’s control over Egypt was complete when his lovely daughter Nitocris married Mentuemhet, the mayor of Thebes, and was appointed ‘divine Adoratrix of Amun’.

Some of the citizens of Judah were upset at King Josiah for welcoming Assyrians into their midst. Nobody had really forgiven what Assyria had done to Israel. A fear lurked deep-down that it could happen to them, as well. Perhaps the Yawists were spies, sent to prepare the way for an Assyrian invasion! Two years later the animosity still hadn’t blown over. Josiah realized he had to do something. As he was praying about it, an idea came to him.

Josiah called for the elders and leading people to gather. “I hate and fear the Assyrians as much as you,” he told them. “Sin-shar-ishkun is a wicked and foolish king. He has been very cruel. He doesn’t even care for his own vassal states. But I have investigated the Yawists at length and I swear to you that they are not like their Assyrian brothers! They were transformed by the preaching of an Israelite, Jonah. They are now true Israelites indeed! To show my confidence in them, I have decided to give Nahum a job as one of my own advisors. His knowledge and wisdom about far-off nations, and the prophecies he has received from YHWH about them, have proven invaluable. I’ve found him and his family above reproach.”

Nahum walked forward, his large family trailing along behind. He bowed before the king, gratefully accepting the post of advisor. Josiah assigned him and his family a lovely apartment in the palace and pegged his salary to be the same as his chief advisors or his ‘king’s prophet’. But he was not finished. “Due to the misunderstanding directed against Yawists,” Josiah continued with a big grin, “I have decided to a public demonstration of the confidence I have in Nahum.” He turned to put a hand on Nahum’s shoulder. “My eldest daughter Joy, the delight of my eyes, is now eight years old. Your eldest son, James, must be twelve or so. I offer you a betrothal contract for him to marry my daughter Joy, and thus to become the king’s son-in-law.”

It worked. After consulting with his wife Nancy, Nahum agreed. From then on, the Yawists were accepted in Judah without as much discrimination.

Soon the word got out. Yawists from all over the world began streaming into Judah, for they had been despised and hated pretty much everywhere else. Josiah welcomed them and made sure they were adopted into the families of Judah. Thus one more nation was added to Abraham’s ‘father of many nations’. Logos was very pleased.

As they came, he grilled them to find out as much as he could about the nations to which they had been scattered. He had an ulterior motive. The Assyrian overlords up in Samerina had learned to trust him. Trade was blossoming between Israel and Judah. They could see the benefit in increased prosperity, which is always the result of peace and free trade. That gave King Josiah freedom to visit the remnants of the displaced tribes of Israel. Josiah talked with them and felt compassion for their exiled brothers and sisters in far-off lands. He determined that he would seek them out and try to bring them home.

CHAPTER 14 – THE DOWNFALL OF JOSIAH

Logos was glad that Josiah extended Judah's hospitality to the Yawists from Assyria. He was also glad that Josiah showed such compassion on the remnants of the 'lost tribes of Israel'. In 618 BC Josiah's beloved wife Hamutal bore him another son. They named him **Mattaniah**. He now had three sons (Eliakim – 15, Shallum – 13, and the baby, Mattaniah) and three other daughters besides Joy.

King Josiah assigned faithful old General Able the task of making sure that idolatry did not flood into Judah with all that increasing trade with the surrounding nations. He knew Israel's history! That had happened altogether too many times before.

So the years went by, with peace and prosperity only increasing year by year. King Josiah found some of the lost tribes of Israel. Yawist refugees told him of various clans of Israelites living in Anatolia, Cimmeria, Urartu, Media, Persia, and even Babylon.

Of course Josiah tried to arrange for their safe return, but King Sin-shar-ishkun got wind of it, and came down furiously on his emissaries, slaying some and sending the others back with threats of Assyrian vengeance upon Judah. King Josiah had never in his life dealt with anyone so venomous. He began to understand why the Yawists had left Assyria! He took out Nahum's prophecy against Nineveh and read it again. Now he allowed himself the luxury of a little gloat that King Sin-shar-ishkun would soon get his comeuppance. Josiah prayed fervently that Assyria's prophesied destruction will be soon, and total.

All the working people of Judah became very wealthy. Businesses flourished. But so did busyness! The Feasts were still held but fewer came. Sabbaths were still kept, but some found that their most lucrative days were when their compatriots rested. Logos grieved that His appointed dates with His Bride had so quickly lost their joy for Judah.

The families of Josiah and Nahum became close. With Nahum as an advisor to the king, their children played in the king's palace together. Judah had become like the fabled Camelot, 'a land filled with sweetness and light where the rains never fall 'til after sundown and the clouds are gone by dawn.' Truly Nahum's prophecy came to pass. Israel was the best place in the world to raise his family.

But alas, as in Camelot, a serpent prowled the gardens. A shocking scandal erupted in Josiah's palace in 616 BC. A sixteen-year-old girl from among the adopted Yawists, Nehushta, was found to be pregnant. Her father Elnathan (Nahum's second cousin who had also gotten a job at the palace) was outraged when the baby's father turned out to be Eliakim, Josiah's oldest son! He discovered that Prince Eliakim had seduced his daughter using the privileges of his rank. Then, after discovering her pregnancy, he had tried to force her to 'have it taken care of'. (Yes, even way back then they well knew how to abort unwanted babies.)

Josiah and Hamutal were appalled, and shamed! After all their careful teaching in the godly virtues! They now faced the hardest of all parental lessons: that no matter how much a parent does, each child still retains the choice to receive it or rebel. Eliakim had heard it and had seemed to receive it, but with their families all living in the same palace, his own pride and youthful lusts had overwhelmed his good training.

As with most palace scandals, they tried to patch it up. Eliakim consented to marry Nehushta and keep his child. But sin always exacts its price. Even after the wedding, relations were strained between them and the others in the palace, especially the Yawists! Eliakim somehow blamed them for his own failure. And he blamed his father for bringing them into the palace. He took his dad's hatred of the Assyrians and applied it now to Nahum and the other Yawists settling in Judah. His hatred turned to bitterness and rebellion. As the eldest son and crown prince, Eliakim wore an outward air of respectability. But he never got over that bitterness in his heart. Many people of Judah couldn't trust him. It's amazing how quickly a prosperous and happy people forget the Source of their wealth when they allow the subtle self-righteousness and pride of the adversary gain a toehold in their hearts. The prosperity remained. But a dark root of bitterness began to creep deep underground. *Satan had the open door he needed.*

The next year, 615 BC, grizzled old General Able died. Great was the mourning across the land, for he was much loved for his service to his country. Sadly, his replacement did not have the methodical diligence of the old general. He had inherited a land free of all outward idolatry, but neither he nor Josiah understood the power of the idolatry that had been forced underground. Now it began to spring up and blossom in the hearts of many in Judah.

That summer Nehushta bore a son. She was seventeen, and Eliakim eighteen. They named him **Coniah**, 'Created'. But knowing that he could be king someday, the YHWH-loving court dubbed him Jeconiah, 'YHWH Created'.

I must say, especially since he had wanted to abort him, that Eliakim learned to treasure his son. In the years to come, when so many in the palace and even his own wife distrusted him, Coniah was the light of his father's eyes. But Logos was angry. Nehushta never had another child.

Josiah was very distressed at the sudden change in his son Eliakim. He called Jeremiah, his young king's prophet. "What did we do wrong?" he cried.

Jeremiah, now mature in his calling, was ready with the Word of YHWH. "Who is Eliakim's mother?" he asked softly, already knowing the answer.

"Hamutal, of course..." Then he remembered. "No. It was Zebidah, my first wife. I can't believe I forgot her. She died giving him birth. She was cute, and loads of fun, but an utter space cadet compared to Hamutal. Why?"

“Generational curse. The sins of the fathers. Zebidah’s father was Pedaiah, an apostate priest who had wholeheartedly served the Baals during the days of your father Amon. Though you repented and YHWH cleansed your house, Pedaiah never did. He was slain by General Able, but his sins remain, to be visited upon the third and fourth generation according to the law. That generational curse rests upon Eliakim, and upon his son Coniah as well, unless he repents and receives the cleansing of YHWH through the blood of the lamb. Eliakim must be brought to repentance, or he will be the downfall of all Judah.”

Sadly, the more Josiah and Hamutal worked to bring Eliakim to repentance, the more he hardened his heart. Jeremiah grieved for him, and prayed for him daily.

Toward the end of 615 BC, he heard a frightened knock on his ‘king’s prophet’ door. It was young **Zephaniah** son of Cushi and third cousin of Coniah. “Please, do with this whatever is right,” he told Jeremiah, handing him a letter. Then he fled. Jeremiah read the letter, then read it again. His face turned white. It was the most terrifying prophecy he had ever heard. To have it come now, when Judah was prosperous and (outwardly) righteous, made it all the more frightening. Jeremiah bowed his heart to YHWH, prayed for discernment, and slowly read it a third time:

“I will completely remove all from the face of the earth! declares YHWH. I will remove man and beast, birds of the sky, and fish of the sea. I will remove stumbling blocks along with those who stumble. I will cut off man from the face of the earth. I will stretch out My hand against Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. I will cut off the last of the Baals. I will remove the idolatrous priests, and blot out their names, even those who have bowed down to the hosts of heaven, the sun, moon, and planets. Be silent before Adonai YHWH! For the Day of YHWH is very near. On that day... I will punish those who stagnate in spirit, those who say in their hearts, ‘YHWH isn’t concerned. He will do us neither good nor ill.’ All their wealth will become plunder and their houses desolate. Near is the great Day of YHWH! It is coming very quickly! It is a day of wrath, trouble and distress, destruction and desolation, storms, darkness, and gloom. It is a day of loud trumpet and battle cry against fortified cities and high towers. I will pour out distress upon men because they have sinned against Me. Their blood will be poured out into the dust. Neither silver nor gold will be able to deliver them on the day of YHWH’s wrath. All the earth will be devoured in the fire of His jealousy. For He will make a complete end – a terrifying end! – of all the inhabitants of the earth.

“So gather yourselves together, you nation without shame! Seek YHWH before the decree takes effect, before the burning anger of YHWH falls upon you! You humble of the earth who have obeyed His law, seek righteousness! Seek humility! Perhaps you will be hidden in the day of YHWH’s anger. Thus a remnant shall be saved.

“Then Philistia will be abandoned so the remnant of My people may come and pasture on it. They will lie down in peace and YHWH their God will care for them and restore their fortunes. Moab will become desolate, like Sodom, so the remnant of My people will also plunder them and will inherit their land. You also, Egypt and Ethiopia, will be slain by My sword. And I will stretch out My hand to the north to destroy Assyria. Assur will be annihilated, and Nineveh will become a desolation, the haunt of wild beasts. All who pass by her will hiss in contempt. Woe to that tyrannical city, rebellious and defiled! For though I displayed My power and glory, and sent Jonah with My Word, yet Nineveh persecutes and kills My people. She heeded no voice, accepted no instruction, lost her faith, and turned away from YHWH her God. So I have decided to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them My indignation and burning anger. Then all the earth will be devoured and purified by the fire of My zeal!

“Then I will change the languages of the peoples to the one pure language of My holy Kingdom, to reverse the curse of Babel, so all of them may call on My name and serve Me shoulder to shoulder from south of the rivers of Ethiopia to north of the Caspian Sea. Thus My worshipers, My dispersed ones, will bring My offerings. In that day you will forget the shame of all your misdeeds by which you rebelled against Me, for then I will remove the proud from your midst. You will never again be haughty on My Holy Mountain. But I will leave among you a humble and lowly people. They will take refuge in the name of YHWH. Then the surviving remnant of Israel will do no wrong and tell no lies. Instead, they will peacefully feed and lie down with no one to make them tremble.

“Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O Israel! Rejoice! Exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! I, YHWH, have forgiven you. I have washed away My judgments against you, and cleared away your enemies. YHWH the King of Israel now dwells in your midst. I will exult over you with joy, and renew you in My love. I will rejoice over you with shouts of joy. I will give you renown and praise among all the people of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, when I have gathered My remnant, My own, My beloved, those who grieve with Me over the loss of My appointed Feasts.”

Jeremiah was stunned. He wrestled with it all night. But the more he prayed about it, the more convinced he became that it was indeed a true prophecy from YHWH. But for now? Or the future? The next morning he called for young Zephaniah, and told him what he thought. “It’s a stern warning from YHWH. You must take it to the king.”

“But sir? I’m just a kid! A nobody! He won’t listen to me. If you think it’s right, you take it to him.”

Jeremiah smiled at him, and rumbled his hair. “You may be small, but how big is your God? Come on. We’ll go together. King Josiah will listen to both of us.”

King Josiah didn't look down on Zephaniah's youth. He heard the prophecy and pondered it, then made Jeremiah read it again. "Okay," he responded. "I accept that as a Word from YHWH. It's quite similar to the one Huldah gave, you know. After my death, Judah will turn away from YHWH, like they have so many times in the past. He will discipline them, using Assyria. Then he will destroy that vile nation and restore the remnant of Judah. Right?"

Before Jeremiah could answer, Zephaniah spoke up. "Not after your death, O King. The adversary has found a fault in you that will cause your death."

"Huh? How could he? I've been perfect in all my ways. I've kept YHWH's Law wholeheartedly from the day I first heard it until now. I have kept all of YHWH's Feasts. I have ordered my military to keep Judah forever free of idolatry. What fault can the adversary possibly find in me?"

"Possibly your hatred of the Assyrians? And possibly your arrogance in considering yourself better than them?"

"That's going a bit far. YHWH hates them too. You just said so! Besides, I don't hate all Assyrians. I welcomed all the Yawists who came here fleeing the persecution in Nineveh. So there. I am better than them!"

Young Zephaniah wouldn't argue with his king. And Jeremiah simply didn't know. So King Josiah succeeded in justifying himself, thus giving Satan one more open door into Judah. The wickedness began flooding in.

In 616 BC, King Nabopolassar gathered his forces for a showdown with Assyria. He had been planning this for ten years. He moved up the Euphrates, conquering each city and town as he went. But when he got to Gablini, the Assyrians and their Acadian allies were waiting for him. It was a terrible battle. Both sides claimed victory, but in reality both lost. Both sent pleas for help: the Assyrians from Egypt, and Nabopolassar from his allies the Medes, as well as from the Scythians and Cimmerians in Urartu, because he knew they hated the Assyrians just as much.

The next year the Medes under King Cyaxares attacked and conquered Arrapha, and then headed for Nineveh. They took a few suburbs, but when they reached the city walls they were easily driven away. King Sin-shar-ishkun laughed. Nobody could defeat his mighty Nineveh!

Meanwhile, Nabopolassar slowly made his way up the Tigris River from Opis, ruthlessly destroying every vestige of Assyrian authority. He conquered Takrit. But when he reached Assur, Sin-shar-ishkun met him with the full force of the entire Assyrian army!

How did he get there so fast? Nabopolassar was sure he was still up at Nineveh fighting his allies, the Medes. It was a stunning defeat. Nabopolassar fled south. The Assyrians pursued him all the way. He holed up in the fortress at Takrit, where he was surrounded and besieged. It looked like poor Nabopolassar and his brave men were done for.

But in ten days amazing news came from Assur. It was a mighty, fortified city, but foolish Sin-shar-ishkun had left it undefended while he chased south after Nabopolassar. As soon as he was gone, those sneaky Medes (who had never really gone home; they had simply gone into hiding) had taken Assur! They battered open the gates, plundered the city, and massacred all the Assyrians remaining there.

The horrified Assyrian army left Takrit and rushed to Assur's defense, but they were too late. The Medes had the city all bottled up. Suddenly all their bravado flew out the window. With a queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach, Sin-shar-ishkun rushed his forces back to defend Calah. *For the first time, survival of his invincible city was in doubt.*

Thus the Babylonians and Medes joined up at Assur in 614 BC. What a party they had! Then they continued the slow march up to Calah. At first, the Assyrians defended the royal palace with a ferocity that astounded the Medes and Babylonians. Sin-shar-ishkun should have won. But he managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory when he panicked and fled back to Nineveh itself. Thus Calah, beautiful, luxurious, wealthy Calah, was plundered and destroyed. The march went on. By 612 BC Nabopolassar and Cyaxares reached the very gates of Nineveh. Now they heard the good news of the Scythians and Cimmerians. Under King Umanmanda, they were attacking Nineveh from the north. Mighty Nineveh would soon be theirs!

Again it became a bitter siege. The battle-hardened Assyrians were the best warriors in the world. Now they were fighting for the very existence of their fatherland! But suddenly, long before Nabopolassar dared to hope for victory, the fearless Assyrian army broke and evacuated the city out the western gate. *That was too easy!* The Medes and Babylonians entered the now empty city slowly, expecting a trap. But when they got to the palace, they found King Sin-shar-ishkun dangling on the end of a rope. He had hung himself in his fear. It was a sorry sight. King Nabopolassar stared at the body, ruminating on lessons to be learned. Could this be his own end as well? Here hung the greatest man on earth, sovereign of the most feared empire in the world, just a rotting, stinking corpse.

Nabopolassar spent the next year plundering the wealthy city, and then methodically leveling it. Mighty Nineveh was destroyed – made a desolation, exactly as Jonah, Nahum, and Zephaniah had prophesied. Assyria's legendarily cruel power and world dominance was forever broken and its heartland was crushed into the ground.

The victorious armies celebrated. King Umanmanda was just glad to be free of the Assyrian domination. He took his Cimmerians and Scythians back to their homes and families. But the Babylonians and Medes sat down to divide up the Assyrian Empire amongst themselves. The Medes got all the northern and northwestern provinces of Assyria; the Babylonians got Nineveh and everything south of it, including the Levant. [See map, page 308.]

They sealed the deal with a beautiful marriage alliance. King Cyaxares gave his lovely, intelligent, and talented daughter, Princess Amytis, to Nabopolassar's son, young crown prince Nebuchadnezzar. This unified the Median and Babylonian Empires, creating a major new world power which would forever alter the course of history.

With Sin-shar-ishkun now dead, his younger brother, General Ashur-uballit II, fled to Haran with the Assyrian refugees. But they didn't totally trust him. They knew all the bickering and power struggles he and his brother had been having. Many accused him of the hanging! His army's morale was devastated by three successive defeats. They needed help, big time. So Ashur-uballit II called back a favor that Ashurbanipal had done for Egypt, when he had driven the Nubians out and established the 26th 'Saite' Dynasty Pharaoh Psamtik as successor to his slain father, Necho I. Ashur-uballit sent urgent messengers down to Psamtik, pleading for immediate military assistance.

Psamtik I was a good Pharaoh. He had ruled Egypt with wisdom and justice for 54 years. If you recall, his reign had begun with Assyrian support. After putting him in charge, Ashurbanipal had continued supporting Psamtik for nine years by leaving five Assyrian military garrisons to protect him. So there is no way now that old Psamtik I would fail to return the favor. He rushed his crack troops north up the Via Maris and the Great Trunk Road to Haran.

He arrived in 611 BC. With his help, the defense of Haran was successful. Nabopolassar was not expecting all those Egyptian troops strengthening the army he had so recently defeated. He called retreat, and fell back to await reinforcements from King Umanmanda.

But Egypt had suffered a major catastrophe. They won the war, but they lost their Pharaoh. He was old, more than 75. He could not take the stress of the rapid travel followed by the heated battle. His heart failed, not one hour before the Babylonians began their retreat. He continued nobly standing in his chariot, knowing that his collapse could well turn the tide against them, but he lived only a few hours after Nabopolassar had gone. It was just long enough to pass his scepter on to his son, Necho II. "Take good care of Egypt, my son. Be firm, but faithful, to your people and to your allies both. Do not forget what the Assyrians did for us. Continue defending them against the Babylonian threat, for if they are defeated, the Babylonians will soon be at our border. And do not trouble Israel and Judah, unless they trouble you first! For though they may seem weak, YHWH their God is very powerful!"

With that, the old Pharaoh died, heroic in death as in life. His body was carried back toward Egypt with greatest honors. But alas, the materials they had for embalming him from the battlefield proved inadequate. It would not do for a great Pharaoh to be borne into Egypt with his body stinking, filled with worms! So they secretly buried him along the way. To this day his actual grave site is unknown.

Nevertheless, there was great mourning when the news reached Egypt. It was two years, early 609 BC, before the new Pharaoh, Necho II, was ready to return to the aid of his beleaguered allies. By this time, Nabopolassar had joined with Umanmanda again, and the Assyrians had been driven from Haran. They fled to Carchemish on the Euphrates, near the western edge of what used to be their empire. This could be their last stand. Again Ashur-uballit II sent frantic messages to Egypt. Pharaoh Necho gathered Egypt's forces and rushed north along the Via Maris.

By now, Josiah had heard the news of the destruction of Assur, Calah, and Nineveh. But because of his hatred for the Assyrians, he was rooting for the Babylonians! When he heard that the Egyptians were going to aid the Assyrians again, he resolved to stop them. He mustered his army and led it toward Jezreel. But Jeremiah met him on the way. "O King, live forever! But you will not, if you do this thing."

"Don't be silly, Jeremiah. I'm not going to fight the Egyptians – just block them from helping those wicked Assyrians. Whose side are you on here, anyway?"

"I am on YHWH's side. He says to leave the Egyptians alone. Though Assyria is wicked and will ultimately be destroyed, under God's Law King Ashurbanipal won for Assyria the right to Egypt's assistance by his kindness in freeing them from the Nubians. Just stay out of it."

But Josiah was in a hurry and didn't have time to argue. *He will be just fine. He won't go into battle.* His disobedience will cost him, and all Judah.

Josiah's forces gathered on the Plain of Sharon. The Egyptians were coming up the main highway by the sea, so Josiah led his men north, where the plain narrows, to block their way. Then he rode back to meet the Pharaoh.

Pharaoh Necho II didn't even want to talk with him. He sent a message to Josiah. "What have we to do with each other, O King of Judah? I do not come against you, but against the Babylonians, and God has ordered me to hurry. For your own sake, do not interfere. God is with me. My cause is just. If you try to block me, God will destroy you."

King Josiah responded, "O mighty Pharaoh, I have no quarrel with you and do not wish to fight you. But you must turn back and return to your own land, for I will not let you go any further to help those wicked Assyrians."

Pharaoh Necho II did not have time for this. He ordered his troops to take the Megiddo road over Aruna Pass into the highlands, bypassing Josiah. Getting to Carchemish is just as easy on the Great Trunk Road (via Megiddo, Hazor, and Damascus) as it is on the Via Maris (which goes just west of Mount Carmel and through Aphek on the coast).

Josiah was just as determined. He rushed his troops up the steep hills to Jokneam, to get to the Valley of Jezreel before the Egyptians. But when he got there, the Egyptians were already filling the valley, on the main road to Hazor.

Well, he won't fight, but he can still block them. Josiah disguised himself with an officer's chariot, so he could direct his cavalry without becoming a target. They rode furiously to block the Great Trunk Road at the north pass above Shimron. Pharaoh Necho told his archers to loose a warning volley of arrows just ahead of them.

It was just a warning volley. Nobody should have been hurt. But Egyptian archers are the best in the world, and an officer in a chariot makes a tempting target. King Josiah was wounded. He called off the blockade. They rushed him back to Jerusalem. His physicians worked frantically to save him, but it was too late. He died the next day. Strangely, he was the only one who was injured.

Though he had started out poorly when he was a boy, Josiah had become a wise and well-loved king. The entire land mourned his death. His beloved Hamutal was heart-broken. They buried him with greatest honors among the kings of Israel. Jeremiah wrote some **Lamentations** for Josiah which the people all sang, and still do sometimes.

Josiah had died an untimely death at the age of only 39. He had never taken the time to write his will or appoint his successor. His oldest living son, Eliakim, assumed that he would take the throne. But as I said, people distrusted him. They never quite forgave him for the scandal he'd caused. So they crowned his next younger brother, **Shallum**, as king in place of Josiah. Shallum was 23.

An argument arose among the elders about Shallum's name. It had been the name of the pagan priest who had slain Zechariah and usurped the throne of Israel for a month, before being slain by Menahem. That was a sordid time in Israel's history and they did not want any king by that name. So they renamed him **Joahaz** (or Jehoahaz, or Jehoaz; some of the people never did quite get it right.)

Eliakim was furious. Losing the people's respect was one thing, but forfeiting his crown was quite another. He disguised himself and fled the palace. Traveling alone along the Highlands Road can be dangerous, but at 25 Eliakim was very strong and quick. By wearing a beggar's cloak and hiding his royal robes, his sword, and the finery of a crown prince underneath, he managed to arrive at Carchemish. There he demanded to see Pharaoh Necho.

They laughed at him. Why should a beggar ever get to see the Pharaoh? Besides, he was busy helping to defend the city and the Assyrians from the attacking Babylonians. They shooed Eliakim from the palace. He patiently waited by the city gates. Every day he told the officials coming through the gates, "When the Pharaoh is victorious over Babylon, I must see him. I have secret and important news from Judah."

The battle went on for several months. Then, as Eliakim expected, the Babylonians gave up and fled, returning to Nineveh for reinforcements. A joyous celebration rocked the palace at Carchemish that night.

Eliakim waited until the kings and commanders were satisfied with food and wine, and then he snuck into the palace. He had nearly reached the Pharaoh's table before the guards saw him. But as they were reaching for him to throw him out on his ear, he dropped off his beggar's cloak, to stand tall in all the regalia of a crown prince. "I am Crown Prince Eliakim of Judah, the oldest son of the late King Josiah!" he shouted.

Now he had the full attention of everyone in the palace. He had also gained the Pharaoh's curiosity. "What do you mean, 'the late King Josiah'?" he said. "I saw him in his chariot not three months past."

So Eliakim told him the whole story, with due emphasis on the fact that his father was being very foolish in trying to block the Egyptian army, and doubly foolish in disguising himself so the archers didn't know they were shooting at a king. "I know that his death was not your fault, O mighty Pharaoh! You had an urgent job to do, and he got in your way. God punished him for it. Your archers must not be blamed, for even our own prophets warned my father not to block you, but he refused to listen. He was the only one who died that day. It was clearly God's hand against him. That is what I believe, and that is what I tried to tell my people, O King." And here is where he began to stretch the truth a bit. "I insisted that they submit to the will of God, and not allow their anger to burn against you for doing what you had to do. But alas, anger is a terrible thing, O mighty Pharaoh. Josiah was a dearly loved king. *My people are blaming you for killing him in the prime of his life.* I am the crown prince. My father promised the throne to me. But my people in their unreasonable anger denied my rightful crown and anointed my younger brother Shallum as king in my place." Eliakim bowed his head, as if he bore a crushing burden of sadness for the tragic injustice of it all. "But even there, O Pharaoh, I would have remained quiet and borne my loss in silence, waiting until God should grant me justice. However, soon I began hearing plans in the palace – seditious plans, O mighty Pharaoh! My little brother Shallum is a foolish and headstrong boy. He lets his anger carry him too far. He plans to attack your army as you return from Carchemish. Even now Shallum is gathering his forces. He anticipates you will be here about a year or so. By then he will be prepared with an ambush. Of course I know he cannot defeat your great army, O Pharaoh! But in his foolish pride, he doesn't know that. I heard him proudly swear that he will personally put his foot on your neck and slay you with his own spear, to take vengeance for our father's death. When I heard that, O Pharaoh, I knew I must come to warn you. I will assist you in any way I can."

The stunned gathering looked to Pharaoh Necho to see how he would respond. He had no reason not to believe Eliakim. And now that his victory over the Babylonians was, for the moment, accomplished, he could zip back to Judah to verify Eliakim's story.

Shallum, now known as King Joahaz, had only reigned for three months, and the first two of those were spent mourning his father's untimely death and making hateful, bitter remarks about Pharaoh Necho II and the Egyptians who caused it. You'd think there was not a lot of trouble he could get into in three months. You're right, but it was what he had not done that turned out to be significant. Not once had he prayed and asked for God's wisdom to rule in justice. Not once had he requested a Word from God by the king's prophet. Not once had he gone to the temple to worship; the Sabbath was just another day to solidify his kingdom. Oh, he said he would after things settled down. He was not ready. Nobody expected Josiah to die this soon.

So besides making sure his officers and guards were all loyal, he had not done much else, with one exception: everyone knows a king must have a wife. So his focus turned to a task his father should have already planned for him. He ordered all the lovely young eligible maidens in the land to appear before him while he made his choice.

The day after Eliakim's warning, Pharaoh Necho II set out. He would surprise the Judeans. After a high-speed chariot ride with only his elite guard, he appeared at the gates of Jerusalem demanding audience with the king.

King Joahaz didn't have time for that. He had narrowed down his choice to the most lovely forty girls in the land, and he was in the middle of a run-off competition. He ordered them to dance and sing, or otherwise display their endowments and talents for him. Their sensuous dancing and exotic dress (or lack thereof) inflamed his passions. His imagination ran wild. *Maybe he should marry all forty of them! Then he could enjoy this every night!* "Just tell the Pharaoh to wait. I'm in a very important meeting, and can not be disturbed. I'll see him first thing in the morning." He went back to his judging.

Pharaoh Necho II was not interested in waiting. This deliberate insult was confirmation that Eliakim may have told the truth about Joahaz. "I have 50,000 of the world's best warriors up at Carchemish. Take me to your king this very instant, or I shall go back and get them. Then when we return, we will break down these walls and this gate, and all 50,000 of us will go in to see your king!"

So Pharaoh Necho II was ushered into the great room. He saw a 23-year-old kid, still wet behind the ears, sitting on a throne surrounded by dancing beauties vying for his favors. Now he was doubly insulted. "So!" he thundered. "This is the 'important meeting' that in your mind takes precedence over greeting the Pharaoh, king of Egypt?"

Young King Joahaz jumped up, his face turning white. He quickly ordered the dancing girls from the room, trying to think of some excuse for his rudeness. There was none, but he mumbled a few anyway. The Pharaoh only despised his pathetic groveling.

The Pharaoh demanded to see his father, King Josiah, but Joahaz told him the truth. That much of Eliakim's story checked out. Now the Pharaoh accused Joahaz of plotting to attack him to avenge his father's death. Yes, the thought had occurred to Joahaz, for he loved his father (like everyone else) and was pretty upset at the Egyptians for killing him. But he swore he had made no such plot. In his fear, he looked guilty as sin. The more Necho grilled him, the more fearful (and guilty-looking) he got.

So now the Pharaoh questioned the palace nobles. "Has your new king ever said anything to you about blaming me for killing his father, or wanting to take vengeance against me?" Some, of course, covered for him, but it's pretty hard to look a mighty Pharaoh in the face and tell a blatant lie. Some were thus forced to admit that King Joahaz had indeed entertained thoughts of revenge. Duh! During his two months of mourning, he had talked about little else!

So, over all his protests of innocence, Joahaz was put in chains and his brother Eliakim was appointed king in his place. Pharaoh Necho imposed a large fine (7500 pounds of silver and 75 pounds of gold). King Eliakim swore his allegiance to Egypt, and assured him the fine would be paid. Then the Pharaoh gave a speech, telling everyone what would happen to them if they failed to obey their new king. For good measure (since he knew the value they placed on names beginning with YHWH), as Pharaoh Necho set the crown on Eliakim's head he renamed him Jehoiakim, 'YHWH raises up'.

Finally he returned to Carchemish, taking the bound Joahaz with him as far as Riblah on the Orontes in Hamath, where he was temporarily imprisoned. Poor betrayed King Joahaz rotted in a Syrian dungeon for three years awaiting the final outcome of the conflict at Carchemish.

Eliakim/Jehoiakim quickly became a cruel tyrant over his people. He slew all the nobles in the court who were faithful to his brother. He replaced them with the Egyptian guards that the Pharaoh had left for his protection. He took all forty of the dancing beauties as his concubines, much to the horror of poor Nehushta and her father. He ordered a stop to the temple worship, and fired the king's prophet and other spiritual advisors. When the prophet Nahum tried to speak to him about it, he wouldn't listen. He banned him and his family from the palace on pain of death. He knew all the people hated him, but didn't care. He was the king. With the Pharaoh behind him, there was not a thing they could do about it. He taxed and enslaved them to pay off the Pharaoh and his own excesses.

They groaned under the oppression. Not only were they prohibited from worshiping YHWH, but now King Jehoiakim introduced Egyptian and Assyrian gods. He was determined to be loyal to those who gave him his power. Within one year after Joahaz had been deposed and taken into captivity, idolatry had already flooded the land. Many people mourned for him, and his father, good King Josiah.

So now they came to Jeremiah, asking for some hope that they might be able to rescue poor Joahaz and return him to his throne. But Jeremiah was firm. “Do not weep or mourn for the dead. King Josiah and the good land he governed is gone. You may weep for the one who was taken away, Shallum son of Josiah King of Judah, for he is in torment while he yet lives. But he will never return or see his native land again. He will be taken in chains down to Egypt where he will die. But woe to the one who builds his house without righteousness, and who establishes his kingdom without justice! Woe to the one who enslaves his brother and does not give him his wages. Woe to the one who multiplies lovers to himself, and idols across the land! You may think you are building a fine house, with cedar paneling, spacious upper rooms, and bright red trim. But your foundation is rotten, and your fine house will fall. For you have forgotten your father, good King Josiah, who practiced righteousness and justice, and loved My Law. YHWH Himself declares that King Josiah pled the cause of the afflicted and needy. Then it was well with him, for that is what it means to know Me.”

“Therefore thus says YHWH to Jehoiakim son of Josiah King of Judah. ‘They will not even lament for you when you die. You will be buried with the burial of a donkey, dragged away and thrown outside the walls of Jerusalem. All your lovers will be crushed. I spoke clearly to you in your prosperity, but you would not listen. This has been your habit from your youth, that you would not heed My voice. A breeze will sweep away all your supporters, and your lovers will go into captivity. Then you will surely be ashamed and humiliated because of all your wickedness. How you will groan when your pangs come upon you! Pain, like a woman in childbirth, as you are swept away.’”

From that day, Jeremiah began to prophesy in earnest against Judah. He would walk the streets of Jerusalem weeping as he prophesied against them. Some of his prophecies were collected by various scribes and saved in what we know as the book of Jeremiah. They made no attempt at chronological order and jammed them up against each other with 'nary a paragraph break. But the message still comes through loud and clear. Read it for yourself. Judah, and especially Jerusalem, are condemned for their waywardness, and clearly threatened with exile and even destruction if they do not repent.

A good example is found in chapter 26, which came in the second year of the reign of Jehoiakim. Jeremiah was commanded by YHWH to enter the court of the temple on the Sabbath. As the people came to worship, he stood on the steps and shouted “Thus says YHWH! ‘If you will not listen to Me, to walk in My Law which I have set before you and to listen to the words of My servants the prophets whom I have sent you again and again, then I will tear down this temple like I did to My tabernacle at Shiloh, and this city I will make desolate, without inhabitant, a curse haunting all the nations of the earth.’”

The people, especially the priests, were furious! They rushed on Jeremiah, shouting, “He is a traitor! He must die!” They bound him and got judges from the palace to examine him and sentence him to death. When they came, the chief priest pushed the bound prophet toward them, shouting, “A death sentence for this awful man. He speaks curses against this city, this nation, and YHWH’s temple!”

The judges sat at the entrance to the temple, and asked Jeremiah, “Is it true, what they accuse?”

“Yes!” Jeremiah answered. “For YHWH sent me to prophesy against this temple, and against the city and the nation, because of their wickedness. Now therefore, mend your ways! Cease your evil deeds, and obey the voice of YHWH your God, and YHWH will change His mind about the misfortune He has pronounced against you. But as for me, I am in your hands; do with me whatever is good and right in your sight. Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent blood upon yourselves, and on this city and its inhabitants; for truly YHWH Himself sent me to you to speak all these words.”

The judges looked at each other. They couldn’t deny that they deserved YHWH’s judgment. They all knew that the pure worship of YHWH had ceased. The priests now worshiped Assyrian or Egyptian gods in YHWH’s temple! “No death sentence for this man!” They cried. “He has truly spoken to us in the name of YHWH our God!” So they would not let the people put him to death. They assigned **Ahikam** son of Shaphan to be his bodyguard until the people settled down. That turned out to be a long time. Ahikam became a lifelong friend to Jeremiah.

However, Pashhur the priest, the chief security officer at the temple, was angry with their judgment. He plotted to capture Jeremiah. He had his thugs drag him out to the Benjamin Gate north of the temple, beat him severely, and bind him in stocks. Ahikam found out, and came the next morning to get him released. Jeremiah, bruised and bloody, had this to say to the priest. “YHWH doesn’t call you Pashhur, but rather Magomassabib, ‘Terror on every side’. For YHWH says He will make you a terror on every side, to yourself and all your friends. While your eyes look on, they will fall by the sword. ‘So I will give Judah to the hand of the king of Babylon, who will slay some with the sword and exile others to Babylon.’”

King Umanmanda had been seriously injured in the battle at Haran. He had taken his armies and gone home. So Babylonian King Nabopolassar strengthened his army with mercenaries and with soldiers from the Medes and other allies. In 607 BC, he was ready to finally eliminate the Assyrians from the face of the earth. He returned to Carchemish with great wrath, determined to continue the fight until he was victorious. He brought along his son, the crown prince Nebuchadnezzar. It was time he also learned the art of war. Assyrian King Ashur-uballit II and Pharaoh Necho II were waiting, well-prepared for the siege.

In that same year, there was a new king in Jerusalem. Jehoiakim crowned his only son and heir, eight-year-old **Coniah**, the delight of his eyes, as co-regent. The people still called him **Jeconiah** to honor YHWH, as usual, but not to the king's face, because Jehoiakim hated YHWH. Queen Nehushta (Coniah's mother), fled the palace. She could no longer live with her bitter husband and his lovers, so she returned to the home of her father Elnathan, leaving her only son in the care of his father (which turned out to be a big mistake, as we shall see).

Year by year, Jeremiah's prophecies grew more fervent. A few received the message. Many others mocked it and grew to hate Jeremiah. Their own prophets were saying, "You'll never see the sword, or famine! God will give you lasting peace in this place!" Like what we see among the 'progressive liberals' of today, they claimed to be the more liberal, open minded, tolerant, and enlightened ones. They saw the prosperity and changing culture that came with free trade as a good thing. They welcomed the foreign influences flooding Judah, and embraced their cultures and religious expressions as well. "You've just gotta love everyone and show a little respect and tolerance. YHWH's Law is too narrow-minded. It claims there's only one way to worship God! That's bigoted and prejudiced! In fact, it's racist!" They persecuted Jeremiah. They mugged him and threw him into an abandoned dry well in the desert.

Jeremiah cried to YHWH, who came to him. "Their prophets prophesy falsely in My name," Logos said. "I am against them! They steal My word from each other and claim, 'The Lord declares!' when I have neither sent them nor spoken to them. My word is like a fire that consumes, or like a hammer that shatters the rock, or like grain that nourishes compared to their straw that just blows away. Therefore all who say, 'There shall be no sword or famine in this land,' by sword or by famine those prophets will meet their end. Their bodies will be thrown out on the streets of Jerusalem, with no one to bury them. Thus I shall pour out their own wickedness back upon their heads."

"Ahh! My Lord YHWH! You know. You understand. Remember me, I pray. Take notice of me. Take vengeance upon my persecutors. You're being too patient with them! Please, send me somewhere else. For Your sake I endured their reproach, for I live only by eating Your Words. Your Words are my constant joy, the delight of my heart! I am called by Your name, O YHWH God of Hosts! I don't sit with the party-goers, exult with the proud, or laugh with the drunkards. Because of Your hand on me I have lived alone, filled with indignation, surviving in perpetual pain with wounds that will not heal. I have been faithful to You, but Your help for me seems capricious, like a deceptive stream of unreliable water." Jeremiah waited. His bruised and battered body began to relax. It was very quiet here, and the well was a cool respite from the desert sun. A slight breeze moved across the mouth of the well, bringing him a breath of fresh air. Finally Logos came to him again.

"Each time you return to Me, I will restore you, and let you stand before Me. But to be My spokesman, you must extract the precious from the worthless. Some will turn to you, but you must never let yourself be swayed by them! I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze. Though they fight against you, they won't prevail, for I am with you to save you. I will deliver you from the wicked."

Jeremiah submitted. "Yes, Lord!" he breathed, and lay back to wait for rescue. Days went by. With no food or water it was a tough wait. But Logos ministered to him. His body slowly healed from the beatings. Finally he heard voices, and then saw an anxious face peering into the well. "He's down here!" someone shouted. Soon a rope was let down and he was hauled up by strong, loving hands.

"We saw them beat you and carry you away. We tried to follow, but they stopped us. We've been searching for days. Thank God you're okay!" They gave him food and water and took him home.

They told him that Nahum and **Habakkuk** had also been prophesying the destruction and exile of Judah. "They both say that Judah will be exiled to Babylon. We might as well submit now and make it easy on ourselves. Nahum and Habakkuk and their families, with James and Joy and the rest of us here, are preparing a group to leave for Babylon. There must be twenty families already, with more joining every day. They want you to come with us."

The next day, they brought Jeremiah to Nahum's house and introduced him to the rest of the group. Nahum had taken unofficial leadership since it was his prophecy that first urged them to go. Now he prophesied to Jeremiah. "Welcome, My beloved servant! You've faithfully spoken My Word, and have completed your task here in Judah. Now come with this group to Babylon. There I will protect you. Your reward for a job well-done is: I have chosen a wife for you! She will bless you all your days and raise sons to provide for you in your old age. Never again will you face trouble or persecution, for I, YHWH, have decreed it!"

Jeremiah was understandably a bit skeptical. That didn't seem to mesh with what YHWH had recently told him in the well. "Okay, Nahum. That sounds pretty good, but you know the law. Any prophecy of good must come with proof. Where's your proof?"

"Just this." He beckoned to his daughter, Juli. "My daughter has consented to marry you. God has called her to be the fulfillment of YHWH's prophecy." Juli curtsied and bowed her head humbly before Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was still unimpressed. He smiled kindly at them and responded. "That's very generous of your daughter, but that's not really proof. I need proof from YHWH. No offense intended, Nahum. That first prophecy of yours certainly proved right on! But is it possible you've let your own desires in somehow on this one? This is too important for me. I need to hear from YHWH myself."

“Of course. Go and wait on YHWH. He will confirm His Word to you. We’ll be waiting. We figure we have another year or so before the persecution of the believers gets really bad, and maybe two or three years after that before the Babylonians come to crush Judah and all who remain here. We can avoid that if we leave for Babylon next summer.”

Jeremiah glanced at Juli, on her father’s arm, then back at Nahum, who was smiling broadly, then at Juli again, who also gave him a smile. *She is certainly beautiful. Her timid smile betrays her eagerness. She will certainly make someone a lovely wife!* Still, Jeremiah turned away. He must hear from YHWH before making a decision like this.

But as he walked away, Jeremiah’s mind began playing tricks on him. He became overwhelmed with a longing. *Just to be a normal person, with a wife and family, and a little home of my own way out in the country somewhere, maybe someplace where no one knows me, so I won’t have to walk the streets being cursed and spat upon. I have worked hard. I’m 42 now! I deserve at least that much!*

The longing became so strong he began to weep, and he almost turned back to accept Nahum’s offer. *Nahum is a prophet, too. He has the Word of YHWH. Who am I, to defy Nahum’s prophecy? What arrogance! How could I doubt? Who knows, maybe Juli is a prophetess! Then her proposal is truly proof of the good word from Nahum! How dare I go to YHWH and question His holy Word through His prophets?! What utter gall! I must go back and...*

Suddenly Jeremiah smelled a rat. He screeched to a halt. What were those words doing in his head? They certainly weren’t his own thoughts. He went to a secluded bedroom. He fell on his knees beside the bed and called out, “O YHWH, if those are Your thoughts, confirm them to me, please. If they are thoughts from Your adversary, please get them out of my head, for they certainly are not my own thoughts. I will not listen to Your adversary, for I belong to You and You alone, and it is You I serve.”

Jeremiah heard a faint scream of rage as the adversary fled, and the far-off sounds of laughter as the angelic host broke out in celebration. Logos came and comforted him, rejoicing that he has passed the test. “My beloved servant, your job for Me in Judah is not complete; if it were, I would be delighted to send you to Babylon with the group and allow you to marry and raise children. *But you shall not take a wife or raise children in this place.* For the sons and daughters born and raised in this place will come to an end with disease and sword and famine, and their carcasses will be food for birds of the sky and beasts of the earth. Do not enter a house of mourning, to lament or attempt to console them, for I have withdrawn My peace from them, and have set aside My lovingkindness and compassion. You shall neither go to their parties or feasts, nor even eat or drink with them. For behold, before your own eyes I am going to cause the sounds of rejoicing and gladness and the voices of the bride and groom to cease from this place.

“Both great and small will die in this land. They will not be buried or lamented, nor will anyone bring comfort or consolation for the dead. They will have no excuse, for you shall warn them! How could I do what I must do if you were down in Babylon – if you were not here to warn them! You must tell them what I have said. And when they ask, ‘For what reason has YHWH declared such great calamity against us? And what is our iniquity? What is our sin which we have committed against YHWH our God?’ then answer, ‘Your fathers have forsaken Me, and have followed other gods to serve them and bow down to them, and have not kept My Law. Now you, too, have done evil, even more than your fathers! For behold, each one of you now walks in the stubbornness of your own heart without ever even trying to listen to Me or heed My Word! So I will hurl you out of this land into other lands that you have not known, neither you nor your fathers. There you will serve those other gods day and night, for I will not be with you there to show you favor.’ Thus you shall give them My word.”

Jeremiah was shaken to the core. What if he had fallen to the temptation to marry and go to Babylon with Nahum? “Yes, Lord. I will continue to preach Your Word and distribute Your warnings, however You lead. I am Your servant. But Lord? Is there no hope of restoration?”

“Yes! Days are coming when it will no longer be sworn ‘as YHWH lives, who brought us out of Egypt,’ but rather ‘as YHWH lives, who brought us back from the exile.’ For I will take them from the nations of the north where I had banished them, and I will restore them to their own land which I gave to their fathers. I will send fishermen to fish for them; I will send hunters to hunt for them. They will find them upon every mountain and hill, in every valley and cleft of the rock. And they will bring them back to this place. For My eyes are on all their ways. Nothing that they do is hidden from My face, nor is their calamity concealed from My eyes. I will first doubly repay their iniquity and their wickedness with which they have polluted My land. Afterwards they will cry out with one accord, ‘O YHWH my strength and fortress! My refuge in the days of distress! From the ends of the earth the nations come to You crying bitterly, “Our fathers have inherited nothing but falsehood, lies, vanity, futility, and things of no profit.”’ Then I will uncover the lies and expose the falsehoods, for behold, I am going to make them know! This time I will make them know My power, My might, and My glory, and they shall know that My name is YHWH.”

So Jeremiah returned to the group in the living room. He informed Nahum. “Your prophecy for me may be true. I hope it is! But not yet. YHWH has not confirmed it to me. He says my job here in Judah is not finished. But you go. You will find peace in Babylon, for YHWH is with you.” Then he turned to Juli, still clinging to her father’s arm. He bowed and gently lifted her hand, kissing it lightly. “Thank you, my dear, for your kindness. Though I cannot accept your offer, I do hope we meet again someday.”

On his way out the door, Jeremiah was stopped by **Habakkuk**, a young prophet who had been trained in the School of Prophets. “O sir, I would really like you, as the king’s prophet, to discern this... this prayer – confirm it – before I give it to King Jehoiakim.”

Jeremiah read: “How long, O YHWH, will I cry for help before You hear? I cry ‘Violence!’ but You don’t save. Why must I look on such iniquity? Destruction and brutality surround me. Strife and discord rules. Laws are ignored. Justice is not valued. The wicked entrap the righteous, perverting justice. Look among the nations. Observe. Be astonished, you who trust in Assyria! Wonder, you who trust in Egypt! Behold, I am doing something new, which you will not believe until you see. For I am raising up the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous people who march through the earth seizing lands which are not theirs. They are dreaded and feared. They flaunt their own so-called ‘justice’ and ‘authority’. They love violence. Their horde marches forward, collecting captives like sand. They mock kings and laugh at fortresses. They heap up mounds of rubble to capture cities, then sweep through like the wind and pass on, leaving the land plundered behind them.

“But I pray they will be held guilty, they whose strength is their god. For You, YHWH, my God, my Holy One, You have appointed the Chaldeans, even the kings of Babylon, to be Your judge. You, O my Rock of Deliverance, have called them here to discipline Your people Israel. For You cannot tolerate her evil, nor look upon her wickedness. But why then do You look with favor upon the Chaldeans who deal so treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they? I cry out to You to bring the Chaldeans up with a hook; drag them away with their own net – which they worship like a god because their catch is so large.

“So I stood watch, waiting until YHWH should answer my prayer. He told me, ‘Record the vision on tablets of stone, for it is set for its appointed time. It will not fail. It will not delay. As for that proud king of Babylon, his soul is not right within. But I will discipline him. For even in far-off Babylon the righteous one will live by faith.’ Though the king of Babylon is drunk with haughtiness, though he enlarges his appetite like Sheol, though like death he is never satisfied, though he gathers to himself all nations, and collects all peoples; yet all these will take up a taunt against him. They will mock him, saying, ‘Woe to him who increases what is not his, and makes himself rich with another’s wealth.’ Your creditors will arise suddenly; those from whom you collect will awaken, and you will become plunder for them. Because you looted many nations, so the remnant will plunder you. By cutting off others, you have harmed yourself. Thus I will discipline, test, and prove, until the earth is filled with the knowledge of YHWH as the waters fill the sea. YHWH is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silent before Him.” When he finished reading it, Jeremiah nodded. “I confirm this is from YHWH.”

The Babylonian siege at Carchemish lasted two years. Now it was over. Over for Ashur-uballit and the Assyrians, and over for Pharaoh Necho and the Egyptians, too. They were starving, crushed in spirit, with no resistance left. The slain piled up. There was no denying it. Their resolve finally shattered. The Egyptians bolted. The victorious Babylonians, led by young Nebuchadnezzar, pursued them south. Nabopolassar remained at Carchemish with half the army to keep the Assyrians from escaping, too.

Prince Nebuchadnezzar was too kind. He had not yet learned the ruthlessness his father expected of him. Or perhaps Habakkuk’s prayer was already affecting him. He chased the Egyptian army all the way to Hamath on the Orontes, but in the end, he halted his forces and called for a parley with the Pharaoh. Necho II came under a white flag and got down from his chariot to talk.

But when the Pharaoh began to kneel before the young prince, he said, “Stand tall. Don’t grovel on the ground in front of your army. They need to respect you. The Assyrian Empire is ours. You may have none of it. You should not have attempted to defend them, but I won’t hold that against you. You must return to Egypt without delay. Pick up your support troops and equipment you left here in Hamath. Leave nothing behind. If you have any garrisons anywhere else in the Levant, take them with you too. For when we come back, we will slay every Egyptian you leave behind. We now own this entire land, from Carchemish all the way to Egypt. If you swear to submit to me, I will let you go freely, and I will leave you in peace as long as you remain beyond the Brook of Egypt.”

The defeated Pharaoh agreed. He got his men at Riblah in Hamath (including Judah’s King Joahaz), collected his other garrisons around the Levant (which were many, for Egypt at that time had control of Syria, Hamath, Phoenicia, Philistia, and some of Israel), and returned to Egypt just as ordered. Shallum / Joahaz remained imprisoned in Egypt the rest of his life, exactly as Jeremiah had prophesied.

After Nebuchadnezzar returned to Carchemish, the Babylonians used their full strength and overwhelmed the city in 605 BC. It was far too late for King Ashur-uballit II to surrender. Nabopolassar ordered him slain, together with everyone else defending Carchemish. With them died the Assyrian Empire – totally, completely, as Nahum had prophesied. Babylon and her allies reigned supreme.

Young Jeconiah (his father called him King Coniah) was now ten years old and utterly spoiled. With his mother Nehushta away, his adoring father gave him anything he wanted, which was plenty. But the forty young ladies in Jehoiakim’s harem all spoiled him as well – not because they loved him, but as a way to vie for his father’s favors. Surprisingly, King Jehoiakim did not realize that his son had become an arrogant, demanding, self-centered brat. That’s what happens to an ‘only child’ who gets whatever he wants, with no discipline of any kind.

The battle at Carchemish was over, the city plundered, the slain buried. Nabopolassar had time to remonstrate his young son. “Why did you stop short of destroying the Egyptian army and executing their Pharaoh? They are still too powerful. They still consider the Levant theirs. Even if they obeyed you and removed all their garrisons, Egypt will be back, unless you go down and take over. Nature and nations abhor a vacuum. If your forces do not take decisive control of the Levant right away someone else will! Oh, and I’m not sure if King Umanmanda survived the battle at Haran or not, but for whatever reason, the Scythians and Cimmerians refused to support us at the Battle of Carchemish when we needed them. You may need to go up there to discipline them. If they have a new king, he must learn his proper place in submission to us.”

After his lesson on firmness and cruelty, Nabopolassar sent his son south from Carchemish with his full army. He returned to Nineveh, for he was not well.

Nobody knew what was wrong. Maybe it was the water. Maybe he’d picked up a bug that weakened his immune system. Maybe someone had slipped poison into his food. He was barely able to ride his chariot. Toward the end, he got too dizzy even for that. The doctors couldn’t help him.

Now the victorious Babylonian army flooded into the Levant. At every city they verified that all the Egyptians were gone, took tribute, and established control. It was pretty easy, for Pharaoh Necho II had kept his vow. Prince Nebuchadnezzar wanted to please his esteemed father. The cruelty was not in his nature, but he was learning. He established puppet rulers, stationed Babylonian troops in the abandoned Egyptian garrisons, and took captive the nobles who seemed arrogant or refused to submit.

By July of 605 BC he reached Jerusalem. It was the third year of Jehoiakim’s reign; his second year with spoiled ten-year-old Coniah ‘reigning’ by his side. By now, pretty much everyone in the kingdom hated them both, though some still tried to curry the king’s favor. Of course King Jehoiakim ordered the city gates be shut, for he knew the walls of Jerusalem could withstand the Babylonian siege.

But Nahum and his little band knew better. “Open the gates!” Nahum ordered, “for YHWH has given this city into the hands of the Babylonians!”

For the gatekeepers, that was treason! Though they hated their king, yet to deliberately open the gates to the enemy seemed a bit much. Nahum was firm. “If we do not submit to the king of Babylon, YHWH has shown me that we will all be destroyed. Indeed, I and my followers have planned to move to Babylon. But YHWH had us postpone it until now, so we could be here to help save Jerusalem.”

In the end, Nahum convinced them to open the gates to let him and his band out. But they quickly shut them after he had gone, for Nebuchadnezzar was already setting up siegeworks to destroy the city.

Outside the city, Nahum led his band of two hundred nobles, landowners, and wealthy citizens, with their wives and children. They walked directly toward the royal tents of Nebuchadnezzar and his commanders, carrying gifts, and singing joyously.

When he saw the little band marching unafraid toward his tent, Nebuchadnezzar was intrigued. He mounted his chariot and rode to meet them. Nahum bowed before him. “O great king of Babylon! Great conqueror and now ruler of the Assyrian Empire! Great conqueror of Egypt and Pharaoh Necho! We salute you. YHWH our God has told us to submit to you, and to offer you these gifts as tokens of our allegiance.” Here the wealthy fathers presented their gifts, which amounted to a considerable sum. “We know that you have the victory over Jerusalem and all Judah, for YHWH our God has judged my people for our wickedness, and has given us into your hand. Therefore we plead with you, O mighty king! Let us go with you to Babylon. We will serve you faithfully, until it is time for YHWH our God to restore us to our land.” He bowed to the ground.

Nebuchadnezzar smiled. This was so-o-o-o much more pleasant than the cruelty he had feigned. “Are you the king here? You don’t much look like a king to me. Is everyone here in agreement with you?”

Now the story came out. “I am Nahum the Prophet. These you see here are the only ones who will follow me to Babylon. Our king is foolish and stubborn. He hates you, but he is weak and his people hate him. I believe you will have no trouble convincing him to submit to you, for I will assist you. I still have powerful friends in the city.”

They all looked back toward the city gates, which was now closed. “Our foolish king has ordered them closed against you, O King. But give me a half hour and I will have them open for you.”

He instructed his followers. They turned and headed back toward the gate, heads bowed as if they had been rejected by the Babylonians. At first, the gatekeepers didn’t trust them; they were traitors! But Nahum got them to ask Jeremiah, who vouched for him. Finally they opened the gates. Within seconds, Nahum’s men overcame the gatekeepers and blocked the gates open for Nebuchadnezzar!

The king’s elite guard rushed forward to hold the gates while Nebuchadnezzar’s soldiers swarmed into the city. He ordered them to wait and do no violence while he went into the palace to see Jehoiakim. Of course Jehoiakim was furious that he had been betrayed, but what could he say? The damage was done. People flooded into his judgment hall, including Nebuchadnezzar and his guards, Nahum and his group, and the prophets Jeremiah and Habakkuk.

As Nebuchadnezzar walked in, Habakkuk was boldly reminding Jehoiakim, “I warned you that the Chaldeans would come to discipline you. Jeremiah confirmed my warning. Did you heed? Or repent?”

Jeremiah added, “Yes, O King. I confirmed Habakkuk’s prophecy. It fits with my own prophecies warning you of the destruction to come if you did not repent. Now it is too late. But I swear to you, if now you will quickly submit to the king of Babylon, YHWH will go easy on you, and all Judah, and the lives of many will be spared.”

Nebuchadnezzar smiled. *Nahum did indeed have some powerful friends in the city!* So, what else could Jehoiakim do? His people trusted Jeremiah more than they trusted their own king! He submitted. This was too easy. Tender-hearted Nebuchadnezzar wished Carchemish had been so easy! He assigned a tribute to be paid, stationed a garrison to collect it and report back if there were signs of rebellion, then continued south along the coast toward Egypt. Nahum and his followers remained with him, serving in his caravan. Among them went the young prophets Habakkuk and Zephaniah, and some teenagers named Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah son of Hilkiah.

Nebuchadnezzar reached the Brook of Egypt. He knew his father wanted him to go further, to finish off Pharaoh Necho and his weakened army. But he had given his word. He wanted to gain the approval of his father, but he was still young, with a sensitive conscience. After all, Pharaoh Necho II had kept his end of the bargain. He had no cause against him. In the end, he couldn’t decide. But he knew Nahum was a prophet. So he decided to ask his opinion.

“O King, live forever! I do not know what you should do. But YHWH knows, for He is the God of all Creation. Give me time, and I will ask Him.”

Nahum came back in an hour, all smiles. “O King, live forever! YHWH assured me that He will bless you and give you success wherever you go, as long as you obey Him. For you are not like your father, O King. He was proud, cruel, greedy, and ambitious for power and glory. You are kind, honest, strong, and yet still humble. He likes that in you! Therefore He counsels you to keep your vow to Pharaoh Necho, and leave Egypt now. Go in haste back to Nineveh, the eastern district. Your father has died there. It is time for you to receive your kingdom. You will gain great power and honor, and wealth too, for YHWH’s hand will be with you for good, until the day you elevate yourself in pride.”

“My father has... has died?! How do you know?”

“I do not know, O King. I am just a man. But YHWH knows, for He knows all things.”

So Nebuchadnezzar rushed back to Nineveh. He found it just as Nahum had said. His father had died on the very day of Nahum prophecy. He took his father’s body back to Babylon for burial. The nation mourned his loss, but not too much, for they rather liked the attitude of their new king. Thus Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom was established in righteousness. He assigned Nahum a large plot of land just north of the city, and ordered the Judeans to build homes there, plant gardens, and prosper. They called it Tel-aviv.

In the 4th year of Jehoiakim, King Nebuchadnezzar was consolidating his kingdom and enjoying time with his lovely young Median queen, Amytis. The rest of the empire could wait. Making love with his talented and enthusiastic queen was far more fun than making war. He sensed YHWH’s blessing on him, and though he didn’t yet know YHWH, he was grateful. Those Hebrews he had brought from Jerusalem had really captured his fancy! They had some kind of wisdom beyond his own. He ordered his chief steward, Ashpenaz, to select the best of the Hebrew boys, teach them the Chaldean culture for three years, then bring them into his court to be his own personal attendants and advisors. Among many, he picked **Daniel**, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. But Ashpenaz gave them the Chaldean names Belteshazzar, **Shadrach**, **Meshach**, and **Abednego**. (My story will retain Daniel’s Hebrew name, just to avoid confusion.)

The Hebrew boys were taught in the king’s court, along with captive youths which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from other nations. They were fed from the king’s rations of meats and wines. Sadly, none of that was kosher. Even you and I might balk at all the fatty pork and pastries! The Hebrews determined they would starve rather than eat the king’s delicacies. But Daniel had a plan. He appealed to Ashpenaz, “Please, test your servants. Give us vegetables, fruits, nuts, and water – nothing else – for ten days. Then compare us to other youths who eat the king’s delicacies. If you don’t find us stronger, wiser, and healthier than they, then we will eat whatever you say.”

Of course you all know that fruit, veggies, and water are more healthy than pastries, pork, and wine, but Ashpenaz didn’t. He was fearful. He had his orders! But he agreed to the test, for ten days only. Then he ran an exam to compare their strength, beauty, and intelligence with the others. Daniel and his friends were so far above the other boys, that Ashpenaz agreed to let them eat whatever they chose. After a year of their special training, he tested them again. Now he was astounded, for he found them to be wiser even than the king’s own advisors. They became his favorites among all his students. He managed to get special tutoring for them in the ancient arts, things he didn’t comprehend himself. But what they ate, he kept secret from the king.

King Jehoiakim of Judah was frustrated and distressed. Coniah his young son and co-regent had become a little rebel, even against his doting father. The forty lovelies in his harem had come to fear him and no longer vied for his attentions. His servants tiptoed around him and wouldn’t say anything but, ‘Yes, Your Majesty!’ All his best advisors and nobles had taken off with that apocalyptic traitor Nahum. He got no respect! Finally, he called for Jeremiah.

“What is going on here?” He whined. “Everybody hates me! You said YHWH would go easy on me if I submitted to Babylon. I did, but now I think YHWH hates me too!”

Jeremiah opened his mouth to speak the Word of YHWH to him, but then stopped. "I've told you many times, but you cannot hear me. There is no sense my telling you again. But maybe there are some left in this kingdom who can still hear. Call all the people together for me. I will say it one more time, in the hearing of all. If YHWH finds some repentance left in the land, He may postpone the judgments that have certainly begun falling upon you."

Soon the people were all gathered outside the palace. Jeremiah stood on the high parapet beside the king. He raised his hands for silence, and his clear voice rang out across the square. "From the 13th year of King Josiah even to this day, these 23 years, I have not failed to speak to you all that YHWH said, but you have not listened. YHWH sent you other prophets, Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and more, yet neither have you listened to them. Our message has been the same. YHWH says, 'Turn now, every one of you, from your evil way and your wicked deeds, and thus dwell on the land which YHWH has given to you and your forefathers forever. Do not go after other gods, to serve and worship them, and do not provoke Me to anger with the work of your hands, and then I will do you no harm. But you have not listened to Me or obeyed My Words.'

"Therefore I will commission Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, My servant. I will bring him against this land, and against its inhabitants, and against all the nations round about, to utterly destroy them, and make them a horror, a hissing, a desolation. I will take from them the songs of joy and gladness, the voices of the bride and bridegroom, the grinding of millstones and the light of the lamp. Thus this whole land will become a desolation and a horror, and My people will serve the king of Babylon for seventy years. Then when the seventy years are complete, I will punish the king of Babylon for his pride in exalting himself above Me and his iniquity in doing his own pleasure. Thus I will bring down the Chaldeans, and make their land desolate, and will reward them according to their deeds, according to the work of their hands."

Oh, this time the people of Judah heard! The Word of YHWH was never clearer! They bowed and cried and prayed, and swore they would repent and put away their evil and their idolatry. But King Jehoiakim was furious with Jeremiah for getting his people all riled up like that. He ordered him beaten and thrown into his dungeon.

Bleeding, bruised, and battered, Jeremiah cried out to Logos. He seemed surprisingly unconcerned about the beating. "Take a scroll, and write on it all the things you've been saying, about Judah and all the nations, from the time of Josiah even until now. Perhaps the house of Judah is finally able to hear all the calamity which I plan to bring upon them. Perhaps they are ready to actually repent and turn from their wicked ways, so I can forgive them."

But alas, Jeremiah was so badly injured that he could not write. So he hired **Baruch** to take dictation.

Writing the scroll was a big job, taking almost a year to complete. When they finished, Jeremiah told Baruch to take it up to the temple. The people had proclaimed an annual fast day the year before, after Jeremiah had spoken to them. They were even now gathering in Jerusalem to repeat the day of fasting and prayers of repentance for Judah. Baruch read the scroll to the gathering. Again they bowed, cried, and swore they would put away their evil.

Sadly, neither Jehoiakim nor the nobles of his court were there at the temple, with one notable exception: **Micaiah** son of Gemariah and grandson of Shaphan, the faithful scribe of King Josiah. Micaiah came to Baruch and insisted they take the scroll to the palace and read it to the nobles and officers of the king. So Baruch and Micaiah took the scroll to Gemariah and the other court officials.

They got excited about the scroll, and fearful of the prophecies in it. "The king must hear this! However, you and Jeremiah had better hide, or he might kill you. We'll take care of it." So they took the scroll and arranged for another scribe, Jehudi, to read it to King Jehoiakim while he was in his winter house relaxing in front of the fire.

The king and his nobles were not impressed. They had no fear of YHWH. Jehoiakim despised the prophecies of Jeremiah. As the scroll was read, the king casually sliced off pages with his penknife and threw them into the fire. Then he told Jerahmeel (his son by one of his concubines) to take some nobles to the dungeon and execute Jeremiah and Baruch for speaking treason against the king.

But Micaiah got there first and warned the dungeon-master. He was a man who feared God. He had encouraged Jeremiah as he was writing the scroll. Now he hid them, protecting them from the wrath of the king. When YHWH told Jeremiah to rewrite the scroll, the faithful dungeon-master got him the pen and paper and assisted him.

This second scroll had all the prophecies of the first, and more. He ended with, "You burned this scroll, because you didn't like what YHWH said about the king of Babylon coming to destroy Judah. Therefore, O King Jehoiakim, YHWH says that He will not only bring all these calamities on the land of Judah, but He will also punish you. Your dead body will be cast out, unhonored, unburied, leaving none of your descendants sitting on the throne of David."

By 603 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar had reigned for two years. He had pretty well gotten used to being king by now. He enjoyed everyone bowing to him, praising him, and jumping through hoops to please him. He discovered that the bennies of being a king are huge. Anything he wanted, anytime. His guards, servants, and advisors surrounding him at all times. And his Queen Amytis! What a delight! Was this the 'blessing of YHWH' Nahum had promised?

But one night, while sleeping peacefully beside his beloved queen, Nebuchadnezzar had a special dream, which was to dramatically impact everything.

It was a grand, soaring, magnificent dream, full of spirit! Full of significance! Full of deep portents for the future! But what did it mean? The dream ended abruptly, with a world-shattering cataclysm which filled the king with fear even as it awoke him with cold sweat dripping off his brow. Never had he had such a dream! His wife still slept soundly, the room looked the same, the moon still shone as bright, but somehow the universe had changed, and the king knew it would never be the same again.

King Nebuchadnezzar couldn't sleep a wink the rest of the night. Early the next morning, he sent for his advisors, magicians, and astrologers, the wisest and most learned men in his kingdom. *(They are the Magi of ancient Sumer, 'kingmakers' by whose support a king is established or is overthrown. Ever since the time of Arphaxad and his son Cainan, the Kasdim had held the power in the civilized world. They spoke the ancient dialect of Hebrew which was spoken by Noah and his sons before the Flood. But when Ur was conquered by the Chaldeans, the integrity of the Kasdim had been compromised by their overlords. So by the time of Nebuchadnezzar, nearly all the wisdom of the Kasdim had been lost. Now the Magi were little more than soothsayers and wizards.)* "I had a dream," Nebuchadnezzar told his Magi. "My spirit is anxious to know its meaning." He was speaking in the ancient dialect of Hebrew known as Kasdan, the language of Sumer, the language of the Kasdim!

Most of the 'wise men' of Babylon hardly recognized the ancient Hebrew anymore. Babylon had spoken Aramaic (Syrian) for generations – ever since the Assyrian Empire began. Aramaic had become the 'lingua franca' of the Assyrian Empire, the commercial language which every nation had to use to do business with Assyria.

So the Magi answered the king in Aramaic. "O King, live forever! Tell us the dream, and we will be glad to declare to you its interpretation."

Nebuchadnezzar was suspicious. *These are the wisest men in his kingdom. They are supposed to know the wisdom of the ancients. But they don't even know the ancient Kasdan language?* "No! I will not tell you the dream. If you hear the dream, you can easily make up something to sound plausible. I could do that myself. But my dream comes from the ancient gods. So go to the ancient gods and get both the dream and its interpretation. That is my firm command. I give you one month. If you are able to comply, I will reward you with incredible riches and honor. If you cannot tell me both the dream and its interpretation, you will be torn limb from limb and your houses will be made a rubbish heap."

At least he now spoke in Aramaic. That gave them hope. They conferred together in private, then returned and bowed deeply, "Yes, O King! We will go and get your dream and its meaning from the ancient gods. Only let the king tell us the subject of your dream, so we will not appear ignorant before the gods."

King Nebuchadnezzar drove them from his presence. "I shall give you no clues. My command is firm. You have one month to tell me both the dream and its interpretation. There certainly should be enough wizards, prophets, and oracles among you to come up with it in a whole month. Now get out!"

But when the month was up, they pled with him for another month, still trying to ply him for clues.

Nebuchadnezzar was angry. "You're just stalling for time. I said, my command is firm. I don't trust you. From the time I was a boy in my father's kingdom, I have seen how you try to fool everyone with mystical incantations. Now you have agreed together to attempt to deceive me. So I ordered you to tell me the dream first, so I may know that you are also able to give me its interpretation. But if you cannot, it will be undeniable proof that you are all frauds. Every last one of you will be slain, as I said!"

"But Your Majesty! There is no one on earth who is able to declare someone else's dream! No great king or emperor has ever asked such a thing of any magician, wizard, or wise man before! What you are demanding is too hard for mortal man! No one could declare it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with mortal flesh!"

As he suspected, they are all frauds. Why has he tolerated them in his kingdom? They may have been able to fool his father, but they would not fool him. Nebuchadnezzar, in a rage, ordered all the Magi slain at high noon the next day.

Sadly for Daniel and his friends, his command was to kill 'all' the Magi. Their training for the last two years was to become Magi – to become 'wise men', advisors to the king. But the decree was non-negotiable. If the Magi were all to be slain, so would the youths being trained as Magi.

Early the next morning, Daniel and his friends heard the news from Arioch, commander of the king's personal guard. He was assigned the task of executing the Magi, and had come to get them ready. Daniel was only sixteen, while Arioch was a mighty, seasoned warrior. Still Daniel boldly faced him. "Of what crimes against the king are we accused? Have we no opportunity to defend ourselves?"

"Hah!" Arioch despised Daniel's youth. "You don't understand much about kings, do you! When they give a command, you don't question; you just obey!"

"Yes, sir. But if I am to be executed, I would like to know what it was that caused the kings' wrath."

"Oh, he was angry about some dream he had, which none of the Magi could interpret."

"So if I give him the interpretation, he will no longer be angry and you won't have to execute us."

"Mmm... Yes, but it's not that simple. He refuses to tell the dream. You'd have to give him both the dream and its interpretation."

“YHWH can do that. Let me talk to the king.”

“What? You’ve got to be kidding!”

“Would I kid you when my life is at stake?”

So Arioch led Daniel into the throne room before the king. “Your Majesty, live forever! I found a boy among the exiles of Judah who claims his God YHWH can tell the king’s dream and its interpretation.”

Instantly the king was interested. Of course he didn’t know who the kid was, though he looked like a Hebrew. But he had heard about YHWH from Nahum, and he was still expecting that ‘blessing’ that Nahum had promised. “Who are you? Can you get YHWH to tell me my dream?”

“My name is Daniel, O King. I am one of the Hebrew slaves whom you wanted trained in Chaldean customs. We only heard about your dream this morning. I beg you, please, do not slay the Magi until you give me time to go to YHWH and ask Him. He is the almighty God! He alone can tell you the true interpretation for your dream.”

“Almighty God? Hmm. Do you need another month?”

“No, Your Majesty. Just give me one day, I pray.”

“And can you obtain for me both the dream and its interpretation?” Nebuchadnezzar was skeptical, but at least he didn’t despise Daniel for his youth.

“Not I, O King. But I know YHWH is able. He is the one true Creator God, who dwells in the highest heavens. He is the revealer of mysteries.”

“The Creator God? Okay. You shall have your one day. Arioch! Postpone the executions until noon tomorrow. Daniel, if you bring me the dream and its interpretation before that time, I shall grant you riches and honor.”

So Daniel was led back to his quarters with the other Hebrew youths. He told them about the stay of execution, and asked them to beseech YHWH to have compassion on them, and reveal the dream. Then he went to kneel in the closet, and cried out to God the rest of the day and into the night. He was still there at 4 AM, when he heard that still small voice in his soul, “Peace. I have heard your prayers. Sleep now, My beloved. You need your rest.”

Exhausted but now at peace, Daniel dropped off instantly into a deep, dreamless sleep. Unusually for him, he did not awaken with the rest of the boys in the morning. Since he was still in the closet, nobody noticed he was not there when Arioch came to prepare them for execution.

11 AM rolled around. The boys were brought to join the other Magi just outside the palace, where the king’s enemies are slain in front of his window. But now Arioch noticed that he was missing. “Where’s that fraud Daniel?” he raged. “That lying <expletive deleted> was just trying to buy time, so he could make his escape! Search the area! Go back to search his quarters!”

Daniel had not yet awakened. But now, he had begun dreaming. It was a startling dream, full of spirit; a grand, soaring dream, full of portents of the future; it ended with a cataclysmic roar that filled the earth and awakened Daniel in a cold sweat. Suddenly, he knew! He hurriedly washed his face and prepared to meet the king. Then the door crashed open, and the guards sent by Arioch rushed in. “Here he is! We’ve got you now, you lying...”

Daniel didn’t struggle. But the soldiers were cruel. They put a rope around his neck and yanked and dragged him, half carrying, half pushing him with brutal shoves, to the Magi about to be executed in front of the king’s window. It was high noon, and the executions were ready to begin.

“So, you thought you could escape! What have you got to say now, Daniel?” Arioch was openly disdainful. “For your lies I shall slay you first of all!”

“Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon, I pray. Take me up to the king’s presence, for I have heard from YHWH. I will declare the dream and its interpretation to the king.”

“What? You’ve got to be kidding!”

“Would I kid you when my life is at stake?”

“It seems we’ve been through this before. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice... not a chance! It is high noon. The king’s command must be carried out!”

“There he is. In his window. Look! He sees me! He is holding up his scepter to me!”

Arioch couldn’t deny that. He brought Daniel inside to see Nebuchadnezzar, who eagerly asked, “Are you able to make known to me my dream and its interpretation?” He looked anxious and haggard, as if he hadn’t slept a wink.

Daniel bowed low before the king. And now we come to a strange part of our story, which afterward young Daniel was never quite able to explain. He expected to be using Chaldean, or Aramaic, for that is how the king addressed him. He normally spoke Hebrew, as did all the exiles of Judah, but he wasn’t sure the king understood Hebrew.

But as Daniel opened his mouth, what came out was not Chaldean, Aramaic, or even modern Hebrew, but ancient Hebrew, Kasdan, the language of Ur Kasdim and old man Noah. Daniel had not learned ancient Hebrew, you must understand. But he was filled with the Spirit, so he spoke as he was inspired from the heavens. Many of the words were similar, but the pronunciation was really quite different. No one around him could understand a thing he said.

Except surprisingly, King Nebuchadnezzar knew some Kasdan. He had loved ancient history as he was growing up, and he had become intrigued with the language of the ancient Magi, the Kasdim, before they had been corrupted by the Chaldeans. He couldn’t speak it very well, but he could mostly understand it. He was stunned when he heard young Daniel speaking it.

In fact, for the first few sentences, Nebuchadnezzar hardly even heard the words. He was overwhelmed with the sound of that beautiful, melodic Kasdan, flowing like a majestic river from the mouth of this boy as if it was all he had ever spoken in his young life. His pronunciation, his intonation, were perfect – far more fluent than the king's old teacher. "O King, live forever!" Daniel began. "As for the mystery about which you have inquired, neither wise men, nor wizards, nor priests, nor prophets are able to declare it. However, there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. YHWH! This God has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will take place in the future, in the latter days. This was your dream and its interpretation."

Still in Kasdan, Daniel then launched into the most beautifully vivid description of his dream that the king could imagine. It was as if Daniel had been there beside him and had seen it all! Kasdan is a graphic language; every word paints colorful pictures in the mind for those who understand its intricacies. But I must translate it for you into English, though it sadly loses much of its beauty. "You, O King," Daniel said, "were standing beside the big window in your throne room, looking out over the palace square where your people often gather to hear you and give you honor. You saw no people in the square. Instead, it was nearly filled with a massive and glorious statue. The awesome magnificence of this statue was beyond telling! Its feet spanned the square. The top of its hat touched the clouds. Its head was made of the purest solid gold, shining like the sun in its strength. Its great chest and mighty arms were pure polished silver, radiant in their beauty. But its belly and thighs abruptly changed into bronze, on down to the legs, which morphed into iron. They seemed strong but cruel, heartless, and foreboding. Then, O King, you looked down at the feet, and were astounded to see that the iron was no longer strong. Rather it was mixed iron and clay, fragile, cracked, and ready to collapse. Indeed, the ten toes were mostly clay, and already breaking off.

"As you beheld this awesome sight, wondering that the great statue could still be standing upon such fragile feet, your gaze was drawn to the distant Zagros Mountains. Normally their purple majesty relaxes your eyes and quiets your soul. But you saw to your horror that the tallest mountain peak was being sliced off, making a pyramid-shaped stone. You could see no hands, yet it was as if huge hands from above had cut off the mountaintop and lifted it high into the sky. You instinctively ducked, O King, as those unseen hands hurled the pyramid-shaped stone right toward your palace. Yet it was not aimed at you, nor even at your palace, but right at the toes of the colossal statue, where the iron was mixed with the brittle clay.

"A terrible cataclysm ensued, for when the stone crushed its feet, the entire statue exploded and blew away, like chaff from the threshing is carried off on a summer breeze. Only that stone remained. But it had been broken. It lay in three pieces in the middle of the square.

"You mourned the loss of the statue, O King, for you had become attached to it, while at first you hated and despised the broken stone. Then after three days the three pieces united into one and began growing bigger. Now you became attracted to it, seeing it as something mysterious and exciting, not threatening, but of compelling interest. As the stone filled the square, you decided you must learn its mysteries, even if it took the rest of your life. You fell to your knees in worship before the stone. Yet it continued to grow faster and faster until it engulfed you, your palace, the entire city of Babylon! Indeed it quickly became a great mountain, which filled the entire earth! All the kings and great men of the earth bowed to worship before it, just as you had worshiped it, O King. And all the nations of the earth were likewise enveloped within the great stone. Your heart was overwhelmed with awe at its majesty. Now the intensity of your fear and worship so thrilled your soul that sleep could no longer hold you. You awoke, with sweat pouring off your brow. That was your dream, O King, and now YHWH will grant you its interpretation."

The king was sitting on the edge of his throne, with his eyes glued to Daniel. His mouth remained half open, his face white, his pulse raced, and his breathing came in short gasps. Daniel didn't even notice, as he plunged on. "You, O mighty king, are the head of gold, the emperor over kings, to whom YHWH God of heaven has granted the kingdom, the power, and the glory. Wherever the sons of men dwell, or the beasts of the field or the birds of the sky, He has given them into your hand and caused you to rule over them. After you will arise another kingdom like you but inferior to you: your allies the Medes and the Persians. They also shall be great, shining like silver in their strength, but shall never achieve what you have achieved, O King. Then when they become proud, a third kingdom shall suddenly arise to rule the earth, Macedonian Greece, the kingdom of burnished bronze. It, too, shall be great, bringing its influence to all the earth, though not as great as the first two kingdoms. Finally, just as the bronze morphed into iron, after the third kingdom shall arise a fourth, called the Roman Empire. It shall be strong, yet cruel and heartless, like the legs of iron, swift to run to and fro to crush rebellion and break in pieces nations who oppose it. The legs are two, so this empire shall be divided; Roman rule shall never be complete; another nation will always rule alongside. As you saw clay mixed with the iron at the feet, so shall the Roman Empire decay from within, still maintaining the appearance of strength, yet in the end, divided and crumbling. Some within the Roman Empire will remain strong, and others will become decadent and weak, fighting against each other, just as iron cannot mix with clay. Thus the four metals you saw in your statue, the gold, silver, bronze, and iron, represent four great world empires. This part of your dream, O King, covers the entire span of history from the time you first brought the exiles of Judah into your land, through many generations, even thousands of years, until the time of the end of the age."

“Finally, at the end of the age, the Roman Empire will be split, not just into two, but into many nations, many kingdoms, even as the two feet split into their toes. All shall inherit some of the strength, but also much of the weak and brittle decadence of the Roman Empire. Even as the toes became mostly clay, breaking off even as you watched, so these nations shall rise and fall, but never achieve to the strength or glory of the previous kingdoms.”

Daniel paused for breath. His cheeks were flushed red, and his face uplifted and radiant. Nebuchadnezzar was panting in his eagerness. Sweat poured off his brow. “Go on!” he urged. “Go on! What about that pyramid stone? What does it mean? I must know! It was like a god!”

Daniel smiled. “God indeed, O King! Tell me, where was the pyramid stone as you were studying the statue?”

“I didn’t see it, at first. But it must have been resting on that mountain from which it was about to be cut.”

“You are wise, O King. Look out your window. *Lift up your eyes unto the hills, from whence comes your help.* For God is there. YHWH dwells on the top of that mountain. He always watches over you, whether you are aware of Him or not. There He shall remain, at rest, watching over the affairs of men until the end of the age. The pyramid shape of the stone represents a great mystery, which the heart of every man longs to comprehend. Yet to very few is given the wisdom and insight to ask the right question, much less receive the answer. To you, O King, the God of heaven has placed in your heart the wisdom and courage to ask the right question. Therefore ask now, O King.”

King Nebuchadnezzar knew what to ask, almost before the words were out of Daniel’s mouth. But did he dare? He paused. Then slowly, still in ancient Hebrew, he asked, “What must I do, to bring myself and my kingdom into harmony with this ‘God of heaven’ of whom you speak?”

“Yes!” Daniel yelled, raised his fist, and pumped the air. “Yes!” the heavenly host echoed his shout. The sound reverberated across the vast expanse of the universe with awesome power and finality. The devils of the earth shook with fear at the power of their voice, for in it, they heard their own defeat. Logos smiled. “The Father’s Plan of the Ages will be successful. He will see to it. *For that indeed is the right question, the question every man must ask.*”

Now Daniel looked intently into the king’s eager eyes. “The mystery of the stone is this, O King. The pyramid has but one top, sharply pointing toward the heavens. This represents YHWH the Father of Eternity, whom no man can see or comprehend, but who sees and comprehends all things at all times. But the base of the pyramid stone has four corners, pointing to the four corners of the earth. They represent King Logos, the Word of Father YHWH, sent out from heaven to all the earth. The stone rested at the top of the hills while you gazed at the statue; even so YHWH is at rest, watching you build your kingdom.

“You asked the right question, O King, for YHWH has given you wisdom. He has shown you what will happen at the end of the age, so now you know. The most important question anyone can ask is, ‘How can I bring myself and my kingdom (however great or small) into harmony with that great God of heaven represented by the pyramid stone?’ Look again, O King. Lift your eyes again to the top of the hills. See there, and understand. YHWH is at rest. He changes not. He watches over all, yet He does not bow to your will nor is He swayed by your desires. Rather, you must bow to His will and be influenced by His desires.

“So the answer, O King, is as simple as the question, yet so profound that the mighty men, the kings of the earth in all their pride, can never comprehend it unless they are granted wisdom from above. Humble yourself, O King. Look unto the hills. YHWH will give you wisdom. He loves you! He will direct your steps, until the day you become proud and reject His rule over you to go your own way.”

“That’s it? Humble myself and look to the hills?”

“Yes. And expect to receive His wisdom when you ask. He loves to aid you, and He will not deny you as long as your heart is willing to receive it and follow it.”

“What does this have to do with the end of the age, and the stone coming to crush the statue? And why did the stone break and then come back together?”

“Ahh... O King. This is another great mystery. What you did not see is important, too. Whose hands cut the stone out of the mountain and cast it upon the statue?”

The king shook his head. “I could see no hands at all, yet there must have been huge hands, bigger than the mountain itself, for they sliced off the stone more easily than you would slice the top off a banana.”

“Well said, O King! Huge hands indeed! The hands of the Holy Spirit, the third aspect of the almighty God, sent by the eternal Father YHWH to guide and empower Logos the great King. It was the Holy Spirit who picked up the stone and hurled it against all the kingdoms of mankind. But the stone broke when it touched the statue, for the kingdoms of man are all tainted by evil, corrupted by the wickedness lurking within our own hearts, while Logos is altogether holy. When Logos touches us, our sinfulness breaks Him, crushes Him, even to the death. But then the statue exploded and blew away. Just so in His death shall our sinfulness be blown away like chaff upon the breeze. Yet death cannot hold King Logos, the God of Life. Father YHWH will restore Him by the eternal Life of His Spirit. After three days the stone came back together and began to grow, slowly at first, to fill the square, to fill your palace and win your heart, then to fill the city, and finally to fill the earth. All by His unseen Spirit, for YHWH is Spirit. Thus will all nations and kingdoms, peoples and kings, small and mighty, bow before Him to worship and confess that He is King of kings, Lord of lords, the almighty God.”

King Nebuchadnezzar had fallen upon his knees, with his arms held up as if in prayer before Daniel. This was unheard of, in any king's court that ever existed. His guards, who didn't understand a word being said, had their spears and swords at the ready just in case. But the king didn't even see them. He saw nothing but the shining face and burning eyes of the boy standing before him. "What then? Is that all? This 'end of the age' you talk about – is it the end of all things? Are there no more kingdoms?"

Daniel smiled and took a deep breath. "There are no more kingdoms, O King. For Logos the Word of YHWH will set up His Kingdom which shall never be destroyed. It will conquer all the kingdoms of men, but it will endure forever, even to the ages of ages. Now, O King, you know the rest of the story, the final chapter. You know in whom to place your trust. You know to humble yourself and look unto the hills. You know to ask and receive His wisdom and His guidance for your life. *What now do you choose?*"

Nebuchadnezzar could remain on his knees no longer. He fell on his face at Daniel's feet, his choice abundantly clear. Logos saw, and rejoiced. He inspired Daniel to hold his hands above the king and sing this beautiful blessing. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence comes my help. My help comes from YHWH, almighty Creator of the heavens and the earth. He will not allow your foot to slip. He who keeps you will remain alert for you. Behold, He who keeps His beloved will neither slumber nor sleep. YHWH is your protector. YHWH is your shade above your head. The sun will not smite you by day, nor the moon by night. YHWH will protect you from all evil. He will keep your soul. He will guard your going out and your entering in from this time forth forever." (Psalm 121)

The king's court was frozen in suspended animation. But after several minutes, Daniel glanced down and saw the king on his face. A look of shock and bewilderment came over him. Horrified, he too fell facedown to the floor.

When the king finally aroused himself, he saw Daniel prostrate before him. "No Daniel!" he cried. "You must not worship me! For surely your God is a God of gods and a Lord of kings, and is the revealer of mysteries just as you have said! Guards! Bow immediately in worship to Daniel! Then go out and prepare an offering, a sacrifice of fine young bulls, and burn incense for him! He is the prophet of God Almighty! Stand up, young man! I shall promote you to be second in my kingdom, ruler over all of Babylon, chief of all my wise men! And I shall give you great riches and honor. I shall honor your wisdom... Daniel? Arise!" Nebuchadnezzar was still speaking Kasdan and of course none of his guards understood a word. But Daniel was still prone before him. The king bent low and lifted him up. "Daniel? What is it? Why do you not respond to me?"

"O King, live forever!" Daniel answered, but now he was speaking Aramaic. "Forgive me O King. I am just a boy. I do not understand the ancient tongue."

They had been using Kasdan for so long – now the king was mystified. He shifted into Aramaic. "But... Daniel! You've been speaking the ancient tongue all this time! You speak it more fluently than my old childhood teacher, God rest his soul. Didn't you understand what I just said?"

"I knew it was the ancient tongue, O King, for I recently have started lessons with a Magus of the old school. He calls himself Cal, but I'm sure it's not his real name. He says Cal stands for 'Learning of the Kasdim'. His mission in life is to restore the ancient tongue, the wisdom, and the entire culture of the Kasdim. He's been teaching me their history. Before they were conquered by the Chaldeans, the Kasdim ruled the world! But... no, O King. I understood none of what you just said, for I'm still working on the history; he has only just begun training me in the ancient tongue."

"How then did you speak it so perfectly – indeed, so gloriously! – when you interpreted my dream?"

"Uh... I thought I was speaking Aramaic, Your Majesty. YHWH must have changed my speech to the ancient tongue just so you would know it was from Him, and not my own wisdom."

King Nebuchadnezzar was strangely intrigued. He felt compelled to pursue this. "How long will it be before your training is complete, young man?"

"You commanded that we study for three years, O King. Two years are complete; I yet lack the third year."

"Then I will postpone what I promised, for one year. Finish your studies, for I want you to restore the wisdom of the Kasdim to all my Magi. The fools have degenerated to nothing but cheap magicians, wizards and soothsayers who whisper and mutter their vile incantations and don't have the good sense to discern their way out of a paper bag! If I am to be the great head of gold, the king of kings that my dream prophesies, I must have wise men who are really wise, with the wisdom from above! So from this day forth you are the chief of all my Magi, even though you are not finished with your studies. You shall have any teachers you wish. If Cal is wise in the wisdom of the Kasdim as you say, then he shall be your personal tutor. You shall dine beside me at my table, and anything you ask I shall grant."

"Thank you, O King. You are most gracious. But don't forget that it was really YHWH who gave your dream and interpreted it – I was just His tool. Thank Him as well."

"Of course, Daniel. His use of the ancient tongue by you will remind me. It was beautiful, glorious! Learn it as fast as you can, so I can listen to you speak it every day. Now, do you have any requests for me to grant?"

"Just this one, O King. Please grant that I may continue to dine with the other Hebrew youths in training. I fear that once I enter the king's court to dine at the king's table, my education will be greatly delayed. For then I would become involved in many things to distract my training."

In the sixth year of his reign, Jehoiakim rebelled. *He paid tribute for Pharaoh Necho's protection, and now he had to pay annual tribute to Babylon as well? That was not right!* He and his thirteen-year-old co-regent Coniah went down to Egypt to complain. Along the way they picked up others in the Levant who were unhappy with the situation: among them the city-states of Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gaza, and Raphia. At first the Pharaoh didn't want to help them. After his horrible defeat at Carchemish he had given his word to Nebuchadnezzar not to interfere in the Levant. But Jehoiakim insisted. "We are your faithful tributaries! We've been loyal to you! We paid all you asked! But you must defend your tributaries or they'll stop serving you."

So Pharaoh Necho relented and promised to defend them against Babylon. But secretly he hoped he didn't have to, for he was not sure he was strong enough. However, from what he'd heard, Nebuchadnezzar had gone soft. He had become a family man. He enjoyed the luxury of the palace. Maybe he wouldn't bother with the Levant.

Of course the Babylonian soldiers now manning the Egyptian garrisons in the Levant saw what was going on. They immediately sent word to Babylon.

In 602 BC, the three years of training for the exiled youths was complete. Ashpenaz prepared them for testing by the king. He was proud of their training, especially the Hebrews! He mixed them all together and dressed them all identically so the king couldn't spot the Hebrews.

Nebuchadnezzar spent the day grilling them. It didn't take him long to weed out the others and concentrate on the Hebrews. "These young men are ten times wiser and more knowledgeable than even my own Magi and wise men!" he exclaimed. "And even more handsome, as well!" Suddenly he recognized Daniel and the light bulb went on. *Sure enough, the brilliant ones are all Hebrews*, he thought. He remembered his promise to Daniel from a year ago.

So he called for Nahum. He had become the mayor of Tel-aviv, the fertile district between the Euphrates and the Chebar Canal, which he had given the Hebrews. Nahum had become a good personal friend, and was often called over to the palace to advise the king. Nebuchadnezzar relied on his judgment. "What do you think about these kids? They seem so quick to learn, and so astute! Why?"

Nahum bowed. "Because YHWH God of Israel gives them wisdom and understanding, O King."

"Nah! Go on. It's more than that. Why, compared to them, my best advisors are dull and stupid!"

"Well, okay... What do you feed them, O King?"

"Who? My advisors? I give all my Magi nothing but the finest foods – the same foods I myself eat."

"And the Hebrew youths?"

"The same, of course. What are you getting at?"

Nahum shook his head no. He knew what the king ate! "O King, I've never talked with anyone about it, but I'm willing to wager a gold dollar that they are not eating the same foods as your advisors and your other Magi."

"Done!" The king nodded, smiling. He always did like a good wager, and this was a cinch. He himself had ordered their food. His faithful steward would never disobey his orders, never, not in a hundred years.

So he called Ashpenaz on the carpet. "What do the Hebrew youths eat each day, exactly?"

Ashpenaz was caught. He had no way to wiggle out of it. "O King, live forever! I demanded of them that they eat the foods from the king's own kitchen, as with all the other captive youths. But... O King! They refused! They swore they would rather die than eat the king's food! They have been eating nothing but fruits, nuts, and vegetables – and that mostly raw. I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I should have..."

Ashpenaz bowed, fearing for his head. The king stood from his throne and reached into the folds of his royal robe. This was it. He was sure to have a dagger there, and the steward's next breath will be his last. But instead, he heard a bell-like, 'tinggg...' and glanced up to see a shiny gold coin spinning in the air about the king's hand. He grabbed it again. "This is my lucky dollar. Many a wager it has won. But you bested me..." he flipped it over to Nahum, "and I consider it a lesson well-learned. I shall start eating more raw fruits and veggies myself – today!"

Nebuchadnezzar scanned his court. His older Magi were glaring suspiciously at the trainees, frowns on their faces. "Nahum, I have another request. I desire your advice on my new Magi here. They've finished their training and are ready to enter into my service. But can I trust them?"

"No, O King. Of course you cannot trust them. You captured them, took them from their homes and families, brought them to Babylon, and even here you took them away from the other exiles and made them live with you in your palace. Now you want to force them to serve you against their will? Some may never forgive you for that."

"After all my training? What should I do with them?"

"O King, I said 'some'. Give them their freedom to go back to their families with the other exiles. Invite only those who really wish to serve you, to remain with you. You can trust all who stay of their own free choice."

"Free choice? Hmm... That's a novel idea. I'll do it."

The Hebrew boys were listening. Now Daniel stepped boldly to the dais. Nebuchadnezzar held out his scepter, giving him permission to speak. "O King, live forever. Do you remember when I interpreted your dream a year ago? You said that after my training was complete you would make me the chief of all the Magi in your kingdom."

“Yes, Daniel. I remember. And it shall be done. But do you think you are ready...?” The king was starting to have second thoughts. He could not imagine all his old wizards and prognosticators actually submitting to this youngster.

In answer to the king, Daniel turned to the other Hebrew boys, and began to grill them—in ancient Hebrew, Kasdan! He quizzed them about the Kasdim, their history and culture, their character, integrity, wisdom, and all the ancient knowledge of the Kasdim. This went on for an hour, as it became evident that every Hebrew boy was nearly as fluent in the ancient tongue as he.

Then Daniel turned back to the king. “When Cal began teaching me the language of the Kasdim, I realized that all their great wisdom and knowledge is tied up within their language. The meanings of the words and the powerful pictures they convey... restoring the language restores the ancient wisdom as well! We...” he waved a hand at his friends, “shall require that conversations among the Magi all be spoken in Kasdan. Remember how delighted you were to hear me speak it? We shall teach it to all the Magi. Until they learn it, they shall have no call to come before the king. That will keep them in their proper place until they are ready to serve you again. Another benefit, O King. With the Magi advising you only in Kasdan, all who don’t understand it will not be privy to your secret counsels.”

Nebuchadnezzar gladly agreed, and commanded all his Magi: “From this day forth, no Magus will presume to advise the king in any language except in Kasdan. Those most fluent in Kasdan shall rule the others, and teach them, until all the king’s Magi are fully fluent in Kasdan and the ancient wisdom of the Kasdim. And since Daniel is now most fluent in Kasdan, I now appoint him chief of all my Magi, as I promised.”

What else could the old geezers do? They were miffed, of course, but they had to submit to Daniel. Though I must add that they learned to really appreciate Daniel as they began learning the ancient wisdom and discovered how far it surpassed their magician’s bag of tricks.

King Nebuchadnezzar had one more test for Daniel. He had to know if this young Hebrew boy (now seventeen) would be loyal to him even above his own people. When the others had gone, he called Daniel back to his throne. “Daniel, your wisdom is most impressive, so I ask for counsel on a rather sticky problem I have right now. I have just heard that some of my tributaries have agreed together to rebel against me and refuse to pay my tribute. They even talked Pharaoh Necho into supporting their rebellion. They are Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gaza, Raphia... and Judah.”

Daniel didn’t bat an eye. “Punish them, O King! You dare not let such rebellion spread, or your empire will crumble. Crush their arrogance. Take their kings captive and plunder their royal cities.”

“Even Judah? Won’t YHWH protect them?”

“Especially Judah, Your Majesty! I know YHWH will not protect them. They have sinned against Him, and you are but obeying His command to punish them. Their army will flee before you. You will not lose a man in the attack. King Jehoiakim will fall on his face before you and plead for mercy, for God knows he needs to be humbled.”

“And Necho? What about his promise to help?”

“Pharaoh Necho talks big, O King. But I know that he will not try to defend the Levant. He dare not attack you, unless you threaten Egypt itself. Explain his foolishness in promising to help the Levant. But I warn you. Don’t attack him as long as he remains beyond the Brook of Egypt!”

Daniel had passed Nebuchadnezzar’s last test. He will tell it like it is, even if his own people suffer for it. The king was impressed. “Thank you, Daniel. I’ll do as you suggest. Early this spring I will begin a campaign into the Levant. Now, I want you to do something else for me, my friend.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

“I want you to rule Babylon for me, under me, second only to me in all my empire. For I have found you faithful and true. There is no one else in all my empire whom I can trust like you, nor is there anyone else with such wisdom and understanding from the gods!”

“Not from the gods, O King. From the one true God, YHWH, the almighty Creator. But yes, I accept your offer. I am happy to remain by your side to advise you, as your faithful servant. With your permission, I will appoint my three Hebrew friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, to the administration of the provinces of Babylon. That way I can always be available to you rather than getting bogged down in the administrative details of the empire.”

“Of course! Again, I am amazed at your wisdom! By all means, your Magi are yours to use however you like.” King Nebuchadnezzar paused, thinking. He sighed wistfully.

“Yes, my lord the king? Do not hesitate to share with me anything, even your troubles or weaknesses. I swear I will not think the less of you. For I know that you are the ‘head of gold’, and together, we shall achieve that for you.”

“Thank you, Daniel. I see you are very perceptive. I am distressed about my relationship with Amytis. I love her dearly, but I am not pleasing her. Maybe she’s homesick for Media. When she was young she was so supportive and warm to me. Now she has grown cold and cynical.”

“O King, I am young and unmarried. I never considered such things as how to please a woman. Women are very different from men, and all I understand about gaining the respect and cooperation of my fellow man may not apply. Give me time. I will ask if YHWH has any wisdom for me.”

But the more Daniel prayed, the more inadequate he felt to address the king’s problem. Daniel had so much wisdom, except in this one area he was ignorant.

Nebuchadnezzar left on his campaign to the Levant to subdue Judah and Philistia. So Daniel had time to fast and pray until he got an answer. On his first day of fasting, he decided, "That's it. I must get married. That's the only way I will get the experience to answer the king. I'd better do it while the king is in the Levant, so I'll have his answer when he returns next year." He spent the rest of the day making lists of the eligible young ladies among the Hebrew exiles and charting their talents, endowments, and pedigree. Though only seventeen, he shouldn't have any problems getting their father's permission – Daniel had full control of the empire while the king was gone!

It took Daniel a week, for he was very methodical and thorough. This wasn't a decision to be taken lightly. He narrowed the field down to his top three choices. *This is going to be fun! All three girls are delightful, smart, and beautiful.* He laid his list down before YHWH in prayer. But after a few days of wrestling with YHWH about them, it was not so much fun anymore. He went back to his big list, but YHWH seemed to be saying "No!" to each one. Finally he put his lists and charts aside, "O Lord YHWH, God of Creation, I give up. I need Your wisdom. Mine has totally failed. Show me which girl You would like me to marry, even if she is not the smartest, prettiest, or most talented. I'll do whatever You want, for I belong to You."

That night, Daniel had a dream. In it, a shining person came to him. He was clothed in splendor, with long hair like a woman, yet with a full beard like a man. His face was kind yet stern, vibrant with the wisdom of the ages. Daniel fell on his face before him, but he wouldn't permit it. "Don't worship me!" he said in Kasdan, "For though I am glorified, yet I am a created being just as you. Worship YHWH only. Yet, you may sit at my feet to learn of me. I am Arphaxad and Aimee, joined into one person as the earthly institution of marriage portrays. I founded the city of Ur. And... I am the head of the Kasdim."

So Daniel sat at his feet, and for the rest of the long dream he plied this glorious being with questions. Yet for each question, Arphaxad-Aimee merely answered, "Yes. That is a good question. Here. Eat this," and handed him a page from a book he carried. After he had chewed and swallowed the page, the scene was repeated, until finally the book was entirely eaten. Then the vision faded and Daniel awakened to ponder its significance.

In 601 BC, Nebuchadnezzar returned from the Levant. His army was still intact, though it was obvious that his warriors had been beaten and demoralized. At first the king didn't want to discuss his humiliation. All he would say to Daniel is, "You said that I would be the head of gold! A head of gold should not get kicked about like a football!" Then he bit his tongue and said no more.

As the days passed, the king remained morose and uncommunicative. Daniel realized he needed to take the initiative. "O King! YHWH loves you."

"He has a very strange way of showing His love!" Again the king clammed up and would say no more.

"Perhaps it will help to clear the air if I tell you the story of what happened to you in the Levant."

"You don't know what happened in the Levant!"

"True. Just the same, I will tell the story. YHWH is the revealer of secrets, remember? You went to Judah and quickly overcame it. Jehoiakim could not stand before you. He fell at your feet and pled for mercy. You plundered his palace and took many young nobles, princes, and ladies of the court, who are now with Nahum in Tel-aviv. Then you went to the coast and did the same to the rebels in Philistia. Again they could not stand before you. You plundered their cities. They won't rebel again soon!

"But at that, O King, you got proud. You went to Egypt to warn Pharaoh Necho to stop interfering in the Levant. But instead of just warning him, you got angry with him. You accused him of encouraging the Levant's rebellion. You threatened to cross the brook and 'teach him a lesson'. Anger begets anger, O King. Necho angrily dared you to attack, and threatened you in kind. Before either of you could control your tempers, you had ordered your armies to engage each other. It was a disaster. Necho was ready, but you had not yet prepared an attack strategy, since you had only planned to warn him. Your forces were routed and chased clear back to Gaza before the Pharaoh let you go. He mocked you, laughing all the way back to Egypt."

"I know! I know! It's all my own fault for not heeding your advice. You warned me to not attack Egypt. But I was feeling invincible! I guess I sort of let this 'head of gold' stuff go to my, ahh... head. Sorry..."

"It's okay, Your Majesty. YHWH doesn't love you any less for it. He understands our natural human weaknesses. If you learn wisdom from it, your defeat may actually turn out for the best. YHWH is teaching you humility. He will make you the head of gold, but only if you humble yourself to follow His wisdom. Believe me, you aren't the only king YHWH wants to teach humility! After you left Jehoiakim, you probably thought he was humbled, didn't you? No! YHWH showed me that he cursed and raged against Him! So YHWH sent a band of Syrians down from Damascus to attack his northern cities. Did he then repent and humble himself before YHWH? No! More raging and cursing! So YHWH sent a band of Moabite raiders against him. Still no repentance. Then a band of Ammonites – you'd think he would have learned! But no, still he rages against YHWH and rebels against you. I'm afraid he may never repent and learn wisdom. But you are different, O King. YHWH loves you, for you are willing to repent and learn wisdom from Him after just one small defeat by Egypt."

Nebuchadnezzar started to smile, the first smile since his return. "Thank you, Daniel. Yes, I do want YHWH's wisdom. I just wish it didn't cost so much."

Daniel returned the smile. "You're right, Your Majesty. It does always seem to cost somehow, doesn't it. But I swear it's worth it! YHWH's wisdom is more precious than gold! In fact, in your dream the reason YHWH called you the head of gold is because He saw that you love wisdom. Before you were king, you sought for YHWH's wisdom through Nahum. Remember? The first time you thought to attack Pharaoh Necho. You asked Nahum's counsel. When you followed it, YHWH gave you the kingdom!"

Nebuchadnezzar was nodding. He remembered that just like it was yesterday. It was a good lesson. "And now, Daniel, I get to hear YHWH's wisdom through you every day. Was ever a king of any nation so blessed by God?"

"Yes, O King. Solomon! But when he got old, he got proud and forgot YHWH. Soon after his death his glorious kingdom split apart. I hope that never happens here."

"Speaking of YHWH's wisdom, has He said anything to you about my troubles with Amytis? She was even more cold last night than before I left for the Levant. Even her hugs are cold and sad. I don't know how to make her happy. You said you needed time to pray about it."

There was a pause while Daniel considered how to answer, for he didn't really have an answer, even though it had been over a year. "O King, now it is I who must humble myself. I have prayed, at length. I even tried to get married, so I could experience some of what you are going through. But YHWH said 'No!' to everyone I picked. However, YHWH gave me a dream which I believe may be an answer. Except I don't understand it. I am embarrassed to admit it, for I know YHWH is the revealer of secrets and interpreter of dreams. But I have wrestled with it for months, and I cannot see how my dream could be of any help to you."

"Tell me the dream..." The king suggested.

"Well, there's not much to tell. I saw this glorious being. He called himself Arphaxad and Aimee joined into one person. He said he founded Ur and was... is, the head of the Kasdim. He invited me to question him. I did, for what seemed like hours. But he never answered me at all. For each question, he just fed me another page of his book, until the book was all gone. I still don't have a clue how I'm going to get the answers to any of my questions. And he wouldn't tell me whom to marry, either, or say whether I should even get married at all. I don't get it."

"That part about eating his book is easy. The book was filled with God's wisdom. And you ate it. So it's all inside of you now. Just open your mouth and His wisdom will come out in whatever you say." Nebuchadnezzar grinned.

"Ohhhh...!" Daniel gave an audible gasp and left his mouth hanging open. "Of course you're right, O King! How could I have missed it?"

"Well, perhaps kings aren't the only ones in need of humbling in order to get wisdom."

"Yes, I..." Daniel began, but the whole thing tickled his funny bone. He started to snicker. He bowed and tried to suppress it. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I just feel like a fool! Like a court jester!" But now the king was snickering, too. Within seconds, the two broke up into howls of laughter.

Precisely at that moment Queen Amytis entered the court. Her face looked cold and distant, or just plain bored. She strode toward the throne without even awaiting the beckoning wave of the king's scepter. She was halfway up the hall before Nebuchadnezzar even noticed her. But when he did, his smile froze and his laughter cut off as with a knife. Daniel took a little longer to get serious. He was still chuckling as she approached. He watched their faces as they traded hellos. "So, my lord, what was so funny?"

"Nothing, my lady. It was nothing at all. Welcome to my court, my queen. How was your day?"

She gave a little sigh. "Fine, my lord. Just fine."

I won't even try to relate the next five minutes of their 'conversation'. You've heard of dialog. You've heard of monologue. But have you ever heard of zero-log? This was it. Now Daniel knew the answer to their difficulties. He leaned forward. "Excuse me for butting in, my lord and my lady. How long have you been married?"

The guards put a hand to their swords. The attendants in the court gasped at this unheard-of intrusion. But the king was actually relieved at the interruption, being smart enough to realize that his conversation with his wife was going nowhere. He quickly held out his scepter to Daniel. "Ten years," he said, at the same time Amytis responded, "Eleven years, one month, and 23 days."

"And you still don't know each other?"

"Of course we know each other!" The king exclaimed, as his wife mumbled, "I know everything there is to know about him, but he doesn't have a clue..."

"How would you both like a marriage that is full of joy and excitement, satisfying, and fun?"

"Well, of course!" the king answered brightly, smiling. Amytis whispered, "In your dreams!"

Daniel bowed to them, spreading out an arm to each. After a long moment he looked up, smiling slyly. "Follow me, please," He asked, and led them to their bedroom. At the doors, he stepped aside and bade them enter, saying, "Go in and change. Take off your royal duds and put on something comfortable, as if you were mere commoners and had never even heard of the mightiest king and queen of the civilized world. I'll wait."

When they finished, Daniel surveyed the results. "Good. Now," pointing to the king, "You have never heard of Princess Amytis before." Then to the queen, "And you have never known that there was a King Nebuchadnezzar. Okay? That's an order!"

King Nebuchadnezzar was about to say that you don't order a king around, but he bit his tongue. He was trying to figure out what his advisor was after. "Good. Now close your eyes for a moment... Good, good... now turn to face each other and open your eyes." They obeyed, but before they could talk, Daniel continued. "Nezzy, I want you to meet my friend Amy. Amy, this is Nezzy. You don't have to pretend you don't know each other anymore, for I swear that you really do not! You've become too prim and proper as king and queen to let your hair down and be yourselves.

"So we're going to start all over. Nezzy, my friend Amy here is from Media. She loves good jokes, the theater, and a dinner party or lively dance now and then. She longs for the rolling green hills and terraced gardens of her native land. She hates stuffy business meetings with pompous nobles who do nothing but blow hot air around the room. She especially hates being called, 'my lady' or 'my queen' as if she were your pet poodle! Everyone else can call her that, but if you do again (except maybe in formal affairs), I want her to bop you over the head as a gentle reminder. Instead, just call her Amy, or sweet-pea, or honey-pie, or lover-girl, or some other pet name that you and she agree on.

"Amy, this tall, mysterious, dashing young man in the mask is the prince of your dreams. Someday, he'll no doubt make a great king, but for now he's having fun galloping around the country and slaying dragons to win the hand of his fair maiden. Ahem... that's you!" He took her hand and placed it in his, at the same time bowing in a half curtsy which she quickly imitated. "And now that he has won your hand, I swear he will sweep you off your feet! He will build you castles in the sky! No expense will be too great! No detail too small! It'll be the most fun and fantastic ride of your life! Beyond anything you ever imagined.

"But I warn you, Amy. Now that he has completed his quest to win your hand, you also are assigned a grand quest – to plumb the mysteries that lie behind his placid mask! I'll give you two clues to point you on your way. The first is 'lover'. The second is 'wisdom'. You must find ninety eight more by this time next year, or the dam will burst and your castles in the sky will come crashing down on your head."

Daniel backed away a bit, lifting his arms above their heads. "I pronounce you husband and wife. I command you, Nezzy, to spend one full year of honeymoon with your new wife. Forget your first ten (or eleven) years. Those were fake people, department store mannequins, children playing the marriage game. Now that you are really married, spend your time getting to know Amy and learning how to please her. I swear to you, the more you please her, the more you'll enjoy her." Daniel bowed out.

Nebuchadnezzar looked at his wife. "Uh... Amy..."

"Yes, Nezzy?" She snickered, quickly deciding she would follow through with this game, if he would let her.

"Do you really like jokes? Parties? And dancing?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do, Mister Serious!"

"Mister Serious?" he feigned an indignant frown. "But I'm really not that way! I just thought you... well, I didn't think you'd respect me unless I..." he paused.

"...unless you fit the image of the noble, majestic king upon the throne!" She finished it for him. "Well, I knew all those haughty poses were fake; but I figured you did it because you didn't care about me. All you cared about was your empire, your glory and honor, or your bloody battles. That's why I got interested when I came in to hear you laughing. It was the first time I've heard you laugh in years! I didn't know you had a funny bone in your body!"

Amytis paused to smile. "I like it! Maybe that's the third clue to the mysteries behind your placid mask, humor!"

"Daniel is right. I was afraid of you. Afraid to laugh. Afraid I would lose your respect. But I can't believe you thought I didn't care about you! I did everything I could to show you I care! Why, I..."

"Except spend time with me. And except try to figure out what kinds of things I like, and listen to me..."

"Well, you're a princess! You're the finest bred, most beautiful princess in the world. I just..."

"You thought I was made of glass. You were afraid I'd break! You silly... Daniel is right. Forget the old 'Princess Amytis'. She is dead. I'm a girl, alive and kicking, not a glass vase. But I don't mind the 'most beautiful' part. Do you really think I'm beautiful?" She gave him a big smile.

"With a smile like that, you'd melt the heart of any man alive. Nothing in the universe compares to your beauty!"

"Aha! The fourth clue! 'Romance'. My quest is going to be easier than I thought. I would have never guessed you to be a romantic! Nezzy, what would you say to an intimate, candle-lit, moonlight dinner tonight, in that tallest tower overlooking the Euphrates?"

"Huh? Are you a romantic, too? I was beginning to see you as the ice queen personified! I've been wanting to do something like that for years!"

"Me too!" Amytis leaned up and gave him a quick kiss on the nose. "Then it's a date! But before I go freshen up, you've got to tell me what it was that you and Daniel were laughing about when I walked in."

"Well, it really was nothing. It just... ah... Daniel had this dream, and I helped him interpret it, that's all. It just struck us as a bit backwards after..."

"You? Interpreted his dream? Wow! I thought Daniel had the only hot line to God! You must tell me the story at our date tonight. The clues behind your mysterious mask are falling thick and fast. Now I can add 'perceptive' and 'discerning' to our list, and maybe 'spiritual'. We'll reach a hundred by the end of the week at this rate!"

Their dinner date was a great success. ‘Nezzy’ scored more points by having his servants arrange a bed of roses on a board, then slowly push it up just outside the window, so they appeared to be growing. Amy added ‘creative’ and ‘imaginative’ to her list. Also, Nezzy had hired a violinist to serenade them, so after the meal, they danced together. Amy got to add ‘music lover’ and ‘graceful’ to the list.

They began to open up and talk, really for the first time, as Amy had been too young and overwhelmed to share her heart when they’d first married. “Amy? Daniel said you longed for the rolling hills and terraced gardens of your homeland. Was that true, or poetic fantasy to inspire us?”

They looked over the city, at the cold, stark buildings, walls, and towers. Beyond them lay the flatlands of Shinar. The purple hills of Persia were just black silhouettes with the silver moon behind them. Other than the roses at the window (which were now fully ‘grown’) there was nary a tree or bush to be seen. Amy pulled herself close, her head on Nezzy’s shoulder. “It’s okay. I don’t mind the city. I can live anywhere, as long as it is with a husband who talks with me, and tells me he loves me and that I’m beautiful.”

“You miss the trees and gardens.”

“A little. But those roses were a nice touch! Maybe if you bring a small patch of soil up to a rooftop somewhere, I can grow a few flowers of my own.”

“You shall have it. I’ll start tomorrow. I can see it now! We’ll have plants hanging off of every building in the city! I shall build terraces on the rooftops, and cover them with flowers. I shall build archways across the roads, so the flowers drape down over the travelers. The city walls shall have ivy growing to the top. I shall build a watering system, until the entire city is filled with trees, bushes, and flowers. Babylon shall be the wonder of the world for your hanging gardens!” Amy took her note pad (for the list had gotten too long to remember) and wrote ‘dreamer’ and ‘lavish’.

True to his word, Nebuchadnezzar drew up some plans and gave orders to start construction of his dream gardens. Daniel loved the idea, too, and offered hints on how to make it more practical. He didn’t want to ask, but the king knew what he was thinking. “In case you are wondering how last night went after you pulled that little stunt with Amy and me... thank you! It was wonderful! For the first time in our marriage, I felt like we were husband and wife! You were right, we never really knew each other; we were just kids playing at marriage. Now I think I understand the symbolism in your dream of Arphaxad and Aimee joined into one person. That is how a good marriage should be, if only we will really communicate and share each other’s lives. We’re like one person, with each other’s strengths covering the other’s weaknesses. That way there are no weaknesses left, only one complete, glorious person!”

“Wow! I believe you’re right, O King! Again, You have humbled me. I can hardly wait to get married myself.”

“But you told me YHWH kept saying, ‘No!’ You’re young; it’s possible YHWH just wants you to wait awhile before marriage. But as I considered that this morning, another thought came to me. Perhaps it is also the wisdom of YHWH? You know that a king must have a wife, for he must have an heir to carry on the kingdom after he dies. But for a prophet or a Magus, like you, it is very different. His children are his students – those he trains to carry on his ministry. Your Hebrew boys, in fact all the Magi, are your progeny. You have a family the likes of which I could never hope to have! They’re all submissive and faithful to you, something rare among the sons of kings. In a way, you’re ‘married’ to your ministry in the kingdom you’ve chosen to serve, and ‘she’ takes up so much of your time and energy that you don’t have time to spare for a wife.”

Daniel gave a low whistle, and then put his face into his hands. Then without a word, he slid down onto the floor, face down, to cry out to YHWH. An hour later, he got back up, face dripping with sweat. “O King, it seemed so easy to interpret your dreams for you, but for my dream, I can see now that my own desires were blocking me from realizing the truth. I believe you are right. I don’t want to hear it, for I was beginning to really want a wife. But YHWH’s wisdom is more important than having a wife. If He confirms that to me, then I may never marry, for I choose instead to be married to YHWH and His ministry through me.”

Nebuchadnezzar nodded. He was beginning to realize that his wife was rather ‘high maintenance’. Though she was now lots of fun, and the delight of his eyes every day, it took a good deal of his time and energy to keep her happy. “Remember, Daniel, that you ate the whole book in your dream. You have all the ancient wisdom of the Kasdim within you. That is a treasure beyond all earthly treasures. Is it not worth your life to teach it to my Magi, and to me, and my kingdom, even to my entire empire?”

Daniel agreed. At that moment he knew. The king was entirely right. From that day forth Daniel no longer sought a wife. He committed his life to restoring the wisdom of the ancient Kasdim throughout the empire.

Some of the Magi of course resisted, for their focus had always been to hide their secret arts from the people, so they could maintain their mystical power and control. Daniel’s focus was on teaching them the true wisdom of YHWH so they could share it with the people. But Daniel had learned a good deal of discernment along with the ancient wisdom; all those Magi whose hearts remained selfish and cold soon found themselves out of a job.

Within only a few years the remaining Magi had been welded into a talented teaching team, an effective cadre of professor-judges who daily ‘held court’. The fame of their incredible wisdom spread across the earth. As in the glory days of the legendary Kasdim begun by Arphaxad at Ur, people came from every nation under heaven to sit at their feet, ask questions, and learn from them.

They came for another reason, as well. Within only a few years King Nebuchadnezzar's hanging gardens also became world famous. Who would have thought to bring the surrounding farms into the city? Soon every major structure had a garden on the roof. Above his palace, King Nebuchadnezzar made terraces to expose the view to the people below. He built ledges on the walls, and planted gardens there, too. He hired thousands of gardeners. He designed reservoirs, aqueducts, water pumps, and piping to get the water to each garden. He imported magnificent trees and bushes, and planted a dazzling array of flowers, many of them native to Media, his wife's homeland. When every building was covered with green, he embarked on major building programs, expanding the city and building magnificent temples just so he could have more gardens.

Queen Amytis loved every bit of it. While her husband designed the structure of the gardens, it was she who designed the layout of the plants. She spent her days going through the gardens giving orders to the gardeners. She spent her evenings and nights enjoying her beloved. Soon the previously barren queen began producing sons and daughters for her king. Thus Nebuchadnezzar added to the joys of a happy marriage, the joys of raising a family! Amel-Marduk, born in 597 BC, was their first son.

As Daniel had warned, Jehoiakim continued to rebel against Babylon, even after being so badly humbled back in 602 BC. He knew about Nebuchadnezzar's defeat by Pharaoh Necho, and again he figured that the Babylonians would not return to the Levant. The prophet Jeremiah warned him, again. But he would not listen. Finally King Nebuchadnezzar's patience ran out. In December 599 BC, he sent his Tartan to the Levant to deal with Judah. He didn't want to go himself; he was having way too much fun with his wife expanding their hanging gardens.

In order to understand this story, you need to know some things about the people of Judah. Those in the army, of course, were obedient to Jehoiakim, though they didn't really like it. Also, quite a few of the people of Jerusalem, and especially those in the palace, remained loyal to him, trusting in Jerusalem's strong walls and Judah's army.

But not all were so naïve! The warnings of Jeremiah (and his father Hilkiah before him) were having an effect. Many people in Judah, even a few in his own palace, did not trust King Jehoiakim. They trusted in YHWH and in the preaching of His prophets. Jeremiah now openly encouraged them to submit to the king of Babylon.

After King Nebuchadnezzar sent his army into the Levant, two years went by. He was not worried. He would have gotten word if anything had gone wrong. His focus was still on his lovely wife, his new baby son, and his beautifully green city, of which he was justifiably proud. But now his lookouts warned of a rather large group of Hebrews, with many women and children, coming on the road toward Babylon. They looked like refugees.

They sent their spokesman, Ezekiel son of Buzi, a priest of the tribe of Levi, on ahead to talk with the king. Ezekiel was a fine young man, handsome and well-educated. He came to Nebuchadnezzar's court and asked to see the king.

"O King, live forever!" Ezekiel bowed low and gave the traditional greeting, in Aramaic of course, as it was the trade language of the East.

But Nebuchadnezzar stopped him. "Speak in Hebrew, for I understand it. And if you know the ancient Hebrew, Kasdan, you may use it instead, for I understand it, too."

Ezekiel shifted to modern Hebrew. "I am amazed, Your Majesty! I have heard stories of the wisdom of the Kasdim, but I thought it was lost in antiquity."

"Their wisdom and language flourish in my kingdom. All my Magi address me only in Kasdan." Nebuchadnezzar grinned broadly, obviously proud of his achievements.

Duly impressed, Ezekiel expressed his longing to someday also learn Kasdan, before continuing his report. "We've brought you a gift, Your Majesty." He signaled to his aides, who spread out a rather substantial pile of wealth before the king. "This is collected from the people with us. When your Tartan, General Nebuzeradan, came to the land of Judah, we, your servants, gladly submitted to him, because we know that our God YHWH has given Judah into your hand. 24,000 men are with me, besides our wives and children. We seek asylum, wherever in your empire we can best serve you. Also, I have a message from General Nebuzeradan, who is now at Jerusalem."

King Nebuchadnezzar opened the message. After the obligatory flowery preamble, he read, "I have sent these Hebrews who were quick to submit to you. But their king is stubborn. He has mustered his army and shut himself up in Jerusalem. We besieged him, and are prepared to breach the city now. But I await your pleasure, for to you belongs the honor of their final defeat. I only regret that it has taken us so long. We were thus prepared last year, but I received notice that the army of Pharaoh Necho II had gathered against us at the Brook of Egypt. I was forced to withdraw our siege of Jerusalem to confront him. I reminded him of your command, O King, that he may not trespass beyond the Brook of Egypt. I instructed him of the consequences if he should disobey you. When he saw the glory and power of Your Majesty's army, he retreated in fear. I don't believe he will further trouble your provinces in the Levant."

Nebuchadnezzar was very pleased. He welcomed the exiles from Judah, and assigned space for them with the other Hebrews at Tel-aviv. After he got them settled and made sure they had all they needed, he traveled to the Levant to personally take charge of the army for the final onslaught, as was traditional for military conquests of the time. He and his guard arrived at Jerusalem on the 19th of Kislev in his seventh regnal year (the ninth month, our November 18th, of 597 BC).

CHAPTER 18 – KING ZEDEKIAH

King Nebuchadnezzar's Tartan, General Nebuzeradan, explained the situation. "Four and a half months ago, just after I sent my letter with the exiles of Judah, some sort of shake-up occurred in the palace. More from Jerusalem even fled the city to join the exiles. I thought nothing of it, until the 9th of Av (our July 12), when the people gathered on the city wall, shouting, 'Our king has surrendered! Here he is! We want to talk terms of peace!' And then, before our very eyes, they slew their king, stripped off his royal robes, and heaved his body over the wall. We have placed a guard around it, so we could show you." He took him to a place near the main gate, where a small guard was stationed around a nearly naked body lying on the sand. It stank to high heaven, but the flesh had mostly been stripped off by the birds and small animals. "I've not yet answered their plea for peace, for by then I had already sent the letter. I am awaiting your pleasure, O King."

"Well, for starters, get that stinking corpse under ground. Don't touch it – just dig a trench next to it, and use a stick to tip it in, just like you would bury a donkey. Then cover it with dirt. Don't you think I've seen enough dead bodies in my life?"

He gave his men their orders. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I thought you'd like to verify that it was King Jehoiakim,"

"Forget it. Let's go answer their plea for peace."

They approached the main gates under a white parley flag. They were quickly ushered into the palace, where young Jeconiah (Coniah) son of Jehoiakim sat on the throne. He was eighteen and had ruled with his father since he was eight. "I've heard you wish terms of peace," Nebuchadnezzar growled.

"Yes, Your Majesty. We will pay our tribute. My father was a fool for rebelling against you. We have slain him and thrown him over the wall, as due punishment for his crimes. I swear that I will rule faithfully, and will never rebel against you." He looked down and smiled.

Nebuchadnezzar stood there for a minute, aghast that this youngster should so casually expect full forgiveness with just a few glib promises. There he sat, on his throne as if he owned the world when he should be bowing with his face to the floor and pleading for mercy. *What utter gall!* "I'm glad that you are now eager to pay your tribute. I will accept it. In return I will not destroy your city. However, there is one more thing I demand. The king who rebelled against me shall be bound in chains of bronze and brought back to Babylon, where he will spend the rest of his short and pitiful life in my dungeon. It is the law of Babylon."

"But we slew him and threw him over the wall!"

"Then you shall take his place, for you were co-regent with him, and you participated in his rebellion," King Nebuchadnezzar thundered, pointing at Jeconiah.

For a long moment, nobody moved. Then after some whispers among the nobles of the court, young Jeconiah's own guards all pointed their spears at him, forcing him down on his knees and face before King Nebuchadnezzar. Now Mattaniah stepped forward and bowed low before them. "Your Majesty! You are wise in taking Jeconiah. He was indeed just like his father, both in his rebellion and in the self-centered and arrogant way he ruled. We all agree that you should take him in chains to Babylon. The rest of us in this palace have agreed to submit to you. Go through the palace. Go through the city. Take anything that pleases you. We are your servants. And take any from among the army that you choose. All the mighty men of valor are yours. If you take their families with them, they will serve you forever. We are very grateful that you chose not to destroy our city or slay our wives and little ones."

"Who are you, young man? I like your attitude."

"I am Mattaniah, son of King Josiah, may he rest in peace. I am uncle to this king on his knees before you, for his father Jehoiakim was my half-brother."

"Good! You are in the royal family. Your people will respect you. I hereby appoint you as the next king, to rule as long as you are faithful to me. But your throne name shall not be **Mattaniah** but **Zedekiah**, meaning 'YHWH is just'. For in justice the kings before you have fallen, as shall you also fall if you rebel."

Thus Zedekiah began his reign near the end of 597 BC. Nebuchadnezzar took Jeconiah, and 3023 of the valiant men of the army who had stood with him in his rebellion, together with their families. He also plundered the palace and took some gold utensils from the temple to cover the last three years of missed tribute. Finally, just before he left, he made Zedekiah swear his faithfulness, by YHWH God of Israel. "You are king on probation. I have shown mercy to Judah for the last time. If you rebel against me or against YHWH, I shall come again. And if I do, I shall show no mercy. All of Judah and Jerusalem will be wiped clean, like one wipes a dish, leaving none to mourn the slain."

But instead of Aramaic, Nebuchadnezzar had spoken in Hebrew. "O King! I didn't know you knew Hebrew. And do you really know our God YHWH?"

"I know YHWH enough to fear Him. I suggest you do likewise. And you'd better listen to your prophet Jeremiah, too. Not heeding his prophecies is the reason Judah has gotten into this mess."

So Nebuchadnezzar left with his plunder and captives. Jeremiah went to his 'king's prophet' apartment, to pray for their new king. "O YHWH, show me Mattaniah's heart. He seems like such a fine man. Is he truly 'Zedekiah'? Does he want Your justice? How can I pray for him?" As he prayed, a vision materialized. Jeremiah saw the temple's main gate. Beside it lay two baskets of figs. In one, the figs were good but in the other the figs were rotten and stinking.

“What do you see, Jeremiah?” It was YHWH!

“I see two baskets of figs. In one, the figs are very good, but in the other, they are too rotten to eat.”

“The good figs represent the exiles from Judah who have gone to Babylon. I have set My eye on them for good. I will care for them, and bring them back again to this land. I will build them up and not overthrow them. I will plant and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know Me. I, YHWH, will be their God and they shall be My people, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart.

“But then you saw the rotten figs; so rotten they cannot be eaten, but must be thrown out. Even so I will abandon Zedekiah, all his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who try to escape to the land of Egypt. I will make them a terror among all the kingdoms of the earth, a reproach, a proverb, a taunt, and a curse in all the far-flung places where I scatter them. And I will send the sword, famine, and disease upon them until they are destroyed from the land I gave to their forefathers.

“Arise now, Jeremiah. Go to the potter’s house. There I have another word for you.” So Jeremiah obeyed. He arrived just as the potter finished a fine clay vessel. But as he inspected it, he noticed a tiny flaw in the clay. Without hesitation, he crushed it and started over, creating a whole new vessel with the old clay. “Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?” The Word of YHWH flowed. “Behold, like clay in this potter’s hand, so are you in My hand. If you (or any nation) do evil and I decide to destroy you, but then you turn from your evil, I will relent about the calamity I had planned. But if that nation does right, and I decide to bless and prosper them, and then they presume upon My goodness to disobey My voice and do evil in My sight, then I will think twice about all the good I had planned. Therefore tell this to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. For I have determined great calamity against them, unless they repent.

“Now, Jeremiah, buy from the potter. Buy his nicest, most expensive pot, for it will represent the house of Israel.” Jeremiah obeyed, and as he walked away with his purchase, YHWH spoke again. “Take your beautiful pot to the Valley of Ben-Hinnom, by the Potter’s Gate. There say the words I give you.” Again he obeyed.

As he walked past the temple to reach the Potter’s Gate, some priests noticed him. They called to tease him, “Hey, Jeremiah! What lovely pot! I thought you didn’t indulge yourself. Finally decided to enjoy the city’s luxury, eh? Maybe there’s hope for you after all!”

“You bet!” Jeremiah called back. They were laughing and joking, but he was serious. “The city’s luxury indeed! Come and see.” Now he had their curiosity. Soon a long line of priests and others were following him down to the Potter’s Gate. King Zedekiah saw the procession from his palace window and rushed out to see what was happening.

Jeremiah went out the gate, to the brink of the Valley of Hinnom. Suddenly he knew what he must do. He held the pot high. It glistened in the sun. Its colors and decorations were stunning. The crowd filed out the gate, with every eye upon that magnificent pot. Now the cry rang out, “Make way for the king!” and Zedekiah came huffing up. When the commotion had died down, Jeremiah called out, “YHWH God of Israel says this pot represents the entire house of Israel. Look well upon it. It is a lovely pot, for Israel is as the apple of YHWH’s eye.”

King Zedekiah, who had been ushered right up front, smiled. He had intended to ask for the prophet’s blessing upon his new reign as soon as things settled down. Now it looked like he might get it without asking. But Jeremiah’s face grew stern.

“Thus says YHWH of Hosts, God of Israel!” Jeremiah thundered. “Behold, I am about to bring upon this place a terrible calamity, at which the ears of everyone who hears will tingle. Because you’ve forsaken Me, and have burned sacrifices to foreign gods to make this an alien place, and have built high places to Baal and all the host of heaven, and have sent your babies through the fires of Chemosh to fill the land with the blood of the innocents...”

“Wait a minute!” Zedekiah objected. “You can’t be speaking of us! For my administration has barely begun. I’m righteous! I have done none of those things of which you accuse, not I, nor my father, nor his father before him. You are speaking of the sins of Manasseh, my father’s grandfather. And even he repented afterwards, and was forgiven. How can you blame us for what he did?”

“I am a jealous God! Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me,” quoted Jeremiah from the book of Moses. “Yes, I forgave Manasseh when he repented. But the consequence of his sin, of the innocent blood he shed, still hangs over you! *That guilt falls upon you in the fourth generation, unless you also repent and cease your wicked ways.* So I will nullify the counsel of Judah and Jerusalem, so you fall before your enemies, until you die by the sword, or famine, or pestilence. I shall give your carcasses to the birds of the sky and the beasts of the field. I shall make this city a desolation, an object of horror, so those who pass by will be astonished and hiss at its disasters.”

Then, in a sudden dash of fury, Jeremiah turned and hurled the lovely pot far out over the valley. It sailed silently for a few breathless moments, spinning slowly. The people gasped in dismay, for they had really admired it. Then it crashed into a zillion pieces among the other potsherds lining the valley. “Thus shall I break this people, as one breaks a potter’s vessel. Then this place shall no longer be called Topheth, the garbage dump, the place of burning, but rather it shall be called the valley of slaughter, for no other places shall remain to bury the dead. Thus I shall make the entire city of Jerusalem like Topheth.”

The murmuring people were shocked into silence as the expensive pot smashed. But now they found their tongues. “How dare you prophesy against my reign? It has barely begun!” King Zedekiah shouted. Others joined in. Soon nearly the entire crowd was yelling at Jeremiah, things like ‘Fraud!’ ‘Traitor!’ ‘Bigot!’ and ‘Judgmental!’ He bowed his head and pushed through the crowd to the gate, accepting their verbal abuse without further comment.

But when he reached the temple, he stood on the steps above the court and shouted out again. “Because you have stiffened your necks, not to hear My word, YHWH of Hosts God of Israel declares to you, ‘Behold, I am about to bring upon this city the entire calamity I’ve declared against it.’”

Pashhur the priest, chief security officer in the temple, hated Jeremiah anyway. Ever since the judges had negated his death sentence against Jeremiah, Pashhur had plotted for some way to silence him. Now that the people had also turned against him, Pashhur knew his chance had come. He stood up in the full authority of his office to prophesy against Jeremiah. Other priests stood around nodding. Then they tied him, beat him to within an inch of his life, and put him in the stocks at the north gate of Benjamin, leaving him exposed to public ridicule.

The next morning some of the priests came to Pashhur. “Jeremiah was bleeding all night. He may die if we leave him in the stocks any longer.” So Pashhur relented. A chief priest can’t afford to be accused of murder. He went to release Jeremiah.

But Jeremiah perked up when he was released. “You had your chance to repent, Pashhur! As I told you before, so now it is doubled and set, fixed forever. I hear the taunts of your friends saying that I am a ‘terror on every side!’ But that is your name, Magomassabib [‘terror on every side’]! For you are a terror to yourself, your family, and all your friends. While you look on, they will fall by the sword of their enemies. So I will give them into the hand of the king of Babylon. You and your family will go into captivity into Babylon. There you will die, you and your friends to whom you falsely prophesied.”

While Jeremiah was healing up from the beating, he wrote a letter to Nahum and the other elders of the exile. “Thus says YHWH of Hosts, God of Israel, to the exiles whom I have sent from Jerusalem and Judah to Babylon. Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and bear children, and take wives for your sons, that you may multiply there and not decrease. So seek the welfare and prosperity of the city where I sent you. Pray earnestly to YHWH on behalf of Babylon and its king, for in their prosperity you likewise shall dwell in prosperity. Then when seventy years are completed, I will visit you, and fulfill My promise to restore you as a nation and bring you back to the good land of your fathers. For I know the plans that I have for you, plans for good, and not calamity, to give you a future and a hope.

“Then you will call upon Me, and come pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek for Me, and you will find Me, *when you search for me with all your heart*. I will restore your fortunes. I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from exile. So you shall forever be My people, and I will be your God.

“But concerning the king who sits on the throne of David in Jerusalem, and concerning all those who dwell in this city, who would not go with you into exile, Behold, I am sending upon them sword, famine, and pestilence. I will make them like rotten, split-open figs, that cannot be eaten but must be thrown out. Thus I will pursue them and will make them a terror to all the kingdoms of the earth, a curse, a horror, a hissing, and a reproach among all the nations where I have driven them – because they refused to listen to My words which I delivered by My servants the prophets, while you did listen.

“However, even in Babylon there are a few who are false prophets: Ahab the son of Kolaiah, and Zedekiah son of Maaseiah. They claim to prophesy in My name, but I do not know them. I have not sent them. Therefore I testify against them. I will deliver them unto the king of Babylon. He will slay them before your eyes and roast them with fire. Thus their names will become a curse in Israel.

“Also Shemaiah the Nehelamite tries to make his house great in Israel by pretending to be a prophet. He is just a dreamer! He wrote a directive to old Zephaniah son of Maaseiah claiming, ‘God has made you high priest in the line of **Jehoiada** of King Joash’s day. So now rebuke that madman Jeremiah of Anathoth and put him in stocks for his traitorous prophecies insisting that we will be exiled in Babylon for a long time.’ Thus Shemaiah shall never see the good that I shall do for Israel. His descendants shall die out, because he incited rebellion against God’s prophet and His high priest, **Seraiah** grandson of Hilkiah.”

Jeremiah sealed the letter and gave it to his younger brother **Gemariah**, for the king had appointed him as his ambassador to Babylon. When Gemariah and Elasa son of Shaphan took the annual tribute to Nebuchadnezzar, the letter went with them. King Nebuchadnezzar was glad to find Zedekiah faithful with his tribute. And Nahum was delighted to get Jeremiah’s letter. He also had been having grave doubts about those self-appointed ‘prophets’.

Nebuchadnezzar also got a letter from King Zedekiah. He said that Edom had rebelled already, taking advantage of their weakness, by sending raiding parties into Judah and Syria. Zedekiah invoked the Law of the Tributary, which required that their overlords come to their defense. King Nebuchadnezzar agreed. In 596 BC he sent his army to discipline those rebellious Edomites. He deported their young men to other nations. While there, they discovered that Tyre had also rebelled. They were strengthening their army and their walls, and plotting how to withstand the Babylonian invaders.

That was serious, for Tyre was a powerful city. It had a history of rebellion, and of instigating rebellion! General Nebuzeradan took his army down to the seacoast as soon as he finished with Edom. But he was too late. They had just completed their defenses. Nebuzeradan surrounded the city and studied it. In a month, he found no weakness. The walls of their coastal city ran right down to the water. They were strong and high, built on the rock. There was no dirt nearby for siege mounds. Their main entrance was from the sea. They had fast ships which took commerce and weapons between the coastal city and their island, nearly a thousand yards offshore. They had good water supplies both in their coastal city and on the island. Surely the island had enough food for many years, and even if it did not, their ships could continue their trade with other nations, even during a siege. He could not starve them out.

Finally Nebuzeradan gave up the siege and returned to Babylon, with the news that Tyre, with all its riches from its trade with other nations, might well prove invincible.

Nebuchadnezzar heard Nebuzeradan, but since he had not seen it himself, he was not convinced. After all, he was the 'head of gold'! He consulted Daniel.

"O King, commend your Tartan Nebuzeradan. He was wise not to attempt to defeat Tyre at this time. It is the one city in the Levant that you cannot defeat. YHWH has made it so for two reasons. First, so you will not get too proud. If you were to conquer the entire world, you might become arrogant against YHWH who made you the head of gold, and would then be in grave danger. The other reason is that their wickedness has not yet reached the full. When the filth of their idolatry reaches the heavens, I swear that they will be defeated, and their city will be swept clean as one sweeps a stone floor."

Nebuchadnezzar listened to Daniel. He decided to wait to attack Tyre until YHWH agreed that their wickedness was complete. Logos was very pleased with his humble response, and blessed him for it. Daniel also was pleased. Serving this wise king was a joy.

After his aged father had died, Pharaoh Necho II had taken the throne in 610 BC at the age of 53. He died in 595 BC at the age of 68. His son Psamtik II took his place as ruler of Egypt in the 26th 'Saite' Dynasty.

Logos urged Jeremiah to, "Prophecy against Babylon!" Jeremiah obeyed, writing page after page as it flowed from the heart of YHWH – amazing prophecies of Babylon's destruction under the fierce wrath of the Almighty. But Jeremiah was mystified. "O YHWH, I thought Babylon was good. They are Your tool to preserve a remnant of Israel. You said all who are exiled there will be blessed."

"Babylon is my war-club. My powerful weapon of war. With her I shatter nations and destroy kingdoms. But I will repay Babylon and the Chaldeans for the evil they have committed in Zion before your eyes.

"I will repay Babylon according to all her work; all the evil that she has done, so it will be done to her, for she has become arrogant against Me. Therefore I am going to arouse against Babylon the spirit of the destroyer. I will devote all her army to destruction. So flee from the midst of Babylon, O you My people. Abandon her to her fate. Come forth from her midst and save yourselves from the wrath of YHWH. Do not be destroyed in her punishment, for this is the time of YHWH's vengeance."

"When, YHWH? When? That can't be for now!"

"When? My Word is beyond time, for it comes from eternity and extends to the ends of the ages. Yet you shall know, for I shall fulfill it first in your own time. Bind the prophecy into a book, and send it to Babylon with Seraiah son of Neriah. Tell him to read it aloud, while standing by the Euphrates river outside the city gates. Then he shall weight it down and throw it into the middle of the river. When the river dries up and the book of this prophecy is exposed, that very night it shall begin to be fulfilled."

So Jeremiah finished up the book and gave it to Seraiah. Sure enough, next week Seraiah the scribe was asked to accompany King Zedekiah on a trip to Babylon. While Zedekiah was pleading with King Nebuchadnezzar for a reduction in Judah's tribute (claiming extreme poverty, famine, and pestilence), Seraiah stood on the bank of the Euphrates to read the terrible prophecies against Babylon. He was sure glad none of the Babylonians were listening. When he finished, he resealed the book, tied a stone to it, and threw it out into the middle of the river. As instructed, he then prophesied, "Just so shall Babylon sink under the weight of her sins – sink suddenly, because of the sudden calamity I am going to bring down upon her."

Only one person noticed him – Daniel, then 25 and the second ruler in the empire. He was bored with Zedekiah's futile plea and had been watching out the window at that weird dude reading to the river. But his attention was quickly brought back to the task at hand by the king. "Well, Daniel? What should we do for King Zedekiah?"

Speaking in Kasdan as they always did, Daniel bowed to his emperor. "O King, he has fallen on his face repenting and pleading poverty with you. But I know that he still feels too rich, too arrogant, to fall down in repentance and poverty before YHWH our God. I recommend you cut him no slack until he is truly repentant. Now, if you will excuse me, I must discover why his servant is out there reading a book out loud to the river." Daniel hurried out.

He came out the gate just as Seraiah threw the book into the river. "Hey! Wait! What was that? Why did you throw it into the river?" he yelled.

Daniel was too late. The book had sunk like a stone. "Oh, it was just some prophecies Jeremiah gave me. He told me to throw it into the river here. I'm not trying to hide anything from you, Daniel. Honest!"

“Prophecies about what?” Daniel was suspicious.

Seraiah could not hide the truth from the second most powerful ruler in the world. “Against Babylon. Jeremiah said that the king has become arrogant against YHWH and that Babylon will be destroyed. But sir, I’m sure it is for the future, for he said the prophecy will not come to pass until the river runs dry and the book is exposed.”

They looked out over the mighty Euphrates, now near flood stage, filling the huge channel cut under the city walls and through the great city. There was just no way. Daniel nodded. “Okay. Thank you, Seraiah. I accept that. Nebuchadnezzar sure doesn’t seem arrogant now. In fact, he seems to love the wisdom of YHWH. Give Jeremiah my thanks as well. In seventy years then, when it is time for Israel to be restored, I’ll expect the Euphrates to run dry.”

Seraiah’s eyes grew large. “Seventy years, sir? I thought it was for the end of the age and Messiah’s return.”

“Perhaps it is both,” Daniel responded, nodding.

Jeremiah was having trouble with the false prophets in Jerusalem. When King Zedekiah got back from his failed mission to Babylon in 594 BC, they said that he shouldn’t take such abuse. He should unite the surrounding nations into a strong coalition and rebel. Angry at his failure, King Zedekiah agreed. He sent invitations for the surrounding nations to attend a planning meeting. If they built up their armies and all stood together, they might defeat Babylon.

So the next year ambassadors from Philistia, Ammon, Moab, Edom, Tyre, and Sidon gathered at King Zedekiah’s palace. Jeremiah made himself a yoke of wood. He arrived at the palace with it tight around his neck, just as the ambassadors finished their mutual defense agreement.

Not even waiting for the king’s raised scepter, Jeremiah thundered out, “Go back to your masters! Tell them this is what YHWH of Hosts the God of Israel says. ‘I have made the earth and the men and beasts on the face of the earth by My great power. I will give them to the one who is pleasing in My sight. I have now given the lands in the Levant into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, My servant. Even the wild animals of the field serve him. Surely all nations must serve him and his son and grandson, until the time of his own destruction. After that, many nations will make him their servant. But for now, any nation that will not serve him, any king which will not put his neck under the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, I will punish that king and that nation with sword, famine, and pestilence until I have destroyed it by his hand. So don’t listen to your prophets, your dreamers and sorcerers, that you not perish. For they prophesy a lie to you when they tell you not to serve the king of Babylon. *And don’t listen to the king of Tyre.* He thinks that he is god for withstanding Nebuzeradan, but he shall be cast into the pit. But I will have mercy upon all the nations that submit to the king of Babylon. They shall dwell safely in the land, and prosper.’

“O King Zedekiah! Do not listen to the prophets who tell you I’m lying when I say to serve the king of Babylon. They told you that the vessels of gold Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple will be brought back safely to the temple within two years. If they are true prophets, let them pray for YHWH’s protection upon the vessels remaining in the temple, which Nebuchadnezzar did not take. For behold, YHWH told me, ‘... they, too, shall be carried to Babylon, even the silver and the bronze vessels, the bronze sea, the stands, and the pillars. There they shall remain until the day I visit them. Then I shall bring back My holy vessels and restore them to their place.’”

Jeremiah spun, scanning the crowd. He pointed with his finger. “You! Hananiah! You told King Zedekiah that YHWH would break the yoke of Babylon within two years, to bring back Jeconiah and all the exiles from Babylon, and to restore all the golden vessels to the temple.”

“Yes, I did. And so it shall come to pass. In two years.”

“Amen. May YHWH do so, and more. May He confirm the words from your mouth. But you know the law! When a prophet prophesies judgments against many lands and kingdoms, prophecies of war, calamity, and pestilence, he must be believed. But if a prophet prophesies of peace, prosperity, restoration, and blessing, he must have proof! You have no proof, therefore only after your word comes to pass will you be known as one sent by YHWH.”

That made Hananiah mad. He came to Jeremiah and grabbed the yoke off his neck. Then he smashed it over his knee. “So here is my proof. Thus says YHWH, ‘Even so will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the necks of all these nations, within two years.’”

Jeremiah started to walk off. It seemed pretty obvious to any sensible person that Hananiah’s little stunt with his flimsy toy yoke was no proof. But YHWH stopped him. “Go back, Jeremiah. I’m not finished talking to Hananiah yet.” So he returned to the court. The ambassadors were just leaving, but when they saw Jeremiah returning they came back. They really wanted to hear the end of this.

Jeremiah walked right up to Hananiah, not in anger as everyone expected, but with great sadness. “You have indeed broken their yokes of wood, my friend.” He waved at the visiting ambassadors. “But now you have made for them yokes of iron instead. Listen now, Hananiah. YHWH has not sent you. You have made the people trust in a lie. Therefore, thus says YHWH, ‘To correct your lie, I must remove you from the face of the earth. Before this year is out, you will die, because you counseled rebellion against YHWH.’” Two months later, Hananiah was dead.

After Hananiah’s death, Jeremiah was grieving. Not so much for Hananiah, as for all of Judah who had believed his lie. “O YHWH! Is there no joy left in all the earth?” He was depressed and discouraged. He saw no hope, and was close to giving up. So Logos decided to encourage him.

“Take the words I’m giving you, Jeremiah. Write them into a book, for My Word shall stand forever. When the judgments are fulfilled, then you shall rejoice. For behold, days are coming when I will restore the fortunes of My people Israel and Judah. I will bring them back to the land I gave to their forefathers, and they shall possess it. For on that day I will break off the yoke from their neck and tear off their bonds. Strangers shall no longer enslave them. But they shall serve YHWH their God, and David their king whom I will raise up for them. So Jacob shall return and lie down in safety with no one to make him afraid. For I am with you, to save you. I will destroy completely all the nations where I scattered you. And I will chasten you and by no means leave you unpunished, because your iniquity is great. Only I will not destroy you completely, but I will restore you to health and heal your wounds.

“In the latter days, you shall understand this. At that time, all the families of Israel will finally accept Me as their God, and they shall be My people. Then Israel My son shall be head above all the nations of the earth. O Israel! You My people who survived the sword and found grace in the wilderness! I have loved you with an everlasting love! I draw you with My lovingkindness! Again I will build you. So you shall be rebuilt, O virgin daughter of Israel. Once again, all across the hills of Samaria, you shall take up your tambourines and go forth to dance before Me with joy unspeakable and full of glory! And every Sabbath the watchmen on the hills of Ephraim shall cry out, ‘Arise! Let us go up to Zion, to the temple of YHWH our God!’

“He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock. For YHWH has ransomed Jacob and redeemed Israel from the nations. I am bringing them from the north; I will gather them from the remote parts of the earth; the old, the blind, the lame, the woman heavy with child and her young together, a great company. Weeping they shall return, as I shall lead them. For I will turn their mourning into joy, and comfort them. Then they shall shout for joy on the holy mount of Zion. Their life shall be like a watered garden. The virgin shall rejoice in My dance. With her the young man and the old, dancing together. And My people shall be satisfied with goodness.

“Behold, days are coming, when I shall make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and Judah. Not like My covenant at Mount Sinai, which they broke. But I will put My laws within them. My Spirit will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They won’t need to teach anyone to know Me, for all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest of them. Then I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

“For I, who gave the sun for light by day and the moon and stars for light by night, swear that as long as this fixed order remains, so long shall the sons of Israel remain a nation before Me, declares YHWH!”

Thus Jeremiah was encouraged by Logos.

For six years Ezekiel commuted back and forth from Tel-aviv to the palace, as he tried to learn Kasdan from Daniel in his spare time. His duties with the exiles from Judah were many, for not only was he the son of a priest and studying to become a priest himself, but also he was well-respected as the leader of the group of exiles who willingly submitted to Nebuchadnezzar’s Tartan in 599 BC. As such, he had become their counselor and advisor, even as he went to Daniel for his counsel. Now in 593 BC, the fifth year of Jeconiah’s exile, he had a wife, Ella, and two babies, as well as a comfortable little home, a lovely garden, and a zillion responsibilities. Yet he had become fluent enough in Kasdan to converse with the Magi when he visited Daniel. Never truer was the old adage, “To get it done fast, give it to the busiest person you know.”

But all that was about to change. Ezekiel was burned out. He was only thirty years old, but he had been burning the candle at both ends for too many years. He showed up one night for his lesson in Kasdan, and shocked Daniel by the haggard look on his face. “No, Ezekiel. No lesson tonight. Go home. Play with your kids and sleep with your wife. In fact, I order you to take a week off. I don’t think you’ve had one vacation in the six years you’ve been here. I don’t want to see you again until after next Sabbath.”

What could he do? Daniel was the second ruler in the kingdom! Ezekiel obeyed. But the next day he discovered that he had forgotten how to play. It took nearly the entire week for his kids to retrain him. And Ella! Lovely, faithful Ella! It was driving her nuts to have him moping around the house all day every day. Ezekiel couldn’t wait for his vacation to be finished so he could return to his Kasdan lessons and leave the homemaking to his capable wife.

Ezekiel found that vacations are only a different kind of stress. He needed a breather. He decided to take a walk along the Chebar Canal, which flowed from the Euphrates around the outside of the city, not rejoining the Euphrates until it had passed Nippur and Uruk. It was a great place to stretch his legs and do some thinking. As Ezekiel walked, he began meditating on the Kasdan he was learning, and the ancient wisdom of the Kasdim it conveyed. Kasdan is a unique language, pure and sweet, with many lovely word pictures for everything that is true and good, but few and dark words for things that are evil. He realized that Kasdan is a great language for worship. It is full of worship words!

So Ezekiel began to use them for worship. He raised his hands to the heavens as the glorious words rolled off his tongue. He amazed himself. The worship simply flowed! He had no idea that he had achieved this level of fluency in Kasdan! A thrill went through him as he realized the Spirit was now giving him utterance to words he had not yet learned. He knelt there on the bank and let the torrent flow. *This was what he was created for.* He poured every bit of his life energy, body, soul, and spirit, into his worship.

Worship like this is timeless. Who knows how many hours passed? Yet Ezekiel remained there on his knees, praising the God of heaven in the very language of heaven. As always, the heavenly host gathered around, waving the worship on up to the throne of the Almighty, and, as always, adding some of their own to focus and amplify it.

Suddenly they realized – his worship no longer needed amplification! It flowed like purest light up to the throne, illuminating it with a glory never before seen from any human. They were astounded. “Logos! What shall we do? If this keeps up, he will blow a hole in the veil between heaven and earth! He might see us in our heavenly state!”

“Is that such a bad thing?” Logos laughed. The universe laughed with Him. “But you are correct, we must first test his strength of will. For if he is too weak, a vision into the heavenlies could well destroy him. Remember Moses, in the cleft of the rock? He had the strongest character and will of any before him, yet seeing Me still very nearly did him in. It would have slain him if I had not strengthened him. So, send the storm, the earthquake, and the fire.”

Ezekiel’s eyes were fixed on the distant horizon, seeing, but not seeing, a glorious sunset. But then a wind sprang up, to nearly blow him into the canal. He looked to his right and saw a terrible storm bearing down upon him from the north. It was an ugly storm, with black clouds and lightning flashing continuously within it. Suddenly the earth began to quake, just as the winds and rain hit with the force of a tornado, knocking him to all fours. All around lightning flashed and thunder crashed, leaving him within a ring of fire. His ears were deafened by the thunder; his crouching body drenched with rain. A lesser man would have run screaming for shelter. Ezekiel knelt facing directly into the storm, steadied himself against the wind, and again raised his hands in worship.

A big cheer arose from the heavenly host. “Whom shall I send?” Logos called. A zillion hands shot up. Logos chose four special angels, gloriously unique. “Start small,” He ordered. “If he looks faint, back off. I will strengthen him as much as he is able, but remember, he is just a man.”

“Shall we take human form?”

Logos grinned. “Ha! What fun is that? Ezekiel is the one who has dared to penetrate into the heavenly realm. Let him see you as you are. He’ll never forget you! And he’ll never be able to describe it to his friends, either!” Logos began to laugh. He roared until He could barely stand up. The universe shook with the force of His joyous laughter. Logos always did love a good joke.

The four unique angels got together at the point where the flow of worship into the heavenlies was the strongest. Then they peeled back a tiny rent in the veil. Their glory shone through. Ezekiel saw it instantly, but he continued in worship. They opened it wider; still Ezekiel worshiped. They stepped through the veil.

What Ezekiel saw was truly indescribable, for as Logos said, mankind has no words to describe the full splendor of the angelic realm, and the least of His angels is so far beyond our comprehension that human speech simply cannot convey the glory. But with his new understanding of the language of the Kasdim, Ezekiel had rich new terms to actually get the vision down on paper. I’ll do my best to translate his Kasdan into our English language.

This then is Ezekiel’s vision, in his own words.

Though ringed with lightning all around, the heart of the terrible storm remained as black as the darkest night. Then a pinprick of light appeared, like the rising of the morning star. It was not the cold blue-white light of the lightning, but a warm light, like burnished bronze in the sun. My vision was drawn to the light. Somehow I knew that the storm could not harm me while that light shone upon me. So I was at peace. I gazed into it as if into the face of God, my arms lifted in worship and my mouth singing the praises of YHWH in the language of the Kasdim.

The morning star grew slowly brighter, twofold, then sevenfold, then a hundredfold brighter. Still, it remained compellingly lovely and did not hurt my eyes. I was quite sure it was God Almighty Himself! Then I realized that I would be slain, for I had gazed upon the face of God! No man can see God and live. But I forced my eyes to stay open. I didn’t care if I lived or died. To have seen the face of God is worth a thousand deaths! I worshiped all the more.

Then the light resolved into four living beings, shining like the sun in its strength. Now I realized this could not be God, for God is one, not four. No, this must merely be His servants, angels sent to do His bidding, perhaps to bring me a message or take me to Him. If these glorious beings were just His servants, how much more glorious is He?

They each had arms, legs, a torso, and a head like a human form, but there the similarity ended. For they each had four faces. It was like a creature with four fronts, and no sides or back. Imagine, without turning, they could move in any direction and it would always be forward! Even their feet had no front, but were round, a bit like calves’ feet, except cloven in four symmetrical sections.

I studied the closest angel. He had four wings, but I learned that he only used two to fly; the other two always modestly covered his body. Now I knew that these were servants of the Almighty, accustomed to standing in His presence with greatest humility. He also seemed to have an arm and hand like a human hand under each of his four wings. But I never saw more than two hands at a time, for he would fold one pair of wings over his body the instant before opening the other pair to go a different way.

They were flitting about at a dizzying rate. I was amazed how fast they could dart here and there, almost as rapidly as the eye could follow. It seemed like they were staging a spectacular light show, just for me!

The sound of their wings was like the thunder of mighty waters as they zipped back and forth. Yet in all their flying, they remained in perfect formation, so close to each other that their wing tips nearly touched! What kept them unified? With that thought I saw seven intense flames, like torches, darting around between them, touching each one as it passed. So I knew it was the seven Spirits of God who guided them in this spectacular harmonious unity.

Then the four glorious angels came near, to alight upon the earth beside me. Now I saw, just touching the earth beside each of the four, what looked like a spoked wheel, spinning in the same direction as he was moving. All four were identical, so I studied one as he came close. When he darted to the side I saw the spinning wheel rotate in the new direction, but without turning. It was like there were seven wheels, each spinning in a different direction, within each wheel. It was mind-bendingly complex! Each wheel had its own hub, seven spokes, and a rim. Yet as they spun, one inside another, each in a different direction, the spokes did not collide. And the sevens did not end there.

Seven hubs, seven spokes on each hub, seven rims, and now I saw each rim had seven eyes, all around each rim, always open, and seeing in every direction all the time. Now I knew that not only were the seven Spirits of God empowering and unifying the four unique angels, but also each angel had the seven Spirits of God with him, guiding him, giving wisdom and insight, seeing all, knowing all, understanding all. The transcendent, almighty God had become personal, each angel's constant companion.

The four angels darted a bit closer, evidently concerned that their appearance might strike fear into my heart. Indeed I was terrified, but their brightness was welcoming to my eyes, so I forced myself to smile and wave at them. Now they dropped to the ground close to me, so I could study their faces. From a distance they looked identical, but now I could see they were each unique. I gazed up at them, still trying to keep that smile on my face, for they were sixteen feet tall and fearfully awesome. They stopped their darting and looked down at me, returning my smile with faces full of compassion; indeed full of all the best of **human** character traits: humility, meekness, integrity, dependability; every expression of human goodness was written there. The nearest one returned my wave, as if to bid me inspect him more closely. I saw his other three faces were quite different from the face smiling down at me. The face to his right was like a **lion**, blazing with authority, nobility, courage, wisdom, and all the character of a king of kings. The face to his left was full of great strength, like a **bull**; service and instant obedience were written there. He obligingly turned a little so I could see the face looking away from me. It was gazing up into the heavens, with vision and insight like an **eagle**, showing ambition, understanding, and ability to do the will of God. At this point the angel laughed – a delightful, encouraging chuckle – and pointed up in the direction the eagle-like face was looking.

So I looked where he was looking, and saw an azure expanse – a welcoming blue glory cloud – open through the dark clouds of the storm. It was not sky, nor sunshine; it was as if I was gazing into a different realm entirely. As I watched, the expanse opened wider, and I heard a sound coming from it that shook the heavens like thunder, like the crashing waves of the sea, or like the tumult of two mighty armies clashing in battle. The four angels with me echoed the sound with their eagle-like faces gazing up into the blue expanse. Looking at them, I realized it was just the sound of laughter. But this laughter was more than loud – it had such prodigious power that it shook the universe!

The four lion and four bull-like faces joined in the laughter. Then the human-like faces of the four angels smiled down to encourage me to join as well. But I could not for I was overcome with awe. So for the first time, the angel nearest me spoke. “Son of Earth, do you not wish to meet **The One Who Laughs?**”

He was speaking the language of the ancient Kasdim! Suddenly there was nothing I wanted more than to meet The One Who Laughs. I nodded weakly. He held out an arm. Instantly the storm was gone, the canal was gone, the entire city Babylon was gone. I was kneeling on a sea of glass, clear as crystal. Before me was a beautiful mountain, with a mighty river flowing down into the crystal sea. Yet the sea did not get me wet. I allowed my gaze to climb the mountain, and found that with the thought, my body moved swiftly there as well. I followed the river, which was lined with fruit trees in the prime of their fruitfulness. Suddenly hungry, I thought about eating a fruit; again with just the thought I moved under the tree. I glanced back at the four angels. They nodded, so I picked what seemed to be a nice ripe mango and bit into it. Its juiciness and flavor was far greater than a mango! I devoured it eagerly – a little too eagerly. I regretted my haste, for I had splattered the bright red juice all down my front, and I still hadn't met The One Who Laughs. But looking down, my clothes were still clean – in fact, pure and white; cleaner than I had ever seen them. I guess mango juice doesn't stain clothes in the heavenly realms.

I continued up the mountain by this strange method of looking, thinking, and moving without quite touching the ground. It was a little like flying low, except that I didn't need wings. It was so fun I nearly forgot about my quest to meet The One Who Laughs. So when I reached the top of the mountain and saw Him laughing there, I was startled. He was clearly the ruler of this realm, as He was sitting on a magnificent sapphire blue throne sparkling like the finest lapis lazuli gemstone in the sun. I fell on my face before Him. The four unique angels with me, and many others, were bowed before Him as well. I saw that their awesome majestic splendor was as nothing compared to His! Now His laughter, which had shook the universe, was more gentle, caressing, inviting me to join in. Yet I could not, for all my strength had faded away at the sight of Him.

I was in the presence of God Almighty! There was no question now as to the identity of The One Who Laughs. I realized I was looking into the face of YHWH Himself! I was sure that I would be slain on the spot, yet the thought strangely pleased me. *Where better to die than here in the presence of the Holy One of Israel?* “Son of Dust!” He said. “Stand up! Look at Me! Draw near if you dare!” It was a command, spoken in Kasdan. I desperately wanted to obey it but I could not. I struggled to rise. I saw the seven intense flames which had unified the four unique angels now come from the throne, straight at me. Before I could be afraid, these seven Spirits of God entered me. I found myself greatly strengthened, so I could stand. The seven Spirits did not leave me, yet I saw they still danced around the throne, as if enjoying The One Who Laughs.

Now I saw the altar, close to the throne. It was smoking. The live coals on it glowed brightly, as if a sacrifice had been made recently. I smiled. *This is my destiny. What a privilege it will be to end my life a sacrifice, a burnt offering, to The One Who Laughs.* “What a strange thought. YHWH does not permit human sacrifice!” My thoughts argued against the urge within. The four unique angels saw my struggle. One took a tongs to pick up a coal from the altar. But YHWH shook His head, so he just put it back down. The urge grew very strong within. I knew what I must do. I moved near, climbed on the altar, and lay down on the hot coals. Intense pain enveloped me. I died looking into the face of God. Yet not fully dead, for my essence joined the smoke ascending before the One on the throne.

YHWH was thanking each of the angels who had brought me. He spoke tenderly, as if each was the most loved of all His servants. “You’ve done it!” He laughed. “You’ve achieved the impossible! For the first time in the history of the universe you have brought a frail human into My presence, to My very throne, without first having to disguise yourself as human. Won’t it be fun when he tries to tell this story to his friends!” He roared with delight. The four angels laughed and danced among the flames of the seven Spirits. As far as the eye could see, zillions more danced, shouted, and laughed with them.

But it was the One on the throne who held my attention. Though His basic form was clearly human, His glory was indescribable. Brighter than the sun, yet not a flame – more like hot glowing metal, at least from His waist up. Like the sun in our realm, in this realm all the light seemed to come from the One on the throne. His light was not just a warm yellow light, nor a cold white light, but rather all the colors of the rainbow. It flashed across the realm in every hue with a radiance that spoke volumes. At once it portrayed awesome power and glory, yet still invited with warmest love and compassion. I accepted the invitation, determined to return His love in humble submission. With that, my essence separated from the smoke into a more-solid form, like a body. I dropped down, just before the throne, bowed in deepest worship and thanksgiving.

Now He spoke directly to me. “Son of Dust! I also thank you, for daring to come unbidden into My holy realm! Your boldness delights Me! Rare indeed are humans so committed to My worship that they are willing to leave the physical realms behind and penetrate into My realm, to the foot of My throne. Come laugh with Me! Dance with Me! Share My joy!” He came down and reached out to me.

He shrank down to my size, or perhaps it was I who grew to meet His 20 foot tall stature. The music swelled, and for the first time I realized that it had been playing all along, in sweetest, soothing chords of peace and pure joy. I caught a deep breath, filling my lungs with the scent of roses, jasmine, and citrus tree blossoms. I took His arm.

A mighty cymbal crashed. The thrill that ran through my being brought a big surge of energy and enthusiasm as **the Dance** began. It was not the rhythmical Judean dances I had learned, nor the frenetic dances I had seen from the pagan priests. It was not swing, nor cha-cha, nor rumba, nor fox trot, nor tango. It was not folk dancing, nor square dancing, nor ballroom, nor ballet. It was not the Spanish bolero, flamenco, or tarantella. It was neither the hornpipe nor the waltz, the allemande nor the cotillion, the jitterbug nor the bump, a vigorous break dance nor a magnificent, soothing Viennese waltz. How can I describe it? It was a majestic, incredibly high-energy combination of all of those. Our ballroom was the universe. Our lighting was the galaxies. Our audience, the multitude of the heavenly host. And instead of my struggling to keep time with the music, the music kept perfect time with us as we leaped, twirled, flipped, and darted among the stars.

Never before has any human frame experienced such a dance. Yet even as that thought came to me, I knew that in the ages to come, all of humanity will join the Master of the Dance, for I knew beyond doubt that we are made for this. Yet to be the first! What incredible joy! What a privilege! I am at once greatly humbled, and encouraged. I know that from this day forth I will do anything to please The One Who Laughs. My life will forever be committed to serving and loving Him, learning to know and obey Him, and living in harmony with this, His Dance of the Ages.

When the Dance was over, although I felt in my spirit that this incredible Dance is never truly over, the Master of the Dance enveloped me in a flaming hug. It lasted a long time, though time seemed to have no meaning in heavenly realms. But finally He pushed me back a bit and looked down into my face, wanting to talk.

“Thank you, Son of Dust, for coming. Thank you also for dying to yourself upon My altar and for sharing My joy! I am YHWH Elohim, El Shaddai. But in this My realm, I am Logos the Word, fullest possible expression of the eternal Father into the realms of time and space. I am glad that you have come, for I have a mission for you, if you chose to accept it; a mission impossible, harder even than dying on My altar. But first, you have questions to ask of Me.”

Until that moment I had no questions, for it was all too overwhelming and beyond my questioning. But when asked, a question popped into my mind. “Lord YHWH – Logos – I am born in sin, while You are utterly holy. Ever since Your priests were slain and Your temple shut down, no sacrifice for sin has been made. I was sure I would be slain, for I have seen Your holy face! I was compelled to climb upon Your altar, for I dare not bring sin into Your holy, holy, holy presence! Why then do I yet live? How can You touch me, dance with me, even hug me?”

Logos’ smile broadened and the laughter began anew. Joy filled me, my doubts fled, and I laughed with Him. He hugged me again, saying, “My beloved! Sin always results in death. But the one who willingly dies to self out of pure worship and love of Me cannot die. He lives even though he dies, for I am the Resurrection and the Life! Your own willingness to lay your entire self on My altar has brought atonement for your sin. Now you are holy, too. So I can do with you what I’ve always wanted to do with My precious ones. For I did indeed make you to receive My love, to join Me in the Dance, to hug Me, enjoy Me, and share My joy.”

Still enveloped in His hug, I thought there could be no more questions, but another one came to mind. “Why me? I am unworthy! Why not Daniel?”

“Why not you? No man is more worthy than another, for all are equally unworthy before Me. Daniel is great in My house, faithful, true, perfect in all his ways, always interceding before My throne. I speak with him often in dreams and visions, for his spirit communes with Mine day and night. But even Daniel does not have the courage or boldness to blast his way unbidden into My heavenly realms, to captivate Me with his intensity of worship, to take My Kingdom by sheer force of his will and desire!”

I was horrified. “Did I... do that?”

The One Who Laughs was beside Himself with glee. “Yes! Your boldness knows no bounds! Your love of Me, My worship, and My heavenly language combined in you to become a force which could not be denied. That is good! *Bold, I like!* Now, I have a mission for you that will require all your boldness and courage. A most difficult mission. Actually... it is a mission impossible. Will you accept it?”

“I accept! Though it slay me, I gladly give myself into Your service, now and forever!”

Logos pushed me back again and smiled at me. I knew that to bring a smile to this lovely face was worth the cost, no matter how great. He put a hand over my head, and oil soaked through my hair. “Good! I anoint you as My prophet. I send you to the house of Israel. For they are a rebellious people, a stubborn people, who have rebelled against Me and transgressed My Law from the day I led them out of Egypt even until now.” His words were stern, though His face smiled. “Your mission is this. Speak My Words to them, whether they will listen or not.”

“Of course, Lord Logos! That is easy! I am always happy to speak Your Words, whatever You say.”

“Easy?” He gave me a quizzical chuckle. “I said, they are a rebellious people. They will mock you, scorn you, persecute you, and try to slay you, for so they have always done to My servants the prophets. But you must neither fear them nor be dismayed.”

“As long as I know that I have Your Words, I will stand firm, for Your Word is Truth. But just to be sure I get it right, please give me Your Words in a book. I don’t want to get a single word wrong.”

Logos threw back His head to laugh out loud. “Ezekiel! Since when did I ever write out My Words to My prophets in a book?” It was clearly a challenge.

I rose to the challenge. “Bold I like!” You just told me. So now I will be bold. I demand a book! I cannot take their persecution or mocking unless I am absolutely sure I have the total Truth from You, word perfect!”

“They have the book of Moses, the Law, the writings of the Prophets. They have the Psalms and the Chronicles of My people. These are My Words! Simply remind them of all I promised, and all I threatened if they forsake Me.”

I hesitated, pondering. The watching angelic host held its collective breath, frozen in my moment of decision. *Have I asked too much? Am I dishonoring the King of the Universe?* “No! I’m not Moses! I’m not Joshua, or David, or Isaiah, or Jeremiah! I demand my own book, or I cannot accomplish Your mission. I know my limitations. Every word out of my mouth must be Your Word, lest I bring shame to Your holy name and disgrace to Your mission!”

I had put a stern look on my face. Now it was reflected on the face of Logos. For a moment it seemed as if He would lash out in wrath on me. But then that irrepressible chuckle burst out and in an instant the laughter again filled the heavenlies. For a while it could not be contained, as all the heavenly host shouted the victory and sang glad songs of praise and joy before the throne.

“Did you hear him?” Logos laughed to the four angels at His throne. “This Son of Dust is zealous for My name! He longs for the purity of My Word! He refuses to bring disgrace on My mission! I knew when he first penetrated the heavenlies that He would be perfect for this! Come, celebrate with Me!” Again I found myself swept up into the Dance, joined by myriads of the heavenly host, romping with them throughout the vastness of the universe.

If anything, the thrill of this Dance was even greater than the first; and even more indescribable! So I will skip past it, and past the hug that followed, to the conclusion. “How I love you, Son of Dust! What joy this has been, to dance with you. We shall always remember this time. This will give you courage to stand when they persecute you. Now are you ready to accept My mission?”

“Yes my Lord and my God!” Still smiling, I bowed my head low. “As soon as I have my own book.”

“What if I say I cannot give you your own book?”

“You cannot say that. First, because You cannot lie. For I know that You who created the universe can do all things. Second, because I know that the one who created me bold would not then crush my courage as one crushes a bug.”

Logos nodded to me. “Bold, courageous, I made you. Now I have also developed in you endurance, patience, and perseverance under adversity. Thus I enable you to fulfill My mission impossible! For all things are possible to the one who endures to the end. Come and see!” He led me to the throne itself. The adoring angels lifted off its top: the Mercy Seat. Logos reached into the box underneath, and pulled out a book. “Here, My friend. This is your own book. Observe that it is inscribed with your own name – ‘The Book of Ezekiel’. In it is every word, every situation, every encounter you shall face with the house of Israel.”

“Thank You, Logos. You had it all along. I knew You could do it. I will memorize Your book and not deviate by one word. Now I’m ready to return to the realm of men.”

“Not so fast. Open your mouth. Eat the book.”

“What? Eat the book? But I’ve not read it yet!” I glanced down to flip through my book. It looked nice, but it was filled with lamentations, mourning, judgments, and woes.

“Bold I like in you, because you are like Me!” Logos grabbed the book out of my hands. “Eat it, Son of Dust. Feed on it. It will be sweet in your mouth, though it may grow bitter in your stomach. Fill your body with the words of this book. Then go speak it to the house of Israel.”

As He spoke He broke off chunks of the book and stuffed it into my mouth. It was indeed sweet. I submitted to His feeding, chewing until the entire book was finished.

“But Lord Logos! Now we are back as before, for I am ready to go, but I have not the book anymore!”

Once again Logos laughed, loud and long. This was a sparkling, encouraging laugh, with the power of infinite love behind it. “Go! Now you have My Words within you, filling your body and soul, even into your heart. Go to the exiles, the sons of your people, and say to them, whether they listen or not, ‘Thus says YHWH Elohim!’ The words that come out of your mouth will be My Words, for you now have My Word within you.”

The Spirit within now lifted me up to carry me away, down the mountain, across the sea of glass, and back to the Chebar Canal. As I left, I heard the angelic chorus singing and shouting, “Blessings go with you from this place! And blessing, glory, and honor be unto Him who sends you from this place!” So I came to the exiles, and to my home and family. I plopped down, without moving or speaking, for seven days, so overwhelmed was I with the vision.

They told me many came to see me during that time. Messengers from Daniel, asking why I was not back from my vacation – why I had not renewed my Kasdan lessons. Visitors from Tel-aviv asking my help on all the projects I’d started. Elders who wanted my counsel on the many things I was doing to aid the exiles, for I had been a very busy man. Then Daniel himself paid me a concerned visit. “Ezekiel, my friend. Snap out of it. You were just working too hard. That’s why I ordered you to take a vacation. But I was too late. You’ve already burned out. Come with me to the palace. I will care for you there until you’re better, and ready to renew your work. You will need to do nothing there but continue your Kasdan lessons with me, for the Kasdan language is soothing and healing to your soul.”

So he brought me to the palace, into the quarters of the Magi. There Daniel sat me down, gave me water and some fruit, and began to rehearse with me my recent lessons in the language of the Kasdim. But as soon as the Kasdan began flowing from his lips, I awoke and interrupted him. In fluent Kasdan with flawless accent, I told Daniel and the other Magi of my vision and of the book I had eaten.

“You have clearly been in heavenly realms! For I was your teacher, yet your command of Kasdan far surpasses mine! Yet as with any prophecy of good, it must be proved before it can be believed. Therefore stand now among us, and speak the Word of YHWH from the book that you have eaten.” He said it like he was certain that I could comply.

So I stood, still rather weak and wobbly, and spoke those bold words, “Thus says YHWH God of Israel!” Then I waited, looking down at my toes. For a long time nothing came to me, and I was tempted to doubt. But to his credit, Daniel waited patiently without interrupting. He had faith for me. He knew quite well that every green new prophet needs kindness and understanding at first.

“Son of Dust...” Finally the words began to come, and I realized they were directed at me rather than at the Magi. “I have appointed you a watchman to the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from Me, warn them! For if I tell the wicked, ‘You shall surely die!’ and you do not warn him, he shall still die, but I will require his blood at your hand. But if you do warn him, and he still does not turn away from his wickedness so he may live, he will die in his iniquity, but you have delivered yourself. If a righteous man turns away and falls into iniquity, you must warn him. If you do not, I shall send other warnings after which, if he does not heed, he shall die in his sin, even after all his righteous deeds, but I will require his blood at your hand. However, if you warn the righteous man, he shall turn from his sin, again practice righteousness because of your warning, and live, and you have delivered yourself.”

“A watchman!” Daniel nodded. “I confirm that. It is a true Word from YHWH. From this day forth you are relieved of all your other duties. I appoint you now as a Watchman on the Wall for the house of Israel.”

CHAPTER 20 – ZEDEKIAH REBELS

The elders of the exiles were miffed that Ezekiel was no longer available to help them. There was so much work to be done, so many unfinished projects. Ezekiel, who was brilliant and multi-talented, had been one of their main leaders, as well as being a priest and political spokesman.

But he dropped it all, without a single glance backward, to follow wholeheartedly the Word which YHWH gave him. He warned individuals. He warned the elders and leaders of the people. He warned the people who gathered together to worship on the Sabbath. He sent warnings back from Babylon to Jerusalem. He prophesied to the people. He prophesied to the mountains, the hills, the ravines, the valleys. He prophesied to those destined for slaughter, and to the remnant. He even lived warnings, by doing strange, foolish-looking things to startle the people into paying attention, and then translating when they questioned him.

King Zedekiah of course heard the warnings. But the more he heard, and the more he heard the local prophecies from Jeremiah, the more he hardened his heart. He already had defense pacts signed by Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia. All he needed now was a treaty with Egypt. He traveled down to Sais to see Pharaoh Psamtik II. But 592 BC was not a good year. Psamtik was clear up south in Nubia, consolidating the kingdom of Egypt as far as Kerma beyond the third cataract. Zedekiah couldn't wait. He had a kingdom to run. He returned home.

He tried again in 591 BC, Psamtik's 4th regnal year. King Zedekiah met Psamtik II at Sais. His campaign through Nubia had been successful, and he was feeling pretty good about himself. He let Zedekiah talk him into a campaign into the Levant. Already he had forgotten what his father, Necho II, had told him the consequence would be if Egypt strayed beyond the Brook of Egypt. All he knew was that Egypt had once owned the Levant, and with his army strong and his kingdom secure, it was time to get it back. Zedekiah promised his support, showing him the treaties he had with all the other kings of the Levant. So at the turn of the year, Psamtik II brought his army into the Levant and retook all the old Egyptian garrisons which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from his father Necho II.

Zedekiah had paved his way. The cities and towns in the Levant all welcomed the Pharaoh as their liberator from the tyranny of Babylon. Finally they were free! With their combined armies, Nebuchadnezzar would finally be defeated and sent back to Babylon in shame. Then all the exiles of Judah will be liberated, just in time to fulfill the prophecy of Hananiah the Prophet, who had declared that the exiles would return within two years from 592 BC! (Though Hananiah himself had died, many still believed his prophecy, since they wanted so much for it to be true.) So in 591 BC, Zedekiah and the other nations of the Levant bound themselves under an oath to serve Egypt, to defy Babylon, and to send no more tribute to Nebuchadnezzar.

Sadly, part of that oath was religious. Zedekiah was not particularly religious – he had mostly ignored the temple his entire life – but he knew how to impress the kings of the surrounding nations. He worshiped their gods when they came visiting. Now he began making regular sacrifices to those pagan gods at the temple. When Jeremiah furiously confronted him, he excused himself, “Hey! Don't be so intolerant! We still worship YHWH here. He won't mind if we make my allies feel welcome here, too.” Thus he defiled the temple of Solomon which his own father Josiah had so carefully cleansed. Logos was grieved.

Nebuchadnezzar noticed that the Levant had not sent their tribute. He noticed that no messengers had returned from his garrisons in the Levant. Yes, he suspected that they had rebelled, but he decided to send more messengers with stern warnings of his wrath, and give them another year to come through with his assigned tribute. Sadly, his ambassadors were slain by Zedekiah's soldiers.

King Zedekiah knew the showdown must be near. He anxiously checked to be sure all his preparations were in place. He warned his allies, guessing that the Babylonians would arrive in the Levant before winter. He ran practice alerts and joint exercises with the various militaries now under his command. He verified with all his pagan priests that the rituals and sacrifices to guarantee his victory had all been done. But now he got cold feet. He had so callously scorned Jeremiah's prophecies – but he needed all the gods on his side, including YHWH! So he found two priests of YHWH, Seraiah and old Zephaniah, and sent them to beg for Jeremiah's support, pleading, “King Zedekiah asks, please, pray to YHWH God of Israel on our behalf!”

Jeremiah fired back a message to Zedekiah. “Thus says YHWH, God of Israel! Pharaoh's army, which came out of Egypt for your assistance, will return to its own land. Only after that the Chaldeans will come, and will fight against Jerusalem, and will overthrow it. They will capture it, and burn it with fire. Do not deceive yourself, saying, ‘The siege has been long and wearisome for them. They will give up and return to their own land.’ For I swear to you, that even if you defeat the entire Chaldean army so none but their wounded remain among them, their wounded would still rise up and burn this city with fire.” He could not have made it any more clear.

590 BC was a year of waiting. The armies were all ready. Nebuchadnezzar could not defeat them. Psamtik's armies covered the Levant, with every garrison manned and on full alert, awaiting the inevitable attack from Babylon. But the messengers reported back daily that there still was no sign of the Babylonians. So the whole year became a bust.

Harvest time arrived. Hananiah's prophecy had failed! His ‘two years’ were past. The time for battle was past. The men needed to return home. They were tired of waiting. Psamtik II promised Zedekiah that they would return the next spring, and then took his army back to Egypt.

King Nebuchadnezzar now received word that all the garrisons in the Levant had been taken over by Egyptians, and all his soldiers stationed there had been mercilessly slain. Now he knew why none of his ambassadors had returned; they too had all been slain. This was more than a rebellion. It was a total conspiracy of the entire Levant! Nebuchadnezzar was furious. He had not been demanding too much! He had been very good to them. They were prospering under his benevolent rule. And he had warned them exactly what would happen to them if they rebelled. *So now he must keep his word.*

Still, the king consulted his second-in-command and chief advisor, Daniel. He asked for time to pray about it, for he recognized this as a critical hour for his people in Judah. Daniel alerted Ezekiel to be praying too, for he had come to respect the young prophet's extraordinary perspective.

Ezekiel gathered some elders of Judah to his home in Tel-aviv and urged them to intercede with him for Judah. They spent three days and nights in earnest prayer and fasting together. Early in the morning just before sunrise, when many had fallen asleep, Logos came to Ezekiel. He ripped open the veil between the two realms, reached down through the veil, and yanked Ezekiel up into the heavenlies by his hair. As his tale is told in Kasdan, which few in our wisdom-poor culture understand anymore and even fewer can translate properly, I will translate it for you.

This then is Ezekiel's story, in his own words:

I was nearly in despair, for I knew that my own people in Judah were in mortal danger. Many times before, Logos had come to me and spoken clearly to me, and I had always been bold to speak His word. But now He tarried! Why, at this desperate time of need? Bold I had burst through into His realm by the Chebar Canal. 'Bold, I like!' He had said. But now I did not feel bold. I was anxious, fearful, yes, even terrified for my people. I cried out in the agony of my soul, tormented in spirit, and totally unable to reach through the bleakness of my fears to the glory of His holy presence. But yet I would be bold! I yelled, screamed, cried, jumped up and down and shook my fists toward the heavens. "The Word is within me indeed!" I shouted. "So where is it already! Why do I stand here shouting at You in darkness of soul and spirit while You are off somewhere dancing beyond the stars?" At that moment, the heavens above were blown open and Logos appeared, only to reach down, grab me by the hair, and yank me up!

"O Son of Dust," Logos said, looking stern and rather disgusted with me. "Boldness to come into My presence in worship, to defend the honor of My name, to require of Me all that is in accord with My nature, and to do My will, is a wonderfully precious and blessed thing. But boldness in anger, in anxiousness or fear, or boldness to force Me to do that which is against My nature, is a perversion which My adversary uses against you. That kind of boldness shall not take My Kingdom." He let go of my hair and dropped me.

Not expecting the rebuke, I was appalled. I fell on my face before Him. "Get up!" He commanded. "*You pray for Judah and Jerusalem, do you?* So come with Me already. Look at the abominations there; then see if you are still bold to command Me to show them mercy!"

Instantly we were beside the main north entrance to the city. The glory of God had always covered the city, but now there was no glory. I easily saw why. A huge pagan idol had been built, right in the entry to the city. No wonder God was angry! "Now do you see what they are doing, Son of Dust? *Yet you shall see greater abominations than these!*"

Next Logos took me to the main entry to Solomon's temple. There stood another idol, huge, hideous, and menacing. Logos would not look at it. With His back to it, He cried out as if in agony, "Now you see what great sins My people commit, to push Me out from My own temple! *Yet you shall see greater abominations than these!*"

He brought me into the temple court, before the door to the holy place. But instead of entering, He pointed down to an adjacent wall. The wall was damaged, as if it had been broken and then crudely repaired. "Dig there, Son of Dust. Go in. See the abominations they are committing inside!" I obeyed. Within was a large secret room filled with pagan priests, witches, wizards, every kind of unclean beast, vile insects, bats, mice, rats, and idols of every shape and kind in horrible profusion, on shelves around the room, and even carved upon the walls. It was dark, and the room was full of smoke from burning incense, but as my eyes grew accustomed to the haze, I saw seventy elders of Israel standing in front of the pagan priests, their incense censers in their hands. "Get an eyeful, O Son of Dust. See what sins the elders of Israel are committing in secret, each with his carved idols. They think I cannot see in their murky room. *Yet you shall see greater abominations than these!*"

He next took me to the court of women in the temple. Many women were there, though it was not the time of one of the seven Feasts of Israel as given by YHWH. Besides, the women were weeping, not celebrating joyfully as YHWH had commanded. I was startled to realize that this was a high 'holy' day on the pagan calendar – the winter solstice. These were all Hebrews, yet they were weeping for the death of Dumuzi (Tammuz in Hebrew), as Ishtar (Astarte) had commanded at the time of Nimrod and the first pagan religion. Today was their 'Black Child-mass'. They had sacrificed a male human child and had drunk his blood in memory of the death of Dumuzi, so winter would pass and his life would be re-born in the spring greenery. Logos saw my utter revulsion and nodded, again crying, "*Yet you shall see greater abominations than these!*"

He then brought me to the court of priests, where the high priest of YHWH stood at the altar to burn the morning sacrifices to YHWH. Except now the court was filled with pagan priests. They turned their backs to the temple and bowed in worship to the rising sun – the Egyptian sun god!

“Do you see this, Son of Dust? Even these abominations are but a light thing for the house of Judah, for they have filled the land with violence and provoked Me repeatedly to My face, to thumb their noses at Me and dare Me to arise. Therefore I shall arise, in My wrath! *My eye shall have no pity, nor shall I spare. Though they cry loudly in My ears, yet I shall not listen to them.*”

Logos turned away from me and commanded loudly, “Let the executioners of the city come forth!” Six bronze giants came over the north wall, each carrying a sword – wait. There was a seventh, but he was small and a bit chubby, with a white linen priestly robe, stoodgy-looking beard, and a briefcase instead of a sword. They all entered the temple courtyard and stood beside the bronze altar.

Logos addressed the small chubby one first. “Go through Jerusalem. Take your pen in your hand and put a mark on the forehead of every person who sighs and groans over the abominations which are being committed in the city.” Then to the six bronze warrior giants He added, “Follow My scribe. Go through the city after him and strike. Do not allow your eye to pity. Do not spare. Utterly slay the old and the young, both men and women, maidens and little children, but do not touch anyone on whom is My mark. Start here from My temple. Defile the temple and fill the courts with the slain. Go, now!”

I watched after them, and saw with horror how many were the slain; how few remained with the mark on their foreheads. I could not bear the sight. I fell on my face before Logos, crying, “Alas! O Lord YHWH! Are You destroying the entire remnant of Israel? Will You wipe out Jerusalem in Your wrath?”

Again, He looked at me sternly. “After all you’ve seen, still you dare to pray against My Father’s will? Don’t fight Me. Join Me! For the iniquity of the house of Israel is very great. The land is filled with blood, and the city is full of idolatrous perversions. Yet they still claim that I don’t see. *Therefore My eye shall not pity, nor shall I spare, but I will bring their vile conduct down upon their heads!*”

At that point the chubby scribe returned to report his mission complete. Logos nodded to him, while overhead the sky was suddenly rent asunder to expose that glorious realm which I had visited by the Chebar Canal. Those four awesome unique angels with the four faces were still there, kneeling around the sparkling sapphire blue throne. Over the throne, and over their heads as well, was that brilliant welcoming azure glory cloud I’d seen. “O you guardians, come down!” Logos shouted up to the four angels.

“Those unique angels are guardians?” I asked.

“Yes, from time immemorial, these are the guardians of My people Israel.” They darted down. That azure glory cloud from over the throne came with them, filling the temple and all its courts. I, too, was enveloped within it. But this time, it terrified me and filled me with dread!

I fell on my face, wondering if the glory cloud would slay me. *What is it? Perhaps it is the fire of purification?* The sound of the wings of the guardians blasted through the temple court as if conveying the voice of God Almighty Himself. Logos answered my thoughts. “The azure glory cloud is the Spirit of the eternal Father, come in great power and authority, and now filled with terrible wrath!”

Logos commanded the chubby scribe in the linen robe, “Enter between the whirling wheels under the guardians. Fill your hands with coals of fire to scatter over the city.” He obeyed. Everywhere he scattered the coals, fires broke out, until Jerusalem was filled with thick, black smoke.

Then I saw the four guardians rise on thundering wings above the city, directly over the temple. The glory cloud rose with them, hovering over their heads. Logos snatched me up as well, and plopped me down near the eastern gate.

Twenty-five chief advisors of the city had met there after fleeing the fires. They were discussing the situation. I heard Pelatiah say, “Don’t worry about those old ghettos burning up. We’ll just replace them with nice new houses. Jerusalem is like an iron pot, protecting all flesh within from any attacks of the surrounding nations.”

“Iron pot, indeed!” retorted Logos. “A pot filled with the flesh of those you have slain, roasting over the flames! Son of Dust! Prophecy My judgements against them!” With that, He filled me with the Spirit of Prophecy.

“Thus says YHWH Elohim!” I shouted. “I know what you have said, for indeed I hear your every thought in your bedrooms, and I have seen all your slain whom you have laid out in the streets. Therefore I shall execute judgment against you! Your iron pot shall be smashed, and I shall deliver you into the hands of foreigners. Judah shall fall by the sword, out to the borders of Israel, for you have not remembered My laws nor obeyed My commands, but have lived by the customs of the pagan nations around you. Then you shall know that I am YHWH!”

Pelatiah was just saying, “Do not fear. God is...” But at my prophecy, he crumpled, as dead as a doorpeg. I fell on my face, crying out once again, “Alas, YHWH Elohim! Will You bring the remnant of Israel to a complete end?”

He lovingly reached down and lifted me up. His touch strengthened me. “O Son of Dust,” He said. “Your fellow exiles are the remnant, not these who remain in Jerusalem. For these have said, ‘In their wickedness YHWH cast them out of Judah so we could take their property.’ But I swear, though I scattered My remnant throughout the nations, yet I am their protection everywhere they have gone. In a little while I shall regather them out of all the nations where I scattered them, and give them the land of Israel. When they come they will remove all the abominations from it. So I shall give them a new heart and put a new spirit within them, that they may obey Me, to walk in My Law. Then they will be My people and I will be their God.

“But as for these in Jerusalem whose hearts go after their detestable abominations, I shall bring their wicked deeds down upon their own heads. Then they shall know that I am YHWH Elohim, God of Israel!”

At that, the four guardians lifted up their wings with a thunderous roar, the whirling wheels beside them, and darted off east of the city to Mount Olivet. The awesome azure glory cloud representing the Spirit of the eternal Father still hovered over them. The six warrior angels and the chubby scribe in the linen robe went with them. I knew they were on a ‘search and destroy’ mission to bring the wrath of almighty God down on the pagan temple that was there, as well as on every other pagan influence and abomination that they would find throughout Judah. But with my eyes still gazing upon that wondrous glory cloud, Logos gently lifted me up and carried me away, back to Babylon, back to the exiles, back to the elders of Judah whom I had asked to pray in my living room in Tel-aviv.

I found myself lying flat on the floor. Elders around me were crying, praying, and putting wet towels on my face. “I’m okay,” I tried to reassure them. “But I’ve just had a terrible vision! Judah is doomed! Jerusalem is burning! Our brothers there are being slaughtered! And it is YHWH Himself, indeed, the wrath of the almighty eternal Father, who is doing it!” Then I shared with them the vision.

They quickly notified Daniel. He jumped in his chariot and rode furiously to see me, for he had to hear the vision for himself. Hearing me, he wept. Then, weeping all the while, he drove slowly back to tell King Nebuchadnezzar.

“O King, live forever!” Daniel bowed, still red-faced from wiping his eyes. “I have the Word of YHWH for you regarding your campaign to the Levant. ‘Go. Show no mercy. Let your eye not pity, nor let your arm spare. For I, YHWH, give them into your hands to do what you will.’”

King Nebuchadnezzar’s eyes grew large. “You would counsel this against your own people, Israel?”

“Not my counsel. The counsel of YHWH of Hosts, God of Israel, in whose name I speak. He says, ‘They have not only rebelled against you, O King. They have also rebelled against Me, My Law, and My priests. You are My weapon of judgment against them. Yet a remnant will be saved; those whom you choose to bring back to serve you in Babylon.’”

“And what of Egypt, whose armies have now retaken all their garrisons throughout the Levant? For I heard that Pharaoh Psamtik has allied with Zedekiah and the entire Levant, promising to help defend them.”

“I will send the Pharaoh and his armies back to Egypt, O King. If he won’t listen, he will die and I will put another in his place. Psamtik shall not hinder you. I swear it.”

“I will do as you say, Daniel my friend. When I come to the Levant and find the Egyptian garrisons all empty, I will know that what you have said is true.”

But the next day, as King Nebuchadnezzar prepared his army for battle, the elders of Judah rushed up to Daniel. “Ezekiel seems to have gone crazy, again. He packed some luggage last night, made a hole in our little mud wall around Tel-aviv, pushed all his baggage through it, and walked away from the town, with a cloth over his face to cover his eyes. We think you should come to make him go to the hospital. His visions have driven him insane.”

So Daniel returned with them to Tel-aviv. A big group there was holding him captive at his own house. “What is this all about?” Daniel commanded. They shook their heads and shrugged their shoulders.

Ezekiel was inside. They had given him some lunch, but he was eating it quivering and wide-eyed with terror. He did indeed look quite insane.

Ezekiel had been silent, but now he shouted out, “Thus says YHWH Elohim! ‘This burden concerns Zedekiah and the princes of Judah, as well as the nobles of the house of Israel who are in Jerusalem. I am a sign to them. As I have done, so they shall do, covering their face with a cloth so they cannot see the destruction of the land of Israel. But I shall spread My net over them! They shall be caught in My snare! So I shall bring them back to Babylon, to the land of the Chaldeans. But King Zedekiah will not see it, though he shall die here. I shall send a sword after his noblemen, his guards, and his troops. The survivors shall be scattered to the four winds. So they will know that I am YHWH, when I scatter them among the nations and spread them out among the foreign countries. But I shall spare a few of them from the sword, famine, and pestilence, so they may tell all their abominations among the nations where they go, so they, too, may know that I am YHWH!’”

“From now on they shall eat their bread quivering with anxiety. They shall drink their water wide-eyed in horror. Their land will be stripped of its fullness by violence and wickedness. The cities will be laid waste. The land will become a desolation. So all shall know that I am YHWH!”

“When?” One of the elders of Judah shouted out. “You’ve been prophesying to us doom and destruction for years! But the days grow long! Every vision fails!”

“The days now draw near, with the fulfillment of every vision. Thus says YHWH Elohim! ‘None of My Words will be delayed any longer, for in your own days, O rebellious house, I shall speak the Word and do it!’”

Daniel hurried back to the palace. “O King, live forever! YHWH just spoke again through Ezekiel. After you have taken the Levant, and after you have put up your siege against Jerusalem, King Zedekiah and his men will try to escape through a hole under the wall. But your servants will capture them, kill some, and bring the survivors into Babylon, where they will die. Thus you shall know that YHWH is with you for good, to establish your kingdom and to make you the head of gold as He has promised.”

CHAPTER 21 – JUDAH FALLS INTO EXILE

Pharaoh Psamtik II really intended to return in early spring. In fact, he worked hard to strengthen and refresh his armies in preparation for the battle that he knew was coming. But everything seemed to be against him. It even seemed like his own gods were fighting him. Finally he consecrated a fast and entered his favorite temple to kneel and pray at the feet of Ra, the sun god.

When he didn't come out after a whole day, his servants entered, to find him facedown in front of Ra, stone dead. "It is the curse of Ra!" they whispered among themselves. "He should never have attempted to aid the Levant!"

Still in the prime of life, Psamtik had only ruled for six years. His son Apries took the throne of Egypt as Pharaoh Wahibre Haaibre [Bible spelling: Hophra]. He determined to no longer anger Ra by trying to aid the Levant. So Egypt vacated its military garrisons and relinquished its claims on the Levant. Pharaoh Wahibre ruled for nineteen years. But Egypt was never again a world power.

The Babylonians reached the Levant in spring, 589 BC. The Egyptians had all been recalled from their garrisons by Pharaoh Wahibre. Thus King Nebuchadnezzar knew that Daniel's prophecy was true. He directed his campaign from Riblah, while his general Nebuzeradan methodically conquered every city in the Levant (except Tyre) dealing with them according to their rebellion or submission. Arvad, Byblos, Sidon, Acco, Joppa, Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Gaza; he went down the coast. Then across the Valley of Jezreel, subduing the cities of Israel's highlands. Then Aram and south to Bashan, Gilead, Ammon, Moab, and Edom; finally north through the Negev, Simeon, and the cities of Judah. It was a clean sweep of every rebellious city.

It took nine months to reach Jerusalem, the last of the Levant's mighty fortified cities. By December 11, 589 BC (Tevet 10) the famine was already severe in Judah. Every other city had fallen to the power of Nebuzeradan's army, while he'd hardly lost a man. So it was an invincible force that besieged Zedekiah in his 'iron pot' with his nobles and his puny army. In far-off Babylon, Ezekiel knew, for God told him. Logos had him prophesy woes to the 'bloody city' on the very day the siege began. (Ezek 24:1-2)

Again King Zedekiah began to get repentant. He sent Pashhur with old **Zephaniah** son of Maaseiah (now 103; one of the few priests left who remained true to YHWH), to find Jeremiah. "O Jeremiah, great prophet of YHWH." Pashhur bowed. "Please inquire of YHWH on our behalf, for Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has come against us. Perhaps YHWH will deal with us according to His great mercy and kindness, so the Babylonians will withdraw."

"Pashhur, you vile snake in the grass! Now you and everyone else will see how you have brought 'terror on every side'! I would not even answer you, except you have brought with you one whom YHWH loves."

Jeremiah turned to Zephaniah. "This is how to answer Zedekiah and his nobles. 'Thus says YHWH God of Israel! Behold, I will make your weapons of war useless in your hands. For I Myself shall war against you, in fierce wrath and unspeakable indignation. So I shall strike down the inhabitants of Jerusalem, man and beast. They shall die of famine or disease, until the walls are broken down and your enemies take over the city. Afterwards, I shall give Zedekiah and his nobles, officers, and servants, all those who survive the sword, famine, and disease, into the power of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. He will neither spare, nor have pity, nor grant compassion.'

"But this is what you shall say publicly, to the common people, 'Thus says YHWH God of Israel! Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death. Those who stay in this city will die by the sword, famine, or plague. But those who go out now and surrender to the Chaldeans will live. For I have set My face against this city for harm and not for good. Jerusalem will be given into the hand of the king of Babylon and he will burn it with fire.'"

Zephaniah bowed and kindly thanked Jeremiah. But Pashhur was furious. He gathered some other nobles of the court and petitioned King Zedekiah. "Jeremiah must be put to death! He is a traitor! He is still telling all the people to go out and submit to the king of Babylon! He wants to surrender the city! And now he's even discouraging the soldiers who are trying to protect you, O King!"

King Zedekiah had just heard Jeremiah's prophecies from old Zephaniah the chief priest. He knew that Pashhur was correct. His anger rose within him. "Go. Jeremiah is in your hand. I will not prevent you."

So Pashhur and his friends ran back to catch Jeremiah. They tied him up and cast him into a cistern. His feet sank down into the mud at the bottom. "That's the last time you will 'terror on every side' me, you traitor! At least I am loyal to the king!" Pashhur snarled down into the cistern.

But Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian eunuch over the king's harem, overheard Pashhur's plot. He appealed to King Zedekiah. "O my lord the king! Live forever! Those men have done wickedly. Jeremiah is the one who warned us of this famine! He is a true prophet of YHWH! He has been warning us for years; now his warnings have come to pass. If we'd only listened to him, we wouldn't be in this pickle! It may not be wise to persecute YHWH's faithful prophet."

King Zedekiah couldn't argue with that. Now he began to realize that this whole siege was actually his own fault, for failing to heed the warnings of the prophets. "You're right, my friend. Go now. Take fifty men from my personal elite guard with you. Bring Jeremiah up from the cistern, and guard him carefully. Don't let Pashhur kill him."

Ebed-melech obeyed. For Jeremiah's own protection, they put him under house arrest in the barracks, under the watchful eye of the captain of the king's own guard.

Zedekiah couldn't sleep. What Ebed-melech had said had struck home, and now his conscience bothered him. Finally he called for Jeremiah. He led him into the king's secret passage to the temple (called 'the third entrance'), where they couldn't be overheard, and pleaded for advice.

Jeremiah was not very hopeful. "If I tell you what to do, you will just get angry and put me to death. If I give you advice, you will not listen to it."

"No! I swear I'll listen! As YHWH lives, who made this life for us, surely I will not put you to death, nor even give you up to those who seek your life."

"Okay. Here is YHWH's counsel. If you surrender to the king of Babylon now, you will live, this city will not be burned, and your family and the nobles of your court will all survive. But if you will not go out to the king of Babylon now, then this city will be burned and you will not escape."

"O Jeremiah! You don't know what I've done! I have fiercely condemned and railed at everyone who already surrendered to Babylon. I called them traitors, and swore revenge against them. If I surrender also, I'll be thrown in with them! They will laugh me to scorn and torment me!"

"I promise; you will not be thrown in with them. Please obey YHWH in what I am saying, that it may go well with you. But if you keep refusing to go out, even the women of the palace will go out before you to the officers of Babylon, where they and their children will speak evil against you, laugh you to scorn, and despise you in their hearts."

King Zedekiah just could not do it. He hardened his heart once more. "Go back to the guardhouse. Tell no one of our conversation, on pain of death. I'll talk to you again later. Pray to YHWH for me!"

"Pray for you? Yes, I will pray that you will obey and submit to King Nebuchadnezzar. You cannot escape him. I swear to you that you shall speak with him, face to face, eyeball to eyeball. If you have submitted to him, he will deal kindly with you. But if not, his face is the last thing you shall ever see. Yet because you showed kindness to me, you shall not die by the sword, but shall die in peace, and be honored and properly mourned at your burial."

King Zedekiah went off in a huff. That was not the answer he wanted. He decided to just wait until Jeremiah cooled off awhile, and then try again.

That night, Jeremiah had a strange dream. His cousin Hanamel (son of his uncle Shallum) came to him in the dream and offered to sell his land. What a silly thing, to buy property in a land which Babylon has just laid waste! Yet the next day, exactly as in his dream, Hanamel came to him with an offer to sell his land. So Jeremiah knew it must be what YHWH wanted him to do. They agreed on a price, and Jeremiah and Hanamel signed the deed and made it official with witnesses from the elders of Judah. Jeremiah didn't understand it, but he was obedient.

Jeremiah handed the signed deed to Baruch the scribe, saying, "Take this deed. Seal it in a clay jar, so it will last a long time." Then, full of the Spirit, Jeremiah lifted his hands to the heavens to pray. "Ah Lord YHWH! You made the heavens and the earth by Your great power! Nothing is too difficult for You! You show Your lovingkindness to thousands, but repay the sins of the fathers upon their children after them. O great and mighty God, YHWH of Hosts is Your name, great in counsel, mighty in deed! Your eyes are open to the children of men, giving to each one according to his own deeds. You delivered Your people from Egypt with awesome signs and wonders, giving them this good land, flowing with milk and honey. But they did not obey Your voice or walk in Your Law, so You have made all this calamity fall upon them. Even now the siegeworks have reached the city to overcome it, for the sword, the famine, and the plague have all come to pass just as You promised. So why, O YHWH Elohim, have You told me to buy the field, even though the entire land is a desolation and is given to the Chaldeans?"

Now Jeremiah heard the familiar laughter. The heavens split open, and there was Logos enjoying His little joke. "Behold! I am YHWH, God of all flesh! So you say nothing is too difficult for Me? Indeed! Though I give this city to the Chaldeans, into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar to burn it because of the abominations which My people have committed in it, provoking Me to wrath by prostituting themselves to pagan gods and doing only evil since their youth, yet I shall gather them out of all the lands to which I drove them in My rage. I will bring them back to this place, and make them to dwell in safety. Then they shall be My people, and I will be their God. I shall teach them My ways, that they and their children may fear Me always. I will make an everlasting covenant with them to never turn away from them, but to do them good always. I will put the fear of Me into their hearts so they will not turn away. I will rejoice over them, and plant them in this land with all My heart and soul. This land shall become like a watered garden. Fields shall be bought and sold in this land which you just called a desolation and given to the Chaldeans. For by My name YHWH I swear to restore their fortunes."

Inspired, Jeremiah wrote a letter and gave it to Baruch to seal up along with the deed to his land. That night he slept in peace, knowing that he had done the right thing.

Now Logos entered Jeremiah's dreams. "Call upon Me by My name YHWH! So I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things which you know not. For though the land is laid waste, filled with the corpses of those whom I have slain in My wrath, though I have hidden My face from this place due to their great wickedness, yet behold! I will bring to them My complete healing. I will reveal to them an abundance of peace and truth. Thus I will restore the fortunes of Judah and Israel, and rebuild them as before. This shall bring them great joy, resulting in praise and glory to My name before all the nations of the earth.

“For I swear to you, again shall be heard in this place – which you called a waste and a desolation – the voice of joy and gladness, the voice of the bride and groom, the voice of those who cry out, ‘Oh! Give thanks to YHWH of Hosts! For He is good! His lovingkindness is everlasting!’ and the voice of those who bring their thank offerings into the temple of YHWH. For I will restore the fortunes of the land even better than before. Shepherds will again pasture their flocks in peace. Vineyards and farms will again produce in abundance. Peace and prosperity will return.

“Count the days! For the days are coming when I will fulfill the good Word which I have spoken over the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days I will cause a righteous Branch of David to spring forth. He shall execute righteousness and justice upon the earth. From then on, David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel and Levi shall never lack priests to minister continually before My holy presence. Thus Judah shall be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell in safety. Then she will be known by a new name: ‘YHWH our Righteousness!’”

It was such an encouraging word! Jeremiah lay in bed a long time the next morning, meditating on it. But when he got up, and looked out at the city full of plague and famine, and the countryside laid waste by the Chaldeans, he again began to have doubts. He knew the history of Israel! “O Lord YHWH! What if the Messiah You promised comes and establishes His rule of justice and righteousness – and yet Israel again rebels, *against Him!*?”

Logos looked at Gavriel and Michael. “Shall I tell him of all the times My people will yet rebel, even against their Messiah who is given to them? Shall I tell Jeremiah of all the discipline they must endure before they are ready to actually receive their Messiah?”

Michael, prince of all the guardian angels over Israel, shook his head. “No, my Lord. I suspect that Jeremiah is already too discouraged. He could not bear it. Just give him the bottom line. That is what he needs to hear.”

So that night, Logos came to Jeremiah in his dreams. He took him on a journey through space, where they saw Earth spinning inexorably on its axis, the planets circling the sun, and the myriads of stars and galaxies blazing through the heavens. Then He laid Jeremiah gently back to sleep with the soothing promise, “If My covenant with the earth and sun can be broken so day no longer follows night, then also My covenant with My servant David can be broken, that he not have a son to reign on his throne and Levi not have a priest to minister to Me in My temple. If My covenant with the planets fails so they leave their orbits and fall from the sky, then I will reject the sons of Jacob and the sons of David My servant from being king over them. But just as the host of the heavens cannot be counted, and as the sand of the sea cannot be measured, even so I will multiply the descendants of David My servant and the Levites who minister unto Me.”

King Zedekiah was getting desperate. He saw no way out of his mess. He had to do something to get Jeremiah to bless him! He searched the book of Moses for ideas. He happened upon the passage that told of the year of Jubilee, restoring the land to its original owners, and setting free their brother Israelites who had been sold into slavery. They had never done that in his memory. But the last year of Jubilee had been in 601 BC at the time of his brother Jehoiakim, so it was not his fault. He was about to go on, when he saw that the Hebrew bondservants were actually supposed to be set free every seven years. He counted up the years. 14 years had gone by. So in early 587 BC King Zedekiah proclaimed freedom for all the Hebrew slaves. That ought to score a few points with old Jeremiah!

The people of Jerusalem grumbled. They had paid good money for their slaves; why should they set them free? But Zedekiah was adamant. He, of course, did not have to set his own servants free, for he was the king. But everyone else had to obey. He set a day and commanded the Jubilee celebration. At the party, all the king’s officers, nobles, priests, and wealthy landowners swore a solemn oath that they would release their fellow Hebrews from bondage. Even those who had grumbled about it got into the spirit of the celebration. They made a big show of the slaves they were promising to set free.

The next day Nebuzeradan hurriedly withdrew his army from the siegeworks and left to meet a big Egyptian force that had been spotted coming up to Azekah, and a second force which had reached Lachish in the highlands. Jerusalem was saved! There was dancing in the streets as the starving people hurried out to their farms to replenish their food supply.

Well, you know what happened. They had obeyed grudgingly, but now that the pressure was off, each one secretly reneged on his vows and tore up the ‘free citizen’ papers. So when Zedekiah came to Jeremiah, beaming and hoping for a blessing, all he got was, “Though you recently repented and did what was right, each man proclaiming release to his neighbor, yet then you turned again and brought them back into subjection! Now you think I will bless you for proclaiming release to your fellow Hebrews? No! I will proclaim release to you – release to the sword, to the plague, and to the famine! For I shall bring the king of Babylon back to this city. He will besiege it all over again, and capture it and burn it with fire just as I promised. And all those wealthy slave owners who broke their vows will die at his hand. I will give their bodies to the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth. Thus I, YHWH, will make the cities of Judah a desolation, without inhabitant!”

“But why? I did what YHWH wanted!”

“Yes, you did. But YHWH sees your heart, and the hearts of all who obeyed you outwardly but never followed through. Tell me. How many Hebrews in the palace still serve you without pay?”

Now Zedekiah was indignant. "I'm the king. They are supposed to serve me without pay."

"Did anyone serve in the palace of good King Josiah without pay? No! Everyone, from the king's prophet to the lowest scullery maid received a fair wage, for your father was kind and fair to all."

"What can I do? I can't afford to pay them all!"

"Then release them. Perhaps some of them will not be so foolish as you, and will surrender to the king of Babylon as YHWH commanded."

Again, King Zedekiah hardened his heart. Logos shook His head, with His great beard flopping back and forth. "How many times have I warned him?"

With tears in his eyes, Michael answered, "I don't know anymore, my Lord. I've lost count. But it is well over 300. The angelic host are in awe that you should be so patient! Truly, mercy triumphs over judgment."

"True. But now My righteous wrath cannot be denied. Call your angels protecting the walls of Jerusalem!"

Michael gave the dreaded summons. Soon, thousands of angels gathered around the throne. "Your mission to watch over My Holy City is over, for she is holy no more. Abandon her, until her walls and towers are torn down and My temple is burned and razed to the ground. *Instead, cover Nebuzeradan and the army of Babylon. Protect them, for they are My weapon of discipline against My people.*"

Shock and horror swept through the angelic host. They had never before heard such terrible news, nor received such a tragic command. Yet, obedient through their tears, they went to protect, not Israel, but her enemies: King Nebuchadnezzar, his generals Nebuzeradan and Samgar-nebu, his chief priest Nergal-sarezer, his chief advisors Sar-sekim and Nebushazban, and all his dreaded army.

Protection they needed! For Pharaoh Wahibre had changed his mind. His father Psamtik II had warned him about the Babylonians. They had just conquered the entire Levant and were about to take Judah, too. Egypt would be next. 'Curse of Ra' or not, he had to protect Egypt. Besides, surely by now the Babylonians would be exhausted from all their fighting, while his armies would be fresh.

Wahibre had conscripted everyone in Egypt who could hold a weapon. He rushed into the Levant in early 587 BC. By traveling fast and light he hoped to reach Judah before the Babylonians even knew he was there. It ought to be a total surprise; even Zedekiah didn't know he was coming. To be sure, the Pharaoh divided his forces into two armies. One took the main road through Ashkelon up to Azekah. Wahibre led the other into the highlands at Lachish. *He will attack the Babylonians in a giant pincer and crush them.*

Pharaoh Wahibre was correct. The Babylonians were surprised and unprepared to face the Egyptians.

The classic pincer attack was well-executed. General Nebuzeradan's forces, exhausted from their hard labors on the siegeworks, were running to catch up to their general. And now they found they would be fighting on two fronts! The wise general called a retreat and ordered his forces to re-group. Then General Nebuzeradan raised a white flag to arrange a parley with the openly scornful Pharaoh.

"So, you've come to surrender! Wise move, General!"

"Actually, no. I've come to offer you a deal."

"Sure! I offer your life and the lives of your men if you immediately turn about and flee back to Babylon!"

"On the contrary. King Nebuchadnezzar offers you your life and the lives of your men if you return to Egypt and leave the Levant to us. For I know that YHWH is on our side and you cannot defeat us. But if you insist on attacking us, your army will be routed. Then after I finish in the Levant, I vow that I will come to Egypt to tear down your gods and burn them, to show you how weak they are! On the other hand, if you leave us in peace now, I will respect Egypt and not destroy your worthless gods."

Well, you know how well that sat with the proud new Pharaoh. He ordered the attack. The angelic host were barely in time. For the next five hours everything was a blur of arrows and swords as the two mighty armies clashed. Surely the Babylonian forces would have been devastated if it were not for the angels batting the arrows and pushing aside the tips of the Egyptian swords. It was not easy, but in the end, the Egyptian forces fled back to the Brook of Egypt, screaming, "The curse of Ra!"

When it was over, not a single Babylonian had died. General Nebuzeradan knelt in awe. "O YHWH, God of Daniel! You are mighty indeed! And your word to Daniel is Truth!" They returned to the siegeworks at Jerusalem.

Ezekiel had written many prophecies to King Zedekiah but this might be the last. "Thus says YHWH to the land of Israel. 'An end! The end is come on the four corners of the land. Now the end is upon you! I send My anger against you. I shall judge you according to all your ways, and thus your own abominations will return upon your heads. My eye shall not pity, nor shall I spare. Then you will know that I am YHWH! The sword is outside; famine and plague are within. Those who escape, will go mourning, like the wind sighing over the mountains, like doves in the valley. Every hand will hang limp; their knees will be weak like water; sackcloth will be their clothes; shame will cover their faces; their heads will be bald; they will throw their silver and their gold into the streets as an abhorrent thing, as it was to Me when they molded it into the idols and images of their abominations! So I shall give the city into the hands of foreigners as plunder; to the wicked of the earth as spoil. And I will bring the worst of the nations to dwell in your houses and cultivate your fields. Disaster upon disaster! Then you will know that I am YHWH!'"

Ezekiel wept as he gave it to Daniel, as he had with all the others. He didn't even want to send it, until Daniel had confirmed it as a Word from YHWH. Daniel's eyes, too, were red with weeping as he sealed it and gave it to the couriers. They cried to YHWH for mercy on their people.

"YHWH loves you, Daniel!" Ezekiel said. "Perhaps if you deliver the letter yourself and then stay in Jerusalem, YHWH might spare the Holy City for your sake?"

Immediately the Word of YHWH came to him. "Son of Dust! If any other nation sins against Me by committing unfaithfulness so great that My wrath is loosed upon it to send famine, plague, and the sword against it, even though these three righteous men stand in its midst, Noah, Daniel, and Job, yet as I live, they could save only themselves by their righteousness. Even their own children would not be delivered! How much more then, when My own people Israel are unfaithful to Me and when I send My judgments against Jerusalem, *the bloody city*?! Yet, be encouraged, for I have hidden some who are righteous within the city. They will survive, and be brought here to you, so you can see their righteous conduct. Then you will be comforted after the great calamity that I have brought on Jerusalem, so you will know that all I have done was not in vain.

"Behold, I will nullify the old Hebrew proverb, 'The fathers eat sour grapes, but their children's teeth turn tart.' For all souls are Mine! The soul of the father as well as that of the son is Mine! The soul who sins will die. But if a man is righteous – if he practices justice, walks in My Law, and deals with integrity – he will live. But if his son is violent, to shed blood, sacrifice to idols, defile his neighbor's wife, oppress the poor, exact interest or extortion, or any other abomination, he shall die for his iniquity. Then if his son sees his father's evil ways and turns from them to abandon his father's footsteps, but rather walks according to My Law in the integrity of his heart, he will not die for his father's iniquity, but will live. The son will not bear the punishment of his father, nor the father bear that of his son, but each shall be judged according to his own deeds.

"If a wicked man repents to turn away from all his sins and abominations, to practice justice and righteousness, he shall live and not die. His sins will not be remembered against him, because of his righteous deeds. On the other hand, if a righteous man stumbles and falls, to do evil according to all the abominations of the wicked man, then all his righteous deeds which he has done will no longer be remembered, for the treachery which he has committed. Therefore I judge you, O house of Israel, according to your own conduct. So repent! Cast away all your sins! Make for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why should you die? For I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Therefore repent and live!"

Daniel and Ezekiel were encouraged. *If only Judah could hear this, maybe she could yet repent and be saved.* They decided to send it with one last appeal.

They were busy making a list of all Judah's sins, when YHWH spoke again to Ezekiel. "Son of Dust! Would you judge the bloody city and show her all her abominations? *Here is your list.* She sheds the blood of the innocents. She fills the land with idols. She perverts My holy institution of marriage – My joining together one man with one woman. She treats parenthood lightly, considering babies to be just a bother. She oppresses strangers, orphans, and widows. She despises My holy things; neglects My Feasts; profanes My Sabbaths. She eats at pagan shrines and slanders the ones who refuse their temple prostitutes. She commits unspeakable immoralities, adultery, and sodomy. She takes bribes to pervert justice. She loans at interest to oppress the poor with her dishonest gain. Besides all this, she has forgotten Me! She has forgotten all that I have done for her, and all the warnings and discipline I have given her when she went astray. Her prophets conspire against me. Her priests have done violence to My holy Law. They have defiled My holy things, and made no distinction between the holy and the profane. They do not teach the difference between the clean and the unclean. They hide their eyes from My Sabbaths, so I am dishonored among them. Her princes are like ravenous wolves, ripping up the prey, destroying lives for dishonest gain, and her prophets just smear whitewash over them, seeing false visions and divining lies for them when I have not spoken. I searched for a man among them; one who would build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land that I should not destroy it, but I found no one. Thus I have poured out My indignation upon them, to consume them in the fire of My wrath, even the consequences of their own way which I have brought down upon their heads."

Horried at the long list, Daniel and Ezekiel sent it off to Jerusalem with urgent entreaties to repent before it was too late. They also asked the exiles to fast and pray. But Logos wouldn't allow them to pray for mercy. He said that judgment was already passed, so there could be no mercy without repentance. So the exiles fasted, mourned, wailed, and repented, in fervent intercession that their brothers in Jerusalem would do likewise. Due to Ezekiel's prophecies, the exiles understood the seriousness of the situation!

Jeremiah was still in the barracks of the king's guard under house arrest. He wasn't doing so well. Zedekiah had been getting, and even reading, all his prophecies, and all those that Ezekiel and Daniel had sent, too. But with each new prophecy it seemed he hardened his heart even more. He had his own agenda, and it was not repentance! He was still searching for some easy way out; some way to get the blessing of YHWH without really having to call the city to repent and change their ways.

So YHWH finally stopped warning Zedekiah. But He did give Jeremiah a message for Ebed-melech. "Behold, the time of Jerusalem's downfall has come. But because you believed Me and rescued My prophet Jeremiah, I will now rescue and honor you. Go out now to the Babylonians."

CHAPTER 22 – THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

Ebed-melech was grateful for Jeremiah's kind words. He came back to him as he was ready to go, to ask, "Is there anything else I can do for you before I take my family out to surrender to the Babylonians?"

"Yes, one more thing. I'm still under house arrest here, but I have one last important job that I must do. Find old Zephaniah the priest. Tell him, 'It's time.' I know he will understand. Then go. Take everyone who will go with you. Don't look back. And don't mourn for me."

At the age of 105, Zephaniah was not as strong as he been when Josiah had cleansed the temple 38 years before. But he knew what had to be done. He found Jeremiah, and they looked at each other sadly. "Yes," Zephaniah agreed. "It is time indeed. This very night. I've already bribed the guards out of the temple treasury."

Without another word, they bowed and wept together, praying silently for YHWH's protection. Near midnight, they walked out of the guardhouse, nodding their thanks to the guards on duty for 'looking the other way'.

They went to the temple, where Zephaniah had told Seraiah and the other trusted priests to wait. "We can't go through the city streets this time," Zephaniah explained. "The streets even now are filled with terrified, desperate people; the lawless prey upon the weak; the soldiers take whatever they wish; nobles and peasants alike scrounge for food. We must use Solomon's secret security system."

Zephaniah swore the other priests to secrecy, and then commanded two of them to lift the heavy bronze plate on the side of Yakeen. The dry sand inside began to flow out rapidly, so Zephaniah had them push it aside to make room for more. Soon, there was a big pile of sand around the base of the big bronze pillar. The 80 ton bronze capital on top of Yakeen began to drop down into the pillar.

Jeremiah and Zephaniah were inside the temple with the other priests. Together they moved the heavy veil to one side, so the most holy place was exposed. Some of the priests complained in horror. "We shall all be slain! We cannot enter the most holy place! Only on the Day of Atonement, and only the anointed high priest..."

"So let us be slain already," Zephaniah retorted coldly. "The holy presence of YHWH left the temple long ago. He is not here. I've only kept you here for one purpose. After we do this, our lives aren't worth a copper penny unless YHWH approves of our labor and grants us favor with the Babylonians. For they shall breach the walls this day."

With the veil removed, the priests were startled to see the Ark of the Covenant slowly rising out of the ground on its stone foundation. Jeremiah and Zephaniah knew what to do. They reverently grasped the long poles and carried the Ark off the rising stone slab. They told the other priests to collect everything else of value from the temple.

The stone slab rose nearly ten feet, held up by a large cedar elevator room. Zephaniah sent a priest outside, to tell the other two to replace the bronze door in Yakeen and yank the matching door from Boaz, the pillar on the other side of the temple entry. Then he and Jeremiah lovingly carried the Ark of the Covenant into the big elevator room. "Bring the other furnishings in here. Get the bags from the temple treasury, too," Zephaniah told the other priests. They scurried about, bringing stuff, as their cedar elevator started to sink slowly back down.

It was nearly halfway down when Zephaniah told the remaining priests to go out and help clear sand away from around Boaz one last time. "Once it's cleared away, come back and jump in with us. We'll all go down together."

They gauged the speed of the elevator's descent and hurried out. In a few minutes they were back, but before they could jump in with the others, old Zephaniah cried, "Wait! Bring the heavy veil. We'll need it, too."

They didn't have time to unhook it. They yanked on one end to break the curtain rod, and slid it off, rings and all. Then they dragged it over, stuffing it into the hole and diving in after it with but inches to spare. Now they saw the dark passage which King Solomon had carved under the floor of the temple. The ancient elevator finally came to a halt, with a satisfying crunch as the stone foundation slab above them wedged firmly back into its place. All light from above was cut off, putting them in darkness.

Jeremiah and Zephaniah just worshiped awhile. The darkness was soothing to them. But the others began to get spooked. So Zephaniah struck a flint, and lighted one of the seven lamps on the golden seven-branched lampstand. By its light, they saw other lamps which King Solomon had left, together with sealed reservoirs of oil.

Soon they were on their way north through the secret underground passage. Old Zephaniah knew just where this passage led – to Solomon's security grotto beyond the north wall, where he had hidden the Ark long ago.

They had only gone a hundred yards when Zephaniah commanded a halt, pointing to a pair of tall stone blocks and stone hammers on either side of the wall. Using the hammers, he and Jeremiah broke the two blocks. A thick granite slab slid down with a rumble and a crash, blocking the way back to the temple. They smiled and dusted off their hands. "Just as I was taught," Zephaniah whispered. "No one will ever go through this tunnel again."

They finally reached the underground grotto. They spent the rest of the night packing the temple furnishings into it, covering them with the heavy veil, covering that with cedar planks that Solomon had left for the purpose, and covering those with rocks. It nearly filled the grotto. As they left, they broke apart the stops to let another heavy granite slab crash down, permanently sealing the grotto. Then they headed up toward the secret sliding wall.

They paused just inside the wall for prayer and praise. They had taken their time and done a good job. YHWH must be pleased. Jeremiah was in awe at the brilliance and carefulness of King Solomon and the work he had put into protecting the sacred Ark. Within the secret grotto, they had found a stone case made just for it, with a thick stone lid so heavy it had taken all six of them to put in place. Now, perfectly sealed with that final stone plug, nothing, not even a mouse or a cockroach, could get inside. The temple furnishings were safe for a long time. Jeremiah knew that they would never see the precious Ark of the Covenant again. He prophesied, *“Here the Ark will remain, undiscovered, untouched, unharmed, until the end of the age, when Messiah comes to claim His Kingdom of peace and righteousness.”* They joined in worship; no one wanted to leave the peaceful stillness of the dark passageway.

Outside, they heard the screams and death cries of the slain. Zephaniah had been correct. The walls of Jerusalem had been breached early that morning, while they were in the tunnel to the secret grotto. By now the Babylonians had overrun the city. They hadn’t been a minute too soon. The fateful date was the 9th of Tammuz (June 24) 587 BC.

They had no food, but these were men used to fasting. They drank from the small pockets of water dripping down from above into Solomon’s quarries. But they refused to eat the bats or salamanders they found, as they are unclean. A month passed as the Babylonians finished taking their captives and looting the city. Now Jeremiah was glad that he had never married. Surely his wife would have been slain by now, and he didn’t know if he could bear it. He prayed for strength for the others. They all had wives and families, some still within the city.

Ezekiel had done a lot of strange things among the exiles in Babylon. He was known for the weird illustrations of his prophecies. Like the time he had played in the mud with a brick and an iron plate, to portray the siege against Jerusalem. And the time he had lain on his side for days corresponding to the years Israel and Judah would have to bear their iniquity. And the time he had shaved his head and beard with a sword, and then divided up the hair into thirds to illustrate that a third of them would die by the sword, a third die of famine, and a third be scattered.

Now Logos gave one final prophetic illustration to Ezekiel, the most difficult of all. “Son of Dust, prepare your heart. I am about to take Ella, the delight of your eyes. But you shall not weep for her. You may groan silently, but make no mourning for the dead or wailing at her grave. Don’t even accept the gifts of food your friends bring to console you. Don’t tear your clothes or bare your head or shave your beard. Dress and work like any other day.”

That was a hard one for Ezekiel. He had one last lovely evening with Ella and their children, ages seven and nine. The next morning he warned all the elders of the exiles. That evening, on the 9th of Av, 587 BC, Ella died.

He’d already prepared her grave and hired a nanny for the children. He buried Ella quickly, without ceremony, as YHWH had commanded him. His response to Ella’s death was unusual and dramatic. It got everyone’s attention! The exiles begged him to tell them what it meant.

“Ella was the delight of my eyes, my greatest and most precious treasure on earth. Suddenly, she is gone, and no one mourns her passing. Even so, YHWH has a precious treasure: it is the entire house of Israel, His holy sanctuary, and His holy city, Jerusalem. Yesterday, His temple was the desire of your eyes, the pride of your power, the delight of your soul. Today it is gone, this very day. Jerusalem is burned. The sons of Israel have fallen by the sword, with no one left to mourn their passing. For all that YHWH has been warning these many years has happened.”

The passage where Jeremiah and his crew were hiding began to get hot. The Babylonians must have set fire to the city. They retreated down into Solomon’s quarries, deep underground, where it remained cool. There, weakened by hunger, they lost all track of time. Perhaps they were doomed to die there. Some day, the dwellers in Messiah’s Kingdom may find their dry bones and realize it was they who had protected the treasures of the temple. One of the bored priests scratched icons into the walls, pointing to the stone plug sealing the grotto. But when Jeremiah saw what he was doing, he told him to stop. “Messiah won’t need your markers, I assure you!” he laughed.

Jeremiah and Zephaniah sat up and looked at each other. “It is time!” They said together. Weak with fasting, they slowly climbed the ramp and opened the sliding wall. They went out and closed the wall behind them. The city was charred rubble. Most of the walls were broken down. They quickly scanned south toward Solomon’s temple. But it was gone. Completely gone. Not one stone remained atop another. Weakness and horror overwhelmed them. They fell facedown into the ash carpeting the ground.

After a time of weeping, they urged themselves on, so they wouldn’t be found near the secret entry. They slowly made their way back to the guardhouse where they had started. Soldiers were there; Babylonians! But they had no resistance. They collapsed before the captain of the guard.

A deep gruff voice intruded into Jeremiah’s foggy mind. “General Nebuzeradan! We found these men at the guardhouse. Are they the ones you are looking for? They are weak, but I think they are unharmed.”

Jeremiah opened his eyes to see a huge, kindly-looking Babylonian officer staring down at him. “Who are you? How did you escape the slaughter?” he asked. Jeremiah only managed a croak in reply. His throat was very dry.

“Nebushazban!” General Nebuzeradan ordered. “Give these men some food and water. I think they may be the ones King Nebuchadnezzar told me to protect. Bring them back when they are stronger.”

So they were cleaned up and brought before the general the next day. He was delighted to find that one of them was Jeremiah. "King Nebuchadnezzar told me to look out for you and to make sure you weren't hurt. I'm glad I found you!" Nebuzeradan had forgotten his earlier question about how they escaped, which was good, as they didn't want to tell him about the underground passage.

"By order of the king, you are free to go anywhere you want. You may come with me if you wish; I'll take you back to Babylon with the refugees. Or you may stay here with the remnant – I'll put Gedaliah in charge here. Or you may go with me to Riblah – I'm taking Zedekiah and his family there to see the king before I return to Babylon. (Zedekiah escaped through a hole in the wall, but we caught him, just like Daniel told us we would.) You do whatever you like. I'm supposed to deal with you exactly as you ask me. Oh. I suppose the same offer extends to your friends here."

"Thank you, kind sir. Please, give us a day to think and pray about it. It's an important decision!"

So the next day they returned before the general. "Sir," Jeremiah began. "I request that you bind me in chains and take me by force down to Ramah where you're holding the refugees bound for Babylon. After that, I don't know what YHWH wants me to do."

"Chains? Why in chains? King Nebuchadnezzar told me that he didn't want you bound in chains!"

"I prophesied that all who left the city and submitted to Nebuchadnezzar before the wall was breached would be sent freely to Babylon, but those who were still in the city would be slain or bound in chains. I remained in the city. Do you think I am exempt from my own prophecy?"

"Okay..." Nebuzeradan didn't fully understand that. "What about your friends? They get to decide for themselves, and they sure don't have to choose the same as you. Introduce them for me, please."

"This is Zephaniah son of Maaseiah. He was elected the ruling chief priest after Jehoiada was slain by Jehoiakim's thugs. This priest is Seraiah son of Azariah son of Hilkiah. He will become the high priest when he comes of age. His father Azariah was high priest, but he also was slain. These are my scribes Baruch and Seraiah, twin sons of Neriah." He continued to introduce all the others.

Zephaniah spoke for the priests and the temple security men. "We've all discussed and prayed about this. Only the scribes want to go with Jeremiah. We priests want to go with our king to Riblah, to see King Nebuchadnezzar."

"And I warned them not to!" Jeremiah growled.

"We feel it is important to stand with King Zedekiah in this his greatest hour of trial."

"Yeah, right. Zedekiah is certain to be punished. So... you want to be punished along with him?"

"Nebuchadnezzar is merciful. Besides, you prophesied that Zedekiah would not die by the sword, but would go to Babylon to die in peace and be honored in his burial. So we choose to stand with him."

"Aren't you presuming that Nebuchadnezzar will treat you the same as he treats Zedekiah?"

But they were adamant. So Nebuzeradan took all the priests up to Riblah, along with King Zedekiah, his family, and other nobles who had been spared from the palace. But he bound Jeremiah in chains as he had requested, and dragged him off to Ramah with the waiting refugees.

The exiles couldn't believe Ezekiel. Solomon's temple gone? Jerusalem burned? Its people slain? No. It was too terrible to even consider. Ezekiel went right back to work, prophesying against Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon, and even Egypt. *They were wrong to resist Babylon. They were wrong to gloat over the fall of Israel, taking advantage of her weakness, instead of helping her. And they will once again be disciplined by Babylon.*

Daniel was especially interested in Ezekiel's prophecy about Tyre. *Had their wickedness reached the full so soon?* Yes. Evidently the king of Tyre had gotten proud at having overcome Nebuzeradan. That had opened the door for wickedness to overwhelm the city.

But when Daniel studied Ezekiel's prophecy closely, he saw that Nebuchadnezzar would only be able to overcome their mainland city, and then only with great difficulty. So Daniel wrote to Nebuchadnezzar telling him all about it.

Another month went by. The cleanup seemed to take forever. The refugees waited patiently at Ramah while the plunder was packed for travel and the new government under Gedaliah was established over the peasants being left behind to till the soil.

Nebuzeradan finally returned from Riblah. He went right to Ramah to talk with Jeremiah. He was extremely upset. "I don't care what your reasons are. I'm taking off these chains and setting you free!" he snapped. "Now you can do as you choose – the whole land is open to you, or you may come with me to Babylon. I'm nearly ready to go."

"What is bothering you?" Jeremiah asked gently.

"Nothing. Well... YHWH your God promised all this calamity upon Judah, and He did just as He had promised, because you sinned against Him. But I feel bad about it all just the same. It's a crying shame that Jerusalem had to be destroyed... your beautiful temple... the king's palace..."

"No, what's really bugging you, General?"

Nebuzeradan looked at him strangely, then took a deep breath. "I see you really are a prophet, as Nebuchadnezzar said." He bowed his head. "I'm sorry. Nebuchadnezzar slew your friends, all of them. And killed Zedekiah's entire family and then put his eyes out. I feel terrible about it."

Months had gone by. Still no word had reached the exiles in Babylon. Perhaps Ezekiel's prophecy was all wet. Nebuchadnezzar might have shown mercy, or maybe Judah had withstood his siege. Still, Daniel ordered the exiles to prepare places for more refugees. He and Ezekiel had no doubts about those prophecies from YHWH.

In mid-586 BC, the watchmen for the city told them of a large group of refugees on the road. The exiles went out to meet them. They found refugees from other nations too, but among them were 832 leading men of Jerusalem, with their wives and families, who had gone out of the city and surrendered to Nebuzeradan during the siege. Even in greeting their fellow exiles, they had neither joy nor tears. It was as if the entire group had traveled from the Levant in stunned silence. They even refused to tell their brothers at Tel-aviv what had happened.

The recent refugees were soon settled in the quarters prepared for them under Daniel's orders. A week passed, and still no one told what had happened in the Levant. The entire town was living on pins and needles to know the fate of Jerusalem! So finally, to settle the suspense, Daniel ordered all the elders of the exiles to appear before him in the king's court. With Nebuchadnezzar still gone, he was in charge. The judgment hall filled up with silent people, both the recent exiles and those eager to hear their story.

Since nobody wanted to talk, Daniel just picked one at random. It was Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian eunuch who had helped Jeremiah escape from the cistern. He bowed to Daniel, then stood silently before the group. Minutes passed. Finally he began, haltingly. "It's too terrible to tell. My eyes are dry. No tears are left in me. I can't eat, or sleep, for the haunting images seared deep into my brain. We fled the city and surrendered to the Babylonians near the end of last summer. My family was among the last to come out. Nebuchadnezzar wasn't there – he was up north, at Riblah on the Orontes, directing the campaign. But his general Nebuzeradan was kind to us. He fed us and let us stay in Ramah. A chief priest named Nergal-sarezer was put over us. He too was very kind. He let us..."

"We all want to know what happened to Jerusalem!" Daniel interrupted him. "So why are you beating around the bush? Tell us the fate of Jerusalem!"

Ebed-melech stopped in mid-sentence, closed his eyes, and shuddered. Then he started again, his eyes still closed. "Jerusalem is gone. Its walls were breached on the 9th of Tammuz." He choked, coughed violently, and finally went on. "They made us watch. The Babylonians rushed into the city. No one tried to defend it. King Zedekiah, with his nobles and his army, had already fled. No one in the city even raised a sword or spear. They were too weak – almost too weak to stand – from famine or plague. Many had already died. The rest were slain without mercy. Their bodies were stripped and thrown into the Hinnom Valley. The Babylonians didn't lose a man in the assault."

Ebed-melech paused. His eyes opened wide in horror at the memory. A trickle of wetness ran down his cheeks as he continued. "When the soldiers couldn't find the king, they searched his palace walls. They found a secret garden gate where he and his noblemen had escaped. It led under the city wall. They chased after them down to the Jordan. King Zedekiah was trying to escape out into the desert. His soldiers and nobles were too weak to fight. They were all captured. Most of his nobles were slain. Zedekiah and his family were taken to Riblah to see King Nebuchadnezzar. General Nebuzeradan told us that King Nebuchadnezzar passed judgment against him, slew his entire family and all the priests who supported him, and then gouged out his eyes. But he kept him alive. King Nebuchadnezzar got your letter and went with General Samgar-nebu to besiege Tyre. But General Nebuzeradan came back to Ramah for us. He was very kind to us. He provided food, and let us..."

"What about Jerusalem!" Daniel interrupted again. "What happened to the Holy City? Is the temple still...?"

Ebed-melech shook his head. "Gone. Gone. All gone. The Babylonians broke down the city walls. Then they plundered everything of value, including the sacred things from the temple. They feared a plague, so on the 9th of Av they set the city on fire, including the king's palace and the temple. After it cooled they pulled down the temple walls, searching for more gold that had melted from them during the blaze. Nothing is left, but ashes and heaps of rubble." He shuddered again, violently, shutting his eyes again as if to block out the memory. "They made us watch..."

"The Ark of the Covenant! Did they get the Ark?"

"We never saw it, but I'm sure they did. They took everything of value. They even broke up the bronze sea and the huge pillars, and brought the bronze back with them. They were very thorough."

"And my friend Jeremiah? Baruch? The two Seraiahs? Old Zephaniah the priest? Why aren't they with you?"

"I don't know. At Ramah they brought Jeremiah to us in chains. But later they took him away. He may be dead. Or hopefully he was among the peasants left to till the fields. I don't know. I just don't know."

The unthinkable had happened, exactly as Ezekiel had prophesied the day his wife died. The grief in the room was so thick it seemed like swimming in molasses. Someone began to wail. Daniel quickly ordered, "Stop your crying! Mourn silently. Do not allow your grief to turn you against YHWH. Bless His holy name! Give praise and honor to Him! Thank Him for His faithfulness! He has done exactly what He promised us through His servants the prophets. Even in this, the worst of tragedies, He saved the remnant; all those who obeyed Him. And we have His promise of restoration, in seventy years. So do not be found to be rebelling against Him now." In all this, Daniel did not sin in thought or deed. Logos was very pleased with him.

King Nebuchadnezzar had read Daniel's letter. He was pleased to finally have YHWH's permission to attack Tyre. After sending his General Nebuzeradan with the refugees and all the plunder to Babylon, he went with his army, under the command of General Samgar-nebu, to Tyre. His empire was now supreme throughout the civilized world. To his east, he was allied with the Medes and the Persians. To his north the Scythians and Cimmerians were again in submission to him (their King Umanmanda had died after the Battle of Carchemish). All the old Assyrian provinces in the west were now his, with the one exception of tiny Tyre. The Arabians of the south were sending him tribute. He had broken the hold of Egypt over the Levant, and it was just a matter of time before he would conquer them, too. Nebuchadnezzar was quite pleased with himself.

But when he got to Tyre, he realized why Daniel had said that YHWH had left it there to humble him. He, too, spent a month studying the city while his men scrounged for material to build the siege mounds. He finally came to the same conclusion as his General Nebuzeradan had, ten years earlier. The city was impossible to take!

But he had YHWH's permission. *He is the head of gold! It is not an arrogance thing*, he decided. *It is his divine right, as the king of kings and emperor of the world*. So he ordered his army to begin the laborious process of hauling dirt and rock from the hills (which were several miles away) for the siege mounds. This could take a very long time!

The king of Tyre laughed at him. He was secure within his impregnable walls. He had plenty of fast ships to bring supplies from their offshore island, which was supplied by trade with other nations. Tyre was wealthy, prosperous, and full of exotic foods and precious treasures. Tyre may seem small compared to the Babylonian Empire, but the entire empire could come against it and not succeed! Even if they tried to block Tyre's trade with other cities along the local seacoasts, they couldn't block their trade with Crete, Cyprus, and the rising civilizations of Greece, Ionia, Caria, the Aegean Islands – as far as Carthage and Hispania. Never in the history of mankind had the ruler of a single city held such power in the palm of his hand.

The king's actual name is lost to the dustbin of history. He called himself Tyrel, which translates to 'God of Tyre'. He became arrogant beyond words. No longer satisfied with worshipping all the gods of the nations, he now demanded worship for himself.

Logos was utterly disgusted with him. He gave Ezekiel another prophecy against him, including: "Because you lifted up your heart in pride, claiming, 'I am a god, sitting enthroned among the gods!' though you are just a man – Because you think you are wiser than Daniel, and no secret escapes you – Because you have increased your riches by your own wisdom and trade, and have used your riches only to expand your own pride and glory – Because you have made your heart like the heart of almighty God..."

"Therefore, behold, I will bring strangers upon you, the most ruthless of the nations. They will draw their swords against the perfection of your wisdom, and defile your matchless splendor. They will bring you down to the pit. You will die, like any other sailor who is pierced through by the sword and tossed overboard into the depths of the seas. Will you still say, 'I am a god' in the presence of your slayer? No! You will die the death of the pagan by the hand of strangers, declares YHWH Elohim!"

Ezekiel gave the prophecy to Daniel, who sent it to Nebuchadnezzar, who in turn gave it to King Tyrel. But Tyrel only laughed all the harder. What did he care about Israel's God? He shaved the beards of Nebuchadnezzar's messengers, and thumbed his nose at the Babylonians.

Logos shook His head. "He knows the history of My people. He saw what happened to Judah, and Jerusalem. Yet he cannot hear My warnings. He really thinks he is god. What do you think, Gavriel? Shall we break down his walls and give him into Nebuchadnezzar's hands?"

"But my Lord! You know that Nebuchadnezzar has a problem with pride! If we give Tyrel into his hand so soon, Nebuchadnezzar surely will stumble and fall."

"Of course you're right, dear Gavriel. We'll delay it for a few more years, while I work on Nebuchadnezzar's pride problem. He'll be prepared to take Tyre someday, I know."

So the walls remained secure, while the Babylonians continued their slow construction of the siegeworks. But Nebuchadnezzar got bored. He decided to let General Samgar-nebu work on the siege against Tyrel, while he returned to Babylon, to his lovely Queen Amytis, and to their now unbelievably beautiful hanging gardens. The thought pleased him no end.

Logos patiently instructed his angelic host. "Do you see how Tyrel is just like Satan his father? Like Tyrel, Lucifer thought he was perfect, in beauty, in power, and in wealth. Remember all the treasures of the earth I gave him? When he was in the Garden of Eden, I gave him every precious stone as his own: the ruby, topaz, diamond, beryl, onyx, jasper, lapis lazuli, turquoise, and emerald. I made him chief musician for the Dance, master of the tambourines and harps. On the day he was created, I appointed him to be the anointed cherub who covers and protects the Holy Mountain of God, walking in the midst of the seven flames of the Holy Spirit of the eternal Father. Indeed Lucifer was perfect, blameless in all his ways, until pride was found in him and he became profane, just like Tyrel!"

"Therefore I cast him down from the Mountain of God; I destroyed the covering cherub from the midst of the flames which dance between the whirling wheels. Now Lucifer, you are Satan, My adversary. Your heart was lifted in pride because of your beauty and power. Your wisdom was corrupted because of your splendor. So I cast you to the ground, where all who see you are appalled at you!"

CHAPTER 23 – THE REMNANT OF JUDAH

Nebuzeradan had appointed **Gedaliah** (son of Ahikam son of Shaphan the old scribe for Josiah) governor over the remnant left in Judah. Since Jerusalem was uninhabitable, he had established his government at Mizpah, a few miles northwest of Ramah. When Gedaliah heard that Jeremiah was still alive and in chains at Ramah, he paid him a visit. He was there the day that Nebuzeradan took off his chains and gave him his freedom. “Please stay with us at Mizpah,” he urged. “YHWH did not call you as prophet to the exiles. He called you as prophet to Judah. We need you here!”

Jeremiah was discouraged at what he had just heard from Nebuzeradan about his friends. He was not sure he even wanted to be a prophet anymore. “I’ll pray about it.”

“You’d better decide pretty soon,” Nebuzeradan said. “Tomorrow I leave for Babylon with the refugees.”

Jeremiah bowed his head. Logos remained silent, but Jeremiah had been a prophet long enough to understand the basic principle of obedience: when he couldn’t hear from God, his only responsibility was to obey whatever God had told him last. “Okay. YHWH doesn’t seem to be answering. So I’ll remain in Judah until He says to leave.”

Jeremiah’s two faithful scribes, the twins Baruch and Seraiah, chose to stay with him. Gedaliah was delighted. Nebuzeradan sent them off to Mizpah, while he prepared the remnant to hit the road for Babylon at dawn.

Jeremiah hardly even saw the road between Ramah and Mizpah. He was stuck in a blue funk. He spent the whole time complaining to YHWH. “O God! Why did You let Nebuchadnezzar kill old Zephaniah and Seraiah and all the other priests? They were faithful to You! They stayed behind in Jerusalem just to protect Your temple and Your Ark. They took a beating rather than reveal the secret grotto. And they only went up to Riblah because they were loyal to the king. They really cared! Why were they slain?”

YHWH just let him stew for three days. Then he gently came to Jeremiah in his sleep. “Jeremiah My beloved. Why are you angry with Me? Have I not done all that I promised I would do?”

“Why did old Zephaniah and Seraiah the priest have to die? That wasn’t fair! They were faithful! They saved Your Ark! And the priests and Levites serving them, and their families, too – now they’re all dead! It’s just not fair!”

“You yourself prophesied that all who remained in Jerusalem would die by the sword or be hauled off in chains. Besides, I gave Nebuchadnezzar the authority to pass judgment upon them. Though they were indeed faithful to the temple and loyal to their king, and though they did protect the Ark, Nebuchadnezzar judged them unfaithful to Me! His exact words were, ‘As priests of YHWH, you failed in your duty to stand firm in His Law and turn Judah and her kings back from their evil ways.’”

“But they did all they could! How could You give that godless king of Babylon authority to judge Your priests?”

“First, because He judged rightly. I, too, find My priests guilty of failing to turn the nation back to righteousness, for failing to teach the distinction between the holy and the profane. And second, because you warned them not to go, and they did not heed your warning. I do honor the word of My prophets, you know. But third, because King Nebuchadnezzar is not as godless as you think. It just so happens that I love him! He has a tender heart toward Me. He loves My wisdom. He cares for My precious ones at Babylon. He even promoted My servant Daniel to second in command in his kingdom, and his Magi are restoring the ancient wisdom of the Kasdim to the earth. He loves his wife and remains faithful to her. He cares for his people. He loves truth. He hates lies, which I also hate. He tries to govern his empire by My principles of wisdom. You think I’m not being fair because you don’t see the big picture.”

Jeremiah’s head was spinning. He remembered the prophecy given him by young Habakkuk just before the siege at Carchemish. He had asked, “...why do You look with favor upon the Chaldeans who deal so treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?” Suddenly he realized that he had held that same question in his heart this whole time. It just didn’t seem fair! Now YHWH answered him.

“Fairness has never been a criterion with Me. Justice and righteousness are My standards. Judah did not live up to My standard of righteousness, so My justice demands they be judged. But Babylon did not have My standard of righteousness; now they are learning. They too will be judged based on how much of what they have learned they are able to keep. Even now, My angelic host are protecting King Nebuchadnezzar and his warriors. If they continue in My ways, they will become the greatest empire mankind has ever known, greater even than Solomon’s kingdom. But if they turn back from following My ways, they too will be judged. And if they fail to heed My warnings, they also will be destroyed. Now, is that so hard to understand?”

“No, Lord. I’m glad Nebuchadnezzar is taking care of the exiles. He has been kind to me, as well. I only was upset about the deaths of the priests.”

“You mean these?” Smiling, Logos opened up the veil between the two realms. There stood old Zephaniah and Seraiah the priests, and the other servants of the temple, together with their wives, children, and extended families. They were celebrating their reunion and their entry into the realm of YHWH their Lord. Jeremiah had never seen any group of people so happy! The vision faded, but from then on, Jeremiah no longer feared death. Next morning he woke up encouraged, and ready to assist Gedaliah in governing over the remnant of Judah left in the land. A new day had dawned. The devastation was past. Gedaliah sent word for the people to gather at Mizpah in a week.

Everyone was surprised at the tremendous response. Elders, leaders of clans, soldiers and their officers, even those who had fled to Ammon, Moab, Edom, and Arabia to survive the holocaust – they all came flooding back to Mizpah when they heard that Gedaliah the scribe had been appointed their new governor. They all trusted and loved him, just as they had all loved his godly father Ahikam (Jeremiah's bodyguard during the reign of Jehoiakim) and his grandfather Shaphan (King Josiah's scribe).

Gedaliah made a great governor. The people who came to him were demoralized and traumatized. He encouraged them. "Do not be afraid of serving the Chaldeans," he told the gathering. "I will stay here at Mizpah and stand up for you before them. As long as we do not rebel against them, I swear they will treat us well. The Chaldean soldiers here with me are here to protect us, not harm us. So go out now to harvest the fields. Don't waste the wine or summer fruit! Repair the broken-down houses and live in them. Take over the cities of those who were slain or exiled. Raise up many sons and daughters, and prosper in the land that YHWH has given you. Jeremiah assures me that in seventy years when the land has had its Sabbath rest, the exiles will return. Judah will be restored. Jerusalem will be rebuilt. Your sons and daughters shall see it and rejoice!"

It was a good word. The people obeyed. They began to rebuild, settle in, and prosper as Gedaliah commanded.

As Ezekiel had prophesied, the surrounding nations laughed at Judah's calamity and tried to take advantage of their weakness. So the first thing Gedaliah had to do was establish a defense force. He made **Johanan** son of Kareah commander of the soldiers who had escaped the slaughter. Johanan made his own brother **Jonathan** his captain. Their father Kareah became one of Gedaliah's advisors.

"What a beautiful, godly, strong family!" Jeremiah thought when he first saw them. "They are the right choice to be protectors of Your people Israel, Lord. I'd sure like to get to know this family." But he couldn't just invite himself over to their house for tea. And he didn't have a house to invite them to. So he was surprised and pleased when Kareah sent him a dinner invitation the very next week.

A veritable feast had been prepared for him. He was treated royally, as if he were somehow their protector. After the dinner, Kareah stood up and gave a little speech, honoring Jeremiah for his commitment to the Word of YHWH and the authority of His Law during these troubled times. "You almost singlehandedly held back the flood tide of evil in Judah, allowing the exiles and the remnant to escape the holocaust. We are ever grateful. How can we reward you for your faithfulness?" Everyone cheered and clapped, urging him to ask whatever he wished. Jeremiah slowly stood, admiring this beautiful, close-knit family. He was overwhelmed with loneliness for the family he'd never had. Tears came to his eyes. He rubbed them with his fists, exclaiming, "I wish to God I had a family like yours!"

"YHWH never let me marry. The only family I have is Baruch and Seraiah, my twin scribes who look out for me. If you'd allow me to join your family circle sometimes, I would be most grateful. That is all the reward I ask." He sat down abruptly, overcome by all the smiling faces.

"We'd love to have you join our family circle, as often as you wish. But it sounds like what you really want is a wife," Kareah responded. "Would YHWH permit you to marry now? Why don't you ask him? We'll wait."

Jeremiah was suspicious. "Why? Do you have someone in mind?" He knew Kareah had some lovely daughters.

"Not if YHWH doesn't want you to marry yet."

That was good enough for Jeremiah. He bowed. Then he got down and knelt on the rug. Soon he was on his face. This was important. He didn't dare get it wrong, or let his own desires get in the way. Logos came to him, with His characteristic breath of love, joy, and peace. It filled him. "Yes. He will allow me to marry now. Though I'm not sure if anyone will have me. I'm over sixty, you know."

"Will you trust me? May I take the role of your father, and arrange a bride for you? I do have a daughter in mind, whom I adopted 20 years ago, at the time of the first exile after Nebuchadnezzar won the battle of Carchemish."

Suddenly there was almost nothing Jeremiah wanted more than to have this godly and wise old man as his own father-in-law. He jumped at the chance. "If your daughter has not been married, and if she will have me, I accept."

"She is a virgin. And she will. We shall plan the wedding for next week, if that is okay with you."

"How do you know she will? She hasn't seen me before this very day. I don't want you to force her."

"Trust me, Jeremiah. I would never force her."

So Jeremiah agreed. I know, that is not the way we do things here in the west, but it was very common in the east for fathers to arrange marriages like that. Jeremiah was on pins and needles for a week!

Jeremiah's wedding was beautiful, with nearly all of the remnant in Judea attending, for they all loved him. His bride was lovely; ten years younger, and still retaining the flower of her youthful beauty. And yes, no one had to force her. She was willing, eager, smiling up at Jeremiah with a light that shone even through her veil. After the ceremony was over and everyone had gathered for the wedding feast, Jeremiah was permitted to lift the veil to see his new bride for the first time. He held her close and stared into the face beaming up at him. She was strangely familiar, as if he had known her in his dreams. He barely heard the priest intone, "...and now, Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah, and Juli, daughter of Nahum the Prophet and adopted daughter of Kareah, I pronounce you husband and wife. Jeremiah... [the dramatic pause] you may kiss your bride."

For the next few minutes, the rest of the world didn't exist. "Juli! Is it really you? I was sure you had gone to Babylon with Nahum!"

"How could I ever leave you, my beloved?"

"But where have you been? How did you escape the holocaust that came to Jerusalem?"

"I stayed in Bethlehem with Kareah's family. He adopted me. It was as close to you as I dared."

"And when the Babylonians overran the land?"

"We fled to Edom, and hid there."

"Why didn't you contact me? I never knew..."

"I didn't want to interrupt your ministry. And I knew YHWH would never let you marry as long as Jerusalem was so wicked. I prayed for you. A lot! They really needed your prophecies..."

"And you never married...?"

"Of course not. How could I marry someone else and still focus on my prayers for you? But when Jerusalem was destroyed, I thought maybe YHWH might let you marry."

"Oh! So you were the one who had Kareah invite me over to dinner last week!" It was becoming clear.

Juli smiled her biggest, brightest smile. "Well, I didn't make him. He respects you, too. But I must admit I did plant a few suggestions along the way."

After the feast, Jeremiah and Juli took a honeymoon, leaving Judea in the capable hands of Gedaliah, Johanan, and Jonathan. But with Jeremiah gone, Satan saw his chance. He began to pull strings behind the scenes. Within two months after Gedaliah had been made governor of the remnant in Judea, General Johanan came to him. "Sir. I smell a rat. Ishmael son of Nethaniah is a bit too eager. And I don't like the way he flatters you! So I did some checking. I found that when he fled Jerusalem, he took refuge in Ammon with King Baalis. He even served in the palace there. But now he's back here buttering you up! I think Baalis has paid him to kill you and give us into the hands of Ammon. You know how the Ammonites have tried to take advantage of our weakness from the first."

"Ishmael? Don't be silly. He serves me well. He's a good man. Don't let yourself become so paranoid, my friend."

But the next week, Johanan was back. "Sir! Now I'm sure of it! I personally searched his home when he was out, and found scads of Ammonite money and jewelry! He's been paid off to harm you! Let me kill him secretly. No one else need know. For why should the remnant gathered here be scattered again when you are killed?"

"No. I'm sure you're mistaken. Such slander is wrong. Baalis probably just wanted to help him. Don't mention it to me again unless you have proof."

Alas, Johanan's hunch was right. On the 3rd of Tishri, Ishmael invited himself into the palace at Mizpah to dine with Gedaliah and his nobles. After the meal, when the nobles were full and satisfied with wine, he and his ten hired thugs slew them all. Then he went out, surprised the Chaldean guards, and slew them as well. He continued, killing all the young men in the palace and throwing their corpses into a cistern. The rest of the people, including the daughters of Gedaliah, he captured and took with him. Knowing he'd be chased, he headed away from Ammon and hid out at Gibeon. But Daliah, one of Gedaliah's daughters, tore pieces from her dress to mark their way.

Johanan heard the terrible news. Full of wrath, he and his soldiers chased after Ishmael. They were starting toward Ammon when Jonathan saw a piece of Daliah's dress. Following the trail of pieces, they caught up with Ishmael at Gibeon. Now his captives turned upon him, too. Ishmael was outnumbered. He sliced Daliah across the chest with his sword, knowing that Johanan would have to stop to help her, and fled for Ammon.

Even in his wrath against Ishmael, Johanan could not leave the fair maiden bleeding on the ground. But, just as Ishmael figured, by the time they attended to her wounds, he was long gone. He returned to live with King Baalis in the Ammonite court. Logos was not pleased with his treachery. Ishmael had suffered a herniated lung during his flight to Ammon. It turned into a form of pneumonia, and would not heal. The rest of his miserable days were spent going to doctor after doctor, with no relief.

Johanan was angry, bitter, and fearful. They had finally begun to recover from the disaster and prosper. Now this! Why had Gedaliah not listened to him? Nebuchadnezzar was sure to find out that his soldiers had been slain. *Then he will come seeking revenge! They must flee to Egypt.*

He was in charge, now that Gedaliah was dead. But he was a soldier, not a governor. He panicked and called for the elders of Judah to meet him at the gathering place at Bethlehem, south of the smoking rubble that had been Jerusalem. He wrestled with it as they were gathering. He didn't want to be their king. Finally he decided that he had to do it. Nobody else was able to lead this people.

Johanan stood up to address the crowd. He explained what had happened, and why they must now flee to Egypt from the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar. Most of the elders agreed, except Kareah insisted they wait for Jeremiah to get back from his honeymoon before making such a big decision. "We don't have time to wait." Johanan shouted. Then he realized he was beginning to sound frantic. He needed to compromise. "Okay. It will take us two weeks to get all packed and ready to go. So you all go home and start packing, while I ride to find Jeremiah. If I can find him in time, and if he has the word of YHWH for us before those two weeks are up, then we'll do whatever YHWH tells him. Otherwise, we'll just go. Jeremiah will have to catch up."

But Kareah was not about to let him off so easily. “No, son. What if everyone is all packed to leave before you find Jeremiah? Nobody will want to obey the word of YHWH through him. You need him before you finalize...”

“He’s just down in the Jezreel Valley. I’ll find him.”

Kareah insisted. “Everybody, swear an oath that you’ll obey the word of YHWH through Jeremiah, every word. Then you can go home to pack if you want.” So they did.

Johanan took three horses, and rode hard to find Juli and Jeremiah. It took him three days. They were all the way down by the beach north of Mount Carmel. He filled them in on all that had happened as they rode back. “Everyone is meeting at Bethlehem on Tishri 24. We’ve got to know the Word of YHWH before then! We have all sworn to obey whatever YHWH tells you, every word of it, but we’ve got to know right away, before we’re all packed and on our way to Egypt!” It was the 15th of Tishri by the time he had them back at Mizpah. The elders again gathered, but Jeremiah still had no word from YHWH. He promised to pray.

Jeremiah and Juli went to Kareah’s home and poured out their hearts. They carefully explained the situation to YHWH – how urgent it was and all. Finally in the stillness of the night, Logos answered, “My beloved! What a joy to fellowship with you! How are you enjoying My precious treasure, My beautiful gift I reserved for you from the dawn of time? Does she delight you as she does Me?”

“Yes, yes. She’s wonderful, Lord. But didn’t You even hear what I told You? We need Your answer, right now!”

“I’m so sorry that your honeymoon was cut short by faithless men. The problem is, they have forgotten My Feasts. That’s really why Gedaliah was slain. They don’t even remember that today began Sukkot. If they would celebrate My Feasts, it would be much easier for them to trust Me and not fall prey to fear. Tell them that I’ll give you that answer, after you finish your honeymoon.”

So that night when Johanan came to find if there was any word from YHWH, Jeremiah told him what YHWH had said. “I’m going back on my honeymoon. YHWH says to fret not. Cease striving. Celebrate the rest of Sukkot with gladness. YHWH says if you do, it will be easier to trust Him. He’ll give you your answer about going to Egypt when I get back in eleven months.”

Poor Johanan nearly had a conniption fit. “What?! Eleven months?! That’s totally unacceptable!” he yelled. “By then, the Babylonian army will have wiped us off the map! Celebrate the Feast? This is no time to party! Don’t you understand what just happened? I will not let you go back on your honeymoon! I’ll surround this house with my army! You get back on your bloody knees and don’t get up until you hear what YHWH wants us to do!”

So Jeremiah and Juli got back down on their knees. But YHWH said no more until the last day, Tishri 24.

With nearly everyone in Judea already gathered at Bethlehem, Johanan and Jonathan brought Jeremiah with them by force, as he still did not have an answer. On the road, Jeremiah pled with YHWH, “Johanan and Jonathan are good men. The others, too. They’re all good people! They really want to hear from You! If you don’t give me their answer today, I fear they’ll do something rash!”

Finally Logos spoke. “Yes. Rash is the right word, My beloved. Young, impetuous, and impatient. Their faith is so small. I’ve been trying to teach them, but I fear their minds are set. They may have to learn the hard way. You will have My Word when you stand up before them.”

Everyone was at Bethlehem, packed and ready to roll. As Jeremiah stood to speak to them, Kareah warned him, “I think you’re too late. Their minds are already made up.”

Jeremiah nodded. “Nevertheless, now I have the Word of YHWH for them. They did promise to listen, and to obey every word. I expect them to keep that promise.” He called out to the assembled elders, “I have prayed as you asked me, for ten days. Up until this moment I really did not know what to tell you, except to celebrate the Feast with joy, and trust God until after my honeymoon. *But now, hear the Word of YHWH!* ‘If you stay in this land I will prosper you here, and relent about the calamity I inflicted upon you. Do not fear the king of Babylon. I am with you to deliver you from his hand. I will have compassion on you and restore you to your own place.

“Furthermore, I Myself will be your teacher, when you celebrate My Feasts with gladness, for you will learn to trust Me. Even though the temple is gone, My priest will make atonement for you. Thus I will protect you, to do you good and not harm on this land I have given you.

“But if you reject My Word and flee to Egypt for safety, then I assure you, the sword you flee here will overtake you there! The famine you fret about here will visit you there! The pestilence you think covers this land will find you in that land! So those who determine to put their trust in Egypt will die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence until there are no survivors from the calamity I will bring upon them. Just like My wrath was poured out on the inhabitants of Jerusalem for disobeying My word, so shall My wrath be poured on upon you when you enter Egypt. So you will become a curse, an object of horror, and will see this good land no more.”

Johanan was furious. “That’s a lie! You really expect us to believe that you got no word from YHWH for ten days, then at the last minute when we are all ready to leave, you come up with that? I don’t believe a word of it! Let’s go! When Jeremiah gets a real word from YHWH, he’ll tell us.”

Now Baruch the faithful scribe stood up. “Wait! Don’t be so hasty. I’ve known Jeremiah all my life; I know he would never tell a lie. Remember, you promised to obey whatever YHWH told him. This is YHWH’s word!”

Johanan angrily bellowed out, "Remember what I said? We swore to obey only if Jeremiah gave us YHWH's word 'before the two weeks are up.' Well, they're up. It's too late. I know Jeremiah's word is a lie, because YHWH is always on time. He's never late. So we're going. I hope you are packed, because you're coming with us. Hit the road!"

Jezaniah ben-Hoshaiah agreed. "Jeremiah and Baruch have taken the side of the Chaldeans against us, just as before Jerusalem fell. They want us destroyed or exiled."

Thus the elders of Judah broke their vow to hear and obey the word of YHWH through Jeremiah. They headed for Egypt, with their families and all they possessed. They forced Jeremiah and his friends to accompany them. Logos was grieved for all the suffering that would result.

Jeremiah seemed cheery enough along their way south. Johanan was curious. "I thought you would be angry with us for not listening to you."

"Angry? Whatever for? God is your judge. I'm only responsible to do what He has given me, and right now, that is to enjoy my wife. I am enjoying Juli very much, thank you. I'll gladly leave all the fretting to you and your collaborator Jezaniah, for you have a lot to fret about!"

They reached the land of Egypt on the coast at the Nile Delta. The first city they came to was called Tahpanhes. It was the site of an ancient fortress guarding the entry into Egypt from the Levant. The fort was originally built at the time of Amenemhat III and Joseph, over a thousand years before. But Wahibre's father Psamtik II had modernized the city and had built a small palace there as well.

The Hebrews waited while the Egyptian guards called for the Pharaoh. Wahibre came, sat on his throne before the broad stone pavement, heard their story, and passed judgment. "You're all welcome to stay here in the land of Egypt. I am only sorry that I was unable to help defend you against Babylon. That was the strangest battle I have ever been in! We were stronger than they, and should have overwhelmed them. But the gods fought against us! Never mind that. Here, you will be under my protection – and under the protection of my gods! Feel free to settle in this fertile portion of the Nile Delta. Live here and prosper."

After he left, Johanan and Jonathan came to Jeremiah with their expected, 'I told you so's'. But Jeremiah was pulling up a few of the paving stones and digging a hole underneath, near the entrance to the Pharaoh's palace. He took some large stones, buried them there, and replaced the paving stones, saying, "YHWH, God of Israel, declares, 'I am going to send for Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, My servant. He will put his throne right here. He will strike the Egyptians, set fire to their gods and their temples, and shatter the obelisks of Heliopolis. Their armies will not be able to protect you from his hand. Those destined to die will die. Those destined for the sword will be slain. And those destined for captivity will be taken captive.'"

Nebuchadnezzar returned triumphantly to Babylon. *Tyre's fall is now certain. Egypt must be disciplined for attacking Nebuzeradan at Lachish, but that can wait until my next campaign through the Levant. My general was right to promise to tear down Wahibre's gods. All the world is now subject to me! My hanging gardens and my lovely Queen are now world famous. My Magi have gained a reputation for being the wisest men on the planet. All the kings of the earth come to pay their respects, hear my wisdom, and admire my city and my wife. And they bring gifts! The tribute I receive from all over the world has made me wealthy beyond belief! I am the head of gold!* Thus Nebuchadnezzar began to accept Satan's not-so-subtle temptation to pride.

"Amy, I know what I'll do with all this extra gold. I'll build a huge gold statue, so all the visiting kings can see my greatness and glory! Nobody in history has ever had such a beautiful statue as I will have."

Queen Amytis was unimpressed. "Oh Nezzzy, you and your silly gold. True beauty is in the lovely growing things that now fill the city. That's what people really come to see. Forget the statue. Enjoy me, and our beautiful gardens. Don't I give you pleasure?" So his lovely queen managed to distract him for a time. But now that the idea had hatched in his brain, he couldn't get it out. *He was, after all, the head of gold! The emperor of all the earth!* He did not know that those recurring thoughts in his head were not his own.

Logos bowed His head in pain. "It is as I feared. After all My warnings through My servant Daniel, he has become like his arrogant father. Now his own pride has become an open door to Satan, who will take over his mind and destroy him – and My people, too – unless I intervene."

Nebuchadnezzar knew that Daniel would never permit such a statue. So he told him, "Daniel, you please me greatly. Your wisdom and faithfulness is now world famous. All the kings of the earth come to sit in your court and learn from you and your Magi. But there are many in my vast empire who don't have the opportunity to come here. I want you to take a delegation of Magi on a goodwill tour around the empire. Go in my name. Visit every nation and province under my control, as my ambassador. Take two full years, and then return to me."

So Daniel prepared to go. But he was no dummy. He was taking almost all his Magi, as ordered, but he left his governors Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego behind to advise the king and keep him from doing anything stupid.

Of course the three objected when the king began his golden statue project. Shadrach took the lead. "O King! Live forever! Your city is already very glorious. Do not do this thing, to build a graven image of gold for your own pride and glory. I assure you, it will lead to your downfall. YHWH hates such images, for He knows the temptation to worship them as idols."

“No, no, my friends. Nobody will ever worship it. It’s just a statue, for heaven’s sake. It’s not an idol. It’s not in the image of any of the gods. It’s just a likeness of me. As the king of this great city, I wanted visiting kings to see my image, so they will recognize who it is that built Babylon.”

So the king finished the statue, ignoring the warnings of Daniel’s Magi. He had it erected on the Plain of Dura in front of the city, so approaching travelers would be able to see it from miles away. It was ninety feet high including its pedestal, which was a nine foot cube resting on top of the surrounding pavement. (A Babylonian cubit is one and a half feet, making it 6 x 6 x 60 cubits.) It was cast of the bronze from Solomon’s temple and heavily plated with pure gold. It was strong, built to last forever, so all future generations could admire the great king of Babylon.

The beautiful statue was finished in 583 BC. It was truly an awesome work of art. As the king was admiring it from all angles, Satan managed to come in the open door, just as Shadrach had warned. Nebuchadnezzar ordered everyone in the land to come to a grand dedication ceremony. There would be lovely music and good eats. Everyone would get a chance to congratulate him on the statue’s beauty.

They all assembled, a vast crowd covering the plain. King Nebuchadnezzar stood proudly up to the podium and began his dedication speech. But right in the middle of it Satan whispered to him, “Test their loyalty! Make them bow to the image! Just once won’t hurt! All who love you will gladly bow. Only those who hate you will refuse. They are disloyal! They ought to be slain in your furnace!”

In his pride, the king believed those thoughts to be his own, and added them into his speech. “When the music starts, you must bow before my statue to show your loyalty to my empire. Anyone who refuses to bow is a traitor to my realm; he will be slain in my garbage disposal furnace to protect the empire. Let the festivities begin!”

The music floated sweetly out across the plain. King Nebuchadnezzar was very pleased as the sea of heads bowed down in a wave, reaching as far as his eye could see. The dedication celebration was a smashing success.

Daniel and his caravan of Magi reached Egypt. He was using Nebuchadnezzar’s goodwill tour as an opportunity to teach the nations about YHWH and His wisdom. He had been on the road now for nearly two years, and had toured Elam, Persia, Media, Urartu, Hamath, Syria, and the Levant. His last stop was Egypt, to visit the Pharaoh.

But to his surprise, he found Johanan and the remnant of Judah when he reached Tahpanhes. “Why are you here? I wondered as I went through Judah and found it bare and empty, with cities laid waste and fields untended, for I thought King Nebuchadnezzar would surely leave a small remnant to till the soil.” So they told him the whole story, first from Johanan’s perspective, then again as corrected by Jeremiah and his scribe, Baruch ben Neriah.

“You should have listened to Jeremiah!” Daniel told them. “The king of Babylon is busy with building projects at home. He would never have disciplined you for what happened to Gedaliah. That was not your fault. If anyone, he would discipline Ammon. Nebuchadnezzar is a just king, who discerns the truth of each matter before judging. Now, return to the Levant, quickly! Till the soil. Repair the cities and towns. Prosper! Why should you be destroyed when Nebuchadnezzar’s army comes down to Egypt to discipline Wahibre? He vowed to come into Egypt and tear down their gods and burn their temples. You had better not be here when his army arrives, for you are directly in their way!” They bowed and pretended to submit – what else could they do? Daniel was second ruler in the Empire. But after Daniel was gone, they quickly returned to their comfortable lives in Egypt under the Pharaoh’s protection.

Daniel next arranged to meet with Pharaoh Wahibre. “O mighty Pharaoh! It was very kind of you to offer your protection to the sons of Israel at Tahpanhes. But YHWH our God now says to quickly send them back to the Levant. Then pull down the statues and temples of your gods that have polluted the land. You are under a curse! The whole land of Egypt is under a curse! It was YHWH Himself who commanded King Nebuchadnezzar to conquer the Levant and besiege Jerusalem. When you attacked him, you brought the curse upon yourself and your land. I swear to you that YHWH will bring the Babylonian army back to you. They will devastate your land if you will not obey.”

“You’ve got to be kidding! Destroy all the statues and temples of my gods? Ha! I’d have a civil war on my hands! Polluted the land, indeed. Our statues and temples are the pride and glory of Egypt! You know nothing of Egypt!”

“But my God YHWH knows everything! If you do not pull down your idols now, the Babylonians will come and do it for you. I heard King Nebuchadnezzar promise his general to do it. He serves YHWH and keeps his promises. You think you are protecting the Judeans here, but I assure you that YHWH sees it quite differently. He says you are corrupting them! You must send them home! If you will not, your punishment will be that much worse.”

Pharaoh Wahibre couldn’t do it. His own people would assassinate him. The idolatry in Egypt was too well entrenched in the culture. He sent Daniel away and worked to strengthen his army, preparing for the coming attack from Babylon. *Now he was glad the Hebrews were living at the entry to Egypt. They will be his buffer when the Babylonians come.* The Pharaoh understood just enough about YHWH to know that He protects His own people. The Babylonians probably wouldn’t even get past them.

Sensing an urgency, Daniel and his Magi rushed back toward Babylon. But before they got there, some jealous Chaldean nobles brought accusations against the three governors, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, whom Daniel had appointed over the three districts of Babylon.

“O King! Live forever! Those men of Judah whom you appointed to rule over us have no regard for you or your gods. They don’t serve your kingdom. They refused to bow down to your golden image. We are witnesses. They are disloyal. They serve only themselves and their people.”

King Nebuchadnezzar was enraged. This was the first hint of disloyalty he had found in any of the Judeans. It had to be dealt with, immediately. So he called Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego on the carpet. “You are accused of disloyalty, by failing to bow down to my golden statue. But I didn’t see it, so I’ll give you one more chance. When the music plays, all you have to do is bow down, just once, and all will be well. But if you do not, I will order you immediately cast into the flaming furnace! Just because you’re Daniel’s friends doesn’t mean you can defy the king! What god on earth can deliver you from my hand?”

“O King, you already know our answer. YHWH our God is certainly able to deliver us out of your hand. But even if He does not, know for certain that though we serve you faithfully, yet we can bow to worship only YHWH our God, the one true God over all the earth. We can never serve your gods nor bow down to your golden image.”

Now Nebuchadnezzar, who had already let his anger get out of hand, really lost his temper. His face turned red with fury. He ordered that tar and pitch be thrown into the furnace to heat it seven times hotter than normal. Then he commanded six big military officers to bind the three Judeans with stout ropes and cast them into the furnace.

The caravan of Magi was moving fast, and nearly home. Daniel gazed down the Euphrates, expecting to feast his eyes on the beauty of Babylon’s hanging gardens off in the distance. But suddenly he yelled, “What in Sheol is that?” The Magi stared in stunned silence as the shining golden statue came into view. It appeared right before the entry to the city. It blazed in the sun, as only polished gold can do. With a sudden sense of dread, Daniel urged them on faster. *What had he so recently told Pharaoh Wahibre about King Nebuchadnezzar serving only YHWH, and vowing to pull down the idols of Egypt? He really thought his king had learned to love YHWH and His wisdom!*

Nebuchadnezzar’s six officers were among the best in his army. They were strong and fearless. They tied ropes around Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, then carried them and tossed them bodily into the furnace as if tossing in three logs. Sadly, the flames were too hot. Their army uniforms burst into flames, and the six officers crumpled at the door to the furnace, screaming. Before the king’s horrified eyes, his finest officers burned to a crisp. Now he began to regret his rash anger, but the deed was done. He turned away to flee the intense heat.

Daniel leapt from his camel and came running into the palace. “Where is the king?” he yelled.

“He’s in the scullery, by the garbage disposal furnace.”

Now that was a strange answer. *What could the king be doing in the scullery?* Daniel rushed down. *Stranger yet! The scullery was blistering hot! What sort of garbage could the king be burning?* Daniel met the king at the door to the scullery. “O King! What is going on here? And what is that horrid idol doing out on the Plain of Dura?”

“Daniel! You’re back already! Come, let’s go talk about it where it’s cooler. My statue is not a horrid idol, you twit! I should have you thrown in the dungeon for that remark. It’s just a memorial of me, in honor of the great city I built. As you said, I’m the head of gold. Did you have a good trip? Tell me all about it.”

Logos smiled at Michael. But Michael was mystified. “Lord, why do You smile? I would think You will be filled with wrath! All your careful work with Nebuchadnezzar, and now this!”

“Nebuchadnezzar does indeed have some lessons yet to learn. But I smile at my servants Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Did you see their courage to stand firm in faith, even at the threat of death? Did you see their commitment to righteousness? They please Me immensely.”

“Yes Logos.”

“You are not pleased as well? Tell Me about it.”

“Well, my Lord. I don’t want to criticize Your choice, but I really had hoped You would save them.”

Now Logos laughed out loud. “I already have!”

Together they again peered into the furnace. Michael realized that the Spirit of the eternal Father had formed a channel between heaven and earth. He was blowing gently into the furnace. His breeze of course fanned the flames even hotter, blowing them out the door to slay anyone who came near. But the breeze was cool and moist right where it touched the three bound Hebrews. They were just lying there, talking and praying together.

“Listen!” Logos laughed. The sounds of pure worship floated up into the heavenlies from the three. “All honor and blessing to You, YHWH, God of Israel. In all You have done, Your justice is apparent; Your promises are always fulfilled; Your ways are holy and true; Your judgments are faithfully executed. Your sentence upon us is just, for we have sinned! We deserted You. We didn’t listen to Your Law or observe it. We failed to do what You told us for our good. You treated us exactly as we deserved. You delivered us into the power of our enemies, and now have cast us away into this furnace. Yet, do not abandon us forever, for the sake of Your own name! And do not repudiate Your covenant for the sake of Abraham, Your friend, or Isaac, Your servant, or Israel, Your chosen one, to whom You promised descendants as countless as the stars of heaven, and as the grains of sand at the seashore. So grant us a deliverance worthy of Your holy name! Let the Chaldeans know that You alone are God of all the Earth!”

Logos was laughing thunderously at the sheer joy of it all. “Now I shall arise!” He shouted. “How could I fail to come to them, after a prayer of faith like that?” He quickly moved down via the breeze of the Spirit, stooped to untie the ropes binding the three Hebrews, and lifted them up to stand beside Him.

“Who are You, Lord?” they asked in wonder.

“I am Logos, the eternal Word of YHWH, whom you have honored with your courageous confession.”

“Oh! Are we dead, then? Is this heaven?”

“This is indeed heaven – the heaven of My presence. But you are not dead. Indeed, you are more alive than you have ever been, for you have reached the Source of Life! Come, sing and dance with Me!” He took their hands to form a circle, and led them in singing the Psalms as they danced exuberantly together around inside the furnace.

Logos knew all the Psalms, and the dance steps, too, just as they had always done at the Feasts. It was as if He had been dancing with them all their lives. Perhaps He had. Time ceased to have any meaning; their energy was boundless. They sang and danced with all their might, clear through the Hallelujah Psalms and Psalms of Ascent. Then they improvised, singing new praises in a round. Each person made up a new line as his turn came.

The angels gathered in awe, listening to the new psalm. “We bless You, YHWH, God of our Fathers! May You be praised and honored forever! Blessed is Your glorious and holy name, praised and honored forever! Be blessed in the temple of Your sacred joy, praised and honored forever! Be blessed on the throne of Your Kingdom, praised and honored forever! Be blessed in the vault of the heavens in clouds of glory, praised and honored forever! Blessed are You, descending to the great deep, enthroned on cherubs in the heights, praised and honored forever!

“All things that He has made, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! Angels, servants of YHWH in the highest heavens, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! Heavens above, and the earth beneath, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! Waters above the heavens and waters under the depths, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! Sun and moon, and you stars of heaven, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! Gentle rains and dews, tempest and hearty gale, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! Fire and heat, frost and cold, snow and ice, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! Day and night, light and darkness, lightning and cloud, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! Hills and mountains, valleys and springs of water, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! All you seas, you rivers, lakes, and oceans, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! Everything that grows on earth, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise!

“Sea beasts and all that dwell in the seas, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! You birds of the heavens, and all that fly above the realms of men, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! Animals, wild and tame, and you beasts of burden, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! You sons of men, children of the Most High, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! Priests and you servants of the King of kings, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! Israel, chosen of the Most High, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! Spirits and souls of the virtuous, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! Devout and humble-hearted men, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! You, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, bless YHWH! Give Him glory and everlasting praise! For He has saved us from Sheol, from the power of death; He has rescued us from the flames, and delivered us from the fiery furnace.

“Oh! Give thanks to YHWH! He is good! Give thanks to YHWH! His wisdom and understanding are unsearchable, and His truth endures forever. All you who worship Him, bless the God of gods! Praise Him and give Him thanks, for His love is everlasting and His mercy endures forever.”

Daniel did not want to talk about his trip. The king was obviously covering for something. “O King, live forever! I will give you the full run-down on my trip tomorrow. But right now, we have a grave emergency on our hands. I fear for you, and for your kingdom. Did you hear nothing of all I taught you about YHWH? Look unto the hills, O King! He’s watching you. He sees. He knows what you’ve done. Do you not remember the pyramid stone which crushed the statue? Your statue, and your kingdom with it, is about to be crushed if you will not repent. He is grieved, O King. Confess to Him now what you have done, and He will tell us what to do. Perhaps your kingdom may be spared.”

The rebuke was gentle, and the king’s heart was still tender. He put his hands in his face and began to weep with pangs of guilt and contrition. “I am so sorry, Lord YHWH! I guess I got proud. After all Your lessons on humility and looking to You for wisdom, I failed You. I thought only of myself and my glory. Please forgive me! Forgive me for my anger and for what I did to my faithful servants Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They didn’t deserve...”

“What? What did you do to them?” Daniel was instantly alert, with a growing feeling of horror.

“I’m sorry, Daniel. I got angry at them. I lost my temper when they wouldn’t bow before my statue.”

“Wouldn’t bow... You actually tried to make them bow before that awful thing?!” Daniel was incredulous.

Now the king hung his head in abject shame. “It’s worse than that, Daniel. I... well you see, I swore I would throw them into the furnace if they wouldn’t bow, and I had to keep my promise...”

All this time they had been speaking in Kasdan, which the king's nobles and servants did not understand. Now Daniel shouted at them in Chaldean, "Quickly! Follow me down to the furnace!"

"Oh, Daniel, it's too late. They're burned up. It's been over an hour... in my anger I made them heat up the fire so hot... Well, it slew my soldiers who tossed them in."

Daniel ignored him to run for the scullery. The officers and nobles followed. The king, now curious, followed as well. When they got to the furnace room, it had cooled off to its normal heat – the tar and pitch thrown in to heat it up seven times hotter was burned up. Everyone else quickly gathered around the door with Daniel, so the king sat on a stool in the corner and put his face in his hands. *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had been among his best Magi. Oh how foolish he was to let his anger get the best of him.*

"Look, O King!" The others cleared a path.

"Oh dear God!" King Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed, jumping up. "Was it not three men we cast, bound, into the fiery furnace? How then do I see four? And where are their bonds? And from whence comes this singing I hear, and this joyous dancing that I see? Look! That fourth one is shining like a Son of God!"

They all stood in stunned silence, listening to that final new psalm of praise, which the four were composing on the spot. The incredible joy flowing from the furnace transfixed them. Suddenly Nebuchadnezzar realized that there was nothing in the entire world he would rather have, than to be privileged to join them in that dance!

When the dance and the hymns of praise were finished, Logos gathered the three Hebrews into a group hug. Those outside the furnace saw Him blaze into a fervent white heat, bright as the sun, enveloping Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in its glory. "Oh!" the king exclaimed, exhaling in a deep sigh. "I thought they might still be alive. YHWH has taken their bodies to heaven with Him."

That blaze of glory remained a long time. As bright as it was, it was gentle on the eyes and filled them with peace, as if enticing them to join the hug. Finally the flame dimmed, leaving only the three Hebrews still visible in the furnace.

Nebuchadnezzar came right to the door and called out, "O Shadrach! Meshach! Abednego! Are you still alive? Come out, you faithful servants of the most high God!" They turned to him, smiled, and strolled to the door.

Nebuchadnezzar reached out his hand to help them out, but quickly drew it back. The flames were still too hot for him. But when they stepped out and returned to the king's court, all the nobles were amazed, for they didn't have the slightest injury. Their clothes weren't singed and there wasn't even the smell of smoke upon them. "It's a miracle!" they agreed. "That Judean God YHWH is strong indeed! No other god on earth could have done this!"

The next day, King Nebuchadnezzar called the elders, nobles, and leading citizens together for a proclamation. When they were all assembled, he lifted his hands toward the Zagros Mountains and shouted, "Blessed be YHWH Almighty, the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! He sent His angel to deliver His servants who put their trust in YHWH, even violating the king's command and yielding their bodies to the furnace rather than worship any other god but Him. Therefore, I hereby decree that any people, nation, or tongue saying anything against YHWH the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, shall be torn limb from limb and their houses made into heaps of rubble. For no other god is able to deliver like this!"

Thus Nebuchadnezzar restored the three friends of Daniel to their high office over the administration of the three provinces of Babylon. He also gave them honor, wealth, and vindication over their enemies. But, though he never again required that anyone bow down to it, he did not remove his glorious golden statue.

Daniel spent days telling the king about his adventures touring the empire. But every time he would try to talk about the statue, Nebuchadnezzar would put him off. It was too beautiful; and too expensive! He had put two years of hard work into it, and very much gold! He didn't want it destroyed. He went to great lengths to avoid the subject.

Daniel was always respectful, of course. The king is still the king. But when he got around to the end of his trip, when he had visited Egypt and discovered the Judeans at Tahpanhes, he knew he had to say something. "I reminded Pharaoh Wahibre of what you and General Nebuzeradan vowed – to discipline Egypt for attacking you at Jerusalem. I told him that you now served YHWH and that you would come and pull down the idols of his gods. But, O King, I don't think YHWH will let you do that until something is done about that horrid idol in front of the city."

"Now, don't start that again! We don't worship it. It's not an idol. It's just a monument, a symbol of myself as the head of gold, and the empire I have built. So I don't want to hear any more about it."

"As you wish, O King. Just know this for sure: You will not succeed in Egypt until that statue is gone. I will pray for you, that YHWH will give you a proper warning before you do anything you might regret." So he went off to pray.

Nebuchadnezzar recalled his vow to discipline Egypt, and decided it was time to keep his promise. He ordered his Tartan Nebuzeradan to prepare for a campaign to Egypt early in the following year, which would be 581 BC.

Logos loved to hear Daniel pray. Because of his vast command of the Kasdan language, the torrent of worship from Daniel's lips was like music in the heavenlies. When in the middle of his worship Daniel made his petition, the universe listened. "I delight to answer Daniel's prayers," Logos said. "He loves what I love, and hates what I hate!"

CHAPTER 25 – HUMBLING NEBUCHADNEZZAR

That very night, Logos came to Nebuchadnezzar in his dreams. As with his first dream, he awoke drenched in sweat, fearful and anxious as to the interpretation of the dream. And as before, he called for all the Magi, but they could not interpret it.

Finally he found Daniel. He was in his prayer closet, where he had lost all track of time. At first the king didn't want to interrupt. Kasdan is the most beautiful language in the universe. Even the king loved to listen to Daniel pray.

But this dream had really upset him. Finally he knocked on Daniel's closet door. Daniel slowly came out, rubbing tears of sheer joy from his eyes. "I'm so sorry to bother you..." Nebuchadnezzar made it sound like Daniel was the king and he the servant. "...but I've had another dream. None of the other Magi can interpret it. But you are the chief of the Magi, and in you is the spirit of the holy God, so no mystery baffles you. Please, tell me the dream I had, together with its interpretation."

"Yes, O King. YHWH will surely give you the answer. But again, I beg you for one day to go before Him,"

"Oh... No, never mind. I can't wait that long. You don't need to prove yourself again. I'll tell you the dream. Just dress to meet me in my throne room."

So Daniel washed, dressed, and came to stand before the king, praying all the while. Now in good Kasdan, for he had been studying and using it a lot, Nebuchadnezzar related his dream. Again, although it loses much of its poetic beauty, I must translate it into English, because so few of my dear Readers know much Kasdan.

"I dreamed last night," he said, "that I was looking out my window, admiring my beautiful statue. Then, poof! The statue was gone. In its place was a tiny tree, like a cedar sprout. It was a lovely tree, all alone out there on the Plain of Dura. I studied it, and found it to be perfect, a tree to be greatly admired, although still tender and unpretentious. As I watched, it began to grow. I was amazed at how fast it grew. Soon it became tall and strong; its height reached to the sky. Surely it was visible throughout the entire empire.

"Now it was not a cedar, but rather many kinds of trees in one, for it bore fruits of all kinds to feed the nations. The beasts of the earth found shade beneath it. The birds of the sky nested in its branches. All peoples lived off its fruit.

"But as I looked, a holy angel descended from heaven, shouting out, 'Chop down the tree! Cut off its branches! Strip its foliage! Scatter its fruit! Let the birds and beasts flee out from under it! Yet leave the stump with its roots in the ground. Surround the stump with tender grass, and encircle it with bands of iron and brass. Let it be drenched with the dews of heaven, sharing the grass with the beasts of the field. *Let his mind be changed from that of a man to that of a beast, until seven years pass over him.*'"

The king's face turned white with the memory. "Daniel, I was cool with my dream until that last sentence. The holy one was no longer talking about the stump—he was talking about a man! He said, 'his mind', not 'its mind'. It terrified me, so I awoke. What does it mean? I must know!"

Daniel, too, was pale; his face drawn and tight. He sat there before the king, aghast, too stunned to speak, for an hour, while the king struggled to be patient. Finally he said, "I'm sorry, Daniel. Don't feel bad about it. If you need a day to get the interpretation go ahead. Come back t..."

"My lord the king! If only the dream applied to those who hate you, and its interpretation to your adversaries! For the tree which you saw, which was tender and humble, 'unpretentious', you said, and grew to be large and strong, providing food and shelter to your empire – that tree is you, O King! For when you were young and tender you were humble and kind to all. Now you have grown tall and strong; your majesty reaches to the sky; your dominion extends to the ends of the earth; and all the world feeds from you and takes shelter under your covering.

"But now you have grown proud, and have built a golden image to the glory of your pride as if it were in your own strength or wisdom that you built this great empire. Therefore the holy angel commanded to chop down the tree and destroy it, yet leave the stump in the ground, bound with iron and brass, surrounded with grass, wet with the dew and rain, until seven years pass. This is the interpretation, the decree of the Most High, O King. You shall be driven from mankind. Your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You will eat grass like the cattle and be drenched with the dew and the rain for seven years, until you recognize that YHWH the most high God is ruler over the realms of mankind – Sovereign over all the earth! – and He bestows authority upon whomever He wishes.

"But there is still hope. In your dream the holy angel commanded to leave the stump and its roots in the ground. It means that your kingdom will be restored to you, after you acknowledge that YHWH the God of heaven rules over all, and that He raises one up and puts another down.

"So, I urge you, O King. Turn away from your sin. Acknowledge your pride. Humble yourself. Do righteous deeds. Show mercy to the poor. Perhaps YHWH will relent of this great calamity He has decreed against you."

Surprisingly for those who think they know this story, King Nebuchadnezzar really heard Daniel. He repented of his pride, humbled himself, and again showed mercy and justice to the poor, as when he was younger. Logos was very pleased. One night He responded by knocking down Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue. The king got up the next morning, looked out his window to admire it, and behold, it was lying facedown, shattered into many pieces.

King Nebuchadnezzar was furious! He called Daniel and together they went out to inspect the damage.

Nebuchadnezzar quickly realized that the statue was irreparable. He was heartbroken. "It was so beautiful! Why, Daniel, why? I was obeying YHWH! I was doing all you said! I was being kind, and helping the poor!"

"Yes, O King, you were. It looks to me like YHWH is pleased with you. He has accepted your offering."

"Pleased with me? He has a strange way of showing it. I designed this statue to last forever, only to illustrate that dream YHWH gave: the glory and beauty of my empire and my majesty as the head of gold. YHWH gave me the dream. So He ought to just love my statue. Why would He..."

"No, O King. Look at how it fell. See the head? It is face-down, bowed directly toward the peak of that mountain where you saw the stone cut out without hands. YHWH has given you another chance. Now you can break up this statue, melt down the gold, and have much more money to do good to the nations and peoples under your authority. Look unto the hills, O King! YHWH is guiding you!"

That was a tough one for King Nebuchadnezzar. It took him a while to see the fallen statue as a good thing. But after he had melted it down and used the gold to benefit all the peoples and nations in his empire he saw that Daniel was right. The statue had just been a snare to his pride. He became glad it was gone. He had done the right thing.

In 581 BC, General Nebuzeradan left to punish Pharaoh Wahibre. The golden statue had been cleared away and the gold used for the good of the people, so Daniel assured the king that his campaign to Egypt would be successful. All was well in the empire. The hanging gardens were more beautiful than ever. There was a steady stream of visiting dignitaries to admire them, the king's glory, the beauty of Queen Amytis, and the wisdom of his Magi. Strangely, the Babylonian Empire was more wealthy now than before Nebuchadnezzar had given away all that gold. He was very pleased with himself, as he had every reason to be.

In 580 BC, he stood in his favorite window overlooking his city and its happy, prosperous people. He indulged himself in just a little self-satisfaction. Satan of course was right there hoping against hope that this time he will forget to give YHWH the glory. *Daniel had conditioned him too well! And those visions! He had developed the irritating habit of looking up to those purple hills, as a reminder to seek the wisdom of his Enemy.* Satan squelched a snarl and urged Nebuchadnezzar to turn a bit to his left, so he wouldn't see the hills. Then he gently flattered him. "It is a wonderful city! You have been so good to them! Look at all you've built! It is so beautiful! All your hard work and wisdom has paid off! Everyone looks up to you! Your glory has filled the earth, and your power reaches to the farthest nations!"

The watching angels held their breath. Would he pass the test? He knew what to do. The hills were right there. Daniel had carefully taught him to give thanks in all things, and to always give YHWH the glory.

Alas, this one time, the king failed to look to the hills. He forgot about the pyramid stone cut from the mountain; forgot the vision of the statue crumbling to dust. He even forgot his recent vision of the magnificent tree and its lonely stump. He stood a bit taller in his royal robes, his gold crown shining on his head, threw out his chest, and called out (to nobody in particular), "Is not this Babylon the Great, the city which I have built as a royal residence by the strength of my might for the glory of my majesty?!"

Logos sadly answered. "O King Nebuchadnezzar! To you it is decreed: Sovereignty is removed from you this very day. You will be driven from mankind. Your dwelling will be with the beasts of the field. You will eat grass like the cattle. Seven years will pass over you. Then you will recognize that the most high God is ruler over the affairs of men, and He bestows authority on whomever He will."

Daniel also heard it. He bowed his head and groaned, wondering how he could guard this fine man who had just been caught in his pride. The king was still standing, with a glazed, far-off look in his eyes. Daniel ran to his side, put an arm around him, and gently guided him to his bedroom. But the king had barely reached it when he dropped to his hands and knees and a low guttural growl escaped his lips. Daniel quickly closed the doors, locked them, and sent an urgent summons for Queen Amytis and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

They came on the run. "Something terrible happened!" Shadrach said. Meshach added. "I sense it too!" Abednego agreed. "The kingdom is under attack from the enemy!"

"Yes indeed," Daniel responded. "We must pray. King Nebuchadnezzar has fallen to pride, and we must stand in the gap." So all five got on their knees beside the king and cried out to YHWH. Their prayers went on for hours, but the crucial part, which Logos was eagerly hoping to hear, was: "Give us wisdom to know what to do, to know how to stand in the gap for this king whom You love, until his time of discipline is past. Bind the enemy from going one step further than Your perfect holy will. Grant us grace to act in harmony with your plan, with Your judgments. For Your judgments are holy and true, and righteous altogether..."

Early the next morning, shortly before the dawn, the prayer meeting was over. Clearly the king was solid gone. His eyes were dark; his responses were only snarls and growls. He could no longer stand upright. He lifted his leg to pee on his bedpost. That was the last straw. They could not keep him here. So they tied a rope around his neck and led him through the darkened corridors as one would lead a calf. They took him down to the scullery, past the now cold garbage disposal furnace, and out the kitchen door into the king's vegetable gardens. From there, they fled the city through a secret tunnel, leading to the king's stables and pastures. Daniel was developing a plan. The king's dream had said, 'encircle it with bands of iron and brass,' and he remembered just such a place.

A faithful old shepherd named Sam lived near the king's stables with his wife Sharon. They had served the king all their lives as chief of the royal shepherds and guardian of the king's flocks. Their children were grown and gone. Their bodies were tired and worn from the rigors of the fields. Their eyes were dim, their health failing.

But they did not want to retire. Daniel had heard Sam arguing with the king when he had told him to leave the shepherding to younger men, accept a generous pension, and live in an apartment in the city. "Please no! I plead with you! We don't need your pension. We don't want to live in the city! We love the fields, and our old hut by the stables. We have lived with sheep and cattle all our lives; allow us now to die with them. The younger shepherds help us and still come to us for wisdom. *We have need of nothing but the sun, the rain, and God's good green grass!*" For some reason, that phrase 'God's good green grass' had struck a responsive chord with Daniel. Now it came back.

The sun was not yet above the eastern hills, but Sam and Sharon were already up. They had always been early risers, and old age could not shake their habit. Seeing the smoke drifting up the chimney, Daniel knocked on their door.

"Come in and welcome!" Sam flung wide the door without even knowing who was on the other side. Sharon was finishing up the dishes and it looked like Sam had been reading his morning paper. Daniel tied the rope to the porch railing. He, the queen, and his three friends entered. Seeing her queen, Sharon squealed, dried her hands on her apron, and poked at her hair, looking around for something more presentable to put on.

"What in heaven's name was that?" Sam asked, as they closed the door behind them.

"That is, or was, the king," Daniel said sadly. "But don't be afraid, Sharon. He won't be coming in here. Relax and let me tell you what happened." Queen Amytis, the only one to understand what Sharon was actually anxious about, gave her a big hug as Daniel talked.

When he finished, he added, "No one must know of the king's condition. According to the dream YHWH gave, he will be restored to his kingdom in seven years. His people must respect him, not despise him with taunts of his being an idiot or a beast. Right now, no one knows but us seven. You may take a few shepherds into your confidence if you trust them. But no one else must know. I want you to care for him until his sanity is restored."

Daniel was the second ruler in the empire, or perhaps first ruler under these conditions. Sam and Sharon were certainly not about to refuse his request. But they were practical as well. "Yes, Your Majesty! We will gladly do as you ask. But we are old, and of modest means. We have neither the strength nor the resources to provide for a king. And our health is failing as well. What if we should die before the king's sanity returns?"

"Those are good questions. First, I will provide for your poverty. You shall lack nothing. As for the king – he will need little more than the sun, the rain, and God's good green grass. But he needs a sturdy fence, not just to keep wild animals out, but to keep him within. Put him in that corral by the sheepfold; the one with the brass fence posts and iron rails. He'll be safe there. It has good green grass.

"Your health is another matter. I knew you were old and frail before I came. I've been praying about it. YHWH showed me that you are invincible here until your task for Him is done. This is His work. I promise He will give you strength and health to see it through, and will extend your lives as long as necessary until the king is restored."

"That is a good prophecy," Sam said slowly. "But as you well know, every prophecy of good must be proven before it can be accepted. It has been the law from ancient times."

"What proof would you like YHWH to give you?"

"I want to see!" Sharon said without hesitation. "My eyes are so dim I can scarcely see the sheep anymore. I can't read at all. Sam reads to me each evening before I go to bed. Why, I can hardly get the dishes clean or do the laundry anymore. And when I try to sweep the floor..."

Sam nodded. "I'm afraid my eyes are dimming as well. Either that, or the newsprint is awfully tiny these days."

Daniel smiled. "That is easy for YHWH. He is the God who created the eyes!"

"YHWH? The God of the Judeans? We heard the king's proclamation about him, when He saved those three Hebrew dudes from the fiery furnace. We've actually been hoping someone would teach us about Him!"

"Ha! It's a deal. We are those three Hebrew dudes!" Shadrach laughed. "One or another of us will come here every week to teach you, and to ensure you're doing okay." The three introduced themselves. They chatted awhile to get to know each other.

Daniel had been praying. Now he put his hands over Sam and Sharon's heads. "YHWH bless you, and keep you, and make His face to shine upon you, and give you peace. And YHWH heal and strengthen your eyes, and the rest of your bodies, until your task on earth is done and our king is ready to be restored to his kingdom."

The five rose to leave. "Let's go out to the corral with the king to make sure he'll be okay there," Meshach said.

"Wait!" Sharon cried. "My eyes are still dim!"

"YHWH's Creation took six days," Daniel responded. "If your eyes are still dim after six days, tell us and we will come to take the king back from you."

But as they were leaving, with the king safely in his new 'pasture', Sharon's eyes were already much clearer. By the end of the week, they were completely well and strong.

Nebuchadnezzar had ordered General Nebuzeradan, “Deal with Egypt first. Tear down their idols, just as you vowed. They are the main reason for your campaign. But make a quick pit stop at each of my tributaries along the way, to make sure they are okay. Be kind and generous to all who are being obedient to me. But deal severely with any who have rebelled against me, for if you allow any rebellion to fester, it will spread across the land.”

So when General Nebuzeradan got to Egypt, he only expected to punish them for attacking him while he was besieging Jerusalem. He did not expect to find the Judeans there! Daniel had told the king, but the king had never told his general, as he was confident that Daniel had already resolved the problem. Thus Nebuzeradan was shocked to see the Judeans there, blocking his way into Egypt.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded, incensed. “Where is Gedaliah? I left him to govern you in Judea!”

Johanan told him the whole story, leaving nothing out, even the part about them being afraid of the wrath of King Nebuchadnezzar, though it was Ammon who had incited the assassination of Gedaliah. “When Ishmael slew your soldiers, we fled to Egypt because we had no strength to face you, General Nebuzeradan. The Pharaoh promised us his protection. That’s why we came down here.”

Now, that was the wrong thing to say. But the general understood. All he answered was, “Wahibre’s protection? Ha! We shall see about that!” He moved his army around Tahpanhes and headed on in toward Memphis.

After he left, Jeremiah spoke up. “I warned you not to come here. But YHWH has given us one more chance. General Nebuzeradan did not harm us! Quickly, we must flee back to Judea. Nebuzeradan will return. If he finds us in Judea being responsible citizens, living in our homes, tilling the fields and harvesting the produce, perhaps he will not punish us too much. But if he returns and we are still here, then all that YHWH promised will fall upon us.”

“No!” Johanan retorted. “He left us because he has no orders to attack us. His orders are to attack Egypt. He’ll no doubt be defeated, and we’ll never see him again. YHWH is blessing us here! We shall never leave here to return to that God-forsaken land!”

Jeremiah was adamant. “No! Judea is YHWH’s land! Juli and I are returning, even if we have to go alone. Any of you who wish to live, come with us. All who remain here will die by famine or the sword as YHWH said.”

Baruch and Seraiah immediately agreed to go with him. Kareah, Jeremiah’s father-in-law, concurred. With that, Johanan got angry. “No!” he shouted. “I won’t let you go! I’ll slay you myself if you try to go. You must stay with us!”

“What happened to you, my brother?” Jeremiah asked. “You were kind, humble, and eager to obey YHWH. Has a little power corrupted you so soon?”

Johanan, startled to realize he was right, had no answer. But still his pride would not let him change his mind. He forced them to stay in Tahpanhes.

General Nebuzeradan encountered the Egyptian army at Memphis. He reminded Wahibre. “You attacked us at Lachish while we were besieging Jerusalem. You thought you could defeat us, for your two armies were fresh, and stronger than ours. But YHWH God of the Hebrews fought on our side. I vowed I would come down here to discipline you – to prove that compared to YHWH, your gods are weak. Nebuchadnezzar serves YHWH. YHWH is strong! He saved the Judeans from the fiery furnace, though all the soldiers who threw them in were burnt up. YHWH has made Babylon the greatest empire in the world! Your weak and worthless gods cannot stand before Him!”

“Bah!” the Pharaoh responded. “We were fighting in Judea. Of course the Judean God was strong, there. But here, you are on my land! My gods will protect us! We have many gods, all across the land, and we serve them well! Besides, we are still fresher and stronger than you, and our archers are the best in the world. And here, on our home turf, we have mighty war machines. You have not a chance! We will destroy you to the last man, and feed your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the fields.”

“Sounds like a challenge, eh Michael?” Logos laughed lightly. “Do you still have your angelic host guarding my servants the Babylonians?”

“Yes, my Lord!”

“Then let the games begin!” Once again the angels went before the Babylonians to ward off the arrows, turn the swords, and bat out of the sky the stones from the Egyptian war machines. It was an utter rout. In no time, those world-class Egyptian warriors were fleeing, screaming, “The curse of Ra!”

General Nebuzeradan let them go. He didn’t want to leave Egypt defenseless. He had another mission. He went through Memphis, Heliopolis, and a few other cities in the northeastern Nile Delta, looking for idols and obelisks to Egyptian gods. Wherever they found some, his men had orders to pull them down or smash them, right before the horrified eyes of their own priests and all the people. He also burned some of their temples, and broke down some of their altars. But he didn’t burn the cities or hurt any of the Egyptian people, as long as they didn’t interfere.

When he was ready to leave Egypt, he again went to Pharaoh Wahibre, who was still busy trying to calm his frightened army. “I have showed you mercy, for YHWH is merciful. But I have settled once and for all the fact that your gods are no match for YHWH, the God of the Judeans. I have destroyed all the false gods I found around here. If you want Egypt to prosper, send your army through the rest of the land and do the same. If you do not, I swear Egypt will never again be a great nation as she once was.”

It was basically the same thing that Daniel had told him when he was there. Sadly, the Pharaoh still could not hear. The worship of their gods was deeply ingrained into their culture, in traditions thousands of years old. He could not give it up. Instead, Wahibre surveyed the damage and sent crews to restore the temples and the idols of their gods.

General Nebuzeradan returned to Tahpanhes. He built a temporary throne out on the pavement in front of the Pharaoh's palace there. From there he sat to judge the Judeans. Johanan noticed that his throne was directly over the stones that Jeremiah had buried under the pavement.

"You should have remained in Judea," Nebuzeradan growled. "Your God is powerful. He would have protected you there. You have been foolish to put your trust in Egypt. I just went through lower Egypt and destroyed their gods and burned their temples. They can't help you! In your rebellion, King Nebuchadnezzar says that I must punish you. He is a good king, but he tolerates no rebellion in his empire. So divide yourselves up into ten groups, however you desire. I will then select the largest group, and they will all die to atone for your rebellion. The rest will live."

Of course nobody wanted to be in the largest group, so there was a good deal of shuffling back and forth. General Nebuzeradan gave them plenty of time. When they were through, he stood on his throne and eyed the ten groups. Fearing the God of Israel, he prayed silently for wisdom in his selection. In the end, he picked, not the largest group, but the group with the fewest who looked like leaders, for he did not want to further weaken this feeble remnant of Judah. Then his army moved in and executed that group before the horrified eyes of the others.

"That is what happens to those who rebel against the king of Babylon!" Nebuzeradan called, directing their attention back to himself.

"Now, I have one more task before I leave. Gedaliah was slain, so I must select another to replace him; one who will obey me, and serve YHWH your God. **Johanan!** Come before me! You don't like me, I know. But you do fear me, and you fear King Nebuchadnezzar. That is good. And you told me the truth when I asked why you came into Egypt, even though you knew it was not what I wanted to hear. Also, you are a strong leader. Your people love you; they will follow you. So I appoint you as their governor in place of Gedaliah. I will support and defend you as long as you obey me. Now, everyone begin to pack up! I order Johanan to take you all back to Judea where you belong!"

"Thank you, Your Majesty!" Johanan was learning to be humbled. "I accept your commission, and I promise to obey you. But I have one question. What would you have done to discipline us for the deaths of Gedaliah and your guards if we had just stayed in Judea?"

Nebuzeradan looked surprised. "Why, nothing. It wasn't your fault. I would have disciplined Ammon!"

The Babylonians left to visit other tributaries in the Levant. Johanan, with his brother Jonathan by his side, gathered the elders of the people for a planning meeting. "I'm terribly sorry! I led you wrong when I insisted we come here even after Jeremiah told us what would happen. He was right, even to the exact location of Nebuzeradan's throne here on the pavement. From now on we will only follow the Word of YHWH through Jeremiah."

So he called Jeremiah and urged him to speak. "YHWH likes your change of attitude, my friend. But His Word has not changed. Submit to the king of Babylon and you will live. Rebel and you will die. He ordered us back to Judea, so to Judea we will go. Thank you for leading us, Johanan."

But not all in the group were so quick to agree. Jezaniah ben-Hoshaiah had strongly supported Johanan before. Now he said. "I remind you of what our friend Johanan so recently said – 'YHWH is blessing us here! We shall not leave to return to that God-forsaken land!' I agreed then, and I still agree. Jeremiah was wrong! He is a false prophet. He said we'd all perish by famine or sword, but we did not! Only one tenth of us were slain for the death of Gedaliah. So YHWH is still blessing us here. I vote we remain here in Tahpanhes and prosper. We shall grow, and move into other parts of Egypt – to Memphis, Heliopolis, even to Pathros [upper Egypt] and beyond. Let us multiply and fill the land, from Migdol by the Sea, even up south to Syene and beyond, to the border of the Ethiopians!"

It was a good speech. Jezaniah was a powerful speaker. He waxed eloquent about the greatness of the Judeans and how much the Egyptians loved them and wanted them to stay. *YHWH had called them to be a blessing to the nations!* On and on he went, making promises he had no way to keep and no intention of keeping (as with most modern politicians), until he had the majority of the people with him. Finally he called for a vote, which he won easily.

Jezaniah then told his friend Johanan, "If you still want to return to that God-forsaken land with your Babylonian slaves, go ahead. The rest of us will stay here and prosper!"

To his credit, this time Johanan did not give in to the will of the people. "You have elected Jezaniah to lead you to your deaths!" he swore. "But all those who want to live, pack your stuff and follow YHWH to Judea. We go on the morning after the Sabbath."

Alas, it was a pitifully small band who left with Johanan and Jeremiah after the Sabbath. Jonathan took a count – only 745 men, plus their families. Hardly enough to defend a city, much less the entire land of Judah! But they went anyway. They would obey, though they ran the risk of being overwhelmed by any of the surrounding nations who would soon discover their weakness.

Logos was pleased. After all His warnings, He finally had a remnant of a remnant who would obey Him. He determined to bless and protect them.

General Nebuzeradan took his time. He moved through the Levant, disciplining or encouraging each province or nation as needed. Ammon was duly chastised for killing Gedaliah. Her king and nobles were all slain. Nebuzeradan installed a governor who would obey him. Since history doesn't record his name, I shall call him Al.

Al was a humble and wise man, a half-breed who had long championed for peace between Ammon and Judah. He understood what had happened to Gedaliah, and why. He petitioned Nebuzeradan, "Your Majesty! Before you go, there is one more task I beg you to do for us. Though the Ammonites were certainly complicit in Gedaliah's death, the one who actually slew him was Ishmael son of Nethaniah the Israelite, who wants to usurp the throne of Judah. If Ishmael is not stopped he will try again, for he still lives among us. I beg you to curtail his ambition."

Nebuzeradan nodded. "Thank you, Al. You will make a good governor here. I will do as you ask. Bring this Ishmael before me, that I may pass judgment."

He was brought in and grilled by Nebuzeradan. His ten Hebrew followers were also brought in and grilled. Then all their families were brought before the court. Beginning with the youngest, they were slain with the sword before the eyes of their fathers. Finally the fathers were all slain, until only Ishmael remained. "I will not kill you, Ishmael," Nebuzeradan declared. "Death is too light a punishment for you. You very nearly caused the annihilation of the entire Judean remnant! So I order a pain worse than death. Look now long and hard at these who were slain because of you. When you have seen more than you can bear, I will gouge out your eyes, so this carnage will be the last thing you will ever see. Thus the memory of the horror of your foul deeds will torment you until the end of time." It was a good object lesson for all who want to challenge God's established order. Nebuzeradan had learned that YHWH is the Most High, ruler over the realms of mankind, and that only by His authority does a king receive power. Ishmael learned it too – a little late.

Ammon was the last of the tributaries in the Levant before General Nebuzeradan headed north to Syria and Hamath. Before he left, he went over to check up on Judah to make sure Johanan was okay. But when he got there, he was appalled to see so few in the land! They were being obedient, restoring the homes and tilling the soil as he had ordered. But it was clear there were not enough to protect themselves. *He should leave a large garrison of soldiers to defend them. But how could they even feed such a garrison? It was simply impossible!* "What happened to the others? Did I not leave more than 5,000 strong men in Egypt?"

"Yes Your Majesty," Johanan answered. "I'm very sorry. I really tried to bring them. But Jezaniah gave a big speech and convinced most of them to stay in Egypt. They plan to integrate into Egyptian society and multiply to other cities throughout the land, where they hope to prosper."

General Nebuzeradan was furious. "I must now return to my king in Babylon. But I swear when I come back to the Levant, I will go into Egypt and search out every Hebrew in the land, from Migdol by the Sea up to Syene in Pathros. I will bring the wrath of YHWH down upon their heads for their rebellion. Not one of them will survive!

"But as for you, I shall protect you, because Johanan obeyed me and told me the truth. However, there are too few of you to survive here, for your enemies are strong. So you must come to Babylon with me. There you shall join with the remnant of Judah who went before you. There you shall flourish and multiply until you are strong enough to return to your land."

So they left the Promised Land desolate and without inhabitant, as Jeremiah had prophesied against them in the days of King Jehoiakim. *And yes, Jeremiah reminded them of that prophecy as they headed north from Jerusalem:*

"Do men fall down and not get up? Does one turn away and never repent? Why then has this people of Jerusalem turned away in continual apostasy? They hold fast to lies. They refuse the truth. Even the stork in the sky knows her seasons. Even the turtledove, the swift, and the thrush observe the times of their migration. But My people do not know the ordinance of their God! From the least to the greatest every one is greedy for gain. From the prophet to the priest every one practices deceit. They heal the wounds of My people superficially, saying 'All is well! All is well!' but there is no peace. They aren't even ashamed of what they've done! They don't know how to blush at their guilt. Therefore I shall surely snatch them away! There will be no grapes on the vine, no figs on the fig tree, and the leaf shall wither. Oh that my head were a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of My people! They proceed from evil to evil. Lies and not truth prevail across the land, and they do not know Me! So the pastures have become a wilderness. The land is laid waste, so no one passes through. The lowing of cattle is no longer heard. Even the birds of the sky and the beasts of the field have fled. So I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a haunt of jackals; and I will make the cities of Judah a desolation, without a single inhabitant. Why? Because they have forsaken My Law and refused to heed My voice."

It was the 9th of Av, 580 BC. The tiny remnant mourned for the Holy City and the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey. All they could see behind them was rubble and desolation, a country of wasted opportunity. "Never again!" they swore as they headed toward Babylon. "If YHWH grants us repentance and mercy, we will teach this to our children and our grandchildren, so never again will Israel turn away from YHWH's Law!"

Thus they came into Tel-aviv mourning, 745 men, the last of the exiles from the Beautiful Land. This brought the total to 4600 men plus their wives and little ones who had survived the holocaust and now lived in Babylonia.

“Where is my lord the king?” demanded Nebuzeradan. Daniel had been reigning ever since King Nebuchadnezzar had been ‘put out to pasture’. Queen Amytis ruled beside him, assuring the people that though their king was ‘gone’ all would be well in time. But everyone was getting more insistent to see their beloved king for themselves. So now, with General Nebuzeradan back, it all came to a head. Daniel and Queen Amytis nodded to each other. The good general needed to know. They swore him to secrecy and led him to Sam and Sharon’s hut by the sheepfold.

“You are making the king stay here? In this filthy shack? What kind of treason is this?” The general half drew his sword as they come near.

“No. The king does not live in here. He lives in that small corral behind the sheepfold,” Daniel said gently as he knocked on Sam’s door.

“Welcome my friends! Enter!” Sam’s greeting was in Kasdan! Sam and Sharon had been getting more and more healthy since the king had come. Daniel and his friends visited them often to teach them about YHWH and to take care of their needs. At the same time, they were teaching them the Kasdan language and better eating habits.

Nebuzeradan didn’t understand Kasdan. Now he was really on the alert! But when Sam saw him, he shifted back to Chaldean. “And welcome to you also, sir! I did not know you would be coming. You would like to see your king?”

“Now I’m not sure if I do or not. What have you done to him? This whole thing is insane!”

“Yes, sir. That is very true sir. However, singing to him in Kasdan doth help to sooth the savage beast.”

“And YHWH assures me that he will recover and his kingdom will be restored to him,” Daniel added.

Nebuzeradan’s head was spinning. His voice trembled as he answered, “Okay. Okay. Take me to see him.”

They led him behind the hut, through the sheepfold, and to the corral with the brass fence posts and iron rails. At first the corral seemed empty, though the lush grass had certainly been nibbled. Then they spotted a pathetic shell of a man, on his hands and knees, grazing in the far corner like an ox. His scraggly hair and beard dragged the ground. His body was bare, except for the last remnants of a T-shirt still surviving his scratching on the fence posts.

General Nebuzeradan couldn’t believe his eyes. He vaulted over the fence and ran toward his king, trying desperately to spot some identification, some way to prove that this was really he. But Nebuchadnezzar reared up on his hind legs and snapped at him, snarling as if to declare, “Get away! This is my grass!”

“Don’t move so suddenly General,” Daniel called, coming up from behind. “You’ll do better if I sing to him for you.” He began Psalm 136 in Kasdan.

Now Nebuchadnezzar quieted down and resumed grazing. “Is it really my lord the king? How can I know for sure? What happened to him? He served YHWH! How could YHWH let this happen to him?”

So they told him the whole story. Queen Amytis added, “We can’t prove that this is the king. You’ll have to accept my word. I saw the change in him, and have been helping to guard him ever since then. It’s been half a year now.”

“Grass isn’t very nutritious. Is that all he gets?”

“Oh no, of course not. He gets good mash, with oats, blackstrap molasses, corn, and an apple for dessert.”

“We’ve somehow got to keep this a secret from the common people, General,” Daniel added. “I want them never to know that their king was insane.”

“What have you been telling them up until now?”

“Only that he is ‘gone’, which is certainly true, as you can see. But they need to know more.”

The good general shook his head. “You’ve got more wisdom than I. I’ll stand behind whatever you decide. But if you want my opinion, I’m learning that the simple truth is usually the best policy.”

Daniel bowed for a bit. When his head came back up, he was smiling. “General, I don’t know why I didn’t think of that. Truth is always the best policy. I’ve been wrestling with elaborate schemes and complex plots, but nothing seemed right. I’ll just tell them the simple truth, leaving out the gory details, and leave the rest to YHWH.”

So when they got back to the palace, Daniel summoned all the elders and nobles of the land, including his Magi. Daniel told them the whole story, beginning with the dreams, prophecies, and warnings from YHWH.

He concluded, “YHWH God of Israel loves your king. He wants to make him great, and to make his kingdom the greatest empire the world has ever known. But you saw his statue. Your king rebelled against YHWH. He claimed that it was his own wisdom and power and the glory of his own majesty that made him the king of Babylon. That’s pride. So to humble him, YHWH withdrew his spirit for a time, until he is willing to acknowledge that YHWH alone raises one up and puts another down. Thus your king is very sick right now. He is too sick even to have visitors. YHWH assured me that He will raise him back to health and restore his kingdom in the seventh year. But until then, Queen Amytis will rule the empire. General Nebuzeradan and myself will support her. Please trust us. Be at peace.”

Daniel’s faithfulness and integrity paid off. The people knew him. He couldn’t tell a lie to save his mother’s soul. The people accepted his word and agreed to wait for their king to be healed. The empire waited. During those seven years history records no major government public works or military campaigns in the Babylonian Empire.

CHAPTER 26 – NEBUCHADNEZZAR RESTORED

The Babylonian Empire prospered during those seven years. Peace reigned on all sides. General Nebuzeradan's discipline in Egypt and the Levant had its expected effect, and no nation dared to attack another or rebel against the king. Even more, when they heard that Nebuchadnezzar was sick, many sent condolences, and gifts! The empire grew more wealthy than ever. Michael's angelic host, observing Babylon's protection of the Judean remnant at Tel-aviv under Daniel and the Magi, began to actually enjoy protecting this pagan nation.

Strangely, the Judean remnant left in Egypt prospered as well, but for a different reason. Satan's demonic host were protecting them, and working hard to integrate them into the idolatrous Egyptian culture. So while the Judean remnant at Tel-aviv kept themselves pure and even taught the Babylonians about YHWH, the remnant in Egypt was plunging wholeheartedly into Egyptian paganism.

As Jezaniah had planned, they multiplied and spread throughout the land; first to Memphis, then Heliopolis, then some went down north to Migdol by the Sea, while others up south as far as Syene in the land of Pathros.

Everywhere they went the Egyptians welcomed them. Amazingly, they faced no suspicion or persecution; no racial prejudice; it seemed miraculous how eagerly they were accepted. It made Jezaniah proud of his leadership. He had figured out the key to being accepted in a foreign land. While they had still lived in Tahpanhes, he had urged them to quickly learn the Egyptian language and customs, to eat their food, wear their dress, and always remember that the Egyptians were their hosts while they were the guests. Especially, he urged them to worship the Egyptian gods. "We will still worship YHWH in our hearts, but as long as we are guests of the Egyptians, we must bow to their gods as well. Their gods are very important to them! If we offend them, we'll be thrown out on our ears. Of course we can't celebrate our own Feasts, or the Sabbath, down here. We'll remember YHWH in our hearts on the Sabbath, but we'll have to worship Ra on the day of the Sun. And I hear they still make sacrifices to the planetary gods down here, and they still pour out wine offerings to Ashtoreth [Venus], whom they call the Queen of Heaven. We dare not offend them! We must learn to do the same. Then we will prosper wherever we go in Egypt! After we've again grown strong, we can return to Judea and worship YHWH there as we did before."

One other item of note occurred during those seven years. Nebuchadnezzar's first-born son, the crown prince Amel-Marduk, came of age. He had been born shortly after Nebuchadnezzar's first siege of Jerusalem in 597 BC. But we haven't heard much about him until now because his younger years had been spent in training with the Magi, for his parents wanted the best for him. He completed his training at the age of seventeen near the end of 580 BC.

Amel-Marduk was a kind and obedient boy. He had not particularly enjoyed his rigorous training, for he was not good with languages and had a tough time with Kasdan, being a 'people-person' rather than a student. But he was trusting, eager to help, and intelligent in other ways.

So when he graduated from the Magi Academy, he decided he could best serve his country while his father was 'gone' by being the acting king until his return. Queen Amytis was skeptical (as mothers often are). He was only seventeen! But Daniel thought that might be a good thing; what better education could he get than some on the job training? (With Daniel coaching behind the scenes.)

So for the next six years, Amel-Marduk was the king of Babylon. In the mornings he judged their disputes in the throne room. In the afternoons he traveled through the city visiting the businesses and homes and getting to know his people. He helped all he met. Daniel had taught him that a good king serves his people, and he did that with all his heart. Everyone learned to love this young, humble king who didn't even want to reign in his own name, but in the name of his father whom he knew would return.

In the seventh year, 573 BC, Logos gave Ezekiel a vision of the future restored temple (as recorded in chapters 40 and on). It got everyone excited about restoring Solomon's temple. "No, no!" Ezekiel insisted. "This wasn't a restored temple of Solomon. What I saw in my vision was a whole new temple, much bigger and better. It was a temple that would last through to the ends of the ages!"

While the Judeans at Tel-aviv were heatedly arguing about Ezekiel's spectacular vision of the restored temple and its staggering Messianic ramifications, a quiet knock was heard at the door of the little hut by the sheepfold.

"Come in! And welcome!" Sam called, in Kasdan.

"Thank you," a gentle, resonant voice responded, also in Kasdan, as the door opened.

Sharon reacted first, with a high-pitched scream, then the couple stared in stunned silence at the apparition in the doorway. Sam recovered first. "How did you get out, O King?" he asked, trying not to stare at his two-inch claws, the knee length hair and beard covering his naked torso, and the filth and grime from years of not properly bathing.

The king smiled. "I know what you are thinking. 'The monster has been released! Run for cover!' But I assure you, I am back in my right mind. I got out the same way you got in to feed me. I stood and unlatched the gate. Now, I would be most grateful if you could provide me with a bath and some clothes, and possibly a quick hair and nail trim. I trust there is still an empire left to rule?"

"Yes indeed! And between Daniel, his three friends, Nebuzeradan, your Queen Amytis, and your son Amel, it has been in very good hands, too!" He ran to draw a bath, while Sharon averted her eyes, blushing furiously.

The king spent two days in Sam and Sharon's little hut, getting properly groomed and plying them with questions about all that had happened while he had been 'gone'. They spoke in Kasdan. The king wanted to know, "How did you, simple shepherds, learn such fluent Kasdan?"

"Daniel and his three friends taught us. It was useful to sing to you when you started to get too wild. It calmed you and kept you from hurting yourself."

"Ah, yes. I remember. The beast within me would try to destroy me. I would fight it, but sometimes I would begin losing, sliding down into the pit from which I knew there could be no return. Then I would hear heavenly melodies. I couldn't understand the words – it didn't seem like words at all. It was like colored pictures, beautiful patterns and musical shapes, soothing me, drawing me up from the pit. I am most grateful. I believe you saved my life."

The third morning it was the queen's turn to visit Sam and Sharon with supplies. As always, she came at dawn, dressed in a plain brown cloak with her hair hidden in her hood, so no one might recognize her on the road. Sam and Sharon were early risers. They quickly opened the door when she knocked. "We have a guest," Sam said simply. A handsome middle-aged man sat in an easy chair near the early morning fire. A smile on his face, he turned to gaze at the visitor. Queen Amytis threw off her cloak, shook out her long hair, and scanned for the guest.

Their eyes met. There was a dramatic pause. The angels were ready with their cymbals. Logos, as the Master of the Dance, held His hand high. Everything in the heavenlies remained frozen in suspension. The entire universe held its breath. (And if you think that's corny, you've no idea how much Logos loves, not just the Feast celebrations and the Dance, but also the romance of His precious ones.)

"Amy?"

"Nezzy?"

Sam and Sharon were intent on backing out the rear entrance to spend some quality time with their sheep. They didn't want to intrude upon this holy moment. But Logos and the heavenly host had no such inhibitions. The angels threw open the veil between the two realms to let the glory stream down. The Master of the Dance dropped His hand. The cymbals clashed. "Let the celebration begin, for My beloved has returned!"

The thrill of the Dance, the sweet music, the glorious sparkling lights, and the exotic fragrances swirled across the heavens. Some of it flowed through the open veil to the tiny room below.

Amy and Nezzy were locked in a wondrous embrace. Yes, they heard the music swell, saw the flashing lights, smelled the fragrances, and swayed to the beat of the Dance. What would you expect when it had been seven years since their last hug?

It was late afternoon when Queen Amytis showed up back in the palace with her dark, mysterious stranger. Daniel was beginning to worry about her. "Thank God you're back safely, O Queen! Who is your friend, there?"

"Oh, just an old acquaintance I met along the way. You wouldn't know him, Daniel."

The mysterious stranger bowed low. "O mighty and glorious emperor, live forever! I have come from afar to hear your great wisdom and discernment!"

He almost pulled it off. But Daniel sensed a trace of chutzpah or hint of a snicker behind the words. Instantly, he knew. "I'm not an emperor. I have no power, no glory, no authority, no wisdom or discernment except that which is granted me from above. But I suspect that you have already learned that lesson, have you not, O King?"

Amy and Nezzy glanced at each other. "Rats. I thought we could fool him. But then, we know YHWH is the revealer of mysteries. Daniel, call my people to the palace tomorrow. I've missed them and I have much to tell them."

"Wait, O King! Why don't you try your little joke again? Guess who has been the king while you were gone? I'll bet he doesn't recognize you!"

Amel-Marduk came in from his daily tour of the city. It was dinner time and the strapping twenty-four-year-old was famished. But Daniel called him back to the throne room. "Amel! You have an important guest from a far-off kingdom. The queen and I have been talking with him. We thought you might like to invite him for dinner."

Amel came to sit on his throne. "Welcome, my friend. I'm glad to invite you to dine with us, for I love tales of far-off lands. But first tell me the purpose of your visit."

"O mighty emperor! I have heard of your great wisdom and discernment, your majesty and power. I have come to sit at your feet and learn of you."

"Oh, nonsense. You must be thinking of my father. Or possibly his prime minister Daniel, here. I'm nobody great. I'm just keeping the throne warm until my father returns. He is the great one; the greatest emperor the world has ever known! YHWH has blessed him, and all the world through him, beyond any king in history. I'm just lucky to be his son. I wish he were here so you could meet him."

"He is here. Never was a king more proud of his son!" With that, Amel recognized him. He jumped off the throne into the arms of his father, who continued. "Your mother has been telling me how you've been serving your people, and how you've won everyone's love and respect. Perhaps I should not return – just let you take over for me."

"No, father. Your empire needs you. It would be wrong of me to try to take your place. I have learned a lot from Daniel, but I certainly have a lot more to learn from you. From this moment, I am no longer the king."

Word went out. “The king has recovered!” The great hall was packed with eager, hopeful people from even before breakfast. King Nebuchadnezzar, now back in his royal robes, with the golden crown on his head and his golden scepter in his hand, entered the great hall, to the wild cheers and shrieks of twenty thousand joyous people. He stood before them, arms reached out to them, waiting for the applause to die down. Suddenly he realized, for the first time, *They love him! They really do love him!*

Nebuchadnezzar lowered his head, humbled at the thought. All that he had worked for all his life, the empire, the tribute, the great city of Babylon, the hanging gardens – it was all nothing compared to winning the love of his people. They immediately quieted down when he bowed his head. He looked up again, into a sea of anxious faces, eager to know if he was well. “I am back!” he called out strongly. “I was gone, but I am back! Thank you for your ardent welcome home!” The applause broke out anew.

It just went on and on. Nebuchadnezzar whispered to Daniel, “From whence comes this outpouring of love? I’ve never been loved like this before!”

“Your son!” Daniel smiled. “Every where he went, helping people, serving them, righting their wrongs, it was always, ‘in the name of Nebuchadnezzar my father. When he returns, thank him!’ And also, don’t forget all the good you did for them when you melted down your statue. Your people sure haven’t forgotten!”

It was a long time before he could begin his story. “YHWH God of the Hebrews blessed me more than any other earthly king. He taught me much through dreams, and through my friend Daniel and my beloved Queen Amytis. But I lifted myself up in arrogant pride, presuming that I had achieved all this through the greatness of my own power and the glory of my own majesty. So YHWH took me away, to Never-Never-Land, where kings are beasts and beasts are kings, where the greatest becomes the lowest and the lowly shepherd becomes the ruler.

“I remained in Never-Never-Land for seven years. I was the least among them, like the sheep that mow your lawn, the dog that barks at your door, or the jackal that nips your heels as you hurry home at night.

“Last Sabbath, YHWH brought me back, and restored me to this body you see before you. But I was not dressed in royal robes with a gold scepter and neatly trimmed beard. No! I found myself on hands and knees in a cattle corral, eating grass like an ox! I was stark naked, drenched with the dews of heaven. My hair was wrapped about me like eagle’s feathers, and my nails were as buzzard’s claws.

“My sanity returned. I spit out the grass, looked up, and praised YHWH, the most high God. I finally realized what He had been trying to teach me all along: that He rules over the realms of mankind, giving authority to whomever He wishes, and humbling all those who walk in pride.”

Again, the crowd went wild! The celebrations all over the city that night would be remembered for generations. But there were some in Babylon who did not join in the merriment. It was the priests and servants of Marduk, the national god of the Babylonians. Amel had allowed them a good deal of freedom with King Nebuchadnezzar gone. They had never expected him to return. “I can’t believe it! He even named his son ‘Amel-Marduk’! (Man of Marduk). But now he’s back with his silly dreams and visions. And with Daniel controlling the king, YHWH his God has taken away our power and glory in Babylon!”

So they plotted to get rid of Daniel and the Judeans and end the dynasty of Nebuchadnezzar. But every plot was doomed to failure, for God was with Daniel, to expose the lies, uncover the assassination attempts, and give him favor with the king and all the people. The more they tried, the more King Nebuchadnezzar clamped down on them. Finally he put them under house arrest in their temples. He was so disgusted with them all he finally proclaimed YHWH, God of Israel, as the official God of Babylon.

So the servants of all of Babylon’s pagan gods became virtually powerless by mid 572 BC. Few came to worship in their temples. Their priests were reduced to in-fighting amongst themselves, blaming each other for their failures.

Many can’t believe that. They accept the secular history of Babylon which claims that Nebuchadnezzar remained a pagan and worshiped Marduk and the ancient planetary gods all his life. But I beg to differ. Go to the book of Daniel in the Bible. Notice who wrote chapter four. Would God allow a pagan to write a whole chapter in His holy book? God even calls him “My servant”. (Jer 27:5) Again, my history is correct, and your secular sources are guessing.

Remember the siege that Nebuchadnezzar had ordered upon Tyre, that little city by the sea whose arrogant king, Tyrel, claimed to be an invincible, almighty god? That was 585 BC. Now, thirteen years later, General Nebuzeradan and his son Neriglissar finally managed to break down the main gates and take the city on the coast (though they were never able to even attack the island portion of the city). They returned to Babylon in 572 BC, to a hero’s welcome.

Nebuzeradan was getting old. He’d had enough honors for many lifetimes. With his growing faith in YHWH and the fulfilled prophecies of Jeremiah, he would rather let God, or others, have the glory. So he let his son Neriglissar, a great storyteller, tell the story. He made it sound like the Babylonian army had been so valiant and courageous, when in truth it had been nothing but years of grunt work, moving thousands of tons of rock from the distant hills to protect their soldiers working their way up to the main gates by the sea, while King Tyrel’s ships lobbed boulders at them from just offshore. But when they finally broke into the city, all its people had evacuated by those ships, taking all the wealth of the city with them. Nobody was left to discipline, and nothing was left to plunder.

Nevertheless, Nebuchadnezzar was pleased at Tyrel's defeat. He gave a double honor to his beloved general: by offering his first daughter Nitah in marriage to Neriglissar, and by taking Nebuzeradan's daughter Zerah for his eldest son Amel-Marduk. They had a glorious double wedding at the palace, and the joy of it all filled the land.

These were the golden years of the Babylonian Empire. There was nearly universal prosperity and peace. Sadly, this was not the case in other parts of the world. The Medes and Persians were bickering over their borders. The Lydian Empire in Asia Minor was still vying with Greece over the Aegean Islands. The city-states of Sparta, Athens, and Corinth in Greece, and Aegae and Thessalonika in Macedon, were still jockeying for dominance with the growing world powers of Rome and Carthage. Sea trade had exploded in the Mediterranean, and with it, military ships. I don't want to get in to all that very much, as from this point on your own history books are pretty accurate.

But I must mention one battle in which Dorian Greeks invaded Libya. Pharaoh Wahibre rushed his army to defend his ally, Libya, but he was soundly defeated. Then his own men angrily accused him of treason, claiming (wrongly) that during the battle he had favored foreign mercenaries to the detriment of native Egyptian soldiers. A civil war between the two factions ensued. The native Egyptians turned for leadership to General Amasis II, who had led them in a successful invasion of Nubia 20 years before. They crowned General Amasis II the new Pharaoh. Foolish Pharaoh Wahibre was forced to flee for his life. He arrived in Nebuchadnezzar's court in 571 BC, appealing to Babylon for help in recovering his throne. Frankly, I call that unmitigated gall, after the poor way he had responded to Nebuzeradan's discipline.

King Nebuchadnezzar was inclined to tell him to just go fly a kite. Why should he get involved in an Egyptian civil war? He didn't care who was Pharaoh there, as long as he kept his troops beyond the Brook of Egypt. It wasn't until Pharaoh Wahibre mentioned the Hebrews in Egypt that Nebuchadnezzar got interested. The Pharaoh jumped on it. "O Your Majesty! There are nearly 10,000 Hebrews in the land. Not just in Tahpanhes, but also in Memphis, Migdol by the Sea, and even up south to Syene in the land of Pathros. The Hebrews have been happy there, for I have protected and supported them." He grinned.

Nebuchadnezzar did not grin. He called for General Nebuzeradan. "Why are so many Hebrews still in Egypt? We didn't authorize that! When Daniel found them there he ordered them to return to Judah, and they obeyed."

"Actually, they didn't, O King. I would have explained, but you were 'gone' when I returned from my campaign to discipline the Egyptians. They rebelled against Daniel and remained in Egypt. After I found them, I disciplined them, assigned them a new governor, and ordered them to return to Judah, but they rebelled again. They're still in Egypt."

King Nebuchadnezzar was furious. "I hope you dealt severely with them for their rebellion!"

So now the whole story came out, as I have told you. Nebuzeradan concluded with, "There were too few left to survive in Judah, so I brought all the submissive ones with me, including Johanan, their leader, and Jeremiah, their prophet. We needed to return home, since we had been gone more than a year and were running low on supplies. But I swore I would return one day to slay all the rebels who remained in Egypt against your command."

"I agree, General. Do it! However, give them one last chance. Take Jeremiah back with you. Have him prophesy the Word of YHWH to them again. If they submit, bring them here. If they continue to rebel, slay them all without mercy and plunder their homes and villages."

"What about Pharaoh Wahibre, Your Majesty?"

"I frankly don't give two hoots what you do with him. He's just enabling the Judean's rebellion. Take him back to Egypt with you and do whatever seems right."

So in early 570 BC, Nebuzeradan's Egyptian campaign was ready to leave with Jeremiah and Wahibre. But at the last minute, Ezekiel came to the king with a prophecy. "O King! Live forever! YHWH God of Judah has a Word for you against Egypt. For you made your army labor hard for thirteen years against Tyre in order to overcome it, yet you received no wages for your labors. Your soldier's heads were made bald, their backs and shoulders were rubbed raw carrying all those tons of rocks up to the siegeworks. Yet when you broke through, the city was evacuated and the plunder gone. Therefore, I have given you Egypt, instead! Carry off her wealth! Take her spoil, and plunder her pagan temples! It will be wages for your army. This is your reward for the heavy labors you did for Me in Tyre."

What a strange word! *This YHWH God of Judah was concerned about the wages for his army?* Nebuchadnezzar passed the word along to General Nebuzeradan. When they reached Egypt, the fear of Babylon had preceded them. Trying hard not to let his knees knock together, Pharaoh Amasis II came to meet them to talk terms of peace. General Nebuzeradan was openly disdainful. "If you would stop fighting among yourselves, you might be able to defend your country. At one time, Egypt was the greatest nation on earth. Now look at your pathetic little army. For two cents, I'd slay you all and take over the country myself. Have you not been faithful to your gods?"

"Oh, yes! Your Majesty! We have been most faithful! I have worked hard to restore all their shrines and altars. I have rebuilt the temples, supported the priests, and..."

"Wrong answer! Last time I was here, I tore down those pagan altars and shrines! Just ask Wahibre!"

Now Amasis began to backpedal like crazy. The general was unimpressed. He gave up on them.

“Lookit! Neither of you jokers is worthy of being the Pharaoh! I’m going to let you take your armies down to some big open field and duke it out where you won’t hurt anyone. May the best man win, but if you both kill each other off, Egypt will surely be the better for it. After that, I shall march through your country to knock down your stupid idols again! Why you all insist on believing in those worthless hunks of stone is more than I can understand! How can a god protect your country when it can’t even protect itself? Your country is filled with fools!”

So Nebuzeradan arrayed Wahibre and his mercenaries against Amasis and his native Egyptian soldiers, and then refereed as they fought. Amasis won. Wahibre was slain; his mercenaries scattered. Out of good sportsmanship, Nebuzeradan commanded that Amasis give his rival a good Egyptian burial. “Now, go clean up the mess, attend to your wounded, and command that Egypt mourn for their dead Pharaoh. I’m going out to prove, once again, that your idols are worthless rocks!”

General Nebuzeradan fulfilled his promise. He started at Migdol by the Sea and continued up the Nile as far as Syene (now called Aswan) in Pathros (Upper Egypt). In each city or town, he found the Judeans living there and ordered Jeremiah to prophesy to them.

Jeremiah made it quite clear. “You saw the calamities that befell Judah and Jerusalem. Right now they are in ruins, with no one living there. That all happened because they forsook YHWH and served the gods of the nations. Again and again He sent you His servants the prophets, yet you ignored them. Now you, too, have rebelled, and fled to Egypt even after my warning! I said that you would all meet your end here, by the sword or famine, and that you would become a curse and an object of horror, until there were no survivors left. But King Nebuchadnezzar asked that I give you one more chance. Forsake these worthless Egyptian idols. Return with us to Babylon and you will live. Otherwise you will die. This is your last warning.”

They repeated it all the way up the Nile to Syene. There they turned back north, and the general went into action. He didn’t harm the Egyptians or their towns and villages. He only destroyed their idols and plundered their pagan temples. In the process, he reaped the vast wealth of Egypt, just like Ezekiel had prophesied.

However, in each town where they had found Judeans, Nebuzeradan first sent in Jeremiah to get their response to his prophecy. Nearly everyone replied. “We decided that we are not going to heed the prophecy you gave us in the name of YHWH. We will remain here. We will continue to burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and sacrifice to the planetary gods. When King Josiah forced us stop, all those terrible calamities fell upon us! Now that we have renewed our sacrifices to the Queen of Heaven, we have prospered abundantly in this good land. The Egyptians protect us. We’re safe here. So go back to Babylon and leave us alone.”

In each Hebrew settlement, Nebuzeradan’s answer was the same. He cried, “The Egyptians and their gods cannot protect you from YHWH’s wrath against your rebellion and idolatry! For He has sent me to fulfill His Word against you this very hour!” He ordered his army to slay them all, men, women, and children, and pillage their homes.

When they returned to Sais, Nebuzeradan challenged the victor (and new Pharaoh) Amasis, “I’ve destroyed your false gods. But it was your own bickering that destroyed your army. Now it is time for you to rebuild it. You have plenty of people. I’ve not harmed your people or touched their dwellings. I’ve only plundered the pagan temples as YHWH directed me. So restore the ancient glory of Egypt! Be a powerful Pharaoh by uniting all Egypt. Your people will love you if you rule in wisdom, justice, and kindness.”

Nebuzeradan smiled, as a little plot formed in his mind. “I’m going to give you some incentive. I will return in three years and challenge your army in battle. I’ve been a general now for 37 years. I’m getting old and tired. So you surely should be able to defeat me. If you do not, you don’t deserve to be Pharaoh, and I will appoint someone else. But if you beat me, then I will know that Egypt is in good hands, and will leave you alone to prosper. Remember, there are many strong nations out there who are not as kind as I. If they were to defeat you, I know that all of Egypt would suffer and groan under their oppression.”

When they left Egypt in the fall of 570 BC, there was not a Hebrew remaining alive in all the land of Egypt. A very few actually believed Jeremiah’s warning and submitted to go with the Babylonians to Tel-aviv. But the land of Egypt was plundered as Ezekiel had promised Nebuchadnezzar.

Pharaoh Amasis, a military man himself, was inspired by Nebuzeradan’s challenge. He spent those three years welding his country back together and rebuilding his army into a cohesive fighting force. I’m glad to report that when General Nebuzeradan returned in 567 BC, the 37th year of King Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, the newly rebuilt Egyptian army defeated him. Nebuzeradan congratulated Pharaoh Amasis on his victory. He vowed to never again invade Egypt. “Be strong, and prosper! Let no nation bring its army across these borders again. Live in peace with your neighbors, peace through strength, in this good land which YHWH God of heaven has allotted you. Trust no other god. We shall not meet again.” Amasis II ruled Egypt from Sais for a total of 44 years. Egypt never abandoned her false gods, and never achieved her former greatness.

Nebuzeradan returned to Babylon to retire and enjoy his grandchildren, after 40 years of fighting. He had only lost two battles: that last one (in which his soldiers were sure he had showed mercy and let Amasis win), and his defeat to Pharaoh Necho when Nebuchadnezzar got proud and let his temper get the best of him. Nebuzeradan received fitting honors as one of the greatest generals the world has ever known.

CHAPTER 27 – THE DECLINE OF BABYLON

That defeat and retirement of General Nebuzeradan in 567 BC was the high water mark of the Babylonian Empire, the ‘head of gold’. It is a sad universal truth that when any person or nation gets so strong and prosperous that there are no battles left to fight, no challenges, they tend to forget God and grow self-indulgent. Babylon was no exception.

For more than 40 years Nebuchadnezzar had presided over the greatest empire the world had ever known. His empire was at peace. No nations threatened its borders. His wealth was legendary. He ruled with wisdom, justice, and righteousness. He had learned true humility, and had submitted to the rule of YHWH through him. With Daniel by his side, his three friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego ruling over the provinces of Babylon, and his godly general Nebuzeradan over his army – with his Magi well-versed in the ancient wisdom of the Kasdim – with lovely Queen Amytis supporting and enjoying him – with Babylon now the foremost city in the world, known for its wondrous hanging gardens, its luxury, and its splendor – with a godly, kind, and wise son and daughter-in-law (Crown Prince Amel-Marduk and lovely Princess Zerah) and many other godly sons and daughters (and in-laws) – never was a man so blessed. Truly, Nebuchadnezzar was the ‘head of gold’. And exactly as Jeremiah had promised the exiles, in Babylon’s prosperity they also prospered.

But Nebuchadnezzar noticed a growing complacency, and even antagonism, toward the worship of YHWH. The wisdom of the Magi was no longer treasured as it once had been. The Judeans living in Tel-aviv began to be criticized, as if they were a lower class of citizens who should not be permitted to enjoy the wealth of Babylon. The priesthoods of the ancient Babylonian gods stopped their bickering and secretly allied to restore their power and influence. All these changes had one root cause: the people of the land, now living in prosperity, ease, and safety, had no need to cry out to God, so they didn’t. Instead, they put their trust in their own wealth and the protection of their godly king.

King Nebuchadnezzar was not blind to the opulence, the decadence, and the bent toward selfish pleasures that had swept over the land. Oh, people still went through the motions, but they had lost the fear of God and had become self-centered and careless. Nebuchadnezzar ordered a national ‘Day of Prayer and Fasting’ in 563 BC. He requested all the elders and leading men of the city to join him at the palace. Some showed up to pray with him, but many did not. It was rather pathetic. Daniel was there, weeping over the empire, but he had no encouragement, no prophecy of help from YHWH. The day passed. The king mourned over what had happened to his beloved people. Night fell, the time to send everyone home to bed.

Suddenly King Nebuchadnezzar stood, with a look of horror on his face. He called out, “I have just received a vision!” A stunned silence filled the great hall.

“YHWH has not shown me,” Daniel responded. “Tell us the vision, and I will interpret it.”

The king shook his head. “No interpretation is needed. YHWH took me into the heavens to see all the provinces of my empire. As I watched, the kingdoms of my own allies the Medes and Persians conquered Babylon and took over my empire, in a day, right there before my eyes! They are the torso and arms of silver which is prophesied to come after the head of gold. Now is the time! I am undone! My life is over. All that I worked for is laid waste.” Daniel, Queen Amytis, and others tried for weeks, but the king would not be consoled. Daniel told him that prophecies are usually for the future, and that it could be many years before his vision came to pass. Still, from that day on King Nebuchadnezzar was never the same. He died a year later, at the age of 66. His son, the crown prince **Amel-Marduk**, became king in his place in 562 BC at the age of 33.

The day he was crowned, Amel promised to keep the righteous policies of his father, and even be more generous and kind if that were possible. The people all loved their new king; all, that is, except the priests and servants of the ancient Babylonian gods who were still shut out of public policy and power. They decided to take advantage of King Amel’s natural-born kindness. They appealed to the king for tolerance, claiming that they were hated, discriminated against, and persecuted just because of their ‘faith’.

They would never have gotten away with that under Nebuchadnezzar, and they knew it. He would have simply ordered them all slain for trying to spread their paganism, and that would have been that. He had lived in a different age, when rebellion or paganism was stamped out swiftly, so that righteousness could flourish. I know, it was just an outward control. People could do whatever they wanted in their own homes, as long as they didn’t hurt anyone else. But Nebuchadnezzar had understood the concept of the sacrifice of a few to protect the empire. His world was black and white – any rebels, criminals, or idolaters didn’t get a second chance. I know that sounds rather ruthless to you Americans who make tolerance your god, but I guarantee that lawbreakers, moral perverts, and idol worshipers were rare in his kingdom. Those who did exist kept a low profile and didn’t trouble the land, or they lost their heads!

Not so in the new administration of King Amel and Queen Zerah. He determined to be even kinder than his father. He decreed protection for the pagan priests as long as they remained within their temples and did not try to proselytize among the people. They accepted that, for now, and retreated again. But now with the tacit approval of the king, their power slowly began to grow in Babylon.

In his second year, the king discovered **Jeconiah**, who was still in the infamous Babylonian dungeon from which there was no escape. He had been there for 37 years, ever since being accused of rebellion by King Nebuchadnezzar at the time his father Jehoiakim was slain at Jerusalem.

Once again, King Amel demonstrated his kindness and compassion, by setting him free and bringing him into the palace to dine at his own table the rest of his life. He even made him a throne, and put him over the rest of the Judeans in Babylon, even above Daniel. Similarly, the king reviewed the cases of the others in his dungeon, most of whom had been totally forgotten by society. For almost all of them he granted clemency, setting the prisoners free.

Daniel was concerned. He came to Amel. “O King, live forever! I do not mind your restoring King Jeconiah to his throne over the Judeans. That’s your call to make. But I am concerned about your tolerance of rebellion and idolatry. Those men were in the dungeon for a reason! Your father was a just king! He had them there because he saw their rebellious hearts! In setting them free, you loose rebellion upon the land. That may backfire against you someday!”

But Daniel was getting old, and young Amel considered him a worry-wart. He ignored the advice. *He had earned the love of his people by being kind and tolerant to everyone, regardless of faith, race, or heritage. How could that possibly be a bad thing?* How indeed...

Neriglissar, the son of old General Nebuzeradan, had joined his father’s army at the age of sixteen. He had first served in 586 BC at the siege of Jerusalem. He was now 42 – a seasoned, trusted warrior. Nebuchadnezzar had given him command of the Babylonian army after his father’s retirement in 567 BC. He rather liked being esteemed as ‘the general’. And he loved the honor of being the king’s brother-in-law. Satan found the open door of his pride.

Now the pagan priests of the ancient Babylonian gods saw their chance. The high priest of Marduk arranged a secret meeting with Neriglissar. First he spent some time pumping up his ego with careful flattery. He concluded, “You know, your wife Nitah is the eldest daughter of King Nebuchadnezzar the Great. He gave her to you, because he wanted you to take the throne after him! He would never admit it, for he loved his son and didn’t want to offend him. But he knew, just as you and I and everyone else in the land knows, that Amel will never be a great king. He’s too kind, too easy-going! He goes tripping gayly about the land just loving everyone. If the Persians were to come knocking at our gates he would probably just welcome them in and give them the empire! He has never led an army. He knows nothing of the real world. But you do! I urge you to keep your eyes open for any opportunity to take the throne that is rightly yours. And we promise to support you...”

In his pride, Neriglissar took the bait. Satan screamed with delight. This was too easy. He arranged a time when General Neriglissar was alone with his brother-in-law, King Amel. Then, inflaming the general’s passions with the desire to do away with this wimp and take the throne for himself, Satan inspired him to draw his sword and lop off the king’s head. Kind but naïve King Amel-Marduk had reigned for only two years.

Once the snowball started rolling downhill, it rapidly grew larger. Neriglissar, with his elite guard now in full control of the palace, also tried to kill his sister, Queen Zerah, before she revealed the plot. But she managed to escape. She fled to the queen mother, Amytis, who hid her from her brother. His own wife, Nitah, was another story. As the eldest daughter of King Nebuchadnezzar she was his ticket to power! But now that the queen mother knew, the cat was out of the bag. Nitah also fled, sobbing, to her mother, brokenhearted over her brother’s untimely death. Amytis ordered her own faithful guards to protect them.

Neriglissar now had time to get himself crowned and solidify his kingdom. He banned from the palace Queen Amytis, Zerah, Nitah, Daniel, the Magi, all the Judeans including Jeconiah, and everyone else who might still be partial to Amel-Marduk. He called on the pagan priests who had promised to support him, and they became his advisors and courtiers. It was a clean sweep. In less than a week, the empire was completely under the power of Satan and those who served him.

Daniel was cleaning out his ‘king’s prophet’ apartment in the palace. It was sad. He had held the post for 42 years. The new King Neriglissar made the mistake of stopping by to gloat. Daniel was ready with the Word of YHWH. “You made yourself king by force, but your kingdom will not last. Your wife and your sister will be your downfall, because you cast them aside like a worn-out garment!”

“You’re nuts, old man. I didn’t cast them aside. They ran off. I just banned them from the palace until they get over their anger at me for killing Amel. I’m sure Nitah will soon forget and come back to me.”

“Did you learn nothing at all from those years serving in the army with your honorable father?”

“Of course I did. I learned to live by the Golden Rule. He who rules gets the gold!” He laughed off the rebuke.

Banned from the palace, Queen Amytis took her loyal guard and fled with Zerah, Nitah, and their children. The rest of Nebuchadnezzar’s large family had all married and left home. Hoping to locate some of them, the queen led her caravan northwest along the King’s Highway.

Due to the alliance, the Median Empire had prospered right along with Babylon. Remember they had taken the northern half of the Assyrian Empire following their joint victory over Nineveh. After that, Nabopolassar had driven the remnants of the Assyrian forces out of Haran and slain them at Carchemish, so under Nebuchadnezzar, all of Syria had become part of the Babylonian Empire. Now the Medes wanted northern Syria, too. Seeing the weakness of King Amel-Marduk, they started moving their forces into Syria. *They had assisted in all the battles against the Assyrians, but had gotten nothing more for their efforts after that original division of the empire at Nineveh!* The native Syrians at Haran were very concerned.

Queen Amytis didn't really have a plan to retake the kingdom from her murderous son-in-law. But she and Nebuchadnezzar had been blessed with many children after Amel. Some were now rulers or nobles in the various provinces or city-states of the empire. Perhaps she could convince one of them to help her slay this traitorous son of Nebuzeradan and restore the kingdom to sanity.

They reached Haran. Queen Amytis was praying they would meet the right one, as they rested and replenished their supplies. Their caravan was pretty large with all their guards and servants, so they planned to spend the night in the commercial square with other travelers.

A tall, handsome man from the city noticed the ladies. Though they had dressed plainly for travel, he could spot royalty when he saw it. "My ladies! Don't spend the night in the commercial square! Thieves and dishonest traders frequent this place. I will take you under my protection, and offer you lodging under my father's roof."

Queen Amytis looked at her charges. The ladies were exhausted from many hours on the highway. They were in need of a hot bath. Their children were getting cranky. The adventure had worn thin. They'd run out of fresh clothes and clean diapers. She decided to chance it. "Thank you. Your offer is most generous. Who is your father, kind sir?"

"My father **Nabonidus** is an elder at the city gate; he is a son-in-law to the great King Nebuchadnezzar, for my mother is Nitocris, a daughter of the king."

"Nitocris!" *This could be the answer to their prayers.* Amytis accepted his offer. That evening they were royally treated in the mansion of the wealthy nobleman. After introductions, baths, and a multi-course feast, the ladies relaxed around the family room of their host's palatial quarters. Nabonidus felt honored to have the privilege of hosting his own mother-in-law, Queen Amytis. But he was distressed to learn of King Amel-Marduk's assassination, and doubly so to hear that even the assassin's sister Zerah and wife Nitah had to flee the palace fearing for their lives. He listened to the story with growing concern.

Amytis concluded, "Now Neriglissar has cleansed the palace of all those who loved Amel, Nebuchadnezzar, and YHWH our God, and replaced them with the servants of Marduk and the ancient pagan gods! He is right now restoring the idol worship at the Esagila!"

His lovely wife Nitocris by his side, Nabonidus offered his condolences to Zerah. "Amel-Marduk was a good king, maybe too good! He was too loving, too trusting of those who didn't deserve his trust. Thus General Neriglissar is a double traitor; first because he abandoned defense of the empire's borders to attack the king instead of defending him; second because he abandoned the faith of both his father and his father-in-law, the faith in YHWH, to accept the help of the priests of the ancient gods. He must be deposed, quickly, or it will be the ruin of the empire."

Queen Amytis was amazed that he had understood the situation so well, so quickly. "What then can we do? Is the empire lost? Is there no hope?"

"We need a strong leader, one with a strong faith in YHWH as well as a ruthless hatred of the ancient pagan gods of Babylon. There are millions of strong men across the empire who would gladly fight and die to restore the empire and to bring you and our family back to the palace, if only they had such a leader."

Now the queen saw the possibility. "What is your own background, Nabonidus?" She smiled at him.

He looked down at Nitocris, snuggled up beside him. She gladly accepted the honors. "My husband is a great leader! His faith is strong; even the pagan priests in Haran respect and fear him. He has many friends in this city who would support him. He has just as much right to the throne as Neriglissar, Nitah!"

Nitah instantly recognized her implication. Her own husband Neriglissar would no doubt have to die, in order for her sister's husband to take the throne. Was she willing to accept that? She wrestled within herself.

"Thank you for your big vote of confidence, my dear." Nabonidus responded. "But my pedigree is not as pure as you would like them to believe. My father was a high priest of Ishtar, a drunken sot, a world-class moral pervert. He repeatedly raped my mother; I and my two brothers are the result. My parents never married. My father died when we were still young, probably by my mother's hand. She hated him, and swore to never let another man touch her. She has risen to become high priestess of the moon god Sin. She is still filled with anger at what my father did to her. She uses her high rank partly to get revenge against men.

"After my father's death, I and my two brothers got deeply involved in her 'religion', if you can call it that. We got just as wicked as our father. Like him, I also became a drunkard and a moral pervert. I fathered many children with the temple prostitutes; I don't even know how many. Some are now grown; **Belshazzar** here is my eldest. Most have become as vile as I once was. It is a vicious cycle! My whole family was trapped in it. I saw no escape!

"But I hated it. I fled my city. I lied about my past, and managed to secure a job serving King Nebuchadnezzar and his Magi in his palace. There I learned about YHWH. I fell in love with Him immediately. He and His wisdom are the opposite of everything I hated about my own family. To shorten a long story, I repented and forsook my past." He smiled at his wife. "Daniel saw my repentance and believed in me. Nebuchadnezzar too, for he allowed me to marry his daughter. Then he gave me guards and sent me back to Haran, to clean up the mess and be a witness here for YHWH. Already I have most of the town on my side, YHWH's side! My mother Adagoppe still opposes me with her pagan priesthood, but at least she listens to me."

“Do you think YHWH might be calling you to be that strong leader who could go to Babylon and take back the kingdom from Neriglissar?” Queen Amytis voiced what everyone was thinking. “Would you be willing?”

Nabonidus smiled. In truth, this is where he had hoped the conversation would end up, for that had been his ambition from even before Amel-Marduk became king. “The need is urgent, for the Medes grow strong even as our empire grows weak. They were our allies while we were strong; but I swear they will become our conquerors if we don’t watch out. Will no one else stand up for the empire?”

“We have searched now for six months, from Babylon to Haran, and have found no one.”

“Then if I can have your support, O Queen, I will accept the challenge. But it will be hard. Lives will be lost.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“Many plans. I see the problems all too clearly. I could easily raise an army, for many love me and would serve me to the death. But a direct assault on Babylon would surely fail. The city is too strong. Neriglissar still has the best army in the world, and he’s an experienced military man. But I could turn my liabilities here in Haran into an asset. The key is the pagan worship supporting Neriglissar’s rule. You’ve no idea of the power of the pagan priesthood, but I do! They don’t yet serve the moon god Sin in Babylon, but they are very tolerant of every god except YHWH. My mother is passionate in her service of Sin. So, I could bring Adagoppe and her priests to Babylon, on the pretense of getting Sin established along with the other pagan gods, and then use her to undermine the power of the priests of Marduk. With Mom’s priests supporting me, I’d have a toehold in the palace. In a few years, I’m sure I could gain enough support to overthrow the throne. Then, with the pagan priests competing for dominance, I would do away with them all and restore the empire to worship YHWH!”

Queen Amytis did not like that plan. It sounded like a compromise with evil. *Would Nabonidus really use his mother like that? And then just do away with her?*

But now Nitah, who had been very quiet, spoke up, her decision suddenly made. “We accept your generous offer. We will support you in any way we can. I hate my husband for what he did. I want you to kill him! He has betrayed everything I hold dear. I would kill him myself if I could!”

Immediately Zerah agreed. “He made me a widow, but I am still a queen. And if you have a brother or son who will have me, I will marry him instead, to solidify your claim to the throne.” She risked a glance at Belshazzar, the suave, handsome man who had first found them in the square, hoping he might be the one. He smiled and winked at her.

Nitah caught on fast. “I too am a queen, and now a widow in my heart, as my husband the king is dead to me. If I can aid you by marriage, I also am willing.”

“Wait Nitah! Zerah!” Amytis hissed. “You’re being too rash! We don’t know this family yet!” But it was too late. The dice were already cast.

Belshazzar had plenty of ambitions on his own. What better way to achieve them than by marriage to a queen or two? He was handsome, strong, and rich. He could afford two wives. He took both Nitah and Zerah for himself (making him son-in-law of both King Nebuchadnezzar and General Nebuzeradan). They worked with Nabonidus on his plan to overthrow the rule of Neriglissar by stealth.

But the more the queen mother Amytis learned about this family with its roots so deeply entwined in paganism and moral perversion, the more she doubted the sincerity of their talk about loving YHWH and the empire of her husband. They knew all the right words, but in their hearts she saw a lust for power that scared her. Her daughters had made up their minds; she could not talk them out of it. So she left them and returned to Tel-aviv.

Within the year, Nabonidus and Belshazzar were in Babylon with Adagoppe and her pagan priests. Their plot had worked. King Neriglissar did not know about their marriages to Nebuchadnezzar’s daughters Nitocris and Nitah, and his sister Zerah, and they sure didn’t tell him. He unsuspectingly gave them permission to restore the ancient temple to the moon god Sin. Adagoppe of course was delighted! Soon the priests of Sin were in competition with the priests of Marduk and Ishtar.

In 559 BC, King Cyrus ascended to the throne in Anshan, capital of the eastern province known as Persis. He was the son of Cambyses I (of the Persian house of Achaemenid) and Princess Mandana (daughter of Aryenis of Lydia and King Astyages of Media). He was brilliant, powerful, and ambitious, but also kind and thoughtful.

When he became the king at Anshan, Persis was but an unimportant vassal state of the Median Empire. But Cyrus was not content that his people were slaves to the Medes. He and his father garnered support for a rebellion.

Queen Amytis reached Tel-aviv at a sad time. Daniel, Ezekiel, and all the others were gathered around Jeremiah the Prophet, for he was dying at the age of 88. He’d had 26 years of marriage with Juli since he retired after the fall of Jerusalem. It was a good life; he felt more than repaid for all the suffering he had endured in his younger years.

But when he saw Queen Amytis (now at the age of 68) he perked up enough for one last prophecy. “O Queen! YHWH has seen your faithfulness! He shall reward you. He will extend your life to see the end of the head of gold and the beginning of the arms and torso of silver, the Medo-Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great. When you see it, tell all with faith in YHWH to submit to King Cyrus, that it may go well with them, as they have prospered in submission to your husband. All who rebel against King Cyrus will be slain, but those who submit to him will live.”

“Who is Cyrus the Great?” Amytis asked. She didn’t know the Hebrew Scriptures very well.

“He is a young king of the province of Persis, whom YHWH has chosen to deliver the Judean exiles,” Jeremiah announced. “140 years ago Isaiah prophesied in the days of King Hezekiah, ‘Thus says YHWH to King Cyrus His anointed, whom I will lead by the hand to subdue nations. I have called you by name and given you a title of honor, though you don’t know Me. I will arm you and go before you, that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me. I am YHWH; there is no other; besides Me there is no God. The One forming light and creating darkness, the One causing peace and creating calamity, I am YHWH who does all these.’ Thus I have ordained King Cyrus in righteousness. I will make all his ways smooth. He will rebuild My holy city Jerusalem, and will encourage all My exiles go freely back to Judah, without any payment or reward.”

Once again Juli was delighted to see the prophetic fire in her husband’s eyes as the Word of YHWH went forth. The group cheered with the revelation. But alas. The fire went out. Without another word, before Juli could even cry out, Jeremiah was gone. He died with such a look of joy on his face that Juli knew he had reached a better land.

The exiles mourned the beloved prophet who had saved their lives by his faithfulness to YHWH. At his funeral, Juli was asked to speak. She gave a brief address, comparing Jeremiah’s life with the life of the kingdom of Judah. “During much of Jeremiah’s first 62 years he saw persecution and unbelief, even from his youth when he was enslaved by pagan priests at Anathoth. I knew I was to be his wife, but YHWH would not let him marry, as long as Judah was rebellious, so I just prayed for him. But after the exiles came here and Jerusalem fell, YHWH let us marry. We have rejoiced, and prospered, and our daughters are with you today. Thus let Jeremiah’s life be a sign for you. Your obedience has pleased YHWH! Rejoice and prosper! Bear sons and daughters. You shall be restored to Judah, just as Jeremiah said in his last moments before he himself was received into the heavenlies with YHWH our God!”

His kingdom firmly established, Neriglissar installed his young son on his throne as **Labashi-Marduk**, in honor of the priests of Marduk who had helped put him in power.

Neriglissar was upset that Amel-Marduk had been so lax, letting the Medes take lands that his own father had helped win for Babylonia. So once Labashi-Marduk was secure, he went out on a campaign against the Median incursions into Haran, Carchemish, Que, Tarsus – all the way to the barbaric lands of Cilicia which the Medes now claimed. In two years he secured these provinces back into the Babylonian Empire. But on his triumphant return trip toward Babylon in 556 BC, he was met by a priest of the recently restored temple of the moon god Sin. “I have a message for you from your wife, Nitah,” he called.

“Oh! Good! She’s ready to repent of her rashness and come back to me!” he thought as he opened the letter. But her words were as hard and cold as ice. “To Neriglissar, son of Nebuzeradan, from Nitah, eldest daughter of the great King Nebuchadnezzar. Read these words and despair, you murderer of my dear brother Amel! For **Nabonidus** my brother-in-law took advantage of your absence to kill Labashi your son and take the kingdom. All the people of the empire hate you. But they all love Nabonidus, and they all love Belshazzar his son – who is now my new husband and the husband of Zerah whom you made a widow! They have now fielded an army against you, which shall hunt you down to the ends of the earth and slay you for your treason. I have sent letters to all your captains, inviting them to return to Babylon to receive the king’s pardon, especially if they bring your severed head with them. May God have mercy on your tortured, hunted soul.”

Neriglissar looked around. The priest had been passing messages around to all his captains. Some were already looking strangely from their message up to him. Suddenly he was terrified. He mounted his chariot and fled north for the hills of Urartu. It was the last he was ever seen. He had reigned but a brief four years, more than half of which his son Labashi was on his throne. Thus the house of the good General Nebuzeradan came to an ignoble end.

As Amytis had feared, the conversion of Nabonidus was one of convenience only. Once he got what he wanted, all pretense of loving YHWH and His ways went out the window. He continued to support his mother Adagoppe and her priesthood which had helped him into power.

But one good thing Nabonidus did, which endeared him to his people: he welcomed back to the palace all those whom Neriglissar had banned, the nobles, Judeans, Magi, and many others who had so strongly supported King Nebuchadnezzar. The priests of Marduk were driven from the palace back to the Esagila. Even Daniel and the queen mother Amytis were welcomed back to a position of honor beside the throne. Nearly all of General Neriglissar’s army returned repentant, and were welcomed and pardoned. They brought back tales of the haunted look on the face of their king and general as he had fled for the hills.

So for a few years, things went fairly well in Babylon. But whenever Daniel or Amytis tried to talk to Nabonidus about his promise to restore the worship of YHWH after he had come to power, he dragged his feet. He owed a debt to his mother and her priests. He talked to Adagoppe about converting to the worship of YHWH, but there was no way. She loved the power and glory of her position as Sin’s high priestess, and she was still bitter against men.

Nabonidus just could not handle the gentle chiding of Daniel and Queen Amytis. Even his wife and daughters-in-law began bugging him about when he would cleanse the land of idolatry. In 555 BC he took his army on a long campaign to inspect his borders with Media.

CHAPTER 28 – PROPHECIES OF RESTORATION

Poor Ezekiel was crushed at Jeremiah's death; all the more as he considered his own mortality. He went to Logos in a deep blue funk. "Must all Your prophets die before we see Your restoration?" he whined.

Logos took him into the heavenlies, and showed him the lovely hills of Israel from very high above Jerusalem. "What do you see, Son of Dust?" Logos said gently.

"I see the Beautiful Land, the Promised Land, at peace, enjoying its Sabbaths. It's glorious!"

"You have seen well." He took him much closer. "Now, Son of Dust. What do you see?"

"Oh! Logos! Now I see nothing there but desolation, the rubble of her cities, devastation and ruin across the land. The land has been given to the buzzards and jackals, overcome by weeds and briars, thorns and thistles."

"Again, you have seen well." He took him yet closer. "Now, Son of Dust. What do you see?"

Now he saw Edomites flooding the land, taking homes and farms that weren't theirs, renaming towns and villages as if they owned them. "Lord Logos! Look! The Edomites! They are taking over! Will there be nothing left for us?"

"Again, well seen, Son of Dust! Prophecy against them! They have gone beyond the boundaries I set for them. Prophecy to the mountains of Israel, for they are Mine!"

Filled with the Spirit of Prophecy, Ezekiel thundered, "O mountains of Israel! Hear now the Word of YHWH! For good cause I forsook you, made you desolate, crushed you on every side, and gave you to the buzzards of the sky and the jackals of the field. But now I remind you that you are Mine! I am a jealous God! In the fires of My jealousy, I speak out against all those nations who took My land for themselves when My people were punished. I am against you, Ammananu, king of Edom! I am against you, Mount Seir! I will stretch out My hand against you, to make you a desolation. Then you will know that I am YHWH! Because you laughed at the suffering of My people and did not hate or even grieve for the violence and bloodshed, therefore violence and bloodshed will pursue you. I will fill your mountains and your valleys with the slain, and make of you an everlasting desolation. Then, O Edom, you will know that I am YHWH! And as for you, O mountains of Israel, you will put forth your branches and bear fruit for My people Israel, for they will soon come. Behold, I am for you! I will return to you. You will be cultivated and sown. I will multiply men on you, all the house of Israel – all of it! Your cities will be inhabited, and your waste places rebuilt. I will multiply men and beast, to increase and be fruitful. For I will treat you better than before. I will cause My people Israel to walk on you and possess you, so you will become their inheritance and never again bereave them of children. Thus you also will know that I am YHWH!"

Nabonidus campaigned for two years, from the Persian Gulf through Cilicia. Beyond that to the west was the Lydian Empire. He met King Croesus there, and made a mutual defense treaty with him. Finally all his borders with Media were peaceful, with one exception. Some young upstart named Cyrus threatened his southeastern border. He was pushing for independence for Persis.

So on his return trip he went to Ecbatana, the capital city of the Median Empire, and had a frank talk with King Astyages. *Cyrus is his own grandson, for heaven's sake. So why is he getting so belligerent?* They negotiated a mutual defense pact against Persian aggression, just in case.

His borders secure for now, Nabonidus returned to Babylon. Back to the exhortations of Daniel and Amytis insisting he return to the worship of YHWH. He still could not, for he had divided loyalties: to his wife and friends and family in the court, and to his mother and the priesthood of the moon god Sin. She was all that was keeping him from the wrath of the priests of Marduk that he had driven out of power. Once again he resolved his problems by escaping.

His oldest son **Belshazzar** was becoming a bit of a party boy, but everyone in the palace seemed to like him and he had proven trustworthy. So Nabonidus crowned him co-regent in his absence and took off on another campaign, this one to the Levant. He renewed Babylonian dominance in Hamath, Syria, and on down to Phoenicia and Philistia. Then he headed over toward Edom, which had rebelled.

It felt strange to Nabonidus as he crossed through the devastated lands of Judah and Israel. On the one hand, he sensed an atmosphere of peace, as if the land was finally enjoying its rest. But on the other hand, he saw Edomites in many of the villages, acting as if they owned the land! For some reason, that infuriated Nabonidus. He ordered his army to drive them out, back to Edom. He followed, and confronted King Ammananu with his trespassing.

Ammananu was not very repentant. "Well sir, the land was empty. Nature, and land, abhors a vacuum. Even the king of Babylon leaves peasants in the land to till the soil until the remnant returns. We thought the king of Babylon would be happy with us for..."

"You didn't get permission! That land forever belongs to Judah, who is under my protection! If I catch you there again, I'll come here and devastate your own land!"

Nabonidus then crossed the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt, where he renewed Nebuzeradan's alliance with Pharaoh Amasis. He had been working hard to restore the glories of Egypt, but sadly, a major part of that effort was focused on repairing the temples and idols that Nebuzeradan had destroyed. Like I said, Egypt never again became a world power. Nabonidus, with serious compromises in his own background, did not even see the problem. He encouraged Amasis and moved on to Arabia. He ended up at the Oasis of Tayma, the commercial crossroads of Arabia.

Ezekiel had been having visions and prophecies on a pretty regular basis. Whenever he did he would gather the exiled Judeans at Tel-aviv to share YHWH's word with as many as would listen. Thus on a Sabbath afternoon six months after Nabonidus had left for the Levant, the Spirit of Prophecy overwhelmed him. "Son of Dust! When the house of Israel was living in their own land, they defiled it with their idolatry and moral perversions. For that reason I poured out My wrath upon them, and scattered them among the nations. But that has profaned My holy name! For those who live among them in the nations say, 'These are the people of YHWH, yet they have lost their land!' Thus My holy name is profaned among them. Therefore, Son of Dust, speak to them as I tell you."

So Ezekiel did. "Thus says YHWH! 'It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you profaned among the nations where you were scattered. I have concern for My sacred name, so I will arise to vindicate the holiness of My great name. Then they will know that I am YHWH! Therefore I will take you from the nations, gather you from far-off lands, and bring you back to your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from the filthiness of your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart of flesh. Finally I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes, so you will be careful to observe all My ordinances. Thus you will live in the good land that I gave your fathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God. And I will multiply the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field, that you may never again be disgraced among the nations by famine. On the day I cleanse you from your sin, I will cause your cities to be inhabited and your waste places restored. The rains will return and the desolate land will be cultivated, to become like a Garden of Eden. Then the nations will know that I, YHWH, have rebuilt the ruined cities and replanted the desolate fields. I have spoken, and behold, I will do it!'"

Now it happened that Daniel had also been given a vision, just a few weeks before. It was a terrifying vision, about four beasts coming out of the sea. An angel came to interpret it for him, but Daniel still didn't understand it. It had shaken him to the core. So he had decided to keep mum about it. But after hearing Ezekiel's encouraging prophecy, Daniel changed his mind. As they were leaving, he took Ezekiel aside. "Please pray for my understanding. I had a terrible vision of four beasts. It really shook me up."

Ezekiel promised to pray about it. As he opened the door, he casually mentioned, "Say, weren't there also four parts to that dream Nebuchadnezzar had? The dream you interpreted for him over 50 years ago? Could the four beasts be related to the four sections of the great statue?" Then he went out, leaving Daniel standing there stunned with the revelation. *How could he have missed it?*

Ezekiel loved to worship in Kasdan, the language of heaven. Often he continued up to the Mountain of God, where he knelt in fervent worship for hours. Sometimes Logos spoke to him; sometimes the Spirit carried him away in visions; sometimes he was given prophecies or revelations; but always he enjoyed the worship. He was thus engaged when Logos startled him out of his reverie. "Juli is a widow. She has no sons. Would you care for her?"

"I will do whatever You ask, for I love You. But You know I have never touched another man's wife."

Ezekiel blinked twice, and there stood Jeremiah! With him was his own wife, Ella! "Take her, please, I beg you!" Jeremiah pled. "I am the one who asked this of Logos! She is desperately lonely. There's no one else of your prophetic stature whom she could respect and honor. She is much younger than I; only two years older than you. She can comfort you and you her to the end of your days."

Ella then spoke up. "We are happy in this realm, my love. We will wait for you and Juli to come to us, for we cannot return to you. But I want you to be happy, too! You were never permitted to mourn for me. That wound lies deep within you, festering. It cannot be healed, but by love. I urge you: take Juli! Love her, and receive her love and healing. I will still be waiting for you when you come to this realm." The vision faded and the two vanished.

Ezekiel, who had been quite happy and filled with the joy of worship just moments before, was now overcome with grief. He sobbed uncontrollably, for what seemed like hours. Logos waited patiently.

When his eyes had no more tears left, Logos said, "Now you see the pain that I have caused. It is not right for a man to lose his wife and not even mourn. I commanded it to make a point to the sons of Israel, but My point is now just past history. I would heal your pain. Jeremiah's wife can help you. Will you take her?"

"Yes, Lord!" Ezekiel gasped, wiping his eyes. His soul was dry; his entire being empty, as if he had been slain and had lain dead on the ground all these years. That brief vision of his beloved Ella had brought him back to life and opened up his heart. Now he saw the pain he had hidden deep within for so long, and it bubbled up with fresh agony. He thought he had successfully gotten past such raw emotions! "Why, Lord? Why does it hurt so much?"

"Now you know the pain that I feel at the loss of My Bride, My beloved," Logos answered simply.

Ezekiel was stunned. "Your Bride...? You...?"

"My Bride is Israel, My beloved, My chosen. I have lost her. She is now scattered to the nations, like a valley of dead, dry bones." Suddenly Ezekiel was living the vision, for he found himself standing in a valley filled with dead, dry bones. He saw countless bones scattered all across the broad valley, and they were very, very dry.

Once again, Ezekiel told his story in Kasdan, but I will attempt to translate it for you, dear Reader, into poverty-stricken English as best as I am able, from his own words.

“Son of Dust. Please tell Me, can these dry bones live?” Logos surveyed them with me, a look of deepest longing spread wistfully across His lovely face.

“O Logos, Word of YHWH. Only You know!”

“Prophecy to them in My name, Son of Dust! Tell them, ‘O you dry bones, hear the Word of YHWH!’”

So, filled with the Spirit of Prophecy, I shouted out to the scattered bones, “O you dry bones, come together and hear the Word of YHWH!” I felt a bit stupid, speaking thus to the bones, for they were very dry. But no sooner had the words escaped my lips, than I heard an eerie rattling sound and saw the bones coming together, each to its proper joint. Soon the valley was filled with skeletons, waiting.

I prophesied again. “O you dry bones, let sinews grow, and cartilage, to connect you together. Then let flesh grow upon you, and skin over the flesh to cover you, that you may hear the Word of YHWH!” Again, the bones obeyed my word, until the valley was filled with dead bodies.

“Now prophecy to the Spirit, Son of Dust! Command the Spirit to come from the four winds and breathe on these slain, that they come to life!”

I shouted out with all my might, for I did not see the Spirit anywhere within this broad valley of the slain. But as soon as I shouted, I saw the seven Spirits of the Almighty come rushing down from all directions, blowing across the bodies of the slain with a rushing sound like a tornado. I jumped back in fear, for as the Spirit swept past each dead body, he leaped to life and stood to his feet. Within mere minutes I was staring at an exceedingly great army.

“Son of Dust! These bones are the whole house of Israel and Judah!” As he spoke, He carried me high into space, until I could see all the nations of the civilized world. Even at that great height, I saw the scattered remnants of Israel and Judah. “They cry, ‘Our bones are dried up! Our hope is perished. We are completely cut off!’ Therefore prophecy life to My Bride, Son of Dust, as I give you utterance.”

“Thus says YHWH Elohim!” I prophesied. “I will bring you together, O you dry bones! Behold, I will open up your graves and make you live, and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am YHWH! I will put My Spirit within you. You will come to life, and I will place you upon your own land that I gave you. There you will prosper when you know that I, YHWH, have done it.” Even as I looked, I saw the remnant of Judah, dry as a dead old stick across the land of Babylon, and the remnants of the tribes of Israel, dry as dead branches across the Median Empire. But as I prophesied, the sticks came together into one beautiful bush, living, growing, and fruitful, planted upon the now green hills of the Promised Land.

“Go back to your people, Son of Dust. Tell them what you saw. Find for yourself two dead, dry sticks. First write on one, ‘For all the sons of Judah’, and write on the other, ‘For Joseph, Ephraim, and all the house of Israel’. *Then join them together and prophesy restoration to My Bride.*”

The vision ended abruptly. I was left alone, shaking, exhausted, still on my knees in my cold, empty house. At that moment, I heard a timid knock on my door. I jumped up suddenly, then fainted and fell on my face with a crash, for I was low on blood sugar from days of fasting. “Ezekiel? Are you okay?” a worried-sounding woman’s voice came from the other side of the door.

I crawled over to a chair, and grabbed it to help me up. “I’m fine. Come in,” I called weakly. The door opened and in walked a concerned Juli. She instantly saw the problem, being experienced with the fastings of Jeremiah. She sat me down on the couch and ran to get me some fruit juice.

Juli sat beside me chatting as I sipped the life-giving juice. “Oh Ezekiel, I’m so glad you’re here. I’ve been so lonely! I had to have someone to talk to. Everyone loved and respected Jeremiah, but now that he is gone, I am ignored. I feel abandoned! The men at the market take advantage of me. The youngsters taunt me because I am old. But when I go to talk to the elders, they turn up their noses at me and say, ‘What could you, a woman, possibly know about anything?’ All my life I have supported and prayed for my husband. But now that he is gone, it’s like my life is over! I cannot kill myself, but YHWH will not take me. I don’t know what to do.”

Suddenly the pain of my loss of Ella came back to me full force. I knew exactly how she felt. I looked into her eyes and said, “Juli, I know. I understand.”

She dropped her gaze to the floor. “Nobody really understands. You couldn’t understand, Ezekiel, for when you lost Ella, it was as nothing to you. You didn’t even mourn. You just went on doing God’s will.”

I lifted her face so she could see my tears, and repeated, “Juli, I understand! YHWH made me hide my grief, as an illustration to Judah. But I buried it so deep that it is still there, a raw and festering wound that only love can heal. Will you come to me, marry me, love me, and help to heal that wound? Will you support me – pray for me like you did for Jeremiah? For YHWH has asked me to care for you the rest of your days.” I then told her of my vision.

Needless to say, Juli readily agreed to marry me. All the exiles showed up to celebrate our wedding, even Daniel. We were partying after the ceremony, when I remembered what YHWH had asked me to do. So I found two dead, dry sticks and wrote on them in front of all the people as He had said. Then I held ‘Judah’, while Juli held ‘Ephraim’ beside me. As we pushed them together, the dead, dry sticks turned green, grew together into a single branch, sprouted leaves, and blossomed! It was a miracle!

Stunned gasps of awe swept through the crowd. Juli grinned at this confirmation that she had a real prophet for her new husband. Just seeing her smile at me, I felt a thrill that soaked through me from my head to my toes. Those deep, festering wounds began to heal.

“YHWH Elohim says...” I called out to the people, “Behold, I will take the sons of Israel out from among the nations where I scattered them. I will gather them from every side and bring them back to their own land. Thus I will make of the sons of Israel and the sons of Judah one people, one nation in the land on the mountains of Israel, with one king over all of them. They will no longer be two nations, divided into two kingdoms. Then they will no longer defile themselves with their idols or their detestable things, or with any of their sins. But I will deliver them from all the places where they have sinned and will cleanse them. Then they will be My people, and I will be their God. And My servant David will be king over them, their prince forever. For they will have one shepherd and one law, and they will keep My Law. They will live on the good land that I gave to Jacob My servant, the land of your fathers – they, their sons, and their son’s sons shall dwell there forever. I will make an everlasting covenant of peace with them. For I will set My temple in their midst, that I may dwell with them forever. Thus the nations will know that I am YHWH, when I have restored My precious one to Myself!”

It was a good word, an encouraging word! I could see the excitement growing among the exiles as I prophesied. I told them of my vision of the dry bones coming together. The rejoicing increased, until it could not be contained. The wine flowed. Musicians played. The maidens danced for us, in glorious circles of uplifting beauty. The evening waxed very late. Still nobody wanted to go home.

They prevailed upon Daniel to share his vision from the previous year. “In the first year of the reign of Belshazzar after Nabonidus set off for the Levant, I had a night vision. But I didn’t understand it until Ezekiel came over and gave me the clue! I saw four great beasts come up out of the sea, one at a time. The first was like a lion but with wings like an eagle, an obvious reference to mighty Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar as the head of gold.” His listeners knew all about Nebuchadnezzar’s famous dream, so they caught the meaning instantly. “The second beast was like a bear, with one side dragging its feet but the other side raised up to fight; it is the chest and arms of silver, the Medo-Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great, with the Persians fighting while the Medes drag their feet. He had three ribs in his teeth, which I now understand are three empires he will conquer: Lydia, Babylon, and then Egypt. After him came a leopard, with four heads and four wings, corresponding to the belly of bronze. It represents the Macedonian-Greek Empire, under **Alexander the Great**, which at his death shall divide into four empires for four of his generals. Then came a fourth beast, an exceedingly strong dragon, with iron teeth like the statue’s legs of iron. It had me terrified!

“This powerful dragon was cruel. It flew swiftly across the land, trampling and crushing with its feet, devouring nations before it. It was the Roman Empire. Its ten horns correspond to the ten toes of iron mixed with clay. So much I understand. But the vision went on. First a mist passed before my eyes, and the four beasts faded, living, but subdued by the mists of time. Then the fourth beast, the dragon with ten horns, was slain. Its head was sliced off and its body destroyed and cast into the fire. I rejoiced, for it had been a fearsome nightmare. As I beheld the bloody head, a tiny horn grew up from among the ten horns, uprooting three of the first horns. It had a face, with eyes like a man and a mouth uttering great boasts. He looked like the epitome of evil! He began waging war against the holy ones, overpowering and slaughtering them.

“I cried out in the depths of my soul, ‘O YHWH! How long?’ Then I saw in the heavens many thrones with angels on them. On the center throne sat the Ancient of Days, the Almighty. His robe was like snow; His hair like purest wool. His throne was flames of fire, with spinning wheels darting and dancing like coals of fire in a blast furnace. A river of fire poured forth from the thrones, coming down the mountain on which he sat. The watching angels waited, bowed in worship. Then, as in a courthouse before a judge, one like a Son of Man came to stand trial before the Almighty. Opening the books of the law, the Almighty passed judgment – in His favor! To this Son of Man was given dominion over all peoples, nations, and tongues – an Emperor over all the emperors of the earth, with great glory and honor. For they shall all serve Him forever, and His Kingdom shall not pass away. *In His judgment, the holy ones, the saints of the Most High who had been slain by the arrogant horn, were also acquitted with Him!* The time had come for the saints to take possession of the Kingdom. Thus shall sovereignty, and dominion, and glory, and power be granted to the saints of the Highest One, those who serve and obey Him whose Kingdom lasts forever.” What an encouragement! A fitting end to a fine wedding!

[That was 552 BC. The next year Daniel received a vision of two goats, but I won’t tell it now because the angel told him to keep it secret. I’ll fit it into my story later.]

That summer, King Astyages came from Ecbatana into Persis with 120,000 cavalry and 3000 chariots, aiming to put an end to the Persian belligerence. Cambyses I and his son Cyrus met them inside the border, just before they reached the small town of Gabae. The Persians had only 50,000 cavalry and 100 chariots. They fought for their lives, slowly retreating to give the town into their enemy’s hands. But they inflicted heavy losses, so Astyages was forced to retreat, too. Cambyses died of his injuries, but his son Cyrus gained admiration as a brilliant tactician and military commander. When Nabonidus heard the news, he was surprised that Persis had stood up to the mighty Medes, but figured their little border skirmish couldn’t affect his empire. He remained at the Tayma Oasis.

Queen Amytis soon found out who this King Cyrus was, as did the rest of the empire. The little upstart king who had stopped the mighty Median army was actually her nephew. (King Astyages was her brother; his daughter Mandana was the mother of Cyrus.) All over the Median Empire Cyrus was hailed as a rising star. He had stood up to the cruel and ruthless King Astyages! He unified the Persian provinces for the first time. Now King Cyrus, who was also a brilliant orator, was traveling all over Persis preaching freedom from Median tyranny and oppression.

King Astyages was very unpopular, even among his own people. In those days alliances were often sealed by marriage. His father, King Cyaxares, had allied with the Babylonian Empire (giving his daughter Amytis to King Nabopolassar's son Nebuchadnezzar) and with the Lydian Empire (taking the daughter of King Alyattes II, Aryenis, as a wife for his son Astyages). When he became king, Astyages had tried to do the same, by giving his daughter Mandana as a wife for Persian King Cambyses to seal a treaty with Persis. But Astyages was not as wise as his father, for he had not treated the Persians as allies. Instead, he had abused them, exacted excessive tribute, taken their young men for his army, and passed laws restricting their own culture and freedoms. Besides that, he was a vain and arrogant man, who would turn on his friends or allies on a whim, as well as an offensively superstitious man who ruled the entire empire strictly by the oracles of his gods.

So the hope of freedom preached by Cyrus rang a bell with the Persians, who rallied 'round him to prepare for Persis' final showdown with the cruel Medes. It came the next year, 550 BC. To crush the rebellion, King Astyages put together over a million troops, 200,000 cavalry, and 3000 chariots, under the command of General Harapagus.

They swept down past Gabae, aiming directly for the Persian capital of Persepolis. King Cyrus was in for the fight of his life. This time, he could not just fall back and let the Medes take the city! This was a fight to the death. He had managed to gather 300,000 troops, 50,000 cavalry, and his pathetic squad of 100 chariots. Only a miracle could save them, as they were outnumbered by four to one. It was the old 'David and Goliath' story all over again.

Cyrus mustered his troops on top of a flat hill between Persepolis and the Pasargadae Plain. As the Medes filled the plain, he swept down with a full frontal assault, then slowly over the course of the day, withdrew back to the top of the hill. The next day he did the same, and the third. He clearly was going nowhere, but he was fully committed, to the death. Surely he and every man with him had chosen to die on that hill before they let the Medes take Persepolis.

General Harapagus was angry and despondent, for his own son had been slain in the battle. "Why do they fight like that? How can they keep fighting, knowing that every single one will die? They have no chance at all. None. They should have given up long ago, and fled for their lives!"

It happened that there was a captain in the tent who was a Persian conscript. He was a trustworthy officer, having fought with General Harapagus for many years, including in the battle at Gabae. He wisely answered the old general, "Sir, you fight only because you obey orders from King Astyages, like myself. But the Persians fight for freedom! They are a proud and ancient people. Astyages has not treated them with respect—he has abused them like slaves. Is it not better to fight for freedom rather than be a slave?"

Suddenly the general's eyes were opened. All his life he had fought for... what? The glory of King Astyages? The greatness of the Median Empire? The thrill of battle? Now he saw the abused subjects as people, people who needed freedom and dignity to really live. "Thank you, captain. Tomorrow I shall avenge my son's death! For tomorrow we join Cyrus in his battle for freedom from oppression!"

"But sir? What about the Lydians? The Urartu? The Cimmerians? The Hyrcanians? Surely they will not turn so lightly against the command of the king!"

"Then we will drive them back to their own lands. I will no longer fight to support the cruel tyranny of Astyages! From now on, I too fight for freedom!"

So early the next morning, moments before the valiant Persians came down the hill on what might have been their last charge, General Harapagus ordered his army to turn about face and attack their own allies. Caught by surprise and overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of the Medes, they quickly fled the scene of battle. Then the old general raised the white flag of parley and rode to meet King Cyrus.

He bowed before him. "O King, you are a better man than I, and your cause is noble and just. I refuse to fight any longer in obedience to an arrogant tyrant whom I despise. From this day forth I offer my life and my army in service to you. Like you and your brave men, I would rather die in the cause of freedom than live to support a despot!"

Surprisingly, King Cyrus took his repentance at face value without question. The next year, 549 BC, they marched together to the capital of the Medes, Ecbatana, to capture King Astyages. In only a few short years, the entire Median Empire was in the hands of Persian King Cyrus and Median General Harapagus. Not long after that, they forged peace treaties with Egypt, Libya, and the Levant. Then, by pursuing him through the winter after the time of battles was past, they also captured the fabulously wealthy King Croesus and the Lydian Empire. And by 545 BC they had turned their eyes on the Babylonian Empire as well.

Many of the nations / city-states of the Median Empire actually hailed the Persians as liberators, for King Cyrus saw them as people. He worked to return them to their ancient lands, restore their traditions and cultures, and recover their own gods. Freedom for him was a passion, not just a slogan. He brought peace and freedom wherever he went. Never was an emperor so loved by his subjects.

CHAPTER 29 – THE MEDES AND THE PERSIANS

Following his victory over King Croesus of Lydia, King Cyrus turned over the Asia Minor campaign to his old General Harapagus. It was a smart move. In short order Harapagus conquered most of Asia Minor. He followed his king's policy of tolerance and freedom of religion to those he conquered. Every city-state and kingdom of Asia Minor either surrendered or was conquered, except some of the Phoenicians (who fled to Carthage) and the residents of Xanthus in Lycia (who foolishly all committed suicide). King Cyrus appointed General Harapagus as the 'satrap' (virtual king) of all of Asia Minor for his faithfulness.

King Cyrus did not execute his grandfather, Astyages. On the contrary, though he deposed him, he treated him kindly, allowing him to still eat at the king's table. But he transferred all authority at Ecbatana to his uncle **Darius the Mede**. Again, it was a good move. The Medes had come to hate Astyages, but they loved his son Darius and served him willingly. And even Astyages, wicked as he was, surely would never rebel against his own son! Thus Cyrus proved to be a good judge of character. He gave Darius as much freedom as he could handle. He also left him his father's army, and ordered him to keep a watchful eye on mighty Babylon, as if he knew that someday it would be his.

Wisely, King Cyrus did not immediately attempt to conquer the Babylonian Empire. Instead, he went home, back to that famous hill above the Plain of Pasargadae where the tide had turned in his favor. "This is where I shall build my new capital!" he declared. He planned for modern, earthquake-proof palaces, temples, gardens, and even a mausoleum, with a strong fortress on top of the hill for protection. All his buildings used King Solomon's 'base isolation' design, which in today's terms could withstand an earthquake of about 8.0 on the Richter Scale. And all the while he worked on his new capital, he sent emissaries out to Babylonia, teaching basic but revolutionary concepts of freedom from tyranny and the worth of each individual.

That couldn't have come at a better time. In the absence of his good father Nabonidus, Belshazzar had become an arrogant tyrant, as well as a glutton and drunkard. His two wives, Nitah and Zerah, tried to help him, but by now he had many other wives and concubines. He didn't care. From the beginning of his reign he had observed Daniel bugging his dad about the Judean God, YHWH, so now he banned all Judeans from the palace. He spent his days feasting with his nobles at the palace and his nights in hedonistic abandon, oblivious to the needs of his subjects.

Many of his abused subjects heard the siren call of the emissaries of Cyrus. Some even fled their homes for Persis. Others sent messages to Cyrus assuring him that they would eagerly surrender should he try to take their city. Among them were the priests of Marduk who were still oppressed by the priesthood of the moon god Sin and its powerful high priestess Adagoppe.

Then in 539 BC at the age of 103, Adagoppe died. For the first time, foolish Belshazzar awoke in fear! Adagoppe and her priesthood were all that stood between him and the angry priests of Marduk and Ishtar. Cyrus, who had conquered the Medes and the Lydians, had also captured the hearts of many of his own subjects! So King Belshazzar dispatched his fastest riders to carry the news to his father Nabonidus, who was still at the Oasis of Tayma.

King Nabonidus quickly regathered his forces (who had gotten a bit lazy living the good life at the Oasis) and headed for home. But he must pass through the Levant. And whom did he find there, but those pesky Edomites, again taking over the waste places of Judah and Israel. *He didn't have time for this! They had been warned!* In fierce anger he left behind half his army with orders to kill them all, plunder their cities, and then catch up with him. Thus those prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and Obadiah against Edom were fulfilled to the letter. Edom was laid waste, an everlasting desolation, her mountains and valleys filled with the slain and her cities uninhabited. Only a remnant who fled to the desert survived, and the Edomites never again possessed the land of their fathers.

Nabonidus reached Babylon to a tense situation. The priesthood of the moon god was in confusion. His mother had been their high priestess all their lives. Adagoppe had been strong, focused, and fervent. Somehow everyone had gotten the notion that the moon god protected her and she could never die! Her sudden death had hit them very hard. They had embalmed her body and now they insisted on returning to Haran to bury her in her original temple. Nabonidus appointed his daughter Sin-sarah ('Princess of Sin') as the new high priestess of Sin in Adagoppe's place, hoping to calm them. She was young and obedient to him.

But he was appalled at his own son's profligacy. His kingdom was hanging by a thread. It was his mother's priesthood that held up his government. *If they all leave for Haran, he might not have a kingdom when he returns!* Belshazzar sure didn't have the strength of character to defend the empire. Nabonidus was disgusted with him.

Whom can he trust? Queen Amytis! Was she still alive? Thank God, at the age of 88 she was still well, still every inch a queen. Nabonidus called her back to the palace. Of course he spent a lot more time saying it, but his bottom line was simply, "Help! My empire is falling down around my ears! What can I do?"

Amytis was very gracious. She didn't chide him for all the times he had failed to heed her advice. "O King, live forever! Your son does not love YHWH or His wisdom. Neither does he love your kingdom. All he loves is himself and his selfish pleasures. Depose him. Put another in his place who loves the right things. You may think the priests of Marduk and Ishtar are your only enemies, but Persis will take over the empire if YHWH does not protect you. Cyrus is already winning the hearts of the people."

Nabonidus heard, and heeded. He deposed Belshazzar and crowned **Queen Amytis** in his place. He gathered all his officers and nobles of the palace and demanded they swear fealty to her, and left her with some of his own elite guards for protection. He banned the priests of Marduk and Ishtar from the city, on pain of death if they tried to return. But he was in a big hurry. His mother's priests were anxious to leave for Haran. He must go with them.

Queen Amytis immediately began a valiant effort to restore the kingdom. Sadly, everyone in the palace seemed to hate her for it! Deposed King Belshazzar and the nobles of his court conspired to return and kill the aged queen.

Meanwhile, the priests of Marduk and Ishtar fled the city across the border to Persis. They took great delight in telling King Cyrus, "Babylon is nearly unarmed, the city is in upheaval, the king has left for Haran and his son has been deposed. We all will support you if you invade the Babylonian Empire. We urge you to do it soon, before King Nabonidus returns from Haran, for half his army is still in Edom, and the half he left here has no good commander."

Daniel and his faithful Magi (including all the Judeans like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego), had been banned from the palace by Belshazzar. Queen Amytis knew she could not trust the king's advisors who remained in the palace, for they were all friends of Belshazzar. She had her guards, but they didn't know Daniel, either. Somehow, she had to contact him. She needed his wisdom, and his God! So she took a chance. Late that night while everyone slept, she donned a plain brown robe and escaped the palace. She took the River Road to the Chebar Canal and into Tel-aviv. She thought she would have to awaken Daniel, but she could see him still praying, facing west in his upper room. She knocked softly and let herself in. "Thank YHWH you're safe, O Queen!" Daniel was relieved to see her, "I've been praying for you! A threat of murder is in the palace!"

"No. All is well there. Even Belshazzar would never do that! He is married to my daughter! But I've come to beg a favor from you. I have an army, well, half an army, but no good generals that I can trust. In fact, there is no one in Babylon I can really trust! I sense King Cyrus of Persis may be on the move. The priests of Marduk have fled over to his side. If he is going to attack Babylon, now would certainly be the logical time, while Nabonidus is in Haran. Would you please give me a few of your best men, strong men in whom resides the wisdom of YHWH and the courage of Nebuchadnezzar, to command my army? Right now the city is indefensible and no one seems to care!"

Daniel bowed his head, for a long time. Amytis feared he might have fallen asleep. Then slowly, sadly, he looked up to say, "No, O Queen. I'm sorry. Remember what Jeremiah told you the day he died? YHWH says we must submit to the Medes and the Persians. King Cyrus has already won. If you return to the palace, whether I give you men or not, you will surely be slain."

Belshazzar's men had infiltrated the guards charged by Nabonidus to protect the queen. They arranged for their shift to begin at midnight. When the day-shift guards were asleep, they stole into the queen's apartment and thrust their spears deep into her bedding. But she was not there.

The next morning, Belshazzar returned to the palace, put on his crown, and took up his throne once again. He spread the news about the 'frail old queen' passing in the night. Everyone knew what that meant. To celebrate, Belshazzar proclaimed a grand feast the next month, in honor of his being restored to his throne. He invited a thousand nobles from all across the land. But after the invitations were sent out, his security chief whispered in his ear. "We did as you ordered, O King. But Queen Amytis was already gone. She escaped to Tel-aviv with Daniel."

So Belshazzar went to the half-army that Nabonidus had left at Babylon. "I am your commander, for as long as my father is in Haran," he told them. Then he ordered them to march to Tel-aviv and to slay every person there, especially the queen, Daniel, and all the Magi. "And do it immediately! Before they have time to prepare defenses! For they have turned traitor on us, and have plotted to give the kingdom to the Medes and the Persians!"

The half-army had no commanders. The captains were used to following the orders of the king without question. There were seventy of them, each over about 1000 men. They were lined up to hear their orders. They all saluted King Belshazzar, as usual when orders are given. But then one boldly stepped forward. "O King! Live forever!"

Belshazzar held up his scepter, so he continued. "My loyalty is still to your father, King Nabonidus. He would never give such a command, for he loves the queen and the Judeans, especially Daniel and his Magi. Therefore, slay me, sir. For I cannot obey you. I refuse to harm them."

King Belshazzar was startled. Never had he seen such loyalty, such bravery in the face of certain death. But he didn't really care. He ordered his personal guards to slay the rebel captain on the spot.

But as they ran to him with swords drawn, the other 69 captains stepped forward, to line up with the rebel captain. Belshazzar quickly recalled his guards. "Belay that order! Such loyalty is to be admired and no one will be punished. Go back to defending the border, as you were. I will deal with the old queen's vile treachery myself." Then, furious that he had been disobeyed, he fled back to the safety of the palace. *At least there, he had friends who obeyed him!*

Daniel had gathered his friends to help pray through the night. The sun was high in the sky the next morning when he declared, "The crisis is past; let's get some sleep." He let the queen have his own bed. He and his friends took the floor and couches in the front room. But that afternoon when they awoke, he entreated them. "Please. We must return to prayer. A new battle now rages, for the empire."

King Nabonidus let the pagan priests preside at the funeral of his mother Adagoppe. He watched, mourning silently, as they carried on and on with the most terrible wailing and lamentations. It was as if they had no hope. *Why? For someone who had served the gods so faithfully all her life, should they not be happy that she had gone on to her reward? Did they not even believe in the afterlife?* The dirges continued for days. Suddenly, Nabonidus was thoroughly sick of it all. He felt this urgent need to get back to Babylon and his army. He hoped the ones he had left to discipline Edom had returned. He gathered his guards. They left the pagan priests to finish the funeral and started home.

The Babylonian Empire was in bad shape, worse than anyone had realized. In his absence, foolish Belshazzar had squandered the wealth and goodwill of the empire on wild and riotous living. In addition, the hand of God was severe upon them, with storms, plagues, and widespread crop failures. Inflation and economic chaos were rampant. And to top it off, the emissaries of Cyrus had already been through every part of his empire, convincing his people of the now legendary kindness and religious tolerance of Cyrus, and telling them how well they would be treated if only they would submit to Persis without a fight.

Cyrus agreed with the priests of Marduk. The time was right. His attack must be made while the great Babylonian Empire was relatively undefended. He stopped work on his capital city on the hill of Pasargadae, to muster his army. He ordered Darius the Mede, king at Ecbatana, to bring his army west into Gutium, where its King Gubaru had already promised to defect to Persis. Cyrus attacked Elam, to his west, between his borders and Babylon.

Elam was overrun with little resistance. Its capital city, Susa, and all its governors and nobles, surrendered and swore fealty to their new emperor. From there Cyrus went north to link up with Darius the Mede at Gutium. King Gubaru proved as good as his word, joining the small Gutium army with those of the Medes and the Persians.

Opis on the Tigris River was the final barrier between them and the city of Babylon. Opis was a strategic city. It was on the east end of the Great Median Wall, which King Nebuchadnezzar had built to protect Babylon from attack by Media. The Tigris was too large to cross farther south, and the wall protected them from attack from the north. But at the heavily fortified city of Opis an army could easily cross the river – if only they could take the bridge!

Nabonidus got frantic as he neared home. By the time he reached Sippar (just up river from Babylon) he was whipping his poor chariot horses, leaving his loyal guards behind in the dust. He was overjoyed to see his full army already at Sippar and awaiting his orders – the men he had left at Edom had completed their task and returned. But the news was grim. “Cyrus is on the march! Susa has fallen to the Persians! Opis is under attack! We shall certainly be next. Shall we dig in here, or shall we try to defend Opis?”

Nabonidus did not have the time to think clearly. He was still exhausted from his long, frantic ride. He did not know the strength of his enemy. He had no Magi to advise him. His general had only just returned from Edom, and wasn’t even sure who among his allies remained loyal. All he knew was, his grand empire had been invaded. What should he do? Rather than take the time to wait for wise counsel, he made a snap decision, which was to cost him. “Form up quickly! We march for Opis within the hour.”

King Cyrus was a good judge of character. He liked King Gubaru’s attitude. “Help me take the city of Babylon, and I shall make you its new governor!” he promised. “You will report to King Darius, but he is 62 years old. You may succeed him as king. Obey me and you will prosper.”

Nabonidus rode beside his army toward Opis. He was frustrated that they took so long to get there. They must defend the bridge, before Cyrus could bring his armies across. He ordered his men to march double time. It was a grueling 56 miles, and they were trying to do it all in one day! It was a bad decision. Darkness fell, slowing them even further. The fourteen hour forced march was too much for many of them. They began to stumble and fall. Still Nabonidus drove them on into the night. They finally reached Opis about midnight on September 25, 538 BC.

King Gubaru led the way up to the Babylonian fortress at the east end of the great bridge at Opis. Not knowing he now served the king of Persis, they welcomed him in. He took control of the bridge before it could be destroyed. By nightfall, his own forces were all across the Tigris. Darius and Cyrus decided to wait until the next day to cross.

Nabonidus breathed a sigh of relief. He was just in time. Opis was safe. His ally, King Gubaru of Gutium, who had sworn to protect his eastern border, was on the bridge. The Medes and Persians were still on the other side. *But wait! Why had Gubaru’s army lined up to oppose him?* “Surrender to King Cyrus!” King Gubaru called out to the exhausted Babylonian army. “He will treat you well! He doesn’t want to harm you! He wants to give you a better life than you ever had under the cruel, arrogant Babylonian kings!”

His message rang true. Belshazzar had certainly abused them. Now Nabonidus had abused them, too. Some began to turn against King Nabonidus. He quickly ordered them slain. He must maintain discipline at all costs. But that was another bad decision, for no soldier likes cutting down his own brothers in arms. More rebel. The Babylonians were fighting against each other, a king’s worst nightmare! Nabonidus sounded the retreat and fled back to Sippar. Gubaru never even had to fight. He merely collected the spoils from the fleeing Babylonian army. The next day, when Cyrus and Darius brought their armies across the bridge, King Gubaru proudly related an embellished tale of his victory and total rout of Nabonidus and the entire Babylonian army, and reported that the way was clear for their invasion of the mighty city Babylon itself.

King Nabonidus reached Sippar on his chariot the next morning. His army, or what was left of it, straggled in over the next few days. Many had defected to the enemy. The rest were in shambles, many weaponless and most unable to fight. Nabonidus fed, re-armed and re-organized them, and worked to prepare for the inevitable attack on Sippar.

On October 6, 589 BC, just eleven days from that fateful night at Opis, the armies of Cyrus massed before Sippar, covering the ground as far as the eye could see. Nabonidus had no idea they had so many! He could see King Gubaru, whom he had appointed king of Gutium. He saw the priesthoods of Marduk and Ishtar, blessing the Persian forces in preparation for battle. He saw dozens of his own captains with their thousands, now all faced against him. He looked at the remnant of an army that he had left, and realized that he had already lost. Even his faithful few would not have the heart to fight their own countrymen.

Cyrus was coming under a white flag of parley, to ask for their surrender. Nabonidus did not want to face him. He told his general. "Order the army, or what's left of it, to lay down their arms. Go out. Meet with Cyrus. Negotiate the surrender of Sippar. You have been faithful to the last, but I don't want you to all die because of my foolishness!" Then he got on his chariot and fled toward Babylon.

Coming south from Sippar, Nabonidus reached the town of Tel-aviv first, but he didn't want to stop. He didn't want to hear old Daniel's 'I told you so'. He wanted to go directly to Babylon, to see how his city was doing under the rule of Queen Amytis, to see if his son Belshazzar was behaving himself, and to see his daughter Sin-sarah ruling at the temple of the moon god. He had been gone for two months. Perhaps Queen Amytis had been wise. Perhaps his mighty city could still resist the attack. But his chariot horses were worn out. They stopped of their own accord beside the gates to Tel-aviv. When he whipped them to continue, they balked and turned into Tel-aviv instead. Daniel met him just inside the city gates. Taking the bridle of his lead horse, Daniel said, "Welcome, O King! I'm so glad you came. Please come to my house. We need to talk." Hearing no hint of an 'I told you so', Nabonidus reluctantly agreed. Soon he was sitting in Daniel's living room.

The room was packed. Ezekiel and Juli were there. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were there. Queen Amytis was there, with Nitocris, Nitah, and Zerah. Even his daughter Sin-sarah was there. They greeted him warmly and brought him up to date on Belshazzar's easy coup d'état after he had left for Haran. Then Nabonidus told them the even worse news of the Persian invasion, soon to be on its way south from Sippar.

Nabonidus also wanted to know, "Sin-sarah, why did you leave the temple of Sin empty? You know all the other priests of the moon god will be back soon from the funeral. They may be back already. You are their high priestess! You must be there to take charge!"

"Dad, I hate to be the one to break it to you, but Babylon is lost." Never before had Sin-sarah spoken so sincerely. "Have you not noticed? The gods are all fighting against us. Marduk, Ishtar, Dumuzi, Sin... they all hate us and want to destroy us. The only God who cares about us is YHWH, the God of Daniel. That is why I'm here. I forsook my Sin and his temple, to cast myself onto YHWH's mercy. Please, I don't want to be called Sin-sarah anymore. I hate that name. YHWH hates it, too. Just call me Sarah..."

"YHWH? He won't help us. I never kept my vows to Him. Does he have mercy still for me? How do you know that He cares? It sure doesn't seem like He cares about me! Can He save my empire, and my beautiful city Babylon?"

"Yes!" Ezekiel said earnestly, with his wife Juli nodding beside him. "He will save us all! But only if we now submit to King Cyrus of Persis, as Isaiah prophesied."

"Daniel, is that true? Will Cyrus save my city? What about my palace? My people? His army covers the land!"

"Yes, O King. He will destroy nothing, if we all submit. But any who resist him will be slain."

"Then he will slay me, for I resisted!"

"I swear he will not, O King, if you submit to him now. He will reward you if he sees that your allegiance is sincere – maybe even give you a place of authority in his empire."

"What about my son, Belshazzar?"

Nabonidus was met with silence. No one wanted to be the bearer of the bad news. Finally Daniel said, "I'm sorry, O King. Your son will not submit. He isn't even aware that the empire is being invaded. He doesn't care. His advisors and nobles don't care. They are gathering for a big banquet tomorrow in celebration of his successful coup d'état. They don't have a clue what is coming."

"We must warn them! I will go warn them now!"

"If you do, you will be slain. Your son gave orders that if you, or I, or Queen Amytis, or my Magi, or any of us in this room tries to enter the palace, we are to be slain on sight. A month ago he even tried to get your army to come here and kill everyone in Tel-aviv, but they refused."

"What? My army refused a direct command of the king? Why, that's... that's impossible!"

"Nevertheless, they did. Belshazzar would have killed those who rebelled, but every one of your captains stood together in the mutiny, so Belshazzar had to back down. You should be proud of them! They refused the command only because they knew it would displease you, O King."

Finally King Nabonidus realized that this whole thing was much bigger than he. Shoulders sagging, he humbled himself. He too was learning that it is YHWH who raises one up and puts another down. He ceased his striving and joined the others, waiting for YHWH to direct them.

CHAPTER 30 – THE FALL OF BABYLON

Belshazzar's big feast was in full swing. From morning until night food was continually served and the wine flowed freely. Scantly clad girls gyrated to sensuous music, inflaming the vulgar passions. The king ordered that the idols captured from many nations be set up before them to celebrate with them. Of course the wine was much too good for common vessels, so the gold and silver vessels taken from the temple of Solomon in Jerusalem were used to toast the idols of the nations.

Logos could take no more. "That's it! When he starts using My holy vessels to worship the false gods of the nations, he is toast. Yet, My great love compels Me to give him one last warning to repent." He reached down to write His warning on the wall, directly before King Belshazzar's startled gaze, making His huge hand visible as it wrote.

King Belshazzar did not have the perception to see into the spirit realm. Seeing that solitary hand terrified him. The party, with a thousand nobles in attendance, ground slowly to a halt as everyone realized what had happened.

But the words on the wall were in Kasdan, the heavenly language. Neither Belshazzar, nor any of his nobles, could read it, much less interpret its meaning. He called for all his advisors, wizards, and magicians. They couldn't read it either, for he had thrown out all of Daniel's Magi. Finally, in desperation, he sent to Tel-aviv for Queen Amytis.

The command was urgent. She was brought in the king's own chariot, and briefed hurriedly on the way. She entered the banquet hall, standing tall, regal, at the age of 88 still every inch a queen. She recognized the Kasdan, but wouldn't presume to interpret it. "O King! Live forever! Do not let your thoughts alarm you, nor your face be pale. There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the Spirit of the holy God! Your grandfather found in him great insight and wisdom, and made him chief of the Magi. He is divinely gifted to interpret dreams, reveal mysteries, and solve problems." She then pointed at the servants who had brought her. "Therefore summon Daniel and he will read the handwriting on the wall and give its interpretation!" They jumped at her order, and fled to get Daniel.

He entered the king's banquet hall. It was the first time he had been here in 13 years, ever since Belshazzar had banned all the Judeans from the palace. The king didn't even recognize him. "O Daniel! I've heard so much about you, that in you is the spirit of the gods, who have given you unusual wisdom and... blah blah blah..." He buttered him up, ending, "...if you are able to read that handwriting on the wall, and give to us its interpretation, I will reward you with great riches and honor. I'll clothe you with gold and purple, and make you the third ruler in my kingdom, after only King Nabonidus and myself."

"Keep your gifts for yourself, O King. But I will read the handwriting and give its interpretation."

A noticeable sigh fell over the banquet hall. Daniel saw he had the total attention of over a thousand noblemen. *He had better make this count. Perhaps with this warning, they might yet repent and be saved.* He started with a history lesson. "O King, the most high God granted sovereignty, grandeur, power, and majesty to King Nebuchadnezzar, so that the people of every nation and tongue feared and trembled before him. But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit became proud, he was deposed from his throne, his glory was removed, he was driven from mankind, and he became like a beast of the field, eating grass like a calf. His naked body was drenched with the dews of heaven for seven years, until he learned that the most high God is ruler over the realms of mankind, and that He sets over them whomever He wishes. Yet you, O King Belshazzar, his own son-in-law, though you knew all this, have not humbled yourself. You even tried to kill Queen Amytis, whom your father appointed over you to help you. Worst of all, you exalted yourself against YHWH the King of heaven, and brought holy vessels of His temple before you, to drink toasts to the pagan gods of gold, silver, wood, and stone, which cannot see, hear, or understand. But the true God, in whose hands are your life-breath and all your days, you have neither feared nor glorified, but rather despised. *The hand you saw was sent from Him!*"

Evening fell. The ladies at Daniel's house prepared a simple meal of vegetables, not knowing if Daniel or Queen Amytis would be able to return in time to dine with them. Suddenly they heard an urgent call from the watchman on the wall. "An army approaches! A huge army!"

Suddenly King Nabonidus knew what he must do. All his life he had run from problems, escaped his challenges, and avoided dealing with the very issues that had now destroyed his empire. All the warnings he had been given, all the wise counsel from Daniel, from Amytis, from the Magi, even from his own wife Nitocris, he had managed to put off. *No more.* Now he stood and reached out his arms to Nitocris, enveloping her in one final, big hug. Then, looking at her, but speaking to himself, God, and all the others as well, he said, "I have been a fool. Please forgive me. I will go out and surrender to the king of Persis. May God have mercy on my soul." Nabonidus got back in his royal chariot. His horses were quite obedient. *Strange how they wouldn't let him pass the gates of Tel-aviv before.* He rode out to meet the armies of the Medes and Persians.

King Cyrus saw the lone chariot coming toward them. He called a halt to the armies, and gathered his elite guards and officers around him to meet this emissary from this unknown town which lay before the great city Babylon. "Say, what is that cute little town, anyway? I didn't even know there was a town here."

"That is Tel-aviv. It is just a ghetto of Judean exiles."

Cyrus pointed at the royal chariot drawing close. "Why is the king of Babylon coming from the Judean exiles?"

Nobody could give him an answer. “Order the armies to camp here for the night. I will go by myself to meet with King Nabonidus. Wait here for my return.”

Nabonidus stopped his chariot to get down and bow before King Cyrus. But before he could say a word, Cyrus called, “Get back in your chariot. Speak to me as king to king. Do not let your people ever see you bow or grovel. You need their respect!”

Nabonidus complied, but still said what he had to say. “O King, I have no respect left. I’ve been a fool. My empire is forfeit, yours for the taking. I should never have resisted you at Opis. Half my men were on your side! But I was blind to it all. I have said my good-byes to my wife and friends. My own son has shut me out of the city. Here is my sword, O King. Slay me now, for I deserve no better.”

Cyrus was a good judge of character. He could read the difference between true repentance and mere theatrics. “Slay you? The legendary Emperor of Babylonia? Not a chance, my friend. I value my friends and make good use of my allies. Perhaps with Your Royal Highness working with me, we can save your great and beautiful city Babylon from destruction this night. Do you know of a home in yonder town where we can plan together how to save your city? Lead me there. I would dine with you.” He signalled to his guards to let them know when he’d be back.

King Nabonidus was stunned. How did he do that? One moment this man was his mortal enemy, and the next his lifelong friend! No wonder Cyrus was having success wherever he went. “Yes, Your Majesty. Ride beside me. We can go to the home of a leader of the Judean exiles.”

So they rode back together. Cyrus chatted happily as if they had been friends all their lives. Nabonidus could not conceive of such a man, who would go virtually unarmed, with no guards or even servants, into an enemy city, to dine at the table of a king who recently wanted him dead! *What is his defense if the people of the city should rise up against him? He is the head of the Medo-Persian Empire, for heaven’s sake! How can he risk his life and his empire in such a foolhardy tryst?* Nabonidus was still shaking his head in wonder as they neared the town’s gate. Suddenly he had a thought. It was crazy, but he instantly knew it was right. “Your Majesty, before we go in to dine...”

“Aw, cut the ‘Majesty’ stuff. Kings ought to be able to address each other without all the flowery honorifics. We hear enough of that from our slaves.” So again, Cyrus treated Nabonidus as a friend and equal, astounding him anew. They stopped.

“Yes, sir. I just thought, before it’s too dark, we should look at the river. Everyone knows Babylon is impregnable, with solid brass gates and walls 75 feet thick and 100 feet high. But I think I know a way in.” Cyrus was intrigued. They rode to the fork where the Chebar canal separated from the Euphrates River.

“Look downstream, Cyrus. See how the river flows into the city underneath the walls? Imagine how easy it would be to get your army in if the river was not there? Now, look here at the Chebar Canal. See the sluice gates. They can be raised or lowered depending on the flow of the Euphrates, to keep the main flow under the walls of Babylon constant whether in flood or drought. It is only October; the rains have barely begun and the river is far from flood, so the sluice gates are nearly closed. But if we open them all the way, much of the Euphrates would flow into the Chebar Canal around the city. That would lower the water into the city by half.” He told the two men whose job it was to guard the sluice gates. “I am your King Nabonidus, and this is your new emperor, King Cyrus. We order you to open the sluice gates all the way, and keep them open, no matter what happens tonight!” They scurried to obey.

“Now, sir.” He turned back to Cyrus. “That will lower the water level under the wall to roughly six feet. But that is still too high. So, do you see what I see?” He pointed to the city walls around Tel-aviv, which were about eight feet tall, made of mud-brick, hardened in the sun. “You have an infinite source of labor, and I have an infinite source of material. Together, we can move that entire wall, brick by brick, down here into the river. It will force all the water into the Chebar Canal, allowing us to march right under the wall. If you are willing, we can do it all tonight.”

“That sounds great!” Cyrus said casually. “Now, I’m hungry! Let’s go in and see what’s for dinner. After dinner we’ll come out and see if the river is dropped as much as you think.” They rode to Daniel’s house.

Nabonidus grinned broadly as he introduced Cyrus. “This is King Cyrus of Persis, Emperor of Persia, Media, Lydia, and now... Babylon. He would like to dine with us.” Nabonidus then introduced his wife Nitocris and the rest of Daniel’s guests.

The ladies were ashamed of the simple meal they had prepared for Daniel and Amytis. This was no meal fit for a king, much less the emperor of the civilized world! But King Cyrus didn’t seem to mind a bit. He ate his vegetables with gusto, while regaling his hosts with stirring stories of far-off lands now enjoying the protection, freedom, and prosperity of his empire. As he talked, Nitocris looked at the door and saw the emperor’s royal robe lying there where he had tossed it. With it was the sword he had unbuckled and discarded during their introductions. King Cyrus was totally unarmed! She gasped, her hand to her face. Every eye turned upon her at the interruption. “Your Majesty! Your sword! We were your enemies! How can you just... just leave your sword at the door?”

King Cyrus laughed lightly. “Enemies? You’re not my enemies. Do you think I came here to make enemies? Ha! I came to Babylon to make friends! My lifelong motto is to treat everyone with justice, kindness, and respect. Then even my enemies become my friends.”

“This then, O King, is the inscription that the hand of YHWH the almighty God has written.” Daniel interpreted the Kasdan on the wall into Chaldean: “**Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin**” which I, in turn, will now translate into modern English. “Fifty dollars, Fifty dollars, one dollar, fifty cents.” But as I said, Kasdan is a very big language. Each word paints a picture far larger than the simple thought our words tell us. Daniel saw the whole picture. “This is the interpretation of YHWH’s message to you, O King. **Mene**, from the verb ‘to number’. *God has numbered your lifespan and come to the end of it.* **Mene** a second time. *God has also numbered your dominion and put an end to it.* It is doubled; thus it is set; nothing can change it. **Tekel**, a basic unit of money, from a verb meaning to put on the scales, to weigh. *God has put you on the scales and found you deficient.* You’re too heavy on moral perversion – too light on integrity, justice, mercy, and kindness. **Upharsin** comes from peres, a verb meaning to divide. *Your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and the Persians.*”

Belshazzar was half-standing, his hand gripping his scepter so tightly it had turned white. “But, in that it is doubled and set, what can I do?”

“You can repent of your wickedness, O King. Put away the holy vessels of YHWH. Get rid of these abominable idols. Put some decent clothes on those half-naked girls and return them to their fathers. Cease your drunkenness and gluttony. Put off your royal robes and wear sackcloth instead. Apologize to these you’ve perverted, and to those you banned from the palace. Then go out and surrender to the kings of Media and Persia. Do it this very night.”

Belshazzar was with him, all the way up to that last one. “But wait! That means I lose my kingdom either way, whether I submit or not!”

“Yes, O King. That is what God’s message says. Nothing can alter that. The difference is, if you surrender, you may not lose your life. You may even be permitted to live out the rest of your days as governor of some backwater city somewhere, as long as you are faithful to Cyrus.”

“May...?”

“There can be no guarantee, O King. God grants no guarantees until He sees your heart filled with repentance and humility. But I can guarantee that all here who do not submit to King Cyrus will surely be slain.”

Belshazzar couldn’t do it – not in front of all his nobles. His pride blocked him. He justified himself by ordering that Daniel be clothed in royal robes, with a necklace of gold around his neck, and that he be promoted to be the third ruler in the empire, after himself and his father Nabonidus. Queen Amytis was also royally rewarded with gold and jewels and proclaimed the next in rank to Daniel. Belshazzar assigned them royal quarters in the palace and hurriedly sent them there, so he could finish his party without the disapproving gaze of his two new rulers.

On the way up to their new quarters, Queen Amytis happened to glance out the window. “My! Isn’t the water low for this late in the fall!” she commented casually. Daniel studied the river. He remembered the book of judgments against Babylon which Jeremiah had written and given to Seraiah to throw into the river, saying they will not come to pass until the river ran dry and the book was exposed. *Strange. It has only been 60 years since the fall of Jerusalem. He was sure that Jeremiah had prophesied a full seventy years. This must not be the time.*

They found their new quarters. The guards left them. It was a fine apartment on the top floor, with a great view to the north. But it only had one large bed. Did the king think they were married? Or, more likely, did he simply not care? They plopped on the couch to talk. Queen Amytis slouched, deflating like a balloon with the end untied.

“Tough day, facing down a king, especially when he’s your own son-in-law, eh?” Daniel smiled wryly.

“You don’t know the half of it!” Amytis shuddered and a tear rolled down one cheek. She no longer looked like a queen. Now she just looked like a frightened mother and grandmother about to lose her children.

“I only know that everyone needs a hug once in a while, and it has been a very long time since you had your last. Come closer. I would be most honored to comfort you.”

So they sat close together, hugging, talking, weeping a little, and finally daring to express the deep feelings they have had for each other since the day they first met.

“Why did you never marry, Daniel?” Amytis revealed what was on her mind.

“YHWH is my spouse. And the Magi are my children. I never before had time for marriage. Why did you not remarry after King Nebuchadnezzar died?”

Amytis was very blunt. At 88, she didn’t have time to beat around the bush. “Because you never asked me, and having known you, there is no one else in the world who could ever please me.”

“I’m almost 81, O Queen. I’m too old to...”

“I’m 88, for goodness sake! I wouldn’t ask for anything more than some hugs, some tenderness, some care and understanding once in a while. As queen mother, I have no one else in the world with whom I can let down my hair. But you understand me. Now that our empire has come... come to an end... I’ve no one else – nowhere else to go.” Her plea ended with a little involuntary sob.

Daniel paused in prayer, sensing God’s peace. “Okay, Amy,” he said simply. “It’s the end of an age. We’ll start the next age together – if YHWH permits us to survive this night.” He got up for another look at the river. Now it was lower than he had ever seen it. Perhaps this was the time, after all. “We must leave, my love. Back home to Tel-aviv.”

The two armies of the Medes and Persians finished pulling down the walls of Tel-aviv and rebuilding them across the river. This diverted nearly all the water into the Chebar Canal. Then King Cyrus returned them to their tents to change into dry clothes. The two armies of Kings Gubaru and Nabonidus, now happily unified, were ready to march side by side under the wall and into the city.

Daniel and Amytis rode up in his chariot, each with one arm on the reins and the other clasped in a hug. But nobody noticed, as it was very dark. Strangely, neither Daniel nor Queen Amytis was surprised to see Nabonidus and the exiles working with King Cyrus against Babylon. Daniel called to King Nabonidus. "I am very sorry, O King. We both tried. We warned them as sternly as we could. Your son has hardened his heart. There is no repentance. Send the armies in. Belshazzar is dead to you already."

"Have they been warned about our armies? Are they prepared to resist? What forces do they have on alert?" Stuff any good commander always wants to know.

"They have nothing at all prepared to resist you, Your Majesty. They have just been partying all day. By now they're no doubt all drunker than skunks."

King Cyrus glanced over, startled. He had never seen a drunk skunk. But Nabonidus understood exactly what he meant, knowing what his son had become. Pausing only briefly, head bowed, Nabonidus gave the fateful order. He and King Gubaru led their combined forces down into the nearly dry river bed and under the wall.

The armies of Kings Cyrus and Darius soon came back with dry clothes and weapons. They went out to silently surround the city, so fleeing rebels would have no escape.

Daniel and Amytis were very tired. It had been a long day. They had had no dinner. They certainly couldn't eat what Belshazzar had offered them! But sleep was more important. The queen slept in the bedroom with the ladies, while Daniel and his male guests slept in the front room.

October 12, 538 BC. Daniel and Amytis woke up to a new day. The Babylonian Empire was no more. The city had been taken without a fight. Belshazzar and every last one of his drunk nobles had been slain. Not a brick had been displaced; not a home torched; not a bush of the famous hanging gardens uprooted. The beautiful city was unharmed. That afternoon, Amy was officially adopted into the tribe of Judah and was married to Daniel in a quiet Judean ceremony at the synagogue in Tel-aviv. The only non-Judean invited was **King Cyrus**, who had rather taken a shine to them both. But when he addressed the bride as 'Queen Amytis' she gently reminded him, "Queen Amytis died with her empire. From this day forth I am just Amy, servant of the king." Again, Cyrus was impressed with her attitude. He left the wedding determined to do something for them. They spent their brief honeymoon living in Daniel's home and walking alongside the Chebar Canal.

Astyages' son **Darius the Mede** (Persian royal title: **Ahasuerus**) was given overall command of what had been the Babylonian Empire. King Cyrus appointed his rather young firstborn son Cambyses II as the new king of Sippar, and the victorious Gubaru as king of the city of Babylon.

Cyrus also needed a faithful king for a large, untamed province in eastern Persia, Carmania. There he sent King Nabonidus and his Queen Nitocris. They gladly served there the rest of their lives. Nabonidus had finally learned to do his duty bravely and humbly.

Cyrus spent months carefully interviewing candidates for other positions in his new empire. He was a talented judge of character. Many of these interviews involved the Judeans, especially the Magi of Daniel's earlier days. He found them well-suited for high positions of honor and responsibility in his new empire. He retained Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the same offices as before. But many of the other Magi were assigned to serve their new emperor in other cities and provinces. Thus the wisdom of the Magi was widely distributed throughout the empire.

King Cyrus was especially attracted to Daniel and Amy. The more he got to know them, the more he appreciated their good attitude and depth of wisdom and knowledge. Cyrus finally decided they could best serve him right where they were, at Babylon, the capital of the new empire. He ordered Darius to give Daniel the highest authority, above all the city governors and kings of the provinces. "And get to know them, Darius. They are an incredible couple! I've never seen such faithfulness, or such courage and commitment! If you treat them well, they will be the best friends and supporters you ever had. But if you offend them, they could become formidable adversaries."

With the new empire settled, King Cyrus went back to building his new capital city at Pasargadae, leaving King Darius to handle the details of his new administration. It was a very big job. He had 120 new positions to fill just to govern the provinces of the empire. As King Darius got to know Daniel, he also was impressed with his wisdom. He appointed him to be the first of three presidents over the entire empire. Thus the other 120 kings and city governors (including Gubaru) reported to those three, who reported back to himself. *From the first, King Gubaru was miffed that Daniel, of the Judean exiles, should now outrank him.*

Daniel was happy with his new job. But he was even more happy with his new wife. Finally, after all these years, Daniel had someone he could confide in; someone who understood him and who was intelligent enough, and caring enough, to share his deepest thoughts and desires, yes, even to share his visions. She was nearly as fluent in Kasdan as he, having spoken it with Nebuchadnezzar and the Magi for so long. From their first night together, they decided to hold all their private conversations in Kasdan. Daniel taught Amy to worship in Kasdan each night before bed. Their joy was complete.

CHAPTER 31 – DANIEL IN THE LION’S DEN

The next day, one of the soldiers of Nabonidus came knocking at Daniel and Amy’s door. He held out a muddy package. “I found this in the middle of the river when we marched into the city. I opened it. It’s just a book, but we couldn’t read it. It’s all in Hebrew. So everyone thought I should bring it to you, rather than take it to the king.”

“It’s Jeremiah’s book of woes on Babylon!” Daniel whispered to Amy. “He said it would not come to pass, until the river ran dry. This is why I brought you here when I saw the river running so low.” He paid the soldier a big tip, and brought the book inside to read.

“Proclaim among the nations that Babylon has been captured! Marduk has been shattered; Ishtar has been put to shame; Sin has been forsaken. Their idols have been crushed. For a nation has come out of the north to make her empire an object of horror. Both man and beast are gone from her. The empire is no more. *In those days, at that time, the sons of Israel will come, they and the sons of Judah as well.* They will come weeping, for it is YHWH their God whom they shall seek. They will ask for the way to Zion. They will turn their faces in its direction. They will come back to the Beautiful Land, that they may join themselves to YHWH in an everlasting covenant. And I shall bring Israel back to his pasture, and he will graze on Carmel and Bashan; his desire will be satisfied in the hill country of Ephraim and Gilead. In those days, at that time, search will be made for the iniquity of Israel, but there will be none, and for the sins of Judah, but they shall not be found.”

There was a lot more about Babylon, some of which was not yet fulfilled, like the chapter about the ultimate destruction of the city and desolation of the land. But it was enough to get them to praying for restoration of the exiles to the land of Judah. It had only been 60 years since Jerusalem itself first surrendered to King Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC, but it had been 68 years since the first exiles (including Daniel) had gone to Babylon. Jeremiah had prophesied that the exiles would serve the king of Babylon for 70 years. That was close enough for Daniel. He decided that it must be time for the fulfillment of these prophecies, and that is what he and Amy would pray for.

In fact, they covenanted together to pray three times a day for the restoration of Jerusalem, once before Daniel left for work, once when he came home at noon for lunch, and again right after he came home that night. They had an attic prayer room, with two windows that opened toward the west. Since the weather was mild, they just left those two windows open toward Jerusalem all the time, that their prayers might always be toward the Promised Land. As Amy listened to Daniel’s fervent prayers, she grew to love Judah, and Jerusalem, almost as much as he. Their persistent prayers and deep repentance ascended in a steady flow up to the throne of the Almighty. Logos heard, and was pleased. He loved to listen to Daniel pray.

Over the next few months, Daniel shared with his wife his two terrible angelic visions. Amy was eager to help him understand them. She was exceptionally bright as well as being perceptive, sensitive, and open in her spirit. As they wrestled to decipher them (in Kasdan, the language in which they had been given) Daniel and Amy arrived at a relatively accurate understanding of them. In the vision of the four beasts, they still didn’t understand the part about the little horn coming up from among the ten horns of the last, most terrible beast, the dragon, but they let it go for now to concentrate on the second vision. As before, I will try to translate it for you directly from Daniel’s Kasdan:

“This vision has burned in me ever since the third year of Belshazzar, but I had no one to share it with before, because the angel Gavriel told me to keep it secret, for it applies to many days in the future. But I’m sure YHWH won’t mind if I share my secrets with my own wife! In my dream I was at the winter capital of the kings of Persia, Susa, though at the time of my dream Susa was still the old capital of Elam. While I was gazing out over the Ulai Canal, I saw a super-ram who could fly, engaging in a dreadful battle with a shaggy billy goat. There were some angels talking about it, so I knew it was a prophetic vision, and tried to understand it. Then I saw a glorious Being shining like the sun. He must have been God Himself. He called out to the angels, ‘Gavriel! Give Daniel an understanding of the vision.’ That’s how I knew the angel’s name.

“When Gavriel came close, he was so awesome that I fell down in a dead faint. But he gently lifted me to my feet and strengthened me. ‘Understand that the vision pertains to the time of the end. I am going to let you know what will occur at the final period of the indignation.’ Thus he explained the vision in detail. The super-ram who could fly had two long sharp horns – one longer than the other. They represent the kings of Media and Persia. At first he was butting in all directions, and no other beast could stand before him, just as with Cyrus and Darius. But then as I watched, a shaggy billy goat came out of the west, full of wrath. He had a single big horn right between his eyes. Gavriel told me that he represented Alexander the Great, who would be the first ruler of the Macedonian-Greek Empire. He rushed up to the super-ram and struck him, shattering his two horns and then trampling him. Then he butted down all the other beasts and took over the empire.

“But as soon as he had conquered the earth, his single horn broke off. In its place grew four horns, which Gavriel said are Alexander’s four generals, dividing up his empire amongst themselves. After that, a tiny horn grew up from among the four. It grew fast, toward the south, the east, toward the Beautiful Land, and even up so high it reached the stars! It caused some of them to fall to the earth where the goat trampled them. It grew so mighty, it challenged that glorious Being I had seen – the Commander of the angelic host! Desiring to be equal with Him, it stole away His sacrifice, and desecrated His holy temple.

“At that point I heard one of the angels ask, ‘How long will this horrifying transgression remain unpunished? How long will the holy ones of the Commander of the angelic host, and His temple, remain trampled down?’

“Gavriel said to me, ‘For 1150 days. Then the holy place will be restored. This insolent one, the one skilled in intrigue, the one who makes deceit to succeed in his incredible arrogance, the one mighty by another’s power, will magnify himself in his heart and will destroy many while they feel secure. He will even oppose the Prince of princes! But then he will be broken without any human intervention.’ [Note: this part of Daniel’s vision was first fulfilled by Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 BC, and will be totally fulfilled by the antichrist at the end of the age.]

“The vision was so terrifying I was sick for days. I finally got up and went about the king’s business (for that was before Belshazzar expelled us from the palace). But for all these years I had no one I could share it with, until you, my beloved. What do you think?”

Amy smiled. She wasn’t at all terrified by the vision. “I think YHWH wants you to write it down, just as you have told it to me, and then leave it for future generations to read and understand. It’s not for now. It’s for the time of the end. We will both be long gone. We don’t have to fret about it. Just put it into a book of all your visions, as a warning for future descendants of Israel. Don’t you see? People like you, who are so close to YHWH, so sensitive to His Word, so faithful and righteous that He can talk to you face to face, are really rare! In the ‘appointed time of the end’ when this will take place, there may be none like you left to warn them. YHWH is using you while He has you. After your death there will never be another Daniel.”

“Thank you, Amy. That’s very kind. But I know that after me there will be many Daniels, some greater than I. Yet I know what you mean. There may never be another given such revelations of the time of the end. Yet the honor goes not to me, but to the One who gave the revelations.”

Logos was very pleased. “Even in the greatness of his visions, Daniel remains humble before Me and careful to give Me the glory. And have you heard his prayers?! Full of praise and worship, full of humility and repentance, full of faith in My promises! Here he is, daily repenting for the sins of his people, yet I don’t recall if he has ever sinned himself, do you? Any direct disobedience or rebellion?”

“No, Logos. I’m sure he must have. He was born in sin. But I don’t recall a single time when he himself committed a transgression or held iniquity in his heart. Why?”

“Because, dear Michael, I’ve planned a few little tests for him. For even the greatest, the most holy, must be tested that they may become greater and more holy still. Leave him for a time. Let him not have the joy of My presence for a season. I also remove My hand from Nebuchadnezzar’s wife, for Daniel must go through his testing alone.”

Amy was very sick; too weak even to eat. Daniel knew that she was dying. She had not had the advantage of eating only vegetables and fresh fruits all her life, for she had lived in the palace of the king and eaten the delicacies from the king’s table. Daniel was terrified that he would lose her so soon. Only sipping vegetable juice, she was losing too much weight, and her life-energy was ebbing slowly away.

Daniel begged of King Darius to take a little sick leave to care for her. Darius readily agreed, for by this time he had become good friends with Daniel.

But with Daniel out of the palace, King Gubaru saw his chance. He had never forgiven Daniel for being appointed above him. *Just imagine, a Judean exile in authority over a faithful native son of Babylon! He had done everything right! He had been faithful to the Babylonian emperors, and was now faithful to the Medes and the Persians! He had taken Opis, Sippar, and the city of Babylon itself! And now he was merely governor of the city, while Daniel was second to King Darius over the entire empire. It just wasn’t fair.* Gubaru had assigned his best officers to the case. They’d worked for months trying to dig up dirt or find fault in Daniel’s work, so they could take him down. However, no negligence or corruption could be found in him. Only one thing looked suspicious – all the time he spent, morning, noon, and night in his prayer attic kneeling toward Jerusalem. Now that was what they decided to use against him.

“O King Darius, live forever! Your greatness, awesome majesty, honor, and glory as the emperor of the civilized world, must be recognized! We governors and officers of your kingdom have all gotten together and agreed on a way to do this. Pass a law that, for just one month, anyone in your kingdom who makes any petition to anyone but you shall be executed by being cast into the lion’s den.”

“Why? Why would I want anyone to be thrown to the lions? Sounds a bit harsh, don’t you think?”

“They must be taught to fear you, O Mighty King! It requires something like a den of hungry lions to put the fear of god into them! Then they will honor and respect you as they ought! Besides, it’s only for one month. Just long enough to impress them of your glory and majesty. Here, just sign this paper. It establishes this injunction as a law of the Medes and Persians, which according to King Cyrus may not be revoked.”

You would have thought that King Darius would have smelled a rat. But it’s amazing what a little fervent flattery can do. They got him to sign it. Then they made copies and distributed them throughout the province, making sure that one went to the governor of Tel-aviv.

Yes, Daniel saw it too. He knew exactly what it meant. *He could shut his windows and pray in secret in his darkened attic. He could pray only silently as he tended his dying wife. But no. If Amy was going to die, he would rather die as well, and what better way to die than praying at his window?*

Daniel finished up Amy's morning carrot juice and helped her drink it. Ever since he had invented a juicer for her, it had made it so much easier for him to give her the large amounts of raw vegetable juice she needed, halting her weight loss. He laid her down, and rinsed out the fiber from the screen. His body desperately wanted to drink the rest of the juice, or even eat the fiber, but he resisted. He was fasting and wearing sackcloth ever since Amy fell sick. It was prayer time again, but he was dreading it. He was so depressed. Not just that he couldn't bear the thought of losing Amy, but now it seemed like YHWH was gone too. His regular prayer times had become joyless chores, full of agony and loneliness, trying to reach into the blackness. His worship seemed to just hit the ceiling. *Maybe that was because Amy wasn't able to pray with him. But if she died...*

No. Daniel corrected himself. *She's 89. It's inevitable. When she died, the rest of his miserable life would be like this. No one to share his thoughts, hopes, dreams... his prayers.* With a sob, he committed Amy to God and fled for his prayer attic, faced the open windows, and poured out his heart. "Alas, O YHWH! The great and awesome God who keeps His covenant in lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments. We have sinned. We have forsaken Your commandments, to rebel and act wickedly. We failed to heed Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings. Righteousness and integrity belong to You, O YHWH! But to us, open shame, because of our unfaithful acts against You..."

Logos listened intently. The multitude of the heavenly host crowded around. Every word flowed up from the tiny prayer attic with the purest love and humility. Not a cross word, or a complaint or criticism. Not a trace of bitterness or arrogance. Logos watched as His adversary Satan crept as close as he dared. The angelic host grew tense, but Logos only said, "Peace. When I am gone shall not My adversary fill the void? He is within My Law. What is a test if My adversary is not in it?"

Daniel was flooded with thoughts of despair, even of suicide. *All is lost! Amy is lost! Even the kingdom is lost! Darius has turned against me and has passed this law intended to trap me and throw me to the lions. YHWH is gone, a zillion miles away. The heavens are dull and dreary. All I can picture of the Beautiful Land is the broken foundations of the temple and the charred rubble of Jerusalem.* His eyes were lifted to the grayness of the west, but now he saw men looking up toward his window from inside the main gate. They came closer, sneaking from house to house as if they had something to hide. Probably the ones Darius sent to enforce that injunction he signed. Daniel ignored them to keep on praying. "O God, please listen to the supplications of Your servant, for Your own name's sake! O YHWH, let Your face shine upon Your own desolate temple! O my God, hear us! Open Your eyes to see the desolation of the city that is called by Your name! I don't ask based on any merit of my own. I only plead for Your infinite mercy!"

The men were very close. They were listening to Daniel pray, while one was writing it down. Then they saw him glance at them, and they scurried off like cockroaches fleeing the light. Daniel didn't care. "O YHWH, hear me! O YHWH, forgive! O YHWH, take action! For Your own sake, O my God, do not delay, because of Your city, Your temple, and Your people who are called by Your name!"

"Well, Gavriel, what do you think? Has he passed the first test?" Logos was smiling broadly.

"He certainly has, my Lord. I am awed! May I go to him now to comfort him? What about that silly law, and the lion's den. Shall I take care of them?"

Logos laughed. "Go to him! Give him all that I tell you. And no, that 'silly law' and the lions will be My second test. Thus his victory will be doubled!"

Gavriel came to Daniel that evening, after he had spent all day fasting, praying, and juicing carrots for his dear Amy. He was exhausted, beat down into the ground. He felt about like the buckets of carrot pulp he had buried in his garden. He was not sure he could take another day of this, but as long as Amy lived he would make her carrot juice, and as long as he had breath he would pray for the peace of Jerusalem and the restoration of YHWH's temple.

His evening prayers were nearly finished. Daniel heard a fervent 'Amen!' beside him, in a voice which sounded like Amy's! Not daring to look, he prayed some more and heard it again. *It was Amy! She was well! She had climbed the attic stairs to join him in prayer.* Daniel worshiped enthusiastically for a bit, encouraged and strengthened. Then he turned to give Amy a hug. But alas, it wasn't her.

"Hello, Daniel!" Smiling down at him was Gavriel, the angel who had explained his vision of the ram and the goat. "I have come to give you wisdom and instruction, for you are highly esteemed throughout the heavenlies."

"Highly esteemed? My wife is dying and you tell me that I am highly esteemed? I thought you were Amy!"

"Peace. Nebuchadnezzar's wife is resting. Your carrot juice stemmed the tide. She will recover."

"My carrot juice? Amy needs more than carrot juice! She needs a miracle! And she's my wife now."

"So, the One who created the universe from nothing is now unable to pull off a trivial miracle with carrot juice?" Gavriel snickered softly at his little joke. "Queen Amytis is forever Nebuchadnezzar's wife. She may comfort and care for you in your old age, but she can never be your wife in God's eyes. For you are one of those rare and special saints, chosen to be holy and chaste unto YHWH Himself. He is your spouse. It is a great honor to be so chosen. Bear the honor humbly, that you continue to please Him always. Now, He gave me leave to answer your deepest question, the one regarding the restoration of your people."

Suddenly the small talk was forgotten. Daniel was all ears. “You studied all the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel of the restoration. To a man they agree that Israel and Judah will be brought back to the Beautiful Land, Jerusalem will be rebuilt, the temple will be restored and cleansed, and the people of YHWH will be forgiven. Finally, their sin will be taken away, atonement will be made for their iniquity, and they will be given a new heart, a new spirit, to live thenceforth in limitless righteousness. Now the seventy years prophesied by Jeremiah are almost up. So you expect all this to come to pass very soon. You know that it cannot happen unless Messiah the Prince does it, so you are expecting to see His face before you die.”

Daniel nodded. *This angel must be listening in to his prayers.* “YHWH loves you, Daniel. He doesn’t want you disappointed. He has allowed me to give you the timing. Only you and Nebuchadnezzar’s wife will understand; others will not, not until the time of the end. You must write it all down, so they can read it and understand.”

Daniel quickly got pen and paper and began to write. “Seventy years have been the exile. So seventy times seven years will see the fulfillment of all these prophecies, even to the anointing of the temple with the holy presence of Messiah and the unveiling of His everlasting Kingdom.”

Gavriel paused. “I know you’re disappointed, Daniel, but there is yet another prophecy which must be fulfilled before those seventy sevens begin. Cyrus must give the decree to set the exiles free to begin rebuilding the temple, as foretold by Isaiah. When you see that decree, know that 80 years will pass, troublous years for God’s people, until a future king of Persia, Artaxerxes, will issue the decree to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and restore My Holy City. From the day – write this down, Daniel – from the day Artaxerxes issues that decree, until the day Messiah the Prince is cut off and left with nothing, will be sixty-nine sevens of years total, one seven short of the seventy sevens. This includes the seven sevens of years spent completing the restoration of the Holy City with plaza and moat.”

“What do you mean, ‘the day the Messiah is cut off and left with nothing’?” Daniel asked, horrified, still struggling to keep up on his writing.

“Messiah will die,” Gavriel said with a shudder. “He will have nothing left, no kingdom, no honor, no one to acknowledge Him as God’s Messiah or accept Him as King. Satan will consider it his ultimate victory, but fret not! [for Daniel’s pen had stopped writing]. After three days the Almighty who dwells in eternity will transform it into His greatest triumph, by raising Him back to life and granting Him the Kingdom. Messiah the Prince will be given a name above every name: *King of kings and Lord of lords!* The eternal Father will apply His sacrifice to the transgression of His people, to take away their sin and make atonement for their iniquity. Thus all who receive Him will finally be reconciled to God and granted everlasting righteousness.”

“It’s the New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah, when Messiah puts His laws in our hearts, so all shall know Him from the least to the greatest!” Daniel smiled.

“No! You didn’t hear me. I said, ‘all who receive Him.’ In that day the adversary will go forth with great wrath, to deceive the multitudes. Few of God’s people will receive their Messiah; the vast majority will believe the slanderous lies spoken of Him by the adversary and his prince of the power of the air. This wholesale rejection of their Messiah will stop the clock at sixty-nine sevens of years. Forty years later, the adversary’s minions will destroy the Holy City and the temple, and will scatter God’s people far and wide. Terrifying storms, pestilence, earthquakes, wars, and ever increasing trials and tribulations will torment the earth. An undetermined number of years will pass, waiting for them to repent, return, and finally accept their Messiah.”

“But they will return to Zion and repent!” Daniel again was struggling to catch up in his writing.

“They will indeed return, for I will call them back. They will repent, rebuild the temple, and receive messiah. *But the wrong messiah!* The wrong prince! A demon prince! They will actually make a covenant with the prince of the power of the air. This will start the clock again for the final seven of the seventy sevens of years.”

“A covenant with the adversary?” Daniel couldn’t believe it. “Ooooh... That demon prince must be the ‘little horn’ in my vision of the four beasts, isn’t it?”

“Yes. In the middle of the final seven, the demon prince will reveal his true colors. He will put a stop to the regular temple sacrifice. He will commit the ultimate abomination in the most holy place. His defilement shall spread deadly devastation across the whole earth. A terrible tribulation will follow, such as has never been seen before nor ever shall again, until a complete destruction, as decreed from the beginning of time, is finally poured out on the one who caused all this horror. Then finally the true Messiah shall come again, to fulfill and seal up all visions and prophecies and to cleanse and anoint the most holy place once again. In that incredible Day of YHWH, Jeremiah’s restoration prophecy which you enjoy so much shall be fulfilled.”

Daniel fell to his knees. “Thank you! Thank YHWH, for He is an awesome God, full of wisdom and kindness. I am honored to receive this from Him. But why me? Especially after I failed Him by taking Nebuchadnezzar’s wife.”

“Who said you failed Him? You prayed about it. YHWH gave you His peace, His approval.”

“Why then do you not acknowledge her as my wife? Why is she always ‘Nebuchadnezzar’s wife’?”

“That’s who she is. Marriage is an eternal joining in unity by God. In my realm, Nebuchadnezzar-Amytis is perfectly one, forever. Yet he is not jealous for possession. He loves you, too. He gladly gave her to you for a time.”

“You mean that I had to first obtain Nebuchadnezzar’s permission to marry his wife?”

Gavriel laughed. “No, no. You only had to have the approval of YHWH. But He would not give His approval without the approval of her true husband in the heavenlies with Him. Yet that is quite common. Anyone who loves his wife wants her to be happy! After his death he wants her to marry again, and have all the possible comfort and delights that life in your realm has to offer, that she may be blessed and enriched when she finally returns to him again. Your marriage to Amytis has given Nebuchadnezzar double joy, for he loves you both dearly.”

“So death does not break a marriage covenant?”

“Not so. The covenant must break to free you to marry again. In your covenant with the Babylonian Empire, you ‘married’ the empire. Your ‘children’ are the Magi. When the Babylonian Empire died and the Magi were scattered, it ended. So you were free to marry again. Your old covenant is no more. But for a first marriage of a man and woman joined by God, the covenant is temporal but the bond of unity is eternal. That’s why the law requires a priest to take a wife who is a virgin; a priest must have his own wife. And that’s why marriage to a divorcée is adultery, for in God’s realm there is no divorce. Polygamy is the same. It perverts God’s perfect plan. Homosexual ‘marriage’ or bestiality, like adultery, are perversions of God’s design. Aren’t you glad that God understands human weakness and is quick to forgive? He can turn the weaknesses and failures of a repentant divorcée or homosexual into joy and blessing! He can forgive even the worst adulterer or moral pervert.”

Daniel caught the implication. “So when I reach this heavenly realm of which you speak, I will have no wife?”

Gavriel smiled. “Not so, O Daniel, you highly esteemed one. For you have made yourself chaste, a spiritual virgin for the sake of Messiah’s Kingdom. He has accepted you! Only a few from each generation have the faith, the hope, and the love to do this. YHWH accepts you as especially consecrated unto Himself, and in the age to come, you will find that you with 144,000 like you are joined into one sinless body as a beautiful Bride, and married to the most perfect Spouse of all, the Messiah Himself!”

Daniel was blown away. That entire concept was too big to handle. He never did catch up on his writing. Gavriel vanished. Shaken to the core, Daniel ran down to check on Amy. She was sitting up, drinking the rest of the carrot juice he had made. The light was back in her eyes. She smiled at him. “O Daniel! Thank you for your prayers! I’m much better. In fact, I’m hungry for a real meal tonight.”

Over the next week Amy regained her health. Now on Daniel’s excellent diet, she began to recover her youthful vitality. That Sabbath morning, to the amazement of the watching angels (and with a little supernatural help), Daniel and Amy conceived a child in their old age.

And that same Sabbath, during their morning prayers, soldiers showed up at Daniel’s door, with a warrant for his arrest! They cruelly hauled him off and brought before Emperor Darius the Mede. He was very apologetic. “I was tricked into signing that stupid injunction! Some of the nobles who serve Gubaru seem to have taken a dislike to you, though I cannot figure out why. You are the only one they accused. I’m sorry. I’ve tried everything I can think of, but there is no way out of it without violating the law that Cyrus made for me, that the laws I sign cannot be broken. So I have to go through with it. However, that God you constantly serve is strong! He will deliver you, I’m sure!” He tried to look hopeful.

So, to the obvious glee of Gubaru’s nobles, the soldiers took Daniel directly to the lion’s den. It was an underground cavern with a feeding hole in its ceiling and no other escape. From the angry growls inside, Daniel could tell that the lions were hungry. For sure the nobles had told their keeper not to feed them all last week! The soldiers unceremoniously dumped old Daniel down the hole, where he fell to the bottom in a tangled pile. Without even waiting for the screams they pushed the stone lid over the hole and sealed it with the official red wax of the Persian Empire, in which was embedded a copy of the injunction. The emperor put his own ring into the soft wax, and demanded that all the nobles do the same with their signet rings. Now anyone could see who had made the accusation and the king who had fulfilled his injunction.

Darius returned to his palace, royally upset. *How could these nobles be so heartless as to enforce capital punishment upon a man just for praying to his God? And such a good and faithful man, too! From whence came this hatred, this vile, murderous anger against the finest man in his empire?*

Darius couldn’t change his injunction; though it would thankfully expire in another week. But could prepare another one. He wrote a counter-injunction and signed it just like the first. “Anyone who dares to harm a person for nothing more than bringing worship or petition to his own gods, shall be cast into the den of lions.”

Darius was too upset to eat dinner. That night, he was too upset to sleep. His bold words – claiming to be so sure that this God whom Daniel served would deliver him – kept going through his head. But the king didn’t really know if He would or not, for he didn’t know YHWH. Thus he agonized, fretted, and tossed on his bed all night.

On the floor of the lion’s den, Daniel untangled himself and checked for broken bones. None. He sat up to rub his bruises. His eyes grew accustomed to the dim light coming in through the air vents above. Now he saw half a dozen lions, mostly female, growling around him with menacing gestures. “Well, get on with it,” he said in Kasdan. “If I am to meet my Maker this day, you may as well get it over with. He has given me a good life, a wonderful life. I am prepared to return to YHWH, bless His holy name forever.”

The lions hesitated, almost as if they understood his words. Then they backed away and sat around the walls of the den, still facing Daniel. It looked like they were waiting for him to preach to them or something.

He caught on. “You like the sound of Kasdan, do you? It is a beautiful language, like music. It flows out like the symphony of the stars – music to sooth the savage beast!” Daniel began a time of worship and praise, letting it ring out like a song from the dark den to the highest heavens.

“You see,” Logos explained to Michael. “None who dwell in the highest heaven need fear the beasts of earth!” He began laughing, and was joined by the heavenly host. “Shall we play a joke on him? Would it be too much for him if we remind the lions from whence they came?”

“Please do, O Lord!” Michael was delighted with the idea. “When have You ever missed an opportunity for a good joke to bring amusement and joy to those You love?”

The lions were listening intently to Daniel’s worship, but his mouth was getting dry. He spied a big trough of water by the wall, near the largest of the male lions. It had a hose dangling down, with a trickle of fresh water coming down from above. He paused in his worship to ask, “Please, Mister Lion, king of these beasts. Would it trouble you to let me drink from your water hose?”

“Not at all. Be my guest.” The lion’s mouth didn’t move, but Daniel knew that the thought had come from him, in Kasdan! The angels eagerly watched to see if Daniel would lose his cool and freak out, but no. He had seen visions of angels in glory. No talking lion would startle him now.

Daniel bowed, as if to the emperor. “Thank you, O Lion King. I am most grateful.”

“You are welcome. And I am most grateful to hear the worship from your lips. I must confess, I was beginning to think that the human race had forgotten how to worship. It seemed that the heavenly language was lost to all on earth except the beasts of the field.”

“It is not lost at all. It is now spread throughout the empire. But I must admit that those who speak it rarely keep lions for the torture of their enemies!”

The lions began making strange noises. Daniel realized they were laughing. So he joined in the laughter, along with the heavenly host crowding around.

Daniel got his drink. He chatted with the lions awhile, worshiped some more, and then talked and joked with the lions again. Thus he spent the entire day and night in sweet fellowship and worship.

Dawn was breaking. Sunlight filtered down through the air vents. Daniel could see the faces of the lions again. “I have a question, O King of Lions. You are very hungry. Why did you not eat me in that first moment when I fell into the den, before you even knew I spoke Kasdan?”

The lions laughed again, even more than before. When it finally died down, the lion king responded, “We tried. We surely would have devoured you in a minute, for we are indeed exceedingly hungry. However, we could not penetrate the brilliant glory cloud around you.”

“Glory cloud? Around me? Ha! It must have been the angel of YHWH! He covered me! So it was really YHWH who shut your mouths and protected me!”

“Yes sir, but why are you using the past tense,” the king responded. “He still covers you. The more you worship, the brighter He gets. The glory is still on you, blazing like flames of fire! Can you not even see?”

“See His glory covering me? Not a chance! His glory fills the whole earth! How could I see the tiny speck of His glory that resides on me?” Daniel laughed at the thought. Again the lions all joined in, for they all felt very jovial.

King Darius was not able to sleep a wink. He arose with the dawn. He called for his guards, and then proceeded to outrun them to the lion’s den. But arriving at the stone over the hole, he heard loud lion sounds! Terrified, he ordered his guards to break the seal and push aside the stone cover. “O Daniel, you servant of the living God! Has your God, whom you serve continuously, managed to deliver you?”

“O King, live forever!” Daniel called back. “My God has sent his angel to shut the lion’s mouths, as I was found innocent before Him, and also toward you, O King.”

“What then were those terrible noises I just heard from the pit? It sounded like the lions!”

“True, O King. The lions were just laughing at my little joke. We’ve been having such a good time in worship and fellowship down here, I almost hate to leave. But really, O King. They tell me they are exceedingly hungry. I would be grateful if you would have your soldiers haul me up, and throw down some good fresh meat for them.”

“That I can arrange!” He commanded his soldiers to hoist Daniel out of the den, and called into the dark hole. “Thank you, lions, for not harming my friend. I swear, by noon you shall have all the fresh meat you can eat!”

When they reached the palace, Darius had a grand breakfast, with Daniel by his side. Then the king gave the order for all the nobles whose signet ring was imprinted on the wax seal to appear before him in his courtroom. He asked Daniel to hide behind the throne, just before he brought in the nobles. As they knelt before him, Darius asked innocently, “Are there any others whom you wish to accuse of breaking my injunction?”

“No, O King. It was only Daniel who was so unfaithful and disloyal to you, to worship and serve other gods which you have not known. He deserved to die. Everyone else serves and worships you and you alone, just as you desire.”

“I see. Okay, Daniel, come out. Face your accusers.”

Daniel came out of hiding to stand beside the king. The faces of his accusers turned white with fear. Daniel spoke quietly, but with fierce intensity. “You hate me because you hate YHWH, the living and true God who made us all. You are not content with the position in life He assigned to you. Thus you are guilty of the very thing of which you accuse me, for it is hatred of YHWH and rejection of your lot in life which is the foundation of disloyalty to the king. You cannot do your job faithfully if you are grasping for mine! Nor can you be loyal to a king who has given you a job which you consider beneath you. Further, you have wrongly judged the king. You claim that he does not know YHWH my God, but he does know Him, through me. And you say that King Darius desires worship as well as service. But that is false, for Darius knows that only God deserves worship, and he does not claim to be god. Therefore you are guilty of the very crimes of which you accused me.”

“Hey! That was good, Daniel. I like that. I couldn’t have said it better myself. Now, before I pass judgment, do any of you nobles have anything to say in your defense?”

The nobles could see things were not going their way. They dared one last attempt. “O King, live forever! Don’t you understand what this traitor is doing to you? He has bewitched you! He has cast a spell upon you by his God whom he worships day and night. Let us take him and slay him ourselves, to rid your empire of this great curse! For our gods are the true gods, and his God YHWH is false!”

Darius smiled. “Fair enough. First you will spend one night in the lion’s den, with your wives and children. Since your gods are the true gods, they certainly will deliver you, as Daniel’s God delivered him. Then the next day after you have safely come out, you may bring any charges you wish against my servant Daniel.”

Now the nobles realized that they’d been had. “Wait, O King! That’s not fair! We’ve done nothing to deserve being thrown in the lion’s den!”

“Neither did Daniel.”

“Not true! You yourself signed the injunction!”

“And here is the injunction I signed yesterday.” He read it to them. They finally realized there was no escape. It was a law of the Medes and Persians.

Thus Darius made good on his promise to the lions. They had fresh meat by noon, all they could eat and more.

Darius now wrote a third injunction. He translated it into every language and sent it throughout the empire. “Peace in abundance! I, King Darius, decree that in all the dominions of my empire, all men are to fear and tremble in worship before Daniel’s God YHWH, for He is the living and true God, who endures forever! His Kingdom shall not be destroyed. His dominion over heaven and earth will last forever. He cares for His people, and delivers in wondrous ways, as He delivered His servant Daniel from the lions.”

King Cyrus, still building his capital city on the hill of Pasargadae, got a copy of the injunction signed by Darius. He was intrigued by that last line. *What in heaven’s name was the story behind it? How did his friend Daniel get attacked by lions in the first place?* He determined to talk to Darius about it next time he visited Babylon, but right now he was too busy building his glorious new palace.

The overnight demise of the mighty Babylonian Empire had Pharaoh Amasis gnawing his nails. Nebuchadnezzar and General Nebuzeradan had been tough, but always fair and totally up-front with him. They had never abused their power. Now that their empire was gone, will the Persians be so kind? There was nothing left between him and the growing power of the Medo-Persian Empire, and it frankly scared him spitless. So Amasis began to cultivate closer ties, both political and socio-economic alliances, with the now powerful Greek states, especially in Macedon.

I must now backtrack a bit, dear Reader. No doubt you have been wondering if there are any survivors of the royal line of King David through godly King Josiah. I have good news and bad news. First, the bad news. King Zedekiah’s entire family was slain at Riblah, then his eyes were gouged out and he was taken to Babylon where he died. Jehoiakim’s son Jeconiah was taken to Babylon and thrown into the dungeon, where he rotted for 36 years. He was called ‘Assir’ meaning ‘the prisoner’. In the second year of the reign of King Amel-Marduk, Jeconiah was released from the dungeon and restored to a place of honor at the king’s table. He was 55 at the time. He grew adept at transferring allegiances to each new king of Babylon, and became a trusted noble in the king’s court. He married and had four sons, who all grew up in the palace at Babylon. They identified more with the Babylonians than with the Judeans. They were all slain with King Belshazzar when the Persians conquered Babylon. Not a one survived.

So what is the good news? Well, Jeconiah had married young; he had an heir before he was taken to Babylon. His name was Prince Shealti-el (‘Asked of God’). Shealti-el was born as the siege of Jerusalem began, and was two when his grandfather Jehoiakim was slain and his father Jeconiah became king. When Nebuchadnezzar took Jeconiah and Queen Mother Nehushta to Babylon, Elke, Jeconiah’s wife, took her baby and went back to her father Neri son of Melchi. Neri was a good man. He also was of royal blood, being a descendant of David through Nathan. He gladly adopted baby Shealti-el and raised him as his own son.

But he was in for a surprise! Elke had conceived just before Jeconiah was hauled off to Babylon. The next year she gave birth to... twins! She named them Malchiram (‘Exalted is the King’) and Pedaiah (‘YHWH Redeems’). Sadly, the twins were born premature, weak and sickly. Pedaiah was a fighter; he slowly recovered. But Malchiram didn’t. This family was the last of the royal line of David.

Neri was glad to adopt his new grandchildren as well. He had to assume their father would die in Babylon. He and Elke raised them all in the godly virtues of faith in YHWH and hope in the Messiah. Malchiram's health was frail; he died at the age of eight. Shortly after his death, Neri and his family obeyed Jeremiah and surrendered to Nebuzeradan. They went with the other exiles to Babylon in 588 BC. Shealti-el and his little brother Pedaiah then grew up in Tel-aviv. They remained very close.

Shealti-el married, but his wife bore only daughters. He died in Babylon at the age of 30, without an heir. However, his brother Pedaiah fulfilled his Levirite duty according to God's Law to marry the widow and raise up a son to carry on his brother's good name. That son was born in Tel-aviv in 565 BC. He was named Zerubbabel ('Son of Babylon'). Though technically the son of Pedaiah, legally he was the son of Shealti-el son of Jeconiah and adopted son of Neri.

Zerubbabel is clearly the good news in our story. He was of royal blood from both his adoptive father Neri and his grandfather King Jeconiah. But more than that, he was brilliant, and eager to learn as he grew up. He was tutored by Daniel's Magi. He was wise, hardworking, trustworthy – a true leader. At the young age of 27 he was appointed by King Cyrus (who loved all those trained by the Magi) as governor over the Judeans in Tel-aviv. [Cyrus gave him the name Sheshbazzar, but I'll stick with Zerubbabel.]

Daniel rejoiced that Amy was well. He shared with her all the details of his latest vision about the seventy weeks. They concluded that the next step would be the decree of Cyrus to free the exiles to begin rebuilding the temple.

But Cyrus was in far-off Persia. This called for fasting and prayer. To protect Amy's fragile health, they fasted only from spicy foods, meats, and wine, but still ate their raw fruits and veggies and drank their carrot juice. They determined to pray at their attic window three times daily for as long as it took for King Cyrus to come, make the decree, and fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah.

Logos was delighted. "See! My beloved Daniel is not content to just sit around waiting for the prophecies to be fulfilled. He will join Me in prevailing prayer until he sees the fulfillment! I love to hear Daniel pray! How can we delay any longer? Who among you will go for Me?"

As always, a zillion eager hands rose. Logos selected a surprisingly small warrior angel I'll call Fergis. He zipped down to King Cyrus and gently reminded him of that latest injunction from Darius.

King Cyrus was extremely busy. *So why did that silly injunction of Darius keep coming back to him day and night?* Even in his sleep, he kept thinking, *Why did Daniel need to be delivered from the lions?* He pushed the thought away. "I'll go visit Darius and find out about Daniel next year when I finish with the design and layout of my new palace. There's no hurry. I can't leave now, at this critical phase."

Fergis tried a little harder. He had never dealt with a man of such incredible strength of will. No wonder he had won the empire! Even direct intervention into his dreams did not move him. He simply pushed it aside as soon as he awakened. Finally, after three weeks of trying every trick in the book, Fergis found Michael the archangel and pled for help. "You're being too kind, Fergis. Cyrus is a warrior, like yourself. You've got to put the fear of God into him. The threat of losing his kingdom."

So Michael flew down to Persia to show him how it was done. That night, he entered the emperor's dreams to whisper, "O Cyrus! You won your empire by promising to restore the peoples to their own lands and return their gods, after the cruel Assyrians and Babylonians had exiled them and taken away their gods. But you did not follow through. The exiles of Judah still live in Tel-aviv. Their God, YHWH, is strong. He will take away your empire if you do not keep your promise to them."

The next day, Michael kept a close watch on King Cyrus, until he saw him start packing to leave for Babylon. "That was too easy!" Fergis said. "Why didn't he respond to any of my suggestions?"

Startled at the question, Michael answered, "Oh. Didn't anyone tell you? Kings have demon princes assigned to them by the adversary. To King Cyrus, Satan assigned the prince of Persia, who is very powerful, and devious! He probably snuck in after every word you planted, to steal the word away before Cyrus could act upon it. You've just got to guard him until he acts upon it. I'll go back now; you stick close to Cyrus to make sure the prince of Persia doesn't block him from fulfilling his promise."

King Cyrus stopped in at Tel-aviv first. He went straight to Daniel's home to check on his old friend. There, a whole group of Judean elders were praying with Daniel. After the greetings, Cyrus asked what the meeting was about. A young man answered, "Is there any way we can get back to Zion? Is there anything we can do to earn our freedom?"

Cyrus was startled. "Huh? You want to go back to that God-forsaken place? Why? Aren't you happy here?"

"You, and the kings of Babylon before you, have been most gracious to allow us to live in Tel-aviv. We've been happy, and we've prospered. But this is not 'home'. Zion is. The land of Israel is in our blood. Judah is our own land, forever, from the time of Father Abraham. It was given to us not by kings, nor by conquest, but by YHWH Himself. Please tell us, how can we earn our freedom to return?"

"But right now Judah is a desolate wasteland. Even the Edomites were driven out by King Nabonidus. There is nothing there but buzzards and coyotes. Nothing grows but sagebrush and cactus. The cities are piles of rubble; their walls are flattened. Not a tree interrupts the barren landscape; not a flower dares to lift its head. The rains have failed; dust blows in the wind. You would all die there."

“God is there! YHWH broods over the land, waiting for us to return so He can restore it to us! When we come, with shouts of joy, the wastelands will spring forth like a meadow; the deserts will blossom like a rose. The rains will return in their season, and YHWH will command the land to yield forth of its strength for us. We will repair the ruined cities, the desolations of generations. We will rebuild the walls, to be safe and secure again.”

The smile on the king's face broadened, for he had been testing them. “That is a good answer. I will pray about it. Come to the palace tomorrow. I will let you know what YHWH says to me.” Cyrus turned to leave, but then turned back to the young man who had just spoken for the group. “Who are you, young man? I like your attitude. I'm always on the lookout for bright, earnest young men like you for places of responsibility in my empire.”

Everyone in the group was dressed the same, in sack-cloth and ashes. So when the fellow pushed back the sack to reveal his tear-stained face and tousled hair, Cyrus did not recognize him. “Your Majesty, I am Zerubbabel your servant, the one you appointed as governor of Tel-aviv.”

Cyrus had never heard of a leader so humbling himself before his people. “I'm impressed. It looks like I made a good choice, did I not?”

The next day, the elders all came with Zerubbabel and Daniel to the palace at the appointed time. King Cyrus was ready for them. He had written and signed a proclamation. He read it to them, “YHWH, God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has appointed me to build a temple for Him in Jerusalem of Judah. Whoever among His servants is strong, may YHWH be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple of YHWH, God of Israel. Prince Zerubbabel of Judah shall lead them. Any who are unable to go may still support the enterprise with a freewill offering for the temple of YHWH in Jerusalem. I, too, will contribute money and supplies for the work. Also I will return all the vessels of gold and silver taken away by King Nebuchadnezzar, that the restored temple in Jerusalem may be glorious.”

Cyrus finished reading and looked up, a big grin on his face. “Will that be satisfactory?” he asked Zerubbabel.

“Do you mean that you will just... let us go? Freely? There is nothing we have to do to earn our way?”

“Believe me, you will earn your way once you get there! The work will be exceedingly difficult! That's why I grilled you yesterday. Take only those with you who have a heart to work, and are willing to face the danger. But no, I will not charge money for you to serve YHWH. He is a powerful God! It is He, through His willing servants, who gave me Babylon without losing a man. Can I do less for Him than to restore His people to His land to rebuild His temple?” Thus the prophecies of Isaiah were fulfilled. Logos was very pleased. The Medo-Persian Empire prospered.

In June 537 BC (right after Shavuot in the 3rd month, Sivan), thanks to the generosity of Cyrus, 49,897 exiles returned to Jerusalem. Most had been born in Babylon, and were young and strong. Zerubbabel was only 28. **Jeshua** ben Jehosadak, their high priest, was only 40. By the seventh month, Tishri, they'd cleared out the charred rubble and built an altar on the temple site. They offered sacrifices to YHWH according to the law on the first of Tishri, the Feast of Trumpets. On the tenth they sacrificed a lamb for the Day of Atonement. On the fifteenth they celebrated the Feast of Sukkot (Tabernacles). It was the first time it had been celebrated since before the exile.

After the Feasts, they really got busy, planning, getting organized, buying materials, and continuing to clear out the rubble. Zerubbabel turned out to be a good leader. His boundless enthusiasm was contagious. By the 2nd month of the next year, they had the foundation laid for the restored temple. Zerubbabel declared a celebration with trumpets and cymbals, accompanied by shouts of joy (as well as wailing from a few older Levites who compared it to the glory of Solomon's temple, destroyed 50 years earlier).

The shouts attracted the attention of neighbors to the north, who wanted to come ‘help’. They had been living around Samaria ever since 675 BC, when Assyrian King Esarhaddon conquered Sidon and sent pagan Phoenician captives to what he called ‘Samerina’. They were just as idolatrous as ever. Zerubbabel wisely refused their help.

So now the Samaritans showed their true colors. They feared having a strong Judea on their border, and were determined to stop them from rebuilding. They began harassing the builders. Remember, at this time Jerusalem had no walls! Poor Zerubbabel was forced to divert the work on the temple just to defend against the attacks. Now his efforts focused on protecting the people and guarding the homes they were trying to rebuild at the same time. He began to understand King Cyrus' concerns.

In 630 BC, Greeks from Thera had founded a colony on the African coast west of Egypt and Libya. The colony was led by brave King Battus. By 537 BC it had become a world trading center, named Cyrene after the sacred Kyre Spring which King Battus had dedicated to Apollo.

In 536 BC, Pharaoh Amasis concluded a treaty with King Battus III of Cyrene. Amasis promised to provide Egyptian military support for the Greeks if the Libyans should ever attack. In return, King Battus III agreed to help Egypt if the Persians ever attacked. To seal the deal, Battus offered Amasis his choice in marriage of any Greek woman from Cyrene. Of course the Pharaoh chose the king's own daughter, the lovely Princess Ladice. His fondness for the Greeks was shown by his contribution of 1000 talents toward rebuilding the Greek temple at Delphi after it burned down. Logos was angry at him for putting his trust in the Greeks and ignoring all the warnings from Daniel and Nebuzeradan regarding Egypt's pervasive idolatry.

In the summer of 536 BC, Amy's baby was born. Daniel was 83 and Amy was 90. Everyone knew he was a miracle baby! Their joy spread all throughout Tel-aviv! But after the excitement wore off and the labor of changing diapers and waking up to nurse in the middle of the night set in, they discovered why God does not usually give babies to couples so old. They named him David after King David, Daniel's hero. Daniel hired a maid to help Amy, but the maid couldn't do the nursing. Daniel and Amy of course knew better than to use infant formula in baby bottles.

When their baby was a year old, Daniel and Amy got another shock. They had been having prayer meetings at their house every Sabbath for years. Ezekiel and Juli had always come before, but one Sabbath, they weren't there. Daniel hurried to their home after the prayer meeting, to find them both dead. Now he understood what Ezekiel had recently said, about being 'called to a higher ministry'. They mourned their loss, as longtime faithful friends always do. Ezekiel was 87 and Juli was 89. They had been married for 17 good years.

In the third year since Cyrus had taken over Babylon, and the second since the exiles had returned to Jerusalem, Daniel got a disturbing message from Zerubbabel. It told of all their struggles with the Samaritans, and how slowly the work on the temple was progressing. Daniel was already upset that so many had remained in Tel-aviv. He was 84 or he would have gone himself. Even many of the young, strong exiles had chosen to remain behind where they were comfortable and safe, rather than face the unknown troubles and dangers with Zerubbabel.

This was not at all like Daniel had imagined it would be, when he had received those glorious visions prophesying the restoration of his people. He was very discouraged.

Then to top it off, Daniel got called away from Amy and their baby, to help King Cambyses II for a month at Opis on the Tigris River. He used his free time there to fast and pray, eating nothing but raw vegetables. He alternated between worship, mourning and repenting for the sins of his people, and pleading for God to fulfill His own Word.

"Oh, how I love to hear Daniel pray!" Logos said, for the umpteenth time. The angels too were all gathered around enjoying the music of Daniel's prayers.

Ezekiel-Ella was there, with Jeremiah-Juli. They were amazed and delighted at how Daniel's prayers reached the throne as a melodious song – or even better, as a beautiful symphony. Though they had prayed all their lives, they had no idea that YHWH heard their prayers like this. "Did our prayers sound like this to you, Lord Logos?"

Logos laughed. "I loved to hear your prayers, as I love to hear all My precious ones. But no, only the prayers spoken in the heavenly language come through to the heavenlies as a compellingly glorious song, un-dimmed by sin, vulgar language, base thoughts, and earthly passions."

"Why, O Lord? What is it about Kasdan that comes through to Your throne so clearly?"

"I am holy. Kasdan is a pure language, unpolluted by the names of false gods. Every other language on earth is filled with the names of false gods, since the pagans fleeing the tower of Babel had false gods on their minds. Now, we must answer Daniel's prayer. Whom shall I send?"

Again Logos chose Fergis. "You have had experience dealing with the demon prince of Persia. Beware of him. He has pinpointed Daniel as the source of his troubles. He found him at Opis, and is raging against him. But you have My power to overcome him. Go. Give Daniel all I tell you."

Though small, Fergis is a mighty warrior angel. Still, he was appalled to see the demonic forces arrayed against him, led by the prince of Persia. They looked to be more than ten thousand strong, all encircling Daniel as he prayed. It was a good thing Daniel couldn't see them, or he would surely have been terrified! Fergis addressed the demon prince. "You have no occasion against Daniel. Go back to Persia where you belong, in the name of..."

"Don't threaten me! I know the law. I'm well aware that I have no occasion against him. But look at him! He is now so lonely, discouraged, and depressed he is about to fall. Then I'll have occasion. I'm here to be ready when he falls."

"He will not fall. I am sent to encourage him. So move out of my way, in the name of..."

"I don't have to move out of your way. I have as much right to this spot in the universe as you. I'm entirely within the law. If you can't get through my demons, that is your problem. So go to heaven, you little pipsqueak!"

Poor Fergis tried everything he knew. He started to wonder if perhaps Logos had made a mistake sending him. Logos had said, "You have My power to overcome him." But that sure didn't seem to be the case. Now he wished he had about 1000 of his fellow warrior angels with him. Fergis tried the direct assault approach, again and again. Each time, the demons would just group tight against his attack and hold firm. They couldn't attack him, for they had no occasion, but he wasn't strong enough to break through their combined forces. This was disconcerting.

The last time he had dealt with him, the prince of Persia had only come by stealth to snatch away the word from King Cyrus before he could act on it. But this time, Fergis had never seen demons so bold! Yet, he must not fail. He cannot fail, for Logos Himself had chosen him.

Three weeks passed. Michael showed up. "Well, hello, Fergis my friend. What seems to be the trouble here?"

"Oh, Michael! Am I ever glad to see you! The prince of Persia has me blocked. He keeps saying that Daniel is about to fall and give him occasion."

"And has he fallen?"

“Well, no, not yet. But he is really about to. He’s lonely, discouraged and depressed! I was sent to encourage him but I can’t get through. Every time I attack they just...”

“For three weeks? And all that time ‘he is about to fall’? Don’t you think he has proven himself yet?”

“Oh. Now that you put it that way...”

“Fergis, you’ve been listening to the lies of the prince of Persia! Remember what I told you about him? He is both powerful and devious. Whatever he says certainly has a lie mixed in somewhere, you can count on it!”

Daniel had finished his day’s work and was walking along the banks of the Tigris praying with a few of his aides. It was a warm, cloudless day, but still Daniel’s prayers didn’t seem to reach the sky. He worshiped awhile in Kasdan, which encouraged his aides, but Daniel sensed the great battle in the heavenlies. YHWH seemed further away than ever. Daniel felt all alone. All he had left was YHWH’s Word, the prophetic promise. He hung tightly on to it, and again, as with every day, prayed it back to YHWH.

Logos laughed. How He loved to hear Daniel pray! *Such faith! Such jealousy to guard the honor of My name! Daniel loves what I love, and hates what I hate!*

The prince of Persia had already begun arguing as he approached but Michael refused to listen to his lies. “Stand aside in the name of YHWH and by the power of Logos His eternal Word! If you do not obey me, I shall have occasion against you, and I swear I will blast you clear back to the pit where you belong, this very minute, so help me God!”

The prince of Persia shut up abruptly when he heard ‘in the name of YHWH’. He commanded his demons, and within seconds they melted away from the scene. There was Daniel and his aides, still praying on the banks of the Tigris. Michael gave the small warrior angel a quick side hug. “Now, Fergis, go encourage him, as Logos gives you His Word.”

From this point on I will tell our story in Fergis’ own words, as translated from the original Kasdan out of the report he later filed with Michael his boss.

I was feeling a little foolish. I should have known better than to listen to that demon prince! I guess that’s why Logos sent me. You know I’ll never forget that lesson! I came near to Daniel and his friends, and unveiled myself gently. None saw me, for they were bowed in prayer before the Almighty. So I spoke, joyfully, “O Daniel! You whom YHWH loves! Peace, and greetings from the Almighty!” But I must have forgotten to crank the volume down, or maybe I was a bit too enthusiastic. Daniel glanced up at me with a terrified look on his face, then keeled over in a dead faint. And I’m just a small angel! I didn’t even unveil myself to his friends, but they heard me and ran like scared jack rabbits. Not a very good beginning for someone who was supposed to be an encouragement, I know.

I toned the volume down to barely a whisper, and reached down to help him up. “O Daniel! You man of high esteem! Stand up. Understand the words I’m about to tell you, for I have been sent to encourage you.”

I had to help him stand. He was still trembling with fear. I spoke kindly to him. “Don’t be afraid, Daniel! YHWH loves to hear your prayers! From the first day you humbled yourself and began to pray to understand the future of your people, your words were heard by the Almighty, and I was sent to you. But the prince of Persia blocked me these 21 days. If my boss Michael, one of the archangels who stands before the Almighty, had not come to help, I would still be blocked. I apologize! Now, I have come to give you an understanding of what will happen to your people in the future, for this vision pertains to the latter days.”

Honest, Michael, I had no idea he was so frail! He had seen visions before. He had seen Gavriel himself, just recently! But he bowed his face to the ground and very nearly fainted again. I realized that though he had seen Gavriel, he had never seen a warrior angel before. I must have looked huge and fierce to him. So I shrank down to his size and took on the appearance of a man. That must be how Gavriel did it. Then I touched his lips to restore his speech, and lifted his chin to see my altered size.

At least now he was able to voice his fears. He must have thought I was God! He said, “...anguish has come upon me... how can such a servant as myself talk with such as my Lord? ... I have no strength left... no breath left in me!”

So I strengthened him a third time, saying, “O you man of high esteem! Do not fear! Peace be with you! Gather your courage, for you are very courageous!” Finally he was able to relax enough to listen to my message. This is what I told him. “The prince of Persia is very powerful. He rages throughout the entire empire. But Michael, your prince and guardian, is more powerful yet. I work for him. For your sake, he sent me to be a protection and blessing to King Cyrus the Persian and King Darius the Mede, so they would be good to you, for YHWH loves them, too.

“Now listen closely. I will tell you what is written in the Almighty’s book of truth – YHWH’s master prophetic plan which you shall transcribe as Scripture. After King Cyrus, three more kings will arise over the Medo-Persian Empire. They are Cambyzes II, Darius the Great, and Xerxes I, who will begin the decline of the empire by attacking Greece. Later, Alexander, a powerful warrior king, will arise from Macedonian Greece, and will quickly conquer the Persian Empire. But then he will die, as will all his descendants. His empire will be parceled out among four of his generals. In the south, Ptolemy will get Egypt, where he will grow strong and extend his dominion over the Levant. In the north, Seleucus will also get strong, ruling Mesopotamia, Syria, Persia, and contending with Ptolemy for the Levant. Lysimachus will take Thrace and Asia Minor (Turkey). Cassander will be the king of Macedon and Greece.”

I then left him kneeling on the bank of the river, while I moved up above the river, so I could trace the picture in the sky as I talked. I proceeded to give him a very detailed summary of the major kings and their activities which affect the Levant. I explained how the Levant will be the focal point for all these powers, first controlled by the king of the south, then after terrible battles claimed by the king of the north, from whom will come the first anti-Messiah, Antiochus Epiphanes, just as it is written in the Almighty's book. I gave him a quick overview of the abomination of desolation and the oppression of YHWH's people, from then unto the end times. I also explained that Antiochus is just a type of all who set themselves up against and in place of the Messiah and then try to use their power to destroy YHWH's people, for many more anti-Messiah's like him would come, up to the time of the end.

Daniel's main concern was for YHWH's people. I told him, "Those who have insight, who are alert and prepared, will help many to understand what is happening, but even they will be persecuted and fall under the power of the anti-Messiahs. But they will be granted a little help. The persecution will purify and refine them, and expose the hypocrites among them, until the time of the end. But at that time, Michael, the prince who stands guard over your people, will arise, withdrawing his protection. Then there will be a time of distress and persecution such as has not occurred since nations began. Finally Messiah will come to rescue everyone who was purified by the tribulation – everyone whose name is found written in Almighty's book of truth. He will lift them up to rule with Him

"Ultimately, all the dead will come back to life, some to be judged worthy to live with Him, others to be judged with abhorrence and contempt. Then those who have insight will shine brightly, like the stars of the heavens. They will rule in the age to come, and will lead the others into righteousness. Thus YHWH's Plan of the Ages will be fulfilled to the end of time, in all its beauty and perfection. But as for you, O Daniel, man of high esteem, write these words down and then seal up the book until the end of the age, for understanding will not be granted until it is needed. At that time, many will travel throughout the earth in high-speed machines. Knowledge will then be vastly multiplied, but wisdom and truth will grow scarce. Fools will rule, proclaiming themselves wise, calling evil all that is good, calling good all that is evil, and believing their own lies. Great will be the suffering of those who give them power. The righteous will hide themselves. Then an understanding of your book will be unveiled, to comfort them, and to show them what must come."

I thought I was done, but then I saw the two you sent, one on each side of the river, who wanted me to tell Daniel how long it would be to the end. I was rather surprised, as I thought we were supposed to allow the timing to remain indefinite, as it depends on the choices of YHWH's people. I prayed and asked YHWH for wisdom on how to answer.

YHWH told me to give him the same riddle that He had given him in the vision of the four terrible beasts: "A time, two times, and half a time." I added, "When the last beast breaks the power of the holy ones during the persecution, the great tribulation, all these events will be completed."

But Daniel still didn't understand, as before. He asked, "My lord, what will be the conclusion of it all?"

"Go your way, Daniel," I responded. "My words are sealed up until the time of the end, the time of that terrible persecution. Many will then be purged, purified, and refined, but the wicked will get more and more wicked, while the righteous get more righteous still. None of the wicked will understand, but when your book is unveiled, the holy ones who have insight will understand. They will discover the answers to the riddle I gave you. For it can mean many things. When you are being persecuted for a time, it seems twice as long, but afterwards, it is only half bad because you see the benefit of it. Or it can mean three days in the grave, plus a half day until the resurrection is manifest. Or it can mean 3 1/2 years of ministry and testing, or 3 1/2 years of great tribulation. Or it can mean 3 1/2 years of years; 1260 years of persecution and domination under deception. Only at the end of the age will those who have insight understand that it means all these and more, for true prophecy is multi-layered, with types and anti-types, fulfillments followed by even greater fulfillments. Terrible persecution will fall upon those who live during that time, 1260 days of great tribulation. Then at the end of the age, add 30 days more for the abomination of desolation to run its course after the regular sacrifice is abolished; that totals 1290 days. Blessed indeed are those who make it through that and the Restoration 45 days later, to the 1335th day! But as for you, Daniel, go your way. For you shall enter into your rest with your fathers until the time of the end. Then you will rise on that 1335th day to receive your reward among those blessed of YHWH."

Thus Daniel was encouraged. He returned to Amy and his baby, ready for the next task that YHWH asks of him. This concludes my report. I also am ready for my next task, grateful to have been of service to you and to our King. Signed, *Fergis, warrior angel-in-training.*

The work on the temple at Jerusalem stopped. The Samaritans to their north had threatened and discouraged all the workers to the extent that no one showed up for work. They were all terrified. They spent their time rebuilding their houses and strengthening their defenses. Nothing Zerubbabel could do or say would get them back to work on the temple. He finally gave up and went to work on his own house as well. They had been there two years.

King Cyrus now called Daniel and Amy to Susa, which had become the winter capital of the Persian Empire, on the banks of the Ulai Canal. It was as he remembered it in his vision of the super-ram and the shaggy billy goat, where he had met Gavriel.

CHAPTER 33 – THE DEATH OF KING CYRUS

Daniel was eager to see if Gavriel would return to give him another vision. But no. King Cyrus just ushered them into a conference room of his palace.

This was the ‘silver age’ of the Medo-Persian Empire. Cyrus knew that he was the chest and arms of silver in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. His empire was at peace, from Anatolia and the Aegean Sea to the mountains of Kashmir; from Cyrene in Libya to the Indus River on the border of India; from Syene on the upper Nile in Egypt, north to the Black Sea; from the deserts of Arabia to the Cyrus River in the Caucasus Mountains; from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea; and from the Arabian Sea to the Oxus River and the Aral Sea. All nations of the civilized world were subject to King Cyrus, *except Greece*. (He didn’t consider the growing powers of Rome or Carthage civilized yet.) Cyrus was worried about the growth of Grecian power in the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas. But he hid his agenda. He had to get Daniel and Daniel’s God on his side first.

After a time of polite banter between friends and delight at how fast baby David (now 2) had grown, Cyrus said, “The more I learn of the gods of the nations beyond Persia, the more I am awed at your God, Daniel. Tell me all about Him. I’ll have my scribe write it down. I want to encourage all the peoples within my empire to honor Him.”

Though Cyrus was good at making them feel like this was just a friendly visit, Daniel realized the significance of his request. “O King Cyrus, I am glad to do as you say, but be warned that YHWH our God does not care to be just one in a pantheon of gods. He is the only true God. He will not allow His holy name to be tacked on to a list of pagan gods as if they were in any way equal to Him.”

“I understand, Daniel. But I have built my entire empire on the principle of tolerance and freedom of religion. I will never criticize another nation’s gods. I just want everyone to hear about YHWH’s glory and majesty. Then they can make their own choice whom they will serve.”

Daniel could not argue with that. He and Amy were assigned quarters in the palace at Susa and introduced to Zoroaster, a fine young scribe who was to write it all down. He was enthusiastic, eager to learn, and very bright. He was fluent in Akkadian (Chaldean) and Aramaic as well as Persian. But of course he didn’t know Hebrew or Kasdan.

Daniel didn’t know much Persian. His misgivings were multiplied when he realized the language barrier. He had been able to teach Nebuchadnezzar in Kasdan, the pure language of YHWH. With Zoroaster, he must teach in the commercial language of Aramaic or the pagan language of the Chaldeans. Zoroaster would translate that into Persian so he could publish it in the language of his fatherland. Then Cyrus would take his finished work and retranslate it into the other languages of his empire. It sounded to Daniel like a lot of opportunity for errors to creep in.

But what else could he do? Daniel and Amy lived at Susa for the next two years, helping Zoroaster transcribe what became a rather major religious treatise. They discovered that Zoroaster was also a poet, so they began teaching him the Psalms (translated into Chaldean) which Zoroaster then retranslated into lovely flowing hymns in the ancient Persian language.

Daniel immediately concentrated on learning Persian, so he could verify the translation’s accuracy. He learned that Zoroaster’s name in Persian is Zarathushtra, which roughly translates into ‘camel driver’. YHWH is ‘Ahura Mazda’, the ‘Uncreated Creator’, the divine Father of all, who is all-wise, all-knowing, and all-powerful. Zoroaster insisted that it took two words to translate YHWH’s name, because Persians worshiped only the planetary gods of the nations and had no concept of one single, supreme, uncreated Being.

Poor Daniel struggled with Persian terminology. He was getting too old for this. It never seemed quite right. But whenever he questioned a term being used, Zoroaster enthusiastically explained it away. Ahura Mazda is the one who brought order out of chaos by means of Spenta Mainyu, His Holy Spirit whom He sends to interact with His world and His people. The adversary is Angra Mainyu, the one who comes to lie, steal, kill, and destroy, along with all his Daeva, the demons. They battle to return the universe to the chaos from which it came. Each individual must choose to assist one or the other by his deeds.

At the end of the age, Ahura Mazda will win the conflict. He will send a Messiah, Saoshyant, to renew the earth, to raise the dead, and to judge all mankind. He will reward all those who chose the good, and punish those who chose wrongly. Then He will finally purge all wickedness from the universe and destroy Angra Mainyu in the lake of fire. The seven Spirits which Ezekiel had seen between the wheels are called Amesha Spentas. The angels are Yazatas. The cleansing water of the laver is called apo, and the cleansing fire of the holy altar is atar. It went on and on.

The two years passed. Daniel had done his best. It was impossible to keep up with young Zoroaster’s energy and enthusiasm. Zoroaster returned home to complete and publish his writings (the Avesta) and hymns (the Gathas) in his hometown in Persia by the Ditya River. Daniel and Amy packed to return to Tel-aviv, hopeful that at least the major concepts had been understood. But now Cyrus called them back into his conference room. “So what do you think? Is your God YHWH pleased with my plan to publish His truth throughout the extent of my empire?”

Daniel was not born yesterday. “YHWH is pleased with you, O King. He has blessed you, and your empire, beyond measure, in the hope that you will learn to love and serve Him, and Him only. He will bless your efforts to publish His truth, if you’re doing it to serve Him. But if this is all for your own agenda or your power and glory, you will fail.”

“Oh, I have no agenda,” Cyrus lied. “But I must protect my people. When you told me about Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, you said that the chest of silver abruptly changed to a belly and thighs of bronze, which you called Macedonian Greece. I don’t want that to happen in my lifetime, not as long as I can help it. But I see the power of the city-states of Greece expanding their influence across the Aegean Sea and into the Black Sea, all along the borders of Anatolia. And I see them expanding their power in Libya and allying with Egypt. They’re a very warlike people! I feel the need to mount a campaign against them, especially the cities of Sparta, Athens, and Corinth, and Aegae and Thessalonika in Macedon. They are threatening my empire and harming my people. I would like your advice and the blessing of your God on my trip before you return to Tel-aviv.”

Daniel prayed a brief silent plea for wisdom. “O King, Nebuchadnezzar had to learn that it is YHWH who rules over the affairs of mankind, setting one up and bringing another down. Now you must learn the same lesson, or He will take the empire from you and give it to another. For He has established your boundaries and given you peace on all sides – *except Greece*, that He might test you. Do you think that He does not care about the people in Greece and Egypt, as well as those whom He’s put under your charge? If you love them; if you would protect them against harm; then entrust them into YHWH’s hand. If YHWH chooses to give some to Greece, that is His prerogative. I counsel you to write to all areas under your dominion in Anatolia, Egypt, and Libya. Tell them that you have decided to accept the Greek city-states as trading partners. Wherever the Greeks come, they are to be welcomed and greeted as friends. Tell your people to cooperate with the laws and customs of the Greeks, and to prosper in trade with them. Then see what YHWH will do.”

“Cooperate with the Greeks? That’s nuts! I told you, they’re a warlike people! They want dominion!”

“Assyria was a warlike people. Yet those who submitted to them survived. Babylon was a warlike people. Those who submitted to them survived and prospered. You were a bit warlike yourself when you conquered Media, Lydia, and Babylon, remember? But all who submitted to you have prospered greatly. Is not God likewise able to protect His precious ones in Anatolia and Egypt if they submit to Greece instead of you? Has He lost His sovereign power?”

“But the Greeks want my land! Don’t you think YHWH would bless me if I crossed the Aegean Sea to chastise them, to teach them to leave my empire alone?”

“He will not. YHWH has now fixed the borders of the Persian Empire. I swear to you, O King, that in the year you move an army past your borders to attack another nation, you will die, and your empire will be given to another. So you cannot win if you attack Greece. Of that I am certain. Instruct all who follow after you, too. From the day they set out to conquer Greece, the empire will start to decline.”

King Cyrus did not like Daniel’s answer. He had really hoped for YHWH’s blessing on a campaign to overthrow the Greek city-states and claim Greece for his empire. Then he could add Egypt, and Libya, and... who knows? Perhaps take the blessings of his civilization to Carthage, Sicily, Pompeii, Rome, Sardinia, Corsica, maybe even to Hispania and the barbaric Gauls and Germans. But alas, after all his work in publishing the Words of YHWH, he could not get Daniel to bless his campaign. He finally sent Daniel and Amy back to Tel-aviv in a huff, refusing to write that letter Daniel had recommended. But at least he feared YHWH enough to cancel his campaign to Greece.

So, in 530 BC King Cyrus had an army all fired up and nowhere to go. He had really expected that blessing. You know, dear Reader, how difficult it is for a rich man to say, ‘I’m rich enough,’ or for a mighty man to say, ‘I’m strong enough,’ or for a ruler to say, ‘My empire is large enough.’ Now Cyrus looked around to see if there was some other place he could expand his dominion.

All his borders were at peace – at least all nations of the civilized world – except Greece. He knew better than to attack the teeming hordes of India beyond the Indus River, or to trek over the Himalaya Mountains into the Sinkiang Valley to attack the ancient Chinese Empire. Nothing but deserts and oceans lay to his south. In the northwest he was blocked by the Caucasus Mountains. But north of Persia... Aha! The barbarian hordes beyond Hyrcania, Parthia, Ariana, and Bactria could offer him no resistance.

It’s not like he would be ‘moving an army across his borders to attack another nation.’ There weren’t really any borders up there, anyway. Those savages weren’t nations at all. Sogdiana and Chorasmia were already pretty well subdued up to the Aral Sea. But he ought to just take his army up there to ensure his northeastern territories were secure, and to find out if any other barbarians even farther north, out on the Kirgiz Steppes, might benefit from the protection of the mighty Persian Empire.

When the Persians had conquered the Lydians at Sardis in 546 BC, King Croesus had been put on a throne above a huge funeral pyre. When it was lit, King Cyrus watched him, to see if his gods would save him. As the flames were licking his feet, he behaved with noble resignation. Cyrus realized he was much the same as himself, so he ordered his servants to quench the fire. But they had no water, and beating at the flames merely fanned them until they had spread all around the defeated king. Then Croesus called to Apollo his god. The sky had been clear and cloudless, with not a breath of air, but immediately a storm gathered, dumping rain with such violence that the flames were extinguished. King Cyrus had seen it. It was a miracle!

So now King Croesus lived at the palace in Susa, as a favorite advisor of King Cyrus. Though he had lost his kingdom, he had found a friend in Cyrus, who loved to transform his enemies into friends.

They got to talking about the ambition of Cyrus to expand to his northeast. Satan realized this was his big chance, for he had been given occasion by the king's lie about his agenda and his rejection of YHWH's prophecy through Daniel. Croesus was his own, and even more so since he had answered the king's prayer to Apollo and put out the fire. So Satan spoke through his servant, "By all means, O King! You ought to conquer the barbarians on their own territory, before they become strong enough to attack you on yours. I hear there is a large, strong tribe of Scythians living along the Jaxartes River. They're called Massagetae. Conquering them will expand your empire to the Kirgiz Steppes beyond the Aral Sea!"

King Cyrus was inspired. "I'll do it! And the next year I'll clear out all the Scythians, Huns, and Vandals from the Kirgiz Steppes. Then I may cross the Urals to conquer the Teutonic barbarians. In five years I could have all of Europe out to Gaul and Hispania! Then I can come down upon the pesky Greeks and Latins from the north. I'll put the fear of God into them! Chest of silver indeed – I will surpass the head of gold, Nebuchadnezzar himself!"

That night, King Cyrus had a dream. In it, a man in shining attire stood above him and said, "Now you must learn that it is YHWH who rules over the affairs of men, setting one up and bringing another down." Still in his sleep, he answered, "I already learned that, O Lord. I did not attack the Greeks." The shining man answered back, "If you have already learned, why have you chosen to oppress My precious ones beyond your borders?"

Cyrus awoke, mulling over the strange dream. It didn't make sense. If the shining man was YHWH, why did He call the barbarians His precious ones? There was certainly nothing precious about those wicked savages! And why did He say, 'beyond your borders'? Everyone knows there are no borders up there in the barbarian wastelands. In the end he ignored the dream as just a reaction due to his own anxiousness about the campaign, and headed out.

A great tragedy struck the land of Uzbek, where the Massagetae lived beside the Jaxartes River. They were a strong people, who rarely got sick. Yet their King Tom had died, not in battle or in the ancient 'Passing Ceremony', but rather in disease, a cursed sickness, which prevented him from being eaten to return his strength to the tribe. There was great mourning all across the land, for everyone had loved their king. They prayed earnestly to Tiwat the sun, asking why, and what to do about the tragedy.

Queen Tomyris stood at the setting sun to speak to the gathered multitude. As the widow, she, with her sons and daughters and their spouses, should have had the honor of roasting Tom along with some of his cattle, eating the flesh, and giving the rest to the tribe. So it was their loss that he had died of disease. Loss, dishonor, shame, and sadness for her husband who could not impart his strength to feed his people. Head bowed, she stood to speak.

"Tiwat has spoken," Tomyris intoned. "If the head of a family or clan dies of disease before the Passing Ceremony, that family or clan is cursed. But if the king dies of disease, the entire nation is cursed! So I will bear this curse for you. As your queen, I will lead you; I will go before you in battle just as if I were King Tom; thus I will be slain in battle, and you shall drink my blood and eat my flesh in place of my husband's, and thus I shall atone for the curse."

The rest of the Massagetae applauded her willingness to give herself for her people, and swore to follow her into battle. Little did they know how soon it would be. Queen Tomyris chose her eldest son Prince Spargapises as her general, and began lessons from him how to lead her army in military maneuvers, as her late husband had taught him.

King Cyrus entered the land of Uzbek searching for the Massagetae. At the head of his superbly trained army, he expected no resistance. But when he reached the Jaxartes River, the Massagetae descended upon his army with a stunning ferocity that drove them back, causing many to flee in terror. But what really got to Cyrus was, they were led by a woman! A lovely woman, with long golden hair and a flowing white gown. A fearless woman, who fought from the front of the battle line instead of the rear. An inspiring woman, whose people clearly would follow her to their death. Cyrus was totally smitten.

So he sent her a long letter, explaining who he was, apologizing for the invasion, and offering an alliance of their nations, to be sealed by marriage between him and that lovely lady who led their armies. He got a brief reply. "No. I will die before I marry you. Go back to your own land, or I will put your head on a pole and my people will give your flesh to the birds and the beasts of the earth."

Well, that pretty much put that option to bed. Cyrus set his men to work preparing for a siege. They built a bridge across the Jaxartes, and began building warships to sail down into the Massagetae villages. It would be no big deal. He still outnumbered them by ten to one.

A month went by. King Cyrus got another letter from Queen Tomyris. "I expect you to disregard this warning as you did my last," she wrote. "Yet I must tell you one last time to cease your encroachment upon our land. If you do not, you will die and your soldiers, who are weak and afraid, will be scattered. You think you can trust in your greater numbers, but I swear to you that any man of mine can take out fifty of yours. Even myself, an old woman and mother of twelve, slew twenty of your men on our first encounter. We did it with only wooden weapons, but now we have armed ourselves with the iron weapons of your slain. So chose wisely, O King! If you insist on fighting us, I and my army will be prepared to meet you in battle at dawn on the third day from now, in open and honorable warfare on the plain of Ozero Ashikol, which is less than half a day's march northeast of your camp. My messenger will lead you there."

King Cyrus laughed. Now he was glad he didn't marry this foolish, arrogant woman. *She may be lovely, but her heart is stone! Besides, she is foolish to offer to face us on an open field against such an overwhelming force. Ah... wait. Even a woman would never be that stupid! She must have a trick up her sleeve.* So King Cyrus tortured the messenger until he revealed the truth. Queen Tomyris planned to hide part of her army in the forest above his camp. After they cross the bridge, her army will burn their camp. The smoke from the camp will ascend, causing his army to look back toward the bridge in despair. At that point, they will cross the bridge to attack from behind while the main army attacks out of the woods all along their column.

It was a shrewd plan. Maybe this queen was not such a dodo after all. But information is power, and now Cyrus had it. That night he ordered a huge party. Only a limited amount of wine was served but the men celebrated wildly as if they had an over-abundance. The spies in the woods saw the whole thing.

The next day, he left no one behind to guard the camp. His army crossed the bridge and began to march northeast as if following the messenger, but halting as soon as they were out of sight. The Massagetae behind them swooped down to take the camp. Before they set it afire, they had to taste some of that wine left over from the party last night. *How strange that so much of it still lay around! No sense wasting it. They lived too far north to have good vineyards of their own.* General Spargapises allowed his men to finish off any open casks of wine while they collected the spoils. Soon they were all drinking themselves silly.

Now Cyrus rushed his forces back across the bridge. They easily slew the Massagetae, who by then were too drunk to fight. They captured General Spargapises and bound him hand and foot. But when he sobered up and realized his shameful defeat, he hopped, still bound, into the Jaxartes River and drowned. King Cyrus congratulated himself – he had slain roughly a third of the Massagetae warriors. It made up for his initial defeat.

That evening at dusk, the queen herself, still in that flowing white dress, came walking into camp alone, her stunning golden hair streaming out behind her. She was unarmed. Cyrus could not resist going out to meet her. “We beg you to cease your hostilities until we can gather and mourn our dead. After one week, we will again be ready for battle.” Cyrus could not deny her request. Her beauty, and her utter fearlessness, had captivated him.

The next week, King Cyrus got one last letter from Queen Tomyris. It was long. Most of it was not repeatable in a family book, for she was furious that her son had died and not herself. It was he she had hoped would become king after she was slain in battle. She cursed the Persians for using ‘demon spirit’ warfare and swore to avenge the death of her son. This time she didn't give him any clues as to the time or place of her attack.

After reading the letter, King Cyrus again ordered the messenger tortured to find out the queen's plans. Again, it was almost too easy – a simple midnight attack on the camp that very night, using flaming arrows to set the camp afire while they slept.

But two could play that midnight game. Cyrus ordered his men to pack up, leaving nothing but their still burning campfires and the shells of their tents, and move out shortly after dark. They stealthily circled way around the enemy in the forest, then headed toward the Massagetae capital. They would be burning it while Queen Tomyris attacked their empty tents. As they moved silently through the darkened trees, they came to a large clearing. In it stood a ghostly dancer in a long flowing white dress. The army halted, but Cyrus came forward. The figure twirled and danced in the moonlight as if in ecstasy.

King Cyrus was entranced. He knew her army was on the other side of the hill, even now swooping down upon his empty tents. But here was Queen Tomyris, dancing alone in the middle of the vast moonlit meadow. Like a moth drawn to the flame, the king slowly walked out to meet her. She took his outstretched hand and they danced together, faster, ever faster, spinning and bowing until King Cyrus was exhausted and dizzy. Then the queen lifted her long dress, drew a short sword strapped to her thigh, and sliced off the head of the Persian emperor.

At the signal, her warriors lit their candles in the forest all around. The tiny flickering lights grew quickly, from a few hundred, to many thousands, sparkling among the trees. The entire Massagetae army had surrounded them while King Cyrus was dancing with the barbarian queen. That messenger they had tortured had been deliberately fed false information to trick them into leaving their tents at night and attacking, and they had fallen for the ruse.

Many men rushed into the clearing to protect their queen. But before she returned to the forest with them, she put the head of King Cyrus on a pole in the middle of the meadow, high, lit by candles for all to see. The rest of the night, the Persian army kept glancing at the head of their beloved emperor while they re-organized and tried to develop some kind of defense against the surrounding warriors. It was hard. The flickering candles all around had them spooked. They clumped together tightly and hoped for the dawn so they could begin to see.

But with the first gray of dawn came another surprise. The candles were not being held by enemy warriors; they were flickering on swaying reeds stuck in the ground. They had kept the Persians awake and fearful all night while the Massagetae had gotten a good night's sleep. Now the smells of a hearty breakfast wafted through camp. But before the Persians could eat their own breakfast, Queen Tomyris galloped out on a jet-black stallion, screaming a shrill female battle cry that turned their blood to ice. The woods exploded in warriors all around them.

The body of King Cyrus was buried under a beautiful monument at Pasargadae, his still unfinished city. The entire empire mourned his passing, for all had loved him dearly. His son **Cambyses II**, whom he had appointed to succeed him, ordered this epitaph carved over his grave, “I am King Cyrus. I won for Persis their empire. So do not begrudge me this tiny plot of earth to cover my body.”

For many years the remnants of the Persian army told tales of that battle on the Jaxartes. Each tale grew with the telling, so it is hard to know now what is true and what is exaggerated. Some say that from the beginning of time there has never been such fierce fighting as between the Massagetae and the Persians that day, but that isn't true. The Persians, paralyzed by fear and fainting from hunger, could not fight. Over 200,000 soldiers went out; less than 50,000 returned, and they were so badly traumatized they were never able to fight again. This was against a barbarian force of what? Nobody knew. The inflated numbers you've heard are ridiculous, of course. But they still see ghostly images of a queen in a flowing white dress, with golden hair streaming behind her, riding her black horse before a horde of phantom warriors like demons from their worst nightmares. The head of King Cyrus was never recovered. Some made up the story that Queen Tomyris kept it to use as a vessel for drinking her enemies' blood. But that isn't true either, nor are many other tales you have heard of this famous battle. Some even chose to block it out altogether and claim that it never happened. Never was an empire so humbled. For many years if you merely said 'Massagetae' to a Persian, you were just liable to get a punch on the nose.

But the Persian Empire went on. Over the years, the Persians were slowly able to clean most of the egg off their collective faces so they could hold their heads high once again. Sadly, King Cambyses II never really overcame the bitterness. He did not have a love for his people like his father had. Cyrus was happy to see his subjects all free and prosperous. But his son had no real passion for freedom; it was all about control (just like most modern American politicians). But you can be sure that he never attempted to expand his empire northward into barbarian territory.

Thus what actually happened along the Jaxartes River lies hidden from history, so I must tell it. In truth there were less than 5,000 warriors in the woods that day, and they were resigned to die, every one, to save their tribe from the invaders. Queen Tomyris insisted on being right out front, hoping to die first, to break the curse upon her race. All had sworn to kill fifty of the Persians before they expired, and their queen had vowed to inspire them by shrieking one last battle cry with her dying breath. So their ferocious attack was not so much 'fearless' as 'sacrificial'.

Imagine their shock and chagrin when they regrouped after the battle and discovered that from the queen on down to the water boy, not a single one had died.

Unthinkable! Whose blood would they drink to end the curse? They didn't believe in drinking their enemies' blood; that would be an abomination. And they couldn't drink the blood of those who had died in drunken stupor in their enemy's camp, or that of General Spargapises who had taken his own life in shame. It was a valiant leader's blood, shed in the heat of battle, a king's blood and his flesh that they needed to renew strength to their people. Now none of their leaders had died. It was therefore a most awkward situation that evening when they gathered at their capital to celebrate their victory with a feast.

Of course they all hailed the leadership of their Queen Tomyris. Up until now, her leadership had merely been symbolic, to go before them in battle until she died, so they could eat her flesh and drink her blood to break the curse caused by her husband's sickness and death. But no one could say that now. She had proved herself a real leader, better in battle even than her husband. However, she stood before them only to apologize. “I'm sorry that I failed you. I remained in the thickest part of the battle. I lost count after slaying seventy Persian soldiers. They kept coming at me, their swords raised high, but as soon as they looked into my eyes, their swords would falter. They couldn't touch me. I got so tired I could hardly lift my Persian sword with both hands, yet still they fell before me. Toward the end they were fleeing in panic before I even raised my sword. I wanted so much to die in battle for you. I'm sorry. Now it is too late. I cannot break the curse.”

A sad silence fell over the natural amphitheater. Then a small high-pitched voice piped up. “Mommy! You already broke the curse. You're alive! You don't have to die for us. We never wanted to eat you or drink your blood anyway.” It was Tim, her youngest son, aged seven. Her other sons and daughters chimed their agreement. “We already lost our father. Why should we lose our mother, too, just for a stupid old tradition about drinking the leader's blood?”

Her oldest living son spoke up. “Mom, they're right. You have already broken the curse. It's a new day. We don't have to drink the blood or eat the flesh of our leaders to be strong anymore. We were strong! Not a man died today in battle against 200,000 of the world's best-trained troops.”

“Our leaders have always sacrificed their lives for us, either in battle or as their last act of service when they got old. It is what Tiwat demands.”

“I never heard Tiwat demand that. Have you?”

Queen Tomyris had not either. Nor had anyone else in the tribe. The tradition was very ancient. “Okay. Finish the feast tonight. We shall arise at dawn tomorrow, to fast and pray until Tiwat answers us and tells us what to do.”

So the next day was spent fasting and praying to the sun. Everyone participated except the nursing children. The day following was the same. And the day after that. Some grew weak. But still they fasted and prayed.

Logos chuckled. “Not bad, for a tribe of savages who has never known My Law or heard My name. I believe it is time to pay them a visit.” So He took the form of a man and came down on the rays of the dawning.

The entire tribe was facedown, kneeling to the rising sun. There were no clouds in the sky, yet a shadow fell over them. Queen Tomyris jumped up. *It was Tiwat, coming down on the rays of the sun!* She bowed her face in worship before Him. “O Lord Tiwat, I knew You would come! Thank you! We have always drunk our heroes’ blood to return their strength into our tribe, but now some say that we are strong enough without drinking anyone’s blood. We must know what pleases You, for we serve You.”

“I will teach you,” Logos said, moving behind them. They turned away from the sun to face Him. He sat down on a log in front of them. His whole body shone like the sun in its strength (though much easier on the eyes). “Queen Tomyris, please bring to Me a cup of fermented milk and a broiled fish.” The queen hurried to obey, mystified as to why the great god Tiwat would want a meal of their most common everyday foods. Logos held them up and prayed. “YHWH Father of Eternity, bless these foods to My body.” Then he took a drink of the fermented milk, and ate a big chunk out of the broiled fish. As they watched Him eat and drink, the people were reminded of how terribly hungry they were after three days of fasting.

Now He held the remains out to them. “These have now become My body, My blood, for I have eaten and drunk them and they are a part of Me. Take! Eat! Drink! That they may also become a part of you, and you may become a part of Me. Then remember Me every time you eat this fish, or drink this milk.” He gave them the cup to pass around, then began to break off large chunks of fish and give them to those in front, telling them to take some and pass the rest back. “It was I who aided you in the battle,” He added, “for I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

They were famished. Some took a lot, but there was more than enough. When they were filled, Queen Tomyris asked, “O great Tiwat, does this mean we don’t have to eat the flesh and drink the blood of our leaders anymore?”

He answered her question with another question. “Have you not gained strength from the meal you just ate? Was it not satisfying, after so long a fast?”

“Oh yes, Lord, very much so,” they all agreed.

“Then remember Me when you take the fish and milk. I will satisfy you. I am your life and strength, all your days. No longer eat human flesh or drink human blood, for human life is holy, sacred, and infinitely precious to Me.”

Now little seven-year-old Tim piped up again, “Sir, are You really Tiwat? I always thought Tiwat was the sun.”

“Of course I am Tiwat. Do I not glow like the sun?” The shining form began to laugh heartily.

“But sir, the sun is still back there!” Tim pointed.

“Did I say Tiwat is the sun? No. I, Tiwat, made the sun. It shines because I give it light day by day. The rains fall when I give them water. The river flows when I pull it down to the sea. The fish come to your nets because I send them. The goats grow strong and give you milk when I make the grass to grow. I am not the things you see; I am the Great Spirit who creates and sustains all you can see.”

Tim liked this laughing man who glowed like the sun but was much more friendly. “Sir, I can see me! Did You create me? I thought my mommy created me.”

“Oh, Tim! You’re sharp, you are!” Logos laughed uproariously. “Yes! I created you, just like I created that mighty fir tree over there. For I made the seed, planted it in the earth, covered it, watered it, and caused My sun to shine upon it until it grew into a big fir tree. Just so I made your tiny seed, and put your seed safely in your mommy’s tummy. I lovingly guarded and shaped you as you grew, and told her to give you birth when you were ready.”

“You shaped me in my mommy’s tummy? You were there? You couldn’t fit in there! I don’t think You are really Tiwat, for Tiwat is much bigger and brighter than You. And I can see You! Did You create You?”

“Yes! Yes!” Logos laughed heartily. “Come here with Me, Tim. Sit on My lap and look at My face.” He came, now a little shy for Logos was very big and bright. “Look into My eyes, Tim. I am Tiwat, though in My own realm I’m called by other names. I am big enough to fill the sky, and small enough to fit inside your mommy’s tummy. And I did indeed create Me, just for you, so I could come down and teach you, and give you a hug. For the Me that you see is not really Me, but just a tiny hint of all that I am, which no human being can bear to see. I must return to My own realm now. Stand up and give Me a hug before I go.”

Queen Tomyris was a little upset that her young son was being so forward with their God. She threw her face down into the dirt before them, to say, “O magnificent Tiwat, if my son is bothering You...” At that moment she heard a gasp from the others and quickly looked up.

Tiwat and Tim were gone. Only a multi-colored flame remained, brighter than the sun, reaching up to the sky.

The flame remained for a long time. The people were all mesmerized by it, staring into it, though they were sure their eyes would burn out from the intense brightness. Queen Tomyris knew that her son was burned up, but was actually glad to sacrifice him to Tiwat. Now, no one could doubt that this really was Tiwat, the Creator of the sun, for He now was certainly much greater than the sun.

Then the flame vanished and there stood Tim, dazed and shaking, looking sightlessly around and rubbing his eyes. He took a step, then crumpled to the ground with a shrill cry and began sobbing and calling for his mommy.

Queen Tomyris put Tim to bed and nursed him back to health. His eyes slowly readjusted to earth's sunshine. "You should not have been so bold," she chastised him. "You are just a boy, and Tiwat is a great and mighty God!"

"But mommy, He told me, '*Bold, I like!*'"

"I never heard Him say that. When did He say that?"

"When He took me to His realm, the land of Spirit. I just hugged Him and instantly I was there."

"What else did He tell you?" Tim told her, talking on for almost an hour. She realized that the rest of the tribe needed to hear it too. So she decided to let him tell his story after their regular obeisance to the sun the next sun-day.

But when they arose at dawn and went out to bow to the sun, Tim wouldn't bow. "Tiwat said to bow only to Him, not to any of the things He made."

"Who are you, to tell us what to do? Now you're being naughty!" His mother got angry and began to scold.

"I'm sorry. I just... You wanted me to tell you what He said. He said He loves the little children, even more than a mother or a father can love them."

Well, that shut up Queen Tomyris. She bit her tongue and waited until everyone had completed their regular sun-day worship. The rest of the day they all listened to Tim's story and questioned him about it. It seemed that Tim had spent a long time in this 'land of Spirit'. He had danced with Tiwat across the stars and galaxies of space. He had feasted with Tiwat at a table laden with incredible foods. Tiwat had immersed him and given him breath in a river that wasn't wet. He had run over the land without crushing the flowers. He had flown from place to place with a thought, finding each place more glorious than the last. And he had learned that in His own land Tiwat is called Logos, Living Word of the eternal Father YHWH. It was all so bright and beautiful that he had cried out in shock at his return to the darkness and ugliness of earth.

Tim's story was consistent, and Tim told it with a maturity that surprised everyone, especially his mother. Many believed him, though some did not. In the years that followed, Queen Tomyris made a very good leader of her people, and Tim grew up to be a wise teacher and spiritual leader. Between the two of them, the Massagetae ceased their warlike ways, their cannibalism, and their pagan sun worship, and became a prosperous pastoral people.

Logos was pleased, for now they gave thanks to Tiwat / Logos for the sun, the rain, the trees, the grass, the goats, and the river, and they always remembered Him when they drank their fermented milk and ate their boiled fish.

Daniel returned from Susa to Babylon to continue his job at the palace. But King Cambyses blamed Daniel for giving Cyrus bad counsel, and banned him and his fellow Judeans from the palace. He retired to Tel-aviv in disgrace.

Daniel didn't know what to do with himself. All his life he had counseled kings. Now, at the age of 89, to be falsely accused and thrown out like a used dish-rag hurt, a lot.

But Amy was delighted. "Cambyses II is a fool! Gubaru is a fool! Darius the Mede is a fool! They don't love YHWH or his wisdom. Why should you pour out your life-energy for them? God has set you free to serve His people now. Too many have forgotten Zion. Sit with the elders at the gates and teach them. Reinspire them. Instill in them the love for the land of Israel, the land of your fathers, as you did me. Why have so many remained in Tel-aviv?"

Daniel stared at Amy, standing tall before him, chin firmly squared out and eyes blazing fire, still every inch the queen. "What a treasure you are to me, Queen Amytis, Nebuchadnezzar's wife. I have counseled seven emperors, but you have counseled me. I will sit at the city gates with the elders, but you must sit beside me. Our son will play at our feet. Together we shall counsel all who love wisdom."

So that is what they did for the rest of their lives. There at the gates of Tel-aviv YHWH turned Daniel's disgrace into triumph. He finished his course on earth with honor, teaching the humble of his people, inspiring in them the fear of YHWH and the love of Zion.

Pharaoh Amasis had ruled Egypt for 41 years. He was proud of all he had done to restore the gods of Egypt, strengthen his army, and make alliances with the Greeks. He had set up free trade zones in which the gods of his trading partners were honored equally. The mythology of the Greek gods was now also taught in Egypt's schools.

Though officially at peace with Persia, Amasis laughed with delight at the near destruction of the Persian army by the northern barbarians. He crowed to his people that they would never have to fear invasion from the east. *Egypt was strong, while the Persian Empire had suffered a fatal blow.* Logos was disgusted with him. After all the warnings He had sent through Nebuzeradan, Daniel, Nabonidus, and Cyrus, Amasis still trusted in his gods, armies, and alliances. Logos released him to Satan, who sent a painful disease which ate out his bowels. He died in 526 BC after 44 years as Pharaoh. He was succeeded by his son Psamtik III.

Cambyses II was half Egyptian. His father Cyrus, after conquering the Medes at Ecbatana, had gone to Egypt and sealed a treaty with Pharaoh Amasis by taking his daughter Nititis in marriage. Cyrus had gone on to conquer Lydia, knowing that Egypt would not prevent him. It wasn't until after his triumph over King Croesus that Cyrus learned the truth: Nititis was not Amasis' daughter; she was a daughter of Wahibre (whom Amasis had slain in that bloody civil war at Sais). Cyrus just let it go. He was never one to hold grudges. The Egyptians had kept their peace treaty and had not interfered with Cyrus in any of his conquests.

But when Cambyses discovered the deception against his father, he furiously vowed revenge against Amasis.

So after Cambyses consolidated his power, he began to build up his army to attack Egypt. His mother Nititis tried to dissuade him. “Why do you want to attack Egypt? Your father loved me and my country! Egypt is a good ally! What have they done against you or your fathers?”

“I have nothing against Egypt, mother – only against Amasis. I despise him, for he lied in saying that you are his daughter. He gave you to father out of hatred against you, since you are the daughter of his enemy whom he killed!”

“But what is that to you? I am still an Egyptian princess. Why do you try to carry an offense you were never given?”

Cambyses could not hear his mother’s warnings. His anger had deafened him. He worked hard with his army, for he knew the Egyptians were strong. But his troops were still traumatized by that war with Queen Tomyris and the Massagetae. He soon realized that they were worthless for battle. He sent orders across the empire to conscript fresh warriors from all the nations, and let his father’s frightened men go home to their families. It took four years to rebuild his army into a reasonably competent fighting force. By then (526 BC) Pharaoh Amasis had just died, as I said. His son Psamtik III was struggling to take charge of Egypt.

Now was his chance, before Psamtik learned the ropes. Cambyses ordered his troops to prepare for the campaign through the Levant. But what about Smerdis, his rather ambitious younger brother? Smerdis was with Cyrus at the battle with the Massagetae; he insisted that Cyrus had bequeathed the eastern half of the empire to him before he died. That seemed ridiculous to Cambyses. He knew how these stories grow with the telling. However, Cambyses could not take the chance. He called his best advisor and confidante, Magos Gaumata, into his council chambers. Gaumata had been trained by Daniel with the Magi. Surely he would have wisdom from the gods.

But Gaumata was not a Judean. He was a Mede. His heart was for himself, not YHWH. He had great wisdom, yes, but he saw this as an opportunity to use it for himself. “You are right, O King. Your brother Smerdis cannot be trusted. Surely he would take the kingdom from you as soon as you left. Let me deal with it. I will slay him secretly. No one will ever know. And I will protect your kingdom for you while you are gone.”

Yeah. Right. But foolish Cambyses believed it and gave him permission. Still, as he left the palace to travel with his army, he had this nagging doubt. He had heard of an old oracle at the gates of Tel-aviv. He stopped there to see if the gods had any wisdom or blessing for his campaign.

He was a bit shocked when he found the oracle. He saw an old woman and her husband, probably near 100, with a ten-year-old playing by their feet. The boy must be a great-grandson. Cambyses didn’t recognize Daniel at all. He assumed the woman was the oracle, as she had a regal air. He stood before her, ready to make his request.

“King Cambyses! Welcome! I am glad you came, for YHWH has a word for you.” But it was the man who was talking. His wife clutched his arm, smiling. “I am Daniel, servant of the most high God. I have counseled seven emperors; you are the eighth. YHWH the God of Israel warned me that you would come. He said you would not recognize me, for your anger has blinded and deafened you. All that you’ve seen and heard up to this moment is false, for you have colored it false with your own fallacious perception of it. Return to your palace. Trust your brother Smerdis. Grant him his half of the empire. But distrust your advisor Gaumata, or he will take it from you both.”

“Huh. What could you know of Smerdis or Gaumata? I only came to ask of your gods a blessing for my campaign through the Levant and into Egypt.”

“Ah yes. Your silly campaign to discipline Egypt. Your mother wisely told you not to go. Listen to your mother.”

“How dare you speak to the emperor of Persia like that! I’ll have your head!” Cambyses shouted, his temper rising.

“Yes. Take my head. I am an old man and I grow weary suffering from fools like you. For I now know for sure that you will not listen to my counsel. You will go into Egypt, where you will encounter failure after failure until your life energy is depleted. Finally you will return to find your empire is taken over by even greater fools than yourself.”

Cambyses was enraged. He drew his sword and lifted it high, to slice off Daniel’s head. But that tall, regal woman was leaning up against him, her head next to his. Seeing his sword, she did not duck or shrink back in fear. He could not strike off his head without killing her as well. She said not a word, but as he looked into her fiery eyes, he realized he could not do it. He angrily thrust his sword back into its sheath and turned on his heel. “Only for the sake of your brave old wife!” he muttered, striding over to his chariot so he could catch up with his army.

Psamtik III had inherited a prosperous country, with a strong army, a glorious priesthood of Egypt’s many gods, an extensive trade with allies around the Mediterranean, and a promise from his father that the Persians, weakened as they were, would never be able to attack Egypt. But he had not yet laid his father’s mummy in his royal tomb when he heard the terrifying news of a Persian invasion!

He quickly sent word to two of his allies to bring their armies to his aid: King Battus III of Cyrene by land, and King Polycrates of Samos by sea. But you know how it is with alliances of convenience. Battus III had died in 530 BC, and his son, Arcesilaus III, saw no reason to maintain his alliance with Egypt. In fact, when he heard news of the massive Persian invasion, he immediately sent a letter requesting an alliance with Cambyses, instead. Even after Cyrus’ defeat by the Massagetae, there was still no way Egypt could defeat the mighty Persian Empire, and King Arcesilaus wanted to be on the winning side, here.

As for King Polycrates, he was a fickle tyrant anyway. A pirate at heart, he plundered the islands of the Aegean Sea and the cities along the coast of Asia Minor, and enslaved many for his navy. He had forty naval warships called triremes (with three rows of oars on each side). He populated them with political dissidents and those who hated him (which were myriad). He didn't really care to aid Egypt, but he pretended to send them to the new Pharaoh's aid in fulfillment of his alliance, while secretly sending word to King Cambyses to execute them all as traitors to his realm.

But halfway to Egypt his navy discovered the truth. So they turned their warships around and attacked their own tyrant king. They were able to defeat his remaining sea forces, but could not take his capital island of Samos. So they sailed to Greece and allied with Sparta and Corinth. *Egypt never got her requested aid from her allies.*

General Phanes (of Halicarnassus), in charge of all the Greek alliance forces in Egypt, received that letter from King Arcesilaus III. It commanded him to betray Egypt and ally with the invading Persians! So he directed his army to defect to the Persian forces just as the battle was joined. Then he went by himself to meet the Persians. He found them on the coast highway just south of Raphia.

King Cambyses was suspicious of this lone traveler, but when General Phanes showed him the letter from King Arcesilaus, and then gave him detailed reports of all the Egyptian forces and their locations, he was impressed. "You'll meet the first real Egyptian resistance at Pelusium, O King. They are numerous, well over 50,000, and well trained, but they are superstitious. You can defeat them easily. After that, my own army waits at Memphis with many more Egyptian forces and mercenaries. They would be hard for you to defeat, except I have ordered my men to turn and attack the Egyptians and open the city up to you. I will stand with you, to give you advice, for I am very familiar with the ancient customs of the Egyptians."

"But how do I know that I can trust you?"

"You are facing a fifty mile wasteland with not a drop of drinking water. But I have paid some Bedouins to bring water to your army at El'Arish, and again at Bir Qata, for if you arrive at Pelusium without water you will fail."

"It is good. When I see the water, I will know I can trust you. Now, what was it you said about the superstitions of the Egyptians at Pelusium?"

"They worship cats, Your Majesty."

"So? Cat gods certainly don't frighten me."

"Nor I, Your Majesty. But they fear them greatly. I have never seen any culture fear its gods more. They call the cat, 'Bastet'. If you bring cats in your midst, they will not want to fight you. If you paint cats on all your shields, they will fear to strike you. I have asked the Bedouins to bring all their cats. Not a man at Pelusium would dare to kill a cat."

As he had promised, the Bedouins brought water – and cats! When they reached Pelusium, the entire front line of warriors had cats painted on their shields or carried a cat in front of them. When the Egyptian forces attacked to defend their borders, they were met by cats all along the battle line. Their archers refused to loose their arrows, for fear of hitting a cat! It quickly turned into a rout, for the battle-hardened Egyptian troops could not bear to swing a sword against anyone carrying a cat, even though it was merely painted on his shield. Over 50,000 of Egypt's finest warriors were slain that day.

When Cambyses claimed the city, he brought with him a cage of cats. As the city officials bowed in surrender, he took out the cats one by one. "So, these are your gods in whom you put your trust!" he shouted, hurling the cats with all his might at the faces of his defeated foes.

His army laughed in derision all the way to Memphis.

Memphis had different superstitions and gods. General Phanes knew them all. With his men ready to defect, he did not expect problems. But as they neared the city they met his army fleeing from the Egyptians! They were barely in time to rescue them. Someone had 'let the cat out of the bag', so to speak, and Pharaoh Psamtik had discovered his betrayal. He withdrew his army back into Memphis, then took General Phanes' two sons and sacrificed them on the wall in full view of the Persians. He even drained all their blood and mixed it with his army's wine.

Cambyses attacked, but Psamtik just sealed his men inside Memphis. The Persians set up a siege around the heavily fortified city, and then looked around for other things to do. "Sais!" General Phanes said, heartsick at the loss of his two sons. "Sais is his capital, but while his army is besieged here, it will be relatively undefended. Conquer it first. Desecrate their temples and slay their Apis Bull, for that is their chief god here. When they hear their precious Apis Bull is slain, they will have no strength left in them."

Cambyses did more than just slay the bull. He brought it back to Memphis and tortured it for days in front of the horrified eyes of the besieged Pharaoh. When it finally expired from loss of blood, he roasted it and fed it to his soldiers. Then he looked around for other ways to taunt the Egyptians. "Do you happen to know where Pharaoh Amasis is buried?" he asked General Phanes.

"Actually, he isn't buried yet. They haven't had time. The seventy days of mourning are not up yet. His mummy is no doubt still in his mortuary temple back at Sais."

Cambyses gave the orders. Amasis' mummy was found and brought to Memphis. Again in view of the Pharaoh, he whipped it, pierced it with his spear, slashed at it with his sword, and pulled out its hair. Thus Cambyses took out his vengeance on the Pharaoh who had lied to his parents. After treating it with every possible indignity, he asked General Phanes, "What is the worst thing I can do to it?"

“The reason they go to such lengths to mummify them and bury them in stone is to give them a long afterlife. But their religious superstitions say that if you burn up his mummy, Pharaoh Amasis would have no afterlife at all.”

That was exactly what he wanted to hear. He built a huge wooden pyre, again in full view of his enemies. He put the mutilated mummy of Pharaoh Amasis on top and set it ablaze. They could hear the bitter sobbing of Pharaoh Psamtik as he saw his father’s ‘afterlife’ go up in smoke.

That broke the will of the Egyptians. Memphis fell, and Cambyses ordered a mass execution of the entire royal family and 2000 Egyptian leaders. Psamtik was sent in chains to Babylon. There he lived in exile until he was caught conspiring against the king and executed.

Cambyses crowned himself the new Pharaoh of Egypt. Under the expert advice of General Phanes, he took on Egyptian dress and customs. Cambyses was pretty proud of himself for having conquered mighty Egypt so easily. *That old oracle at Tel-aviv had certainly been all wet.*

As long as he was here, he decided to expand his empire. To make a long story short, over the next three years Cambyses failed at everything he tried. His army failed to conquer Nubia at Napata and Meroe, as they were not equipped to cross the deserts. They failed to attack Carthage, as the Phoenicians they hired refused to work with them against their own kindred. And they failed to take the Siwa Oasis, because his army of 50,000 men just vanished in a massive sandstorm along the way. Cambyses was humiliated, but Logos was not finished yet.

He had been in regular contact with Gaumata, his Magus whom he had left in charge of the empire while he was gone. But now he heard from other sources that his brother Smerdis was ruling in his absence! He knew that Smerdis was dead, for he knew Gaumata had secretly slain him. Finally he put two and two together and figured that Gaumata must have assumed the throne by pretending to be his dead brother! Cambyses hurried back to Babylon with the remnants of his army to reclaim his throne.

His people were quite happy with the new emperor, whom they believed to be Smerdis. He was good to them. He relieved their taxes for three years. Claiming to be the true son of Cyrus, he restored Cyrus’ policies of freedom. He moved to Ecbatana to give Babylon its freedom. So civil war broke out when Cambyses returned and tried to get his empire back. Most of the empire took Gaumata’s side. [Note: in Ezra 4 he has the Persian title ‘Artaxerxes’.]

Now what that old oracle at Tel-aviv had told him was not so laughable. Cambyses was fighting for his life. The empire was on the verge of collapse. Cambyses was too weak to attack Gaumata, especially as nearly everyone, sure that Gaumata was Smerdis son of Cyrus, had given him their allegiance. King Cambyses sent out orders for all those loyal to him to gather with him in Syria at Damascus.

CHAPTER 35 – KING DARIUS THE GREAT, HAGGAI

Cambyses had been a brutal, drunken tyrant. Not many were loyal to him any more. Most had grown to hate him, such as Darius, his own bodyguard. He slew him and made it look as if the scabbard tip had fallen off and Cambyses had stabbed himself with his own sword as he jumped on his horse. That left **Gaumata** (alias Smerdis) as the sole ruler of the Persian Empire. It was February, 522 BC.

But Gaumata was also a scheming, self-seeking fool. Darius well knew his decadent ways. When he reached Ecbatana, Darius arranged to meet with the new emperor, ‘to tell how his brother had died.’ He made it a great story. Gaumata had to pretend to be sad at his ‘brother’s’ travails in Egypt and his fluky death, for he was still pretending to be Smerdis. But Darius the ‘loyal’ bodyguard was faking it as well. After he gained the trust of Gaumata, he and his friends rose up and killed the impostor. Thus Darius took over the empire. King Gaumata (alias Smerdis) had ruled four years since Cambyses had left for Egypt, but only seven months since Darius’ assassination of Cambyses II.

So **Darius** son of satrap Hystaspes became the emperor of the civilized world. He married Atossa, a daughter of Cyrus the Great, to solidify his claim to the throne (for he actually had no royal blood in his veins). Then he wisely toured his empire with a small force to establish his authority in each of his provinces. Most of the kings or governors (called satraps) were willing to accept him as their emperor once they heard how the deceitful Magus Gaumata had slain Smerdis and Darius the Mede (and many others loyal to the Persian kings) and had stolen the throne for himself. Those who weren’t, were deposed and others were installed in their place. It took a few years, for the new King Darius was very thorough. Finally the civil war ended. Peace returned to the Persian Empire.

In 520 BC, King Darius reached Babylon. There he grilled the satraps of the provinces under his command, including King Gubaru. All seemed well. Darius was about to move on, when he noticed that one small province just north of Babylon was not represented. “What’s that town up river from the city? Why have I not had the opportunity to meet its governor and confirm his loyalty?”

King Gubaru was embarrassed. “O Your Majesty! That is nothing. Just a ghetto of worthless exiles from Judea. They are against everyone and everyone is against them. They stick to themselves and will not tolerate our customs or our gods. King Cambyses wisely banned them from the palace long ago.”

“Then why are they alive? I will have no rebels in my empire. But before I slay them all, I must talk to one of their own, to verify your story. Send out now for their governor, chief, or leader to represent them before me.”

So the command was sent out, and soon a young fellow by the name of David showed up from Tel-aviv.

David was only sixteen. Darius was skeptical. “How is it that you, in your youth, are governor of Tel-aviv?”

David held his head high, unintimidated by the emperor. He had been well trained. “I am not the city’s governor, Your Majesty. Zerubbabel was appointed the governor, but he is in Israel. In his absence, YHWH our God governs us through my father, Daniel the Elder. But Daniel is very old and feeble. He sent me to represent him.”

So Darius grilled young David just as he would any other governor of the empire. The longer he questioned him, the more impressed he was, both with his loyalty and his wisdom. “Your parents have trained you well, my son. Our previous emperors may have misjudged you and your people. But now I am intrigued. I wish to see this feeble couple you claim as your parents, to verify your story. If they cannot come here, I will go to them. Get my chariot.”

As they prepared to leave, Darius casually asked David, “Why are the walls of Tel-aviv torn down?” So David gave him a brief history of how the Persians under King Cyrus first took Babylon with the help of the citizens of Tel-aviv. Darius was impressed. “It sounds to me like those living here are very loyal to the kings of Persia!”

His platoon of soldiers reached the gates of Tel-aviv. They dismounted at the entryway. David led the king just inside, where Daniel and Amy were seated at their place of honor among the elders of the city. The others all rose and bowed to the king, but Daniel and Amy remained seated. “So, your son tells me you are the governor of Tel-aviv.”

“Only temporarily, while Zerubbabel is gone, O King. I work here to inspire all my people to fear only YHWH our God, and to return to Israel, the land of our fathers.”

“At your age, old man, everything is temporary. And that’s a strange thing to say to an emperor who has come to see if you are loyal to my empire!”

Daniel nodded at Amy, and his face broke into a broad grin. He bowed. “Your Majesty the King! Live forever!” Daniel gave the familiar greeting fervently, reverently, with a passion that belied his years. “I now know that you and we will get along just fine!”

“What changed your opinion of me so quickly?”

“First, we are lovers of truth. You told the truth about your intentions, rather than trying to trick me to expose any disloyalties I might have. Second, you understand the transitory nature of life. You grasp opportunities when they come, knowing you may not pass this way again. You are no fool, like the two emperors before you, for you do not tolerate those who take power merely for their own pleasure. Instead, you work to build a lasting empire, not for your own benefit, but to benefit all mankind. You view your servants not as your slaves, but as your allies. You gain their trust and loyalty so they will work with you for a better world. History shall view you as **Darius the Great**.”

Darius was startled, almost speechless. No one had ever spoken to him like this before. “Who are you, old man? A prophet? A Magus? An oracle?”

“Yes,” Daniel replied. “I am also advisor and counselor to kings and princes, as I am a lover of wisdom as well as truth. I have counseled eight emperors before you (though not all received my counsel). You are the ninth. Amy and I offer you our friendship and counsel as you have need.”

“If you are an advisor to kings and princes, why has King Gubaru called Tel-aviv a ghetto of worthless exiles, who do not tolerate our customs or our gods?”

“King Gubaru is not like you or me, Your Majesty. He loves neither wisdom nor truth. He loves only self, his own power and glory. He accuses us of intolerance toward his customs and gods because he is intolerant toward ours. If you will research the chronicles of Babylon, you will find that I have always served faithfully and faultlessly. Yet he tried to have me slain. He has persecuted my people from the very beginning. I believe he was offended when King Cyrus assigned me to be above him in rank.”

“How has he persecuted your people?”

“He bans us from the city. He urged Cambyses to pass onerous laws against my people, preventing more of us from returning to the land of our fathers and stopping the work on our temple there. He demanded we work his sheep fields without pay as slaves. He prohibited us from resting on the Sabbath and worshiping YHWH our God.”

“I will check the records. If you were wronged, I will make it right. Now, before I go, do you have any counsel or prophecy from YHWH your God for me?”

“I do. YHWH God of heaven, who created the earth and all that is in it and who upholds it by the Word of His Power, loves you O King! He sees in you the heart of silver in a chest and arms of silver, just as he saw in King Cyrus.”

Daniel then briefly described Nebuchadnezzar’s vision of the great statue. He concluded. “Study Cyrus. Learn to love what he loved and hate what he hated. Cyrus was the greatest emperor who ever lived, because he loved people and valued wisdom, integrity, and good character, rather than loving riches or power. But you shall be even greater than he – if you will remember this one warning: It is YHWH who raises one up and puts another down, and who sets the boundaries of our human habitations, of emperor as well as peasant. Care for and defend all that YHWH has given you, but do not cross your borders to attack those whom YHWH has not given you. In this one thing, King Cyrus failed to heed the wisdom of YHWH, and thus his life was cut needlessly short.”

“I’ll check the records.” Darius turned to leave. “And you are right. You and I will get along just fine. For King Cyrus is my boyhood hero, and I have already begun to pattern my life after him. Thank you for the warning.”

True to his word, King Darius checked the chronicles of Babylon, and sent up to King Cyrus' palace in Ecbatana to check the records there. He verified the truth of all that Daniel had said. He ordered that King Gubaru be executed for his many crimes. He reversed all the onerous laws of King Cambyses. He ordered the Judeans be given back pay for all the services they had rendered the king for which they had never been paid (which was rather substantial). He issued an injunction that no servant of the king would ever again go unpaid. He commanded that the wall around Tel-aviv be rebuilt, at the king's expense. And he became good friends with Daniel and Amy.

Thus one day he arrived at the gates of Tel-aviv. "I have completed all that I know to do to help your people here," he said. "I now ask for your blessing from YHWH your God, for I read in the archives that you so blessed Cyrus."

Daniel and Amy agreed. They prayed YHWH's highest blessing over King Darius and his empire, just like Daniel often used to pray for Kings Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus.

Logos heard, and smiled, amid loud cheers from the heavenly host. "Yes, I also believe he will be called Darius the Great!" Logos laughed. "For he too loves what I love, and hates what I hate, and when he sees what is right, he does it! Michael, put your protection around him, as it was around Cyrus until he left the boundaries I had assigned to him. I now have a small task to do." He took the form of a man and descended to the settlement at Jerusalem.

Haggai had come with Zerubbabel to Jerusalem with such high hopes. It had been a real thrill to get the rubble cleared away and the foundation to the temple finished in less than a year. But now seventeen years had gone by and nothing further had been done. Oh, he now had a nice little home in the city, and a job in the fields. But every time he walked past the temple foundation he wept and prayed for God to 'send someone' to get the people motivated again. *Those cursed Samaritans and that 'stop work' order from King Cambyses! It was all for spite, to keep them weak and dispirited.* Haggai dragged himself home from the fields, crying bitterly as he walked past that barren foundation, "O Lord YHWH! How long? How long?"

A man stood in his way. He turned aside to pass, but the man stepped back into his way. He stopped, studying him. He was certainly not from among the returned exiles. Yet he didn't look like a Samaritan. "Who are you, my lord? Why have you stopped to talk with your servant?"

Logos ignored both questions. He reached up to put His hands over Haggai's head. Warm oil flowed into his hair and dripped down his face. "Behold, I have anointed you My prophet. Go now to Zerubbabel, and to Jeshua son of Jehozadak the high priest. Tell them all that I give you."

"Yes, Lord!" Haggai bowed his head and wiped his eyes on his sleeve to clean the oil out of them. When he lifted his head, the man was gone.

But Haggai was no dummy. That must have been YHWH, and this could well be the answer to his prayers. He hurried to obey. When he found Zerubbabel and Jeshua, he boldly prophesied, "Thus says YHWH of Hosts. 'You say, "It is not yet time for the temple to be rebuilt." But is it time for you to be dwelling in fine paneled houses while My house lies desolate? Consider your ways! You have sown much, but you harvest little. You eat, but are not satisfied. You drink, but don't even have enough wine to get drunk. You put on your clothes, but are never warm enough. You earn wages, to put it in a purse with holes. You hope for much, but it comes to little. Why? Because of My house, which now lies desolate, while each of you runs to your own house. Consider your ways! First rebuild My house, that I may be pleased and glorified. Then I will release the sky to send rain, and the earth to bring forth from its strength for you. Then I will bless your cattle, and your vineyards, and the labor of your hands.'"

Zerubbabel and Jeshua were startled. Their spirits were strangely warmed by this sudden word, which they knew beyond doubt was from YHWH. Zerubbabel responded to his friend Haggai. "Your words ring true. We are beset on every side with enemies who hate us. Our workmen have fled to protect themselves and their families. We still are under a 'stop work' order from King Cambyses. We have no money left even to buy food, much less materials for the temple. Purses with holes indeed! Call all the people together. We resume work on the temple immediately."

Well, it didn't turn out quite that simple. Everyone in the community had an excuse why he couldn't work on the temple just yet. Also, they really did have no money, either to pay the workers or to buy materials. For three weeks Zerubbabel and Jeshua struggled to get the people motivated. Then Haggai had an idea. "The first year we were here, we kept all the feasts and sacrificed on that bronze altar every Sabbath. But the Samaritans scared us off. Tell everyone that we're celebrating the Sabbath again. That doesn't take any money. It's a start!"

So they did. Jeshua the high priest resumed his regular duties. They assembled for the Sabbath to worship and sing together, and after the sacrifice Jeshua offered a long prayer, ending with, "...and YHWH, tomorrow morning, first thing, we promise to begin work on the temple again. We will be here. We just ask You to provide the funds."

It was a crazy prayer and everyone knew it. But it sparked something in the people. So early on the morning after the Sabbath (our Sunday), they all showed up, ready for work, even though they knew there was no money. Zerubbabel put them to work clearing out sixteen years of neglect from around the completed foundation, while Jeshua continued to pray. But – catastrophe, just as they had feared! At noon a few Samaritans showed up again. When they saw the people working on the foundation, they cursed and ran off to get the authorities.

A year earlier, shortly after he'd taken over the empire, King Darius had assigned a new Persian governor over Samaria. Governor Tattenai was still pretty young, but he took seriously the complaints of his people. Rather than merely send officers, he came to Jerusalem personally. "I've been told that you are violating the king's 'stop work' order here. Who permitted you to rebuild this temple?"

Zerubbabel and Jeshua told him the truth – the whole truth, for he seemed willing to hear them out. When they finished, he understood. "I grant you temporary approval to continue your work, until I've had a chance to contact King Darius. I don't see anything that you are doing that should be offensive to my people or to the empire."

Darius summoned young David back into his presence. "I believe I have righted the wrongs of the previous kings of Babylon, my son. All but one. You are young, but you are wise beyond your years. I have a crucial task that I cannot assign to any with lesser integrity than yourself."

"Yes, O King. I am glad to serve you, just as my father served the kings before you."

"You will serve me by taking this letter, and as many Judeans as will emigrate with you, back to the land of your fathers. Give it to Zerubbabel, the governor there. Tell him that he must complete the temple. The letter is for him to show Governor Tattenai of Samaria. I have reversed the command of Cambyses stopping work on the temple. Hurry, David, for from what your honored father tells me, your people in Judea are in desperate need of this letter."

The Judeans in Jerusalem had been interrupted again and again by the Samaritans. They had been taunted and harassed. They had rocks thrown at them and wild animals loosed nearby. Yet they had persevered at the urging of Zerubbabel and Jeshua. But now they were at the end of what they could do without funds. Jeshua was praying for a miracle. Then Governor Tattenai came to Jerusalem again. "I sent that letter to King Darius but he hasn't yet responded. My people claim your workers are harassing them and endangering them with rocks and wild beasts."

That was the last straw for Zerubbabel. He very nearly exploded in anger, and he would have if it had not been for a lifetime of discipline and respect for authority. He bowed, trembling in his fury. "Your Majesty, I swear to you we have done no such thing. But they have, against us! May YHWH our God judge between them and us!"

Tattenai looked at the raucous crowd behind him, then back to the Judean workers. "I like that! I agree, let YHWH your God judge between them and you." He called the Samaritans to stand close by. "Now, Jeshua, you are the high priest of YHWH. If your God is as powerful as I've been told, He can indeed judge between them and you. Therefore pray now to your God. We will all wait, to see how He will judge. And all you boisterous Samaritans, shut up and bow respectfully while he prays!"

Logos looked down in sheer delight. The prayer went on and on, for Logos loved to hear it. Rare indeed are times when a pagan ruler is so fervently interested in His answer to the prayers for His own people. But then He noticed that the Samaritans, and even His own people, had begun to get fidgety. Only Governor Tattenai remained at peace. Logos looked in the governor's heart, and had to laugh out loud. "Look at that! Tattenai is actually expecting Me to answer! Where did he, a pagan, ever get such faith? Even My own people rarely have faith to expect an immediate answer!"

Michael answered, "You asked me to cover King Darius and his leaders. We have been protecting Tattenai from the evil spirits over Samaria ever since Darius appointed him. He has been studying the kings of Persia, and has learned to love Your wisdom and Your ways through King Cyrus."

"Then I will grant to Him My wisdom and I will teach him My ways, with great joy! Bring young David!"

David and his band of exiles from Tel-aviv had been struggling. Every possible hindrance had met them on the highway to the Levant. Storms, wild animals, bandits, rain, cold, mud, hunger – sometimes it seemed like they were slogging through pea soup! Many times even David despaired of successfully delivering the letter. But every time he was ready to give up, he'd remember King Darius' words, "Your people in Judea are in desperate need..."

Now the sun broke through the clouds and a breeze dried the mud. They zipped south along the Great Trunk Road into the Levant. No one in Samaria tried to stop them or sell them stuff. Ahh, no wonder. It seemed as if most of the Samaritans were gathered around the temple site with the Judeans – *praying*? That did not make sense. David had heard the news about the Samaritans blocking the work and harassing the workers. But as he approached, he clearly heard Jeshua praying, while everyone else, even all the gathered Samaritans, bowed respectfully.

Jeshua sensed the people all getting fidgety. He could delay no longer. He concluded his prayer, "Judge now, O Lord YHWH. Defend now the honor of Your holy name! Confirm now to all these people whether we are right or wrong." Everyone responded with a fervent, "Amen."

David had heard just enough of the prayer to realize that his letter could be the answer. He rushed over and handed it to Zerubbabel. "King Darius himself gave this to me for you. He said that you are in desperate need of it."

Zerubbabel broke the king's seal and opened the letter. He scanned it and broke into a smile. He started to hand it over to Tattenai, but the governor shook his head. "No, Zerubbabel. You read it to all of us. Read it loudly, so these troublesome people of mine can hear. I already have a pretty good idea of what it says, for I told King Darius where to search for the original decree of King Cyrus back in the first year of his reign. I'm sure the reason he delayed so long is that he sent up to Ecbatana and retrieved it."

Logos was doing cartwheels and the heavenly host danced and celebrated as Zerubbabel read the letter. “King Darius to Tattenai, appointed governor of Samaria in the province beyond the river. Greetings. I found the decree issued by King Cyrus in which he commanded that the temple of YHWH in Jerusalem be rebuilt, and I concur. Therefore I hereby reverse the ‘stop work’ order of King Cambyses, and order that you permit the work to proceed. Do not allow your people to hinder the Judeans from rebuilding the temple of YHWH on its site in Jerusalem.

“Furthermore, I hereby decree that you provide the full cost of this work, out of the royal treasury, taken from the taxes of the people of your province. Supply funds to the Judeans for whatever they need, not only materials for the new temple, but also provide young bulls, rams, and lambs for their burnt offerings to YHWH the God of heaven, and provide wheat, salt, wine, anointing oil, and whatever the priests of YHWH request of you, daily, without fail, so they may offer acceptable sacrifices to the God of heaven and thus atone for the lives of myself and my sons.

“I further decree that any man who violates this edict or tries to hinder this great work, a timber shall be drawn from his house and he shall be impaled upon it, and his house shall be made a heap of rubble. So may YHWH, the God who caused His name to dwell there, overthrow any king or man who ignores this edict in an attempt to oppose the temple of YHWH in Jerusalem. I, King Darius, issued this decree. Let it be carried out with due diligence.”

Never had there been so stunningly swift and complete an answer to prayer. The enemies of YHWH deflated like popped balloons and evaporated like the morning mist when the sun has arisen. But as they were slinking away, Tattenai called back his chief scribe Shethar-bozenai (the ringleader of the opposition). He ordered him to “prepare a letter to notify all the people of my province that their taxes are going up, to cover the cost of this work. Further notify them of the consequences which King Darius imposes upon any who attempt to hinder this work. And finally, mention to them that it will be to their significant advantage that this temple be swiftly completed, for their taxes will not go back down until it is finished. Perhaps some of them might even be inspired to lend a hand!”

Then he gave Zerubbabel a big wink, grinning from ear to ear. It was obvious that he was expecting this and had enjoyed rubbing their defeat in his foolish subject’s faces.

King Darius personally stopped by Jerusalem later that year. He didn’t stay long, as he was rushing down to Egypt to repair the big mess left by Cambyses. But he stayed long enough to verify that his orders were being carried out and to congratulate young David on a mission accomplished. Yes, by then the funds were flowing, construction was going well, and surprisingly, even some of the Samaritans were helping! King Darius also commended Zerubbabel and Governor Tattenai for their faithfulness.

Egypt was a shambles. King Cambyses had committed unthinkable atrocities everywhere he’d gone, not just to mock their gods, but to wipe out all their defenses and destroy their economy. His soldiers had basically eaten up all the produce of the land and had slain all the strong men, warriors, and nobles needed to keep the country going.

King Darius was appalled. He took control of Egypt in a public ceremony in which he actually apologized for his predecessor! (Almost unheard of in the ancient world.) His first official act was to execute Aryandes, the satrap Cambyses had left in charge, for abusing his subjects. Then he reorganized his officials to put more Egyptians in charge, ordered the rebuilding or repair of all the temples and other things Cambyses had destroyed, rebuilt the main roads on either side of the Nile, ordered work on Necho II’s canal to be resumed, and initiated other public works projects to get the stricken economy going again. Finally, he ordered that all taxes collected for his coming be returned, and that no further taxes be collected for three years. Then he took his army and left, unwilling to eat up any more of Egypt’s scarce resources until they had recovered. His swift, bold actions saved the country from utter ruin. The Egyptians loved, and feared, him.

Darius continued his tour of the empire. He was really enjoying this. The reputation for his similarities to King Cyrus preceded him wherever he went. He was generally received as a liberator and a hero. Daniel’s encouragement to be even greater than Cyrus motivated him to look for ways to improve the empire. He would have quite a list when he got back to Persepolis. History now looks back in awe at the way Darius unified the empire, with state roads, a postal system, and a universally accepted gold coinage system. He was an incredible reformer and organizer. He established a uniform level of tribute – basically a flat tax. He standardized pay and military training for his soldiers. He finished Necho’s canal from the Nile to Suez in the Red Sea, so his ships could sail from the Nile to the Persian Gulf. He finished a new capital city at Persepolis, with walls 60 feet high and 33 feet thick. He turned Pasargadae into a monument to King Cyrus. He actually paid all his workers, unusual at the time. He turned the empire into a mighty wealth-producing commercial enterprise. The whole world would prosper under his wise leadership.

Yes, he would become known as King Darius the Great. But he had one test that he first must pass. He had started his tour of the empire in Pasargadae and Ecbatana and moved through his western provinces. Now he returned to Pasargadae and prepared to travel through the eastern third of his empire. His army had grown, with conscripts from all over the empire. But in Persia, his new troops took on a different flavor. Every strong young man in Persia seemed to have a deep love for the late King Cyrus and a thirst for revenge at his untimely death. It seemed that every one of them was related to someone who had been massacred in that infamous battle with the Massagetae.

King Darius spent a lot of time talking with his Persian officers, and even some of his men. They had horrid tales to tell; you know how these stories grow with the telling. *Queen Tomyris was a demon seductress, who could float through the air and be two places at once. Her warriors couldn't be killed, for if you sliced one in half, two would stand in his place,* and so on. It was all tommyrot, of course, and Darius knew it. Just the same, their thirst for revenge began to get into his blood, too. Even his best military commanders agreed, "Those Massagetae barbarians are a serious threat to your empire, Your Majesty! The whole land trembles in fear of them. If you would be a successful emperor, if you want your people to honor you, trust you, and serve you, you must subdue the Massagetae!"

The worst cut fell when Darius heard, "Your Majesty, everyone hated King Cambyses because he flew away out west like a yellow chicken. Instead of dealing with the Massagetae he ran the other way as far as he could go, spending his time and wasting his resources in Egypt, when he should have been facing his problems right here. You wouldn't want to be like Cambyses would you?"

King Darius had to agree. *If he would become the chest of silver like King Cyrus, he could permit no one to call him a yellow chicken!* He began preparing his army for a major assault against the Massagetae. *He would bring them into submission if it was the last thing he did.* He studied what Cyrus did, so he wouldn't make the same mistakes, but all he got was clearly hyperbole or lunacy. Except everyone agreed that Daniel had warned him not to attack across his borders, and that he had ignored the warning. Now Darius remembered – Daniel has given him that same warning.

He will not make that mistake! He changed his tactics. *He will first send an ambassador to the Massagetae, inviting their queen (or whomever is ruling) to come to Persia for negotiations, to guarantee their mutual border remains at peace.* Great idea. Except no one in Persia was willing to be his peace ambassador! Everyone seemed to be terrified of the barbarians. Some ran screaming when Darius asked. His bravest officers shook their heads at the suggestion.

"You cannot bring that wild woman down here! She is a vile witch, a sorceress! She personally slew ten thousand of our finest soldiers in the battle! Her sword is enchanted. She doesn't swing it; she holds it high and all who see it die. If she comes, she will whisper beguilingly to your face while slitting your throat behind your back. Then she will drink your blood and boil your flesh for her army to eat."

As a last resort, Darius went to Tel-aviv to talk to Daniel the Elder. "What did you mean when you told me not to cross my borders to attack those whom YHWH has not given me? What shall I do about these vicious savages who killed Cyrus and are threatening my northern border? They wiped out most of his army! Surely YHWH will allow me to discipline them, and bring them under submission! My army demands justice, and vengeance upon them!"

"That was eight years ago, O King. A lot can happen in eight years. I suggest you send someone up there to check on them before you bring in a big army."

"I've tried! No one will go! They are all terrified!"

"You go. YHWH is with you, so they cannot harm you."

"That's utter nuts! Risk my life to check on a bunch of savage barbarians? I'm the emperor, for heaven's sake!"

"What about if my son goes with you? If you wish, he will lead a platoon of Judeans from Tel-aviv to guard you."

"Your son is a very bright boy. He is courageous, but he is no fool. He would never agree to such a risky thing."

"I think he will want to go, O King. If he does not, then YHWH will allow you to send in your full army to wipe out the Massagetae. But if he agrees, without any pressure at all, then will you go with him?"

"Okay. But only if he agrees to lead fifty young men from Tel-aviv who are willing to be my bodyguards!"

"Would you like me to write him?"

"No. He would do anything for you, even die for you, or for me, for that matter. I will have my scribe write a letter. And I'll let him know the whole truth about the terrible savagery of the Massagetae!"

Later, when young David and the fifty young men from Tel-aviv showed up at Pasargadae, eager for the expedition into the lands of the Massagetae, King Darius was amazed. "Are you sure you want to do this?" Each one expressed his eagerness to go with the king.

"These barbarians are butchers! They drink the blood and eat the flesh of their enemies! Why, less than 20,000 of them annihilated King Cyrus and his 200,000 man army!"

"Your Majesty!" David smiled. "You know how those stories grow with the telling. I doubt that anything you've heard about them is actually true. But it doesn't matter. We have prayed about it, and we know that YHWH our God is with you, for you love His wisdom and follow His ways. They cannot harm you. The safest place in the empire for us is with you, when you are following God's ways."

Such bravery, he could not imagine. But Darius made his decision. He ordered his army to stand down until he returned, and he traveled north with David and his fearless boys. A wild celebration followed along in the heavenlies, as Logos and the angelic host rejoiced in his victory.

Satan was furious at his defeat. He had worked for years toward this point, fomenting fear, hatred, anger, and thirst for revenge all over ancient Persia. He came whining to Logos. "How did you get Darius to do that? It isn't fair!"

"Darius made his choice, Satan," Logos said simply. "He saw Me in King Cyrus, and he chose to become more like Me. I do not permit you to violate his choice."

CHAPTER 36 – THE DEFEAT OF KING DARIUS

As King Darius and the Judeans traveled north, they passed through the provinces of Sogdiana and Chorasmia, which border on the Massagetae. Of course they asked questions. The answers surprised them. The closer they got, the more they heard that the Massagetae were no longer so warlike. The king was encouraged. When David suggested that they leave their weapons beside the river Jaxartes before entering the lands of the Massagetae, King Darius agreed. So they were unarmed when they found themselves surrounded by Massagetae warriors.

“Who are you, and why have you come?”

“I am King Darius, emperor of Persia, Media, Babylon, Anatolia, and Egypt. I have come...” and in the middle of his thought, Darius changed what he was planning to say. “...er... to apologize for the way King Cyrus treated you, and to ask how the Persian Empire can make amends.”

They were quickly ushered into the presence of Queen Tomyris and her large family. After the introductions, King Darius repeated his apology and again asked what the Persian Empire could do to make amends. Queen Tomyris laughed. “You? You came to apologize to me? I slew your king and most of your army and drove you out of my land. The only men I lost were those who stopped to drink your demon wine! Yes, your demon wine. Apologize for that. Promise to never again send demon wine into my lands!”

The king bowed to her. “I swear it. I am terribly sorry that our wine caused an offense. I will instruct my people. And I do not blame you for anything you did, for it was King Cyrus who invaded your land. I would sign a peace treaty with you. We will respect your borders if you will respect ours. I seek a treaty of peaceful trade with each other. We shall swear to ban any aggression between us.”

The queen turned to her general. “How many are there? How heavily armed? Did they come prepared for battle?”

“Only these fifty, my queen. Their only weapons are for defense against wild animals, and hunting and cooking.”

“Then I will sign your treaty. I am glad that the Persian Empire has matured so quickly. Only eight years after the barbarian invaders under King Cyrus! You are becoming civilized with a new king who loves peace and trade.”

“Again, I apologize. It was all a big misunderstanding, O Queen. King Cyrus thought you were the barbarians!” The queen laughed out loud at that, but Darius plunged on. “I still want to know how we can make amends for the trouble we caused you.”

“Nothing. We have need of nothing. Let us sign the treaty, and you may return to your empire.”

“Tiwat!” Her son Tim pulled on her arm. He was now fifteen, and already respected for his wisdom. “They can teach us about Tiwat! Please, mother, ask them to stay.”

“What could they possibly know of Tiwat?”

“Just look!” Tim pointed directly at young David.

Now the queen saw it – what looked like the reflection of Tiwat on David’s face. She ordered him to approach the throne. “What do you know of Tiwat our God?”

David bowed respectfully. “I know of no one by that name, O Queen. But you speak of God... I know there is only one true God, Creator of the heavens and the earth, who sustains all things by the Word of His Power. We call him Logos, eternal Word of YHWH.”

“That’s Him!” Tim jumped with glee. “That is what He said He is called in His realm. I was sure he would know Tiwat, for I see Him on his face!”

The queen’s icy face broke into a warm smile. She stepped down from her throne toward David. “Are you willing to stay awhile, to teach us more about Tiwat, whom you call Logos eternal Word of YHWH?”

Now young David realized why he had traveled all that long distance. “Of course, O Queen. That would only be my joy and delight, for I love YHWH!” So King Darius left for home, with a signed peace and trade treaty with the Massagetae, amazed that the barbarians he had so feared had become followers of YHWH. David remained behind with Queen Tomyris to evangelize her people.

Not surprisingly, David fell in love with this bold and courageous people. In the years to come, he would teach them many things, about agriculture and trade as well as about Tiwat/Logos. He grew up to marry one of the many daughters of Queen Tomyris and raise his family among them. He became known as a great sage and prophet. Though he was not a priest and never tried to introduce the sacrifices, yet he taught them to keep the Sabbath holy and gave them the principles of the Law of God. To this day the Massagetae remember Tiwat/Logos every time they drink their fermented milk and eat their boiled fish.

So King Darius came home victorious, with the treaty that had seemed like an impossible dream. His wife Atossa, daughter of Cyrus the Great, had given up hope that she would ever see her husband again. But now, she was forced to reconsider all her fears. This God YHWH seemed powerful indeed! She fell in love with Him, too.

With the last barrier to peace overcome, the Persian Empire prospered abundantly. Commerce flourished all across the land. The work on YHWH’s temple at Jerusalem continued under Zerubbabel, with Jeshua the high priest making all the regular sacrifices and Haggai and Zechariah prophesying and encouraging the people. Also, Governor Tattenai loved to come and encourage, along with more and more of his own people. He especially enjoyed the bold prophecies of **Zechariah** son of Berechiah. His visions were weird and wonderful, often prophecies of Messiah and the Kingdom of Heaven to come.

Governor Tattenai was strangely attracted to Messiah. He discovered that he wanted nothing more fervently than to be a part of His coming Kingdom. Some of the Judeans told him he could not, for he was Persian, but he chose to believe the prophecy of Zechariah in which YHWH said, "Jerusalem will be inhabited without walls, for I will be a wall of fire around it, and the glory in its midst! Ho! You there! Flee from the lands of the north. Escape, even you who live in Babylon. Come! Return from the four winds where I dispersed you. I am against all those nations who plunder you, for he who touches you, touches the apple of My eye. Shout for joy, daughter of Zion, for I am coming. *Many nations will join themselves to YHWH in that day, and will become My people.* Then I, Messiah, will dwell in your midst! So you will know that YHWH has sent me."

Some of the Judeans criticized their work. Some were disappointed at the temple compared to the wondrous temple of Solomon it replaced. Some were jealous or lazy. Some had lost the grand vision of the restoration to focus on their own petty troubles. The bitter accusations and complaints had taken their toll on Zerubbabel and Jeshua.

So Logos decided to encourage them a bit. He came to Zechariah in a dream. Jeshua was in it too, clothed in filthy rags. Satan also was there, standing beside Jeshua and accusing him. By this, Zechariah knew the true source of all the opposition. But Logos would not even listen to Satan's accusations. He rebuked him, and Satan fled from the dream. Logos commanded that the filthy rags be removed from Jeshua and replaced with lovely white festal robes. Logos smiled at Jeshua and said, "If you walk in My ways and perform My service, you shall be the governor of My temple and shall have charge of My courts."

Jeshua bowed to accept the offer, but suddenly there were others applauding him! Zerubbabel, Haggai, Josiah, Heldai, Tobijah, and Jedaiah. Smiling, Logos told them, "You men and the work you're doing are a symbol, a sign of the glorious Kingdom to come. For I am going to bring My Servant the Branch of David, the Messiah. On His heart is engraved your names, and the names of all My precious ones. He will remove the iniquity of My people in one day."

As He spoke Zechariah saw a pyramid-shaped stone with seven eyes. It was cut from the top of a mountain and thrown at them, though without any hands. It hit them and shattered, but when the dust settled, the land was level and fertile! All Israel's people were at peace, each living in his own home with his own grape vines and fig trees.

The seven eyes from the shattered stone changed into a golden seven-branched lampstand. Olive trees on either side became angels. They cried, "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith YHWH of Hosts!" The stone itself finally came back together, but not as one – as many living stones, which Zerubbabel laid on his foundation to restore the temple. Finally he set the last stone on top of the temple, yelling with all his might, "Grace! Grace to it!"

With that shout, Zechariah awoke, glad and refreshed. He reviewed the wild dream in his mind, wondering about sharing it with his friends. "Get up," Logos said. "Go to the home of Josiah son of Zephaniah. I'll tell you what to say."

He obeyed. All those in his dream were gathered there, fasting and praying (for it was the fast of the 10th month, in memory of the siege of Jerusalem). They had all gotten discouraged. The labor was hard. The land all around was desolate. They had been praying all night for some sign that YHWH was with them. Now Zechariah had a word of encouragement for them. "You and what you're doing are a sign, a type of Messiah! You are restoring God's people, just like Messiah will do when He comes. And Jeshua? YHWH had a special word for you! But before I give it to you, I need to collect a small offering from all of us here."

So he gathered a little silver or gold from each of them and made a thin crown. Then he got them back together and placed the crown on the head of Jeshua the high priest. "Behold, thus says YHWH of Hosts, 'Your name is Branch, for you will branch out from where you now dwell to build the temple of YHWH. You shall rule with honor and glory over My temple. Thus you will be both a priest and a king, and you will have the counsel of peace between the two offices.' This crown will be a reminder, both to us here and to all who come from far off to rebuild the temple, that YHWH of Hosts has chosen you. For you are a sign, a type of Messiah, who also will be both king and priest. Thus you will be successful in all you do, for YHWH is with you, and will always give you His favor if you will obey Him."

Everyone applauded, as in Zechariah's dream. He told the rest of the dream, and it became an encouragement to them all. Then the word of YHWH came to him again, commanding, "No longer shall you celebrate the fast of the 10th month to mourn the siege of Jerusalem. Nor the fast of the 4th month to mourn the breaching of the walls of the Holy City. Nor the fast of the 5th month to mourn the burning of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple. Nor the fast of the 7th month to mourn the murder of Gedaliah and your dispersion. YHWH says that all these fasts will become feasts of joy and gladness for the house of Judah, if you now will love truth and peace!" Zechariah reminded them of Isaiah's prophecies, such as, "Behold I will do something new! Now it will spring forth; will you not be aware? I will make you a roadway in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. *So do not remember the former things – do not ponder the past.* Your light will rise in the darkness, and your gloom will become like midday. YHWH Himself will continually guide you. He will satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your weary bones. Thus you will be like a watered garden, like a continual spring of water. Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins and raise up the age-old walls. You will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets on which to dwell." Zechariah loved those old prophecies of Isaiah, and they flowed from his lips like a song.

“Then the wilderness and the desert will be glad; the Arabah will rejoice and blossom profusely like the crocus; they shall celebrate with shouts of joy. For they will see the glory of YHWH, the majesty of our God. So encourage the exhausted. Strengthen the feeble. Say to all those with an anxious heart, ‘Take courage! Fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, bringing His recompense with Him. He will save you, and judge those who persecuted you.’ Then the eyes of the blind will be opened; the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. The lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy. For waters will break forth in the wilderness – streams in the Arabah. The scorched earth will become a pool; the thirsty ground, springs of water. A highway will be there. It will be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean will not walk on it, nor fools, nor lions or vicious beasts, nor bandits, nor any to make you afraid. But the redeemed will walk there; the ransomed of YHWH will return; they will come with joyful shouting to Zion with everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find in Zion gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”

Zechariah had been singing at the top of his lungs that glorious prophecy of Isaiah, as it was one of his ‘most favorites’. Now he looked around to see a big group of the returned exiles gathering. He ‘felt a sermon coming on’.

“Thus says YHWH of Hosts!” Zechariah thundered. “Dispense justice, and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother. Do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor, nor devise evil in your hearts against your neighbor. But your fathers refused to listen. They made their hearts like flint so they could not hear the law and the words which YHWH of Hosts sent by His Spirit through Isaiah and Jeremiah. Therefore great wrath came upon them from YHWH! Just as they refused to listen when I called, so I would not listen when they called, says YHWH. So I scattered them like a tempest among the nations whom they have not known, and left the Beautiful Land desolate behind them.

“But I am still jealous for Zion! With great wrath I am jealous for her! So I will return to Zion, to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of YHWH will be called the Holy Mountain. Then old men and old women will again sit in the square in Jerusalem, holding their walking staffs. And the city will be filled with boys and girls playing in the streets. For I will save My people from the nations of the east, and from the nations of the west, and will bring them back. So they will live in the midst of Jerusalem. And they will be My people, and I will be their God, in truth and righteousness. So let your hands be strong for rebuilding the temple. I will give you peace for the seed; the vine will yield its fruit; the land will yield its produce; the heavens will give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to inherit all things. As you were a curse, O houses of Israel and Judah, now I will save you to be a blessing.”

With these and many other exhortations, Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the remnant. Thus the temple of YHWH was completed on the 3rd day of Adar (the 12th month) in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius the Great, 515 BC. So they got all the priests and their offerings lined up just in time for the grand dedication of the temple on the first and the feast of Passover on the 14th of Nisan (the 1st month). And what a celebration it was! With the help of Governor Tattenai (who gladly supplied the food as King Darius had ordered), they sacrificed, sang, and feasted with great joy. They even invited their neighbors into their homes to feast with them.

Even more than under Cyrus the Great, these were the ‘silver’ years of the mighty Persian Empire. Oh there were a few who rebelled; a few who could not believe that Darius had really gotten that treaty with the Massagetae. It had been too easy. Some claimed that Darius was too chicken to really go up there, so he had just forged the whole thing, and the Massagetae were more of a threat than ever. But Darius was firm. He methodically put down the rebellions one by one. No one could stand against him.

Reviewing the dates, Darius helped Egypt in 520 BC, gained his treaty with the Scythian Massagetae in 519 BC, and established Persian sovereignty over the Indus River Valley in 518 BC. Right after that, he began his famous public works projects that I mentioned.

They included building a beautiful new palace and auditorium in Susa, a new palace and capital at Persepolis, monuments to honor King Cyrus at Pasargadae, and other major works at Ecbatana and Babylon. He also got busy on an elaborate new network of roads, with regular guarded shelters and secure post boxes. He hired roving guards to prevent bandits from harassing travelers. Of course he ordered that any bandits be slain without mercy, which may seem cruel to you and me, dear Reader, but you can be sure there were few bandits on his royal highways!

Daniel and Amy had grown very feeble. Their servants still brought them to the city gates each morning, but it was pretty obvious they were not long for this world. About twice a week, some young prophet came to the gate to tell Daniel, “Your wife will be taken from you this day,” or “You must stop working! Go home!” He ignored them.

One morning, those prophecies grew more urgent. “Daniel! Your wife is dying! See her labored breathing? Take her home to care for her. She should be in bed!”

“Yes, yes. I know.” Daniel smiled into his wife’s face. “But she has chosen to die here at the gate with me. Here is where I also will die, so trouble me not.”

One fine fall day in 515 BC, they heard the good news that the temple in Jerusalem was completed. The Judeans there had even used it to celebrate the Feast of Passover that spring. Daniel and Amy were seated / reclining at the gate of Tel-aviv when they heard the news.

“Now, O YHWH, let your servant go in peace,” Amy prayed, “for I have seen the fulfillment of all our prayers.” She died that day, leaning against the shoulder of Daniel at the city gate. After they buried her, Daniel returned to the gate alone, but his heart was broken, and he too passed away in just a few days. Daniel was 104, and Amy 112.

Daniel arrived in the heavenlies in the middle of the grand welcoming party for Queen Amytis. Of course King Nebuchadnezzar was there, and many of their children. Their ancestors were there too, and friends galore, for she was loved by all. Daniel watched silently off to one side. It was so good to see his old friend Nebuchadnezzar again, now young and strong. Queen Amytis stood tall, regal, and lovely, with that old fire in her eyes and spring in her step, every inch the queen, a truly amazing woman. One small solitary angel wandered over to stand near Daniel. “Do you wish she were yours, instead?”

“No, my lord. I have no regrets. Amytis blessed many during her lifetime. I was very fortunate to have been one. But I always knew she belonged to King Nebuchadnezzar, and I do not begrudge him.”

“Don’t you wish this celebration was for you?”

“My lord! I already told you! I have no regrets! I will be satisfied when I see YHWH and bow in worship before Him. Where is He? Why is He not here? All else is nothing to me except to worship and serve YHWH my King.”

The small angel smiled at Daniel, saying quietly, “That is a good answer. That is how you lived your entire life, and now your deepest longings shall be fulfilled. I am pleased. YHWH is here, for I am He. Welcome into the joy of your Lord, My faithful son, My beloved.”

Startled, Daniel faced the small angel. He was about Daniel’s size, while all the other angels were much larger and brighter. “Oh! My Lord! I expected...”

Now Logos laughed, a contagious, welcoming sort of laugh. “You thought I would be the biggest, brightest, most glorious of all, seated on a lofty golden throne, with a kazillion adoring angels bowed before Me. And you planned to run to Me and throw yourself flat at My feet, prostrate in purest worship throughout all eternity.” He guffawed as if that were the greatest joke ever.

“Yes, my Lord, YHWH...” Daniel tried to bow, to kneel, but Logos held him up with both arms.

“If I were that way, how could I get My hug?!”

“Hug? You want a hug? You’ve got to be kidding!”

“I don’t kid. For a hundred years I have longed for a hug from you. To all the others I appear glorious, majestic, and tall. But to you...” Logos pushed him back a bit to stare into his face. “Do you realize how precious you are to Me? What a rare treasure? How unusual and special it is for anyone to remain pure, faithful and true to Me, all his life?”

“Rare? Special? I have only done my duty. Everyone who truly believes in YHWH must do the same.”

“You served kings and princes in My name. You cared for My precious ones; encouraged them in their time of need. You spoke truth and wisdom, My Words, to all who came to you. You taught them My ways and demonstrated My character. Yet you remained humble, faithful even to the den of lions! Do you think I did not see?”

“No, my Lord. You saw, for You were always with me. All I have done was only for the sake of Your mighty name, for it was You who gave me grace and courage.”

“Now you shall receive your reward. Come, give me a hug. I am your rich reward! Now I am yours and you are Mine forever.” Logos embraced Daniel in both arms and enveloped him in a great, flaming hug. Suddenly the party for King Nebuchadnezzar and Queen Amytis screeched to a halt. Everyone turned to look, wondering just who were those glorious Beings now joined into one in the flames.

“That is Logos, whom you know as YHWH,” one of the attending angels said, bowing in reverence.

“And Daniel!” Queen Amytis breathed softly to her husband. “I always knew Daniel was someone special – greater than you or I. We belong to each other. But even when I had the privilege of being married to him, I knew that he belongs only to YHWH. Now at last, he is Home.”

Now that King Darius had subdued all the rebels and gained peace on all sides; now that his projects were going fine and his roads were safe and secure to the extremities of his empire; now that the empire was prosperous, trade thrived, and his people were happy; what was an emperor to do? Of course! Look for other worlds to conquer.

So soon he forgot Daniel’s warning not to attack the Greeks, or any nation across his borders. It happened like this. Traders told him of northern Scythian nomadic tribes called Thyssagetae living north of the Black sea, and Getae living north of Greece and Thrace. If Darius had owned a modern world atlas, he would have seen that a thousand miles separates them from the Massagetae on the Jaxartes River, but he did not. He just naturally assumed that they were all related. *He had done so well with the Massagetae; he will simply bring his treaty along and show it to the others and of course they will all want to come under his broad umbrella of protection within the mighty Persian Empire.*

King Darius had no more Daniels to advise him. He foolishly took his army across Anatolia (Asia Minor) to the Bosphorus in 513 BC, hoping to circle around north of the Black Sea making ‘peace’ with all the Scythians from Thrace (Bulgaria) to Uzbek, the land of the Massagetae.

At first he did well. He crossed the Bosphorus and met no resistance in Thrace, northern Greece or Macedon. Even the Getae on the Danube River were quickly subdued after they saw his generous treaty. [See map, page 310.]

So then King Darius headed north, across the Danube River and the Carpathian Mountains of what is now called Rumania, down onto the steppes of what is now called the Ukraine. There he met the Thyssagetae – or rather, he did not meet them. For they had heard of his coming and they weren't interested in subjection to the Persian Empire.

A large army travels on its stomach. It is impossible to bring enough food with them for a long campaign, so they live on the food 'given' them by those of the king's subjects who are so 'happy' to have the protection of the empire. That is why a big army must constantly be on the move; if they remained in one place, they would quickly eat their hosts out of house and home. And that is why Darius wanted to circle around the Black Sea; he did not want to return the way he had come, for his army had already eaten a year's worth of groceries from all the nations of Anatolia, Thrace, Macedon, and now, the Getae. It was time for the Thyssagetae to contribute their fair share, then he planned to move on around to Chorasmia and Uzbek, and return home via Sogdiana and Bactria.

But the Thyssagetae were not interested in giving any food to this huge army. They could not defeat them, so they stripped their fields, packed up, and retreated from before the Persian forces. As Darius went north and east around the Black Sea he found no food. He continued for weeks. The Thyssagetae were just ahead! But when he got there, they had moved on again, leaving nothing behind. Now he began to realize what a very large land this is!

His army had run out of supplies. He reached the Volga River, flowing south to the Caspian Sea, which he mistook for the Aral Sea. But when he sent his scouts south to find the north-flowing Oxus River in Chorasmia, they ran into an immense mountain range instead. It was the first time any Persian had been north of the Caucasus Mountains. It was all too disorienting to him. He was lost. He went back the way he had come. It was his first defeat.

It would not be not his last. You see, while Cyrus had been a very good judge of character, Darius was not. The satraps he had appointed over the various city-states of Thrace, Greece, and western Anatolia turned out to be petty tyrants with their own selfish interests. In 502 BC various city-states in Ionian Greece (in western Anatolia) and the Greek islands began to plot against their Persian overlords. By 499 BC they had garnered support from powerful Greek city-states like Athens and Eritrea, as well.

Darius was both sad that his rule was not appreciated, and angry that so many people had to suffer in the battles that resulted. Whatever had happened to his peaceful and prosperous empire? Athens and Eritrea attacked Ionia, defeating his younger brother Artaphernes whom he had made satrap of Lydia. They pillaged and devastated the land and burned the capital city, Sardis. Now King Darius realized that he had to take decisive action against these ungrateful and troublesome Greeks.

If only Daniel had been there. He would have reminded him, "Don't attack the Greeks!" But Daniel was not there. Darius ordered his armies in Ionia to quell the rebellion and force the pesky Greeks back into subjection. He sent reinforcements and supplies to his brother Artaphernes, with orders to do 'whatever was required'. So Artaphernes successfully re-subdued most of the revolting city-states by 494 BC. He finally crushed the rebellion in a decisive naval battle off the tiny island of Lade, offshore from the strategic seaport of Miletus in Caria. Miletus surrendered shortly thereafter, and the Ionian revolt came to an end.

So the Greeks lost. The Persians won. Yea. But even in winning they had planted the seeds of their own ultimate defeat. For now the Greeks knew the true nature of Persian rule. It was not the protection and peaceful trade that King Darius had promised them when he had first moved through Thrace. No. It was total domination, with petty tyrants placed over them to bleed them dry and steal their freedoms. And if there was one thing the Greeks treasured more than life itself, it was their freedom.

King Darius was very good at justifying himself. Of course he remembered Daniel's warning not to cross his borders to attack those whom YHWH had not given him, and especially not to attack Greece. But he had not 'attacked' the Greeks in Ionia. He had merely defended Anatolia from their attack on him! Nor had he 'attacked' Thrace, Macedon, or the Getae on the Danube; they had gladly submitted to the 'benevolent protection' of the Persian Empire. And the Thyssagetae on the barbarian steppes – he had not even had the chance to show them his treaty with their brothers, the Massagetae. They just didn't know how much they needed him!

King Darius had become what we call a 'control freak'. Under his watch, the trains will run on time, the interstate highways will be free of bandits, trade will flourish, and the borders will be at peace, *or else!*

Of course Athens and Eritrea must be punished for starting the Ionian rebellion. King Darius sent Mardonius, his son-in-law, to do the job, with orders to do damage control throughout the rest of the Greek and Ionian city-states by replacing any Persian satraps acting like petty tyrants with a more democratic rule. Mardonius was a good man. He was the son of King Gubaru of Gutium, whom Cyrus the Great had made king of Babylon. He had wholeheartedly embraced the Zoroastrian religion (which King Cyrus had made popular in central Persia, and which Darius was trying to establish as a national religion). King Darius had given him his daughter Artozostra in marriage, and had appointed him as one of his chief generals.

Mardonius was successful, at first. The Ionian Greeks were surprised and pleased when he gave them freedom to choose their own leaders. His navy was successful among the Greek Islands of the Aegean Sea. All was well, until he crossed the Hellespont in 492 BC to visit Thrace.

Suddenly things did not go quite so well for General Mardonius. The Thracians had rebelled against the hated Persian overlords, and a big battle ensued. Mardonius was wounded. Of course the power and might of the Persian Empire couldn't be denied and the Thracian resistance was crushed. They took the large island of Thasos. Then they went down into Macedon, which they also subdued.

But Logos was not happy with King Darius or with his son-in-law Mardonius. Despite all the justifications of King Darius, Logos' sense of 'attacking Greece' had been violated. He prepared a storm. [See map, page 309.]

Mardonius was a kind man. He cared about his army. His footsoldiers were tired from the lengthy marching and the battles. Besides, Thessalonika was still in submission to Persia, and he didn't want to burden them with feeding his troops. So he loaded them all on his ships to sail around the Chalcidice Peninsula toward Eritrea. His chariots and cavalry would meet them there just before the battle.

But when General Mardonius reached Eritrea, only a few lonely ships showed up to tell him the sad news. The waters just off the coast of Mount Athos are treacherous anyway. But a big storm had overwhelmed the fleet just as they were rounding the point. Over 300 ships had been blown back onto the rocks. 30,000 of Persia's finest footsoldiers had been lost at sea. The mighty Persian navy was no more. General Mardonius was forced to tuck his tail between his legs and return home in disgrace.

King Darius was furious. *Not in his empire! His empire runs like a Swiss watch! The trains are on time, the interstate highways are free of bandits, peace and trade flourishes all across the land, and no summer storm dares to wipe out his navy!* He deposed General Mardonius, not for the storm, but because of his stupidity in overloading his ships with his infantry just to save their tired feet. But not wanting to publicly dishonor his son-in-law, he claimed that the wounds Mardonius received at Thrace prevented him from serving any longer.

So instead, Darius picked Artaphernes II, the son of his brother Artaphernes of Lydia who had quelled the Ionian rebellion. He and Median General Datis rebuilt the Persian army and navy, and in 490 BC set out to punish Athens and Eritrea. But they were cruel, caring nothing for the Greeks, or democracy, or freedom. Along the way, they forced Greeks from the Aegean Islands to row their warships. They crushed any resistance along the way. They pillaged and burned the entire town of Naxos as punishment for supporting the Ionian rebellion ten years before. They pillaged and burned Eritrea, too, and sent the conquered citizens to Mesopotamia. They destroyed the beautiful temple of Apollo and toppled the fabled statue of Athena. By the time they approached Athens, they were feared and hated all over the Greek peninsula. In early September the Persian army reached the Plain of Marathon. It was just one low mountain range and 25 miles from Athens.

The Athenians deployed their entire army to meet the Persians, leaving Athens basically undefended. *This battle will be a 'last stand', a 'do or die', for if they are defeated at Marathon, the entire city-state is lost.* They knew they had but little chance of victory; the Persians had many times what they could field. But they had become a democracy. Their soldiers were all volunteers, not conscripts like the Persian forces. Volunteers fighting for freedom do make better soldiers than conscripts forced to obey orders.

Too much was at stake. The Athenians sent word to the surrounding cities to gather as many more volunteers as possible. They sent Pheidippides, a long distance runner, over the rocky hills to Sparta, requesting the assistance of the famous Spartan militia. The distance is 150 miles, over terrain at times too difficult for horses. Pheidippides reached Sparta in two days, an amazing feat which even today is celebrated as a 'marathon' (though most people mistakenly think he only ran 26 miles from Marathon to Athens.) Sadly, for all his record speed, the Spartans could not send their army until their Carneia Festival was over, in ten days! Pheidippides ran back to Marathon with the tragic news, arriving on the fifth day after he had left.

So the Athenians and their allies blocked the two passes from Marathon over the hills to Athens. They had 10,000 armed men, under the able guidance of General Miltiades. He looked with dismay at the Persian troop ships spilling out their cargo all over the beaches. Somebody had underestimated! He counted, then counted again. There were over 500 troop ships and 600 tri-remes (warships), with 10,000 cavalry and somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 archers and infantry. It didn't matter how well they fought; they didn't have a chance!

Athens held the high ground. The Persians would be foolish to attack them in the passes. But Athens could not even hope to beat the vastly larger Persian force down on the battlefield. It was a stalemate. All they could do is wait for the Spartans. Then General Miltiades heard the news that the Spartans could not come until their sacred festival was past. So he must somehow keep the Persians occupied here for twelve more days until the Spartans reached him! He dared not allow the Persians to sail around and behind him to Athens! He began sending out raids, and creeping his forces forward as if preparing to attack.

General Artaphernes wasn't fooled for long. He had all the power here, and knew it. He hated stalemates! Under cover of darkness he loaded back up a third of his archers and infantry and most of his cavalry into the troop ships to sail around the peninsula and attack Athens from the rear. That was exactly what the Athenians dreaded most. But because of the moonless, cloudy night they were unaware.

Michael came to Logos. "I removed my protection from King Darius when his forces crossed the Hellespont, as You asked, O Lord. Do You now want me to protect the Athenians instead?"

“No.” Logos shook His head. “The Athenians have not asked for My help. They cry out to their god Pan, instead. But you are right. The Persians need to learn that might does not make right. I have two Ionian Greek conscripts in the Persian infantry. Go and cover them as I lead you.”

“General Miltiades Sir! Wake up, sir! I have important news!” The great general was awakened from a sound sleep at midnight. Soon he faced two Persian soldiers held captive by his men. “We found these men sneaking up the hill. They claim they want to defect, but they also could be spies. They told us that the Persians are now loading ships with troops to send around the Peninsula toward Athens.”

He grilled the men, and sent his own spies to verify. Their story was true. His time had run out. He ordered his forces to attack the Persian army with everything they had, on all three fronts, at first light, with the goal of preventing the Persian ships from launching if at all possible.

The Persians never expected such a bold suicide attack. Their cavalry and a lot of their archers had already boarded the ships, which were departing with the tide. But their remaining forces on the ground still outnumbered the Athenians by three to one. They blocked the desperate Athenian attack in the front. But their flanks were still a bit sleepy and the Athenians broke through, both to the right and to the left. Then the frontal attack began anew, with shouts and screams to their god Pan. The Persians, now fighting on three fronts, were confused and frightened. Many of them turned and bolted for their ships. But by stopping to take on more soldiers, the ships were delayed. Already the Athenians were wading out to stop them from sailing away, with cries of victory to Pan! It became a rout. Now you know where our word ‘Pan-ic’ originated.

64,000 Persian troops lay dead on the field. Another 10,000 died in the surrounding swamps where they had fled in their panic. The Athenians had lost only 200 men, and had captured four troop ships and three tri-remes. Even one of the Persian generals, Datis the Mede, had been slain. Thus the world discovered that the mighty Persian army was not invincible, after all.

Though that battle at Marathon was a decisive Greek victory, the war was not over yet. Most of the Persian navy, with their entire cavalry and a third of their fighting forces, had already set sail for Athens. General Miltiades assigned some troops to guard the battlefield while he took the major part of his forces on a rapid march back to Athens. They made it just after nightfall – an amazing six and a half hours. That is what we call a ‘marathon’. In their combat boots and carrying their weapons, no less. Thus when Artaphernes arrived with his warships the next morning, the Athenians were able to prevent him from unloading his men to attack the city of Athens itself. When General Artaphernes saw the race was lost, he tried to land his troops on the other side of the bay, only to find the Spartan troops now coming to the aid of their fellow Greeks.

The Greek victory was complete. General Artaphernes sailed home in disgrace. The high water mark of the mighty Persian Empire flowed on by. Their power began to ebb. From this day forth the fiesty Greeks began their ascendancy. *If only Emperor Darius the Great had heeded Daniel’s warning and not attacked the Greeks.*

Again, Darius was furious! He did not stop to consider that perhaps YHWH was fighting against him. It never occurred to him that all had been well in his empire until his brother Artaphernes had abused the Ionian Greeks and he had sent Mardonius across the Hellespont to discipline Athens and Eritrea. He should have apologized. Instead, Darius immediately began planning a third attempt to punish those troublesome Greeks. Now Sparta was added to his list of rebels in need of discipline. *They must pay the price, or his entire empire would start to doubt his authority.*

You see, King Darius never did understand freedom. He understood free trade, free travel, even freedom for each nation to live in the land of their fathers and to choose and worship their own gods. He had learned all that from his hero, Cyrus the Great. But Darius had to be in control! To maintain discipline! *Those pesky Greeks didn’t seem to appreciate his benevolent protection. They’d have to learn the hard way. Every other nation in the world was at peace. Ever other province in the empire was in willing submission.*

Darius was a suburb organizer / administrator, without equal. He had their laws codified and punishments listed. Their taxes and conscripts for his army were well defined. But you know how it is with kings who, deep down, know what they are doing is wrong. Darius gave the orders to increase everyone’s taxes to cover his losses, and begin rebuilding his navy. Then he looked for justification for his aggression. Daniel was gone, and Darius never really knew his God, YHWH, so he called on Zoroaster, instead.

Zoroaster was now 65. His enthusiasm for his new religion had never dimmed. He had committed his life to his writings and delving into the mysteries of Ahura Mazda and the unseen realms. He had developed a system of theology far surpassing the simple truths Daniel had tried to teach him. Sadly, Zoroaster never really knew YHWH, either, so it was mostly just a fabrication. But Zoroaster was no dummy! He knew on which side his bread was buttered. He assured the king that Ahura Mazda would protect him and bless his invasion of Greece, as his reward for so strongly supporting the Zoroastrian religion.

Egypt was miffed at the tax increase. They were grateful that Darius had helped to rebuild the land after the abuses of Cambyses. Darius was known in Egypt as ‘The Great Lawgiver’, for he had done a wondrous job of codifying their laws and organizing their government. But now here he was breaking his own laws, increasing their taxes and taking more conscripts for his army than he had promised. They put up with it for three years, but in 487 BC a group of rabble-rousers rebelled against Persian rule.

King Darius did not have time for this. He was nearly ready with his preparations for his third campaign against the unruly Greeks. *Egypt is a model of his administration! They have prospered abundantly under his rule! The trains run on time! There are no bandits on his interstates! His postal service never loses a letter! What do they have to complain about?* He sent emissaries to pacify them, but those rabble-rousers kept at it. He sent soldiers to quench the rebellions but they couldn't find the ringleaders, and the uproar was spreading throughout Egypt. The delays dragged on for a year. Darius got more angry by the day.

"Darius is not responding well to My discipline," Logos said sadly. "He cannot seem to hear Me, though I have sent many warnings. He started out so well! He really loved My wisdom at the first. Now he just loves his empire and his reputation for a peaceful and well-oiled administration."

Michael heard a finality in Logos' voice. "May I send one more warning, my Lord?"

"Of course, dear Michael. He trusts Zoroaster. You may send it through him."

Zoroaster awoke after a tough night. His dreams were vivid; their implications frightening. He tried to push it off, but he could think of nothing else. Finally he went to the king. "O King, live forever!"

Darius was still fuming over the delays to his campaign. "What is it?" he snapped, and then regretted speaking so sharply to his old friend. "Sorry, Zoroaster. I'm frustrated. Can you tell me how to deal with the rebels in Egypt?"

Zoroaster had not considered that. He opened his mouth to say 'No' but 'Yes' came out instead. Now words not of his own choosing flowed from his lips.

"Reduce their taxes. Take no more conscripts for your military. Give them freedom to choose their own leaders, their own Pharaoh. Egypt's ways are different from yours, O King. Promise them free trade and protection without having to run Egypt your way. They will be grateful, and will hail you as a father of their land. The whole world will prosper when Egypt is strong, proud, and free again."

That was not what Darius wanted to hear. "After all I've done for them, just let them go? Are you crazy? Why, every province in the land will revolt!" He was furious, red in the face, veins bulging in his neck, his countenance distorted.

Now Zoroaster remembered his dream. "O King! Your face! That is what I saw in my dream! You were so angry in my dream, that something burst inside your head and you died!" He put his hand over his mouth. He had never intended to blurt it out so crudely. "O King, I'm sure my dream is a warning. Ahura Mazda wants you to be at peace. Your need to punish the Greeks has become an obsession. Let it go! Egypt, too. You do not need to prove to anyone the power of the Persian Empire. Grant both Egypt and Greece their freedom. Give up your anger and be at peace."

Alas, King Darius couldn't do it. His wrath and thirst for revenge against the rebels had consumed him. Now he had lost control in Egypt as well as Greece. He could not stand losing control! In October of 486 BC he suffered a massive stroke and died. He had ruled for 36 good years. Prince Xshayarsha, his oldest son by Queen Atossa daughter of Cyrus the Great, was crowned in his place. His father's dying words were, "My son, regain control in Egypt. And you must discipline the Greeks. But support Zoroaster."

The crown prince Xshayarsha was 35 years old. From his youth he had been trained to succeed his father. He took the Persian title Ahasuerus, but I will use his Greek name, **Xerxes I**. His wife was Queen Amestris. But Xerxes did not love her. Theirs was a political marriage. Amestris was a daughter of Otanes, one of the seven conspirators who had helped Darius slay Gaumata and take the empire. As is often the case with these political marriages, Xerxes never really loved her. Seeing him lusting for the younger, lovelier ladies, Amestris got jealous and bitter. That only made Xerxes despise her all the more. He could not divorce her; she was the mother of his heir, the crown prince Darius. So Xerxes just took a second wife: Vashti, a daughter of King Belshazzar. Vashti was astonishingly beautiful and talented; she was also the wife of Artebanus, his grand vizier. *He will live to regret that, I'm sure.*

First, Xerxes suppressed the rebellion in Egypt. He made his younger brother Achaemenes satrap over Egypt, a big mistake. Achaemenes was cruel and heartless. He became a hated tyrant in Egypt. He ruthlessly ignored Egyptian traditions and imposed a totally Persian style of governance upon Egypt. He did it by using overwhelming force. *King Xerxes will live to regret that, as well.*

After regaining control in Egypt, Xerxes decided to aid Zoroaster. King Darius had openly encouraged the new religion, but had not persecuted those who still worshiped other gods. His son took a different tack. Xerxes began passing laws designed to squelch the old gods of ancient Media and Babylonia and force everyone to worship Ahura Mazda. Some didn't care, since their worship was phony anyway. Others, such as the priests of Marduk and Ishtar, were incensed. *Xerxes will live to regret that, too.*

King Xerxes I was careful and thorough, like his father. He also wanted a peaceful, well organized empire. He well knew the importance of discipline upon the rebels! And he had noticed that his father had been successful against the Ionian Greeks but every time he crossed the Hellespont or Bosphorus he had been defeated. Xerxes would not make that mistake! He tried to negotiate peace. But Mardonius, after his ignoble defeat, thirsted for revenge against the Greeks – he stirred up a party of exiled Greeks to claim that the honor of Darius and the Persian Empire was at stake. Xerxes' attempt at diplomacy failed. He reluctantly agreed to prepare for war, *another decision he will live to regret.*

In 483 BC, Xerxes ordered his army and navy to begin preparations for what would become the biggest invasion in history. This time, those upstart Greeks couldn't defeat him! Everything would be done with overwhelming force and meticulous attention to detail. Once the preparations were underway, Xerxes threw a huge party at his winter palace in Susa. All his army and navy officers were invited, as well as every satrap, prince, and noble in the empire.

His celebration was a colossal success. Royalty from all around the empire came to see his wealth and power, feast on his delicacies, drink his fine wines, and praise the glory of his majesty. It culminated in a seven-day banquet. The feasting was sumptuous; the wine flowed freely. And the entertainment... wow.

Now, in those days, the royal ladies, wives of the nobles attending the feast, did not celebrate with their husbands for obvious reasons. The lewd jokes, the sensuous music and nude dancing, and the scantily clothed serving girls would be an offense to them. So Queen Vashti organized a separate banquet for the royal ladies. It was a more modest affair, trust me. Though many of the most elegant women in the empire were in attendance, their food and drink was just as lavish, and their entertainment just as delightful, yet Queen Vashti had never found any particular pleasure dredging the depths of depravity in search of fun.

King Xerxes was drunk. As often happens with drunk kings, he boasted before all the nobles of the land. "Yes, the dancers are beautiful, but my wife Vashti is more beautiful than them all. Yes those are talented performers, but my wife Vashti is more talented than them all..." And so on. The more Xerxes described her, the more the nobles dared him to call for Vashti to dance before them.

No king in his right mind would allow his wife to come into such a setting. The lewdness, the moral debauchery, was beyond the pale. But Xerxes was not in his right mind. He summoned Vashti, with the demand to don her most seductive dress and do a striptease dance to display her endowments to them all. Queen Vashti was horrified. She knew what was going on in there! She could not, she would not parade around half-naked in front of all those ogling eyes. She sent back a polite refusal, urging the king to just enjoy all the lovely dancers he had hired.

But that was like a slap in the face to Xerxes! Filled with fury, he ordered his advisors to declare what ought to be done to such a disobedient wife. Memucan summarized their opinion: "O King! Vashti has shamed not only you, but all of us as well. For her conduct is a bad example to all the women of the land, to encourage them to react to their husbands with contempt. So banish Queen Vashti forever from your presence O King! Let the king give her royal position to another more worthy than she. Then every man, whether great or lowly, shall be lord in his own household and his wife shall fear him, and thus remain under proper submission and grant him all honor."

In his wrath, King Xerxes signed the injunction, a 'law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be broken.' It was a crushing blow against women, as well as against freedom of conscience and common decency.

When King Xerxes sobered up and got over his anger, he deeply regretted what he had done. He pined for sweet, beautiful Vashti. How he had loved her! Now she was gone from his palace. Xerxes descended into depression.

The king's advisors saw his grief. They suggested that the most beautiful young ladies in the empire be collected and brought into his harem. They will be given a year of cosmetics and training, and then will be tested by the king. Surely one of them will be suitable to replace Vashti.

Xerxes sadly agreed, and gave the orders. But Logos was angry with him. "Remove what little covering King Xerxes has had, but renew My covering over Vashti, daughter of Belshazzar. She shall be required to serve this wicked king no more, but I shall invite her to serve Me instead, for she hates what I also hate, and loves what I also love."

"But Logos! She directly disobeyed her husband!"

"Her husband is Artebanus. Queen Vashti chose what is right. She disobeyed her king only when his command violated My Law and My righteousness."

Vashti was placed in the king's 'second harem' among the 'used' concubines, to never again be called back into the king's presence. There she was given favor among the abandoned women. She helped them through their grief and bitterness, and trained them to lead productive, happy lives. Logos' blessing and protection remained on her.

In 482 BC, Xerxes' foolish law demanding worship of Ahura Mazda had its expected result. In Babylon, the priests of Marduk and Ishtar fomented a rebellion, killing the Persian satrap, King Zopyrus. Babylon declared its independence from Persian laws. The son of Zopyrus, General Megabyzus, was sent down with an army to quell the rebellion. He ruthlessly recaptured the city, taking cruel vengeance for his father's death. He slew the rebels, destroyed the royal fortress, pillaged the temples, and melted down the golden statue of Marduk. Now Xerxes was hated by the Babylonians as well as the Egyptians.

In 481 BC, after 3 years of careful preparations, King Xerxes left with his army for the Hellespont. He spent the winter in Sardis, capital of Lydia, while his army gathered. He now had an incredible two million men, supported by over 1200 warships and troop transports. Early in 480 BC he proudly led his immense army up to Abydos.

With this many soldiers, it would take too long to ferry them across the Hellespont by ship. Xerxes had a double pontoon bridge built of flax and papyrus reeds. But the bridge was just completed and his men were just starting to cross, when Logos sent a big windstorm to tear it all apart. Some of his soldiers drowned in the choppy seas.

Haman, the king's chief wizard and advisor, warned, "The gods are against you, O King. It would be best to turn around and try again another year." But Xerxes refused. *No water or wind gods will get the better of him!* He ordered the bridge engineers beheaded, the winds thrashed 300 strokes, and the waters of the Hellespont whipped 300 lashes, until they were beaten into submission. Then he ordered the bridge rebuilt. This time he succeeded.

His massive army flowed through Thrace and into Macedon, supported by his navy. This time, he will not lose his navy sailing around Mount Athos! Instead, he ordered a ship canal be dug across the isthmus of the Acte Peninsula, to keep his ships near the coast with his army. Thessaly and Phocis were still in submission to Persia, as were the Mycenaean city-states on the Peloponnese. It was primarily Attica, with its capital city of Athens, and Sparta that were still in rebellion. But as Xerxes marched toward Attica, his navy still sailing alongside, a powerful wind-storm came up just off Mount Pelion. Xerxes watched while 400 of his warships were destroyed on the rocks. A second time Haman warned him to put off his campaign. "O King, as chief of the astrologers, I can see that the stars and planets have aligned against you. You cannot succeed. You should turn back now." Again Xerxes refused.

His army reached Thermopylae, where the road along the Gulf of Males is narrowed by steep hills. At the same time his remaining 800 ships reached the straits between Aphetae and Artemisium. But the Greeks had not been idle. They had 271 tri-remes awaiting the Persian fleet in the straits. They also had over 7000 warriors from various Greek city-states at Thermopylae, under the command of King Leonidas of Sparta. They blocked the narrow pass.

King Xerxes was shocked. He had expected the mere sight of his massive army would cow them into submission without even having to fight. Now he regretted allowing Mardonius talk him into it. He sent ambassadors to King Leonidas offering terms of peace. For his surrender, Attica would get the title 'Friends of the Persian People'. They would be resettled in a land even better than their own, where they would be granted freedom to live and worship as they pleased. King Leonidas flat refused. So Xerxes' ambassadors got angry. They pointed to the vast Persian army covering the land. "You do not have a chance in Sheol. You'll all die like dogs. Lay down your weapons!"

"Ha!" King Leonidas responded, "Come get them!"

Still Xerxes waited four days, hoping for the Greeks to become frightened and disperse. He could not understand how they could remain there, knowing they would all die. Finally he lost his patience. He sent General Artapanus with 10,000 troops into a full frontal assault on the pass. His men were cut to ribbons, with only two or three Greeks lost. They regrouped to attack again, with even worse results. General Artapanus himself was slain, along with nearly 9,000 of his soldiers.

Haman warned a third time, "The gods now favor the Greeks. You cannot defeat them!" But Xerxes did not yet realize that God had removed his covering. He just got more stubborn. After all his preparation, with his nearly two million warriors, Xerxes was not about to be thwarted by a measly seven thousand Greeks! The next day he ordered the pass be assaulted by 50,000 troops. Among them were an elite corps of 10,000 "Persian Immortals," his very best warriors. But once again, they were totally defeated, while his enemy suffered almost no losses.

To make things even worse, now Xerxes heard the news of the sea battle taking place off the coast of Artemisium. It was August 12, 480 BC. The day before, about the time he had attacked the pass, his 800 ships had encountered the Greek ships in the straits. So far, the results were grim. Though outnumbered, the Greeks knew these waters. The prevailing winds and the narrow straits were to their advantage. The Greek ships also had better rams on their prows and knew how to use them. 60 Persian ships had already been sunk, and 30 more captured by the Greeks.

Xerxes was perplexed. He now knew for certain the gods were opposing him, but still refused to admit it. Yet he really did not know what to do. He prayed to Ahura Mazda for a sign to show him whether to proceed or not. Satan laughed in glee. That was his invitation!

Trying to avert the impending catastrophe, the Persian naval commander sent 200 ships around the Island of Euboea, to trap the Greek ships from behind. The second and third days of the naval battle were even worse. The Persian fleet was too large to be effective in the straits. Though they sank or destroyed nearly half the Greek fleet, 53 new Greek ships arrived to replace them. Greeks were sinking Persian ships by two to one. Those 200 Persian ships sent around Euboea never returned. As they reached the Cape of Capharius another windstorm sank most of them. The rest later ran aground on the rocks off Chalcis.

Now Xerxes got his 'sign'. Satan inspired a local citizen named Ephialtes to defect to the Persians and betray his country, for the promise of safety from the invaders. He told Xerxes of a mountain path leading around the pass and behind the Greek lines. King Xerxes quickly sent a large force up the path, led by General Megabyzus, with orders to encircle and attack the Greeks from behind.

King Leonidas realized he had been betrayed. He sent the majority of his forces back to defend the Isthmus of Corinth. He knew that all who remained at Thermopylae would die. Still he remained behind with a few volunteers: 300 Spartans, 700 Thespians, and 400 Thebans, to hold the pass and protect his retreating armies. The Persian emperor treated the brave defenders with unusual cruelty, for Satan had filled him with rage. Then he moved through the cities of Attica, plundering and burning all the way to Athens. Yes, King Xerxes gained the victory, but at what cost? He had bartered with the devil for his soul.

When the Greek warships received news of the betrayal at Thermopylae, they also retreated, hoping to protect the evacuation of Athens to the Island of Salamis. The Persians took their time, engaged in ravaging the countryside, which allowed Athens to be completely evacuated. So Xerxes came into an empty city (except a few Athenians had barricaded themselves in the Acropolis.) In a rage, Xerxes ordered the wealthy city burned to the ground, and then immediately regretted his brutal savagery. *His entire life was becoming one big regret after another.*

By the time he caught up with the Greek armies, they were already dug in at the Isthmus of Corinth – another narrow, defensible pass! Xerxes had already learned what the Greeks could do to defend a pass. To defeat them now, he must use his navy – what remained of it – and soon, or his army would starve. In his foolish anger he had burned what little food the retreating Athenians had left behind.

His navy was now down to about 400 ships; still far more than the Greeks, but he must not allow any more to be lost. He needed them to transport his forces around the Greek blockade. They sailed into the bay near Salamis, and spotted some Greek ships lying in wait for them. But at the same time, they saw some ships fleeing west of the island.

That turned out to be a trick to separate their forces. The Persians fell for it. They sent 100 ships after them.

Admiral Themistocles of the Greek fleet was a patient man, with unusual bravery and cunning. He never lost his nerve, even in the face of overwhelming odds. But he feigned weakness and fear, keeping his ships huddled in the harbor as if scared to attack. They were waiting in the rocky shallows, because they knew these waters!

The Persian Admiral had no such wisdom. He simply saw the Greek fleet and attacked, even though they were heading into unknown waters. When they got within the narrow confines of the harbor, the Greek ships turned on them. Now the greater numbers of the Persian fleet were to their disadvantage; they could not maneuver or work together. Many collided with each other or ran aground on the rocks. The Greek navy under Admiral Themistocles scored a decisive victory, sinking or capturing over 200 more Persian ships. The remainder fled in disarray.

Xerxes needed food for his army. The Athenians had moved all their food to the Island of Salamis. So Xerxes began to build a pontoon bridge for his immense army to cross the mile of open water to Salamis. But the Greeks sent flaming arrows to burn up his pontoons as fast as he could make them. Their ships still controlled the bay!

Finally Xerxes woke up to realize that he was finished. Winter was upon them, and his huge army would starve if they didn't get back to Asia. He abandoned Attica and left General Mardonius and his elites to winter in Thessaly. Fortunately his precious bridge in Thrace was safe, still guarded by Artabazus. They retreated over the Hellespont.

After seeing his emperor safely into Asia Minor across the pontoon bridge, General Artabazus took his 60,000 troops back to support Mardonius. Along the way, he decided to discipline Potidaea, a small fortified city on the isthmus to Pallene near the border between Thrace and Macedon. Artabazus besieged the city. After three months the waters of the Aegean Sea retreated dramatically, giving him easy access into their harbor. *Wonderful! He wouldn't have to worry about flattening walls or burning gates!*

But as his army marched through the now dry channel, the waters returned. It was a tsunami! Many of his men drowned. The remnant fled back to Mardonius in ignoble defeat. Persia's defeats weren't over yet. Mardonius failed to negotiate peace with the Greeks over the winter and spring. Then in the summer of 479 BC he was defeated and killed at Plataea, while the remnants of the Persian navy and another 60,000 Persian troops were defeated on the Mycale Peninsula near the Ionian Island of Samos.

With those Greek victories at Plataea and Mycale, the second Persian invasion of Greece was finished. The once mighty Persian Army was demoralized with the death of Mardonius and forced to withdraw under the leadership of faithful General Artabazus. Over the next thirty years, all that Persia had taken in Thrace, Thessaly, Macedon, and the Aegean Islands was reconquered by the Greeks.

His army crippled and his navy destroyed, King Xerxes reached Susa in a deep blue funk, whining, "Why did our gods abandon me at the Hellespont?" His chief advisor, Haman, knew better than to remind him, "I told you so." But his face betrayed his smug, accusing attitude. King Xerxes couldn't stand it, and fired him.

Now Xerxes poured his energies into massive building projects at Susa, Persepolis, and Ecbatana. But he really missed the beautiful and intelligent Queen Vashti, and none of the concubines in his harem pleased him. Even though young lovelies from all across the empire, from every tongue and nation, were brought to him, they were all powder-puffs, with painted faces and fluff for brains, relying on erotic clothes to conceal their emptiness. They only reminded Xerxes of the emptiness he felt inside.

Among the virgin concubines yet to be presented to King Xerxes was Hadassah, an orphan from the exiles of Judea who had been raised by her uncle Magus Mordecai. She was beautiful of form and face as well as talented and well-educated, for Mordecai wanted the best for her. When she was selected for the king's harem, Mordecai was concerned. He instructed her carefully, to just be herself, to not put on airs, and to never be intimidated by the king.

Hadassah was whisked off to the harem for her year of training. Mordecai, who worked at the palace gate, walked back and forth to the harem, hoping for a word with her between lessons to see how she fared.

Hadassah actually did very well. She was quick to learn, and her natural beauty needed no makeup. Hegai, the eunuch in charge of the women in the first harem, was so impressed with her that he put her at the head of the line in her class, and gave her the best instructors to teach her the ways of Persian royalty. In all her lessons at the palace, she never forgot who she was or what her uncle Mordecai had said. Nobody was to suspect that she was just an orphan from the Judean exiles. “No!” Mordecai always reminded her. “If anyone asks, stand tall, look them in the eye, give them a smile with all the joy that wells up from deep within your soul, and tell them that you are a daughter of the King, King YHWH Elohim who rules from beyond the sea.”

So that is all Hegai knew about her. But it was enough, for she said it with such passion and such conviction, that he thought, “Surely this YHWH Elohim must be a great king indeed! For I have never seen a young princess behave so regally, with such assurance!”

Hadassah graduated with top honors, and was assigned her evening with the emperor. Hegai counseled her, “Just be yourself. Don’t put on airs. And don’t be intimidated by him. He’s just a man, in need of companionship. Stand tall, and rejoice with him as if you were already his queen.”

“What do you think I should wear? What would please him? You know him far better than I.”

Hegai considered. Hadassah had been trained in many styles of dress and makeup, but none seemed right for her. “I suggest you not use much makeup, perfume, or jewelry. You don’t need it. And choose a dress both modest and simple, so as to not distract from your natural beauty.”

Now that surprised Hadassah, for she had seen ladies ahead of her dressed fit to kill, with makeup, perfume, and jewelry so thick they seemed to her more like court jesters. She had begun to think that was all King Xerxes wanted. “Will the king not be disappointed?”

Hegai came close, to whisper in her ear. “You are not like the other ladies. All they could hope for was to inflame the king’s lower passions, for that is all they had. But notice that he has not chosen any of them! You have something more to give him. Give him what you are – all that you are. I know he will be pleased.”

King Xerxes was very depressed. He had begun to hate being emperor. It’s a lonely job, and no one understood what he had to go through every day. He felt his failures, his defeats and regrets, acutely, but he had no one with whom to share his feelings. He had begun to hate all the bowing and scraping. He was surrounded by people, yet he was the loneliest man alive. They smiled and said, ‘Your Majesty!’ or ‘Your Royal Highness!’ but he knew what they were thinking. *Behind his back they called him a fool, a wimp, for losing so badly to the Greeks. He wished he could just run away and, well... become a farmer! But he couldn’t. He was too well-known.* It was maddening.

Without Vashti, Xerxes began to feel like life was no longer worth living. *Maybe he should end it all. Then he would no longer have to put up with this constant string of painted ladies trying to seduce him and steal Vashti’s place by his side. Vashti! The only one he had ever truly loved! And the one he could not have, because of that stupid ‘law of the Medes and Persians which cannot be altered’ that he had so foolishly signed when he was drunk.* Now all his failed efforts, all his stupid decisions and bad choices, hit him in full force.

Thus Xerxes decided to commit suicide. He had a secret cache of poison stored away for emergency use against his enemies. *When supper time came, he would refuse to go; complain of a stomach ache or something. Then he would drink the poison, and simply not wake up the next morning. He already had an heir...* But that made him think of Queen Amestris, mother of both Artaxerxes and the crown prince Darius. He hadn’t seen her for years, and was glad of it! *That sharp-tongued, jealous, ugly, bitter old witch!* Just thinking about her steeled his decision. He went to get the poison. *Nobody should have to put up with what he had been through.* But Hegai spotted him in the hall. *Rats. He had come to tell him that dinner was prepared, and to brief him on his evening’s entertainment.* Xerxes didn’t want to talk to Hegai. “Go away. I’m not feeling well. Tell them I’m not coming to dinner. And I don’t want any more... ah... any young ladies. Not tonight.”

“Oh! I’m so sorry, Your Majesty! Princess Hadassah will be disappointed, too, I’m sure.”

“Princess? Really? Princess from where?”

“I don’t rightly know, Your Majesty. All she will say is, from some place beyond the sea. I’m not sure she knows herself. But that she is a true princess, I am quite certain! Never have I seen such royal bearing.”

Huh? Royal bearing? Now that caught the king’s fancy. *Maybe he should postpone taking the poison until tomorrow.* “Thank you, Hegai. You are a faithful servant. Look! You made me feel better already. I changed my mind. I will come to dinner and meet this Princess Hadassah.”

The two entered the dining room and looked to the king’s table. But no regal princess was there; just a tall, slim serving girl. Hegai was shocked. It was Hadassah! She had taken him literally! She was unadorned, in a plain blue satin gown. Her long black hair flowed past her waist tied back with only a simple thin gold ribbon. And she faced the wrong door; all they could see was her back. Hegai felt ashamed. He was responsible! He should have suggested at least a gold belt and a thin princess crown. Why, she wasn’t even wearing earrings or high-heeled shoes! And he had assumed she knew by which door the king entered!

The king was still looking around the room. Hegai, his ears burning with shame, whispered, “There is princess Hadassah, Your Majesty, standing beside your chair. I’m sorry! I neglected to tell her...”

But she had heard them. She turned around. A big smile lit up her face. Her girlish squeal was cut short by a fervent, “O King! Live forever!” She bowed and curtsied, then flowed eagerly toward them, arms lifted forward to the king as if performing a graceful dance. “I am Hadassah, daughter of King YHWH Elohim who rules from beyond the sea!” She stood tall, looked the king in the eye, and radiated the joy that welled up from deep within her soul.

Xerxes was amused. *A princess who wore no jewelry or makeup? A princess who didn't smell like a French whore?* He knew that she had an infinite variety of adornments from which to choose, yet she chose nothing, but herself. There she stood, looking him in the eye with the supreme confidence that none but a true princess can possibly achieve. Now Xerxes was glad he had put off his suicide until tomorrow. Tonight he will discover the secrets of this princess adorned with only her radiant smile.

During the dinner he plied her with questions about her heritage, her father, her race, but the mystery only deepened. She had never seen this ‘King who rules from beyond the sea’, though she knew that she belonged to Him and would return to Him some day. “He is a good king, compassionate, wise, just, exceedingly powerful, and unimaginably wealthy. He rules in perfect peace and freedom, never oppressing, only inviting, entreating. I'm quite certain that all nations will eagerly vie to join His kingdom and submit to His glorious rule someday.”

Now she turned the tables, to begin asking about his empire, his victories and defeats, his friends and enemies, his likes and dislikes. Her questions were insightful and caring, as if she really wanted to understand him, yet bold, as if she already understood and just wanted to draw him from his shell and help to heal his pain.

Dinner was over before he knew it. It was a spectacular meal fit for a king, but already he had forgotten what he ate. He led her up to his private veranda, looking out high over Susa, and set her beside him on the love couch. But unlike all the others, she made no attempt to seduce him or inflame his passions. Her smile faded. “I'm sorry for you! Your job is so lonely! It sets you so far above the people, that you have no one with whom to share your deepest feelings, your own needs and desires. When you have a tragedy or defeat, you have to grit your teeth and bear it, for you have no one who understands. Everyone must make-believe that you are perfect. Please, O King! I will tell no one. You can confide in me. I sense your pain. You have been wounded, grievously traumatized in your soul. You are hurting, deep inside. Perhaps if you share your pain with me, I can help you rediscover the joys of living.”

Xerxes took a deep breath. She had only known him for one hour, and already she had touched his deepest heart. “Pain? Ha! What could you know of pain? The way you describe your Father's kingdom, it is all peace and joy and no one ever feels any pain.”

“I was exiled. I am here in Persia, not with my Father in His Kingdom. The pain of my separation, the loneliness of the loss of my parents and all my family and friends, is more than I can describe. I am alone here, just an orphan, with no one to comfort me but my uncle. I rejoice only because I choose to let go of the past and look for my future restoration to my Father's Kingdom. So I will understand your pain if you choose to share it with me.”

Xerxes looked at her earnest face and began to believe that maybe, just maybe, she might understand after all.

“It is Queen Vashti,” the king finally admitted. “She is the only one I ever truly loved. But in my own stupidity and drunkenness, I have lost her forever.”

“Vashti! I know her. She is chief matron in charge of the second harem. She's a wonderful lady! Kind, intelligent, beautiful in every way. I'll talk to her. She likes me; I'm sure she'll listen. I'll tell her how much you love her. I'll plead for forgiveness. She'll come back to you, I know she will.”

“You would do that for me? Don't you want to be my queen?” Xerxes was incredulous.

“Oh, I would love to be your queen. But more than that, I want to be your friend. I want what is right for you, my lord, and it's just not right for you to lose the one you truly love and have to settle for me instead.”

“Settle for...” Xerxes had to stifle a laugh. “I would to god it was that simple, but it's not; not unless you are able to alter the laws of the Medes and Persians which cannot be altered.” Thus he explained the entire situation.

Hadassah listened attentively. She was a good listener, Xerxes noted with delight, as he despised sharp-tongued motor-mouths like Amestris (his political wife). When he finished, Hadassah framed the crucial question: “Exactly what says that law against Vashti?”

“Simply that she is banished from my sight. If Vashti sees my face again, she must be slain. It is air-tight. I have wrestled with it for years. I can find no way around it.”

“I'm so sorry!” Hadassah bowed her head in grief. Xerxes couldn't believe that anyone could put on an act this good. “How much do you love her? Do you love her enough to give up your empire for her?”

“Well, I don't know. What do you have in mind?”

“The law only has power over you as long as you are King Xerxes and she is Queen Vashti. But if you were to become Jolly Joe Farmer, and she were to become Matron Mary, you could live happily ever after! Assign me some money. I will buy a nice farm for you, wherever you like, but far away from here. I will take Vashti. We will prepare a place for you. Then I will return, with a peasant disguise. We'll trim your beard, change your name, and King Xerxes will disappear forever. I will gladly become your servant, to work in your fields and cook in your kitchen.”

Now Xerxes laughed in spite of himself. He was finally beginning to relax and really enjoy being with this woman. "Very creative! I considered that myself, but I didn't think I could get away with it. However, if you help, perhaps we could pull it off. Would you really do that for me?"

"Of course, O King! I'll do it this very night! Just grant me a small advance to buy the farm. What kind of..."

"This very night? Don't you want to sleep with me first?" This woman was full of surprises.

But now Hadassah stiffened slightly. Mordecai's words came ringing back to her. *Just be yourself. Tell the truth. Don't put on airs. Don't pretend something that you do not feel is right.* The smile faded from her face. "Do you ask me what I really want, or what I will do, Your Majesty?"

"I know what you will do. It's my empire. As you well know, everyone obeys me without hesitation or they lose their heads. I asked you what you want."

Hadassah stood up from the love couch, then knelt before the king, leaning slightly forward. Her long black hair fell down around her neck to touch the ground in front of her. For a few moments her head bowed, as if in prayer. Then she lifted it to gaze earnestly into the king's face and began talking, quietly, as if in a prepared speech. "I will gladly sleep with you, if you are sure that will make you happy. But I warn you that you have done that with each concubine before me, and it has not made you happy. A one-night-stand cannot make you happy or cure your loneliness. What I really want is for you to be happy. Whether with Vashti, or me, or another whom you truly love, that is your choice; I will help you find your love. Only please, Your Majesty, do not use me once and toss me away like a dirty dishrag. I desire to serve you, O King, not just tonight, but forever, for that is true love. Only true love will make you happy and cure your loneliness."

No concubine before had ever spoken so boldly to the king. But he had lost count of the number of times he had been surprised by this woman. "True love? How quaint! You are just a dreamer! Tell me, what other dreams are now bouncing around in that pretty head of yours?"

"Everyone is a dreamer, O King. Dreams are a dime a dozen. I also have many dreams, mostly silly and childish. My Father taught me to focus on higher things."

"Just the same, I command you to tell me your dreams, at least the ones about me. What daydreams went through your mind in your year of preparation to see me?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. I dreamed that you would look beyond the dress, the hair, the adornments, beyond the beauty of form and face, beyond the smile and pleasant talk, to discover the real me underneath it all. I dreamed that you would fall in love with me; that you would court me, fearing to touch me lest you harm me..." She paused, almost afraid to continue, but the king waved her on.

"I dreamed that you would come to me on a white horse, as my knight in shining armor. I dreamed that you would kneel before me, to present me with a ring of gold and glistening diamonds; that you would sweep me off my feet and carry me on your white horse into your palace. I dreamed of a grand wedding, a banquet, with the entire empire invited. And I dreamed that... I dreamed that..." A tear trickled down her cheek, but she bravely continued on, "...that when the banquet was over, and you carried me into your bedroom, that I gave myself to you, body, soul, and spirit, in a wondrous unity to last forever." She was blushing profusely, a fact which might not have been noticed had she caked her face with makeup. She wiped her eyes on her bare arm. "I'm sorry, O King. But you did ask. I dreamed all that and more..." She lowered her eyes.

For a long time, the king sat there studying her, a slight smile playing at the corners of his lips. She continued kneeling, and blushing, for it seemed like he was looking through her dress into her soul. Finally, without a word, he got up and left the room. In a minute he was back with a tiny bag of gold. "Here," he casually threw it to her. "That should be plenty to buy the farm. Go to Vashti. Tell her all that I said. Gather her things and take her with you. Find a small cattle ranch. Come back for me when all is ready."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Without a moment's hesitation, Hadassah stood up, bowed, and left the room. As soon as she was gone, Xerxes rang for Hegai, waking him from a sound sleep. "Hurry. Go to Vashti! Bring her here now, secretly! Do not let anyone see you."

"But Your Majesty, the law..."

"Hang the bloody law! Bring her! Immediately!"

"Did you not enjoy Hadassah? Is there some prob..."

"Hadassah is on her way to see Vashti! You must get to her first! Go! Go! Run!"

Hegai ran. He knew the secret passage to the harem. He returned with Vashti well before dawn.

The king had not slept. He paused for a moment to gaze at her loveliness before realizing that no woman is very lovely when awakened abruptly at four o'clock in the morning. He steeled himself for what he must do. "My dear Vashti! Thank you for coming. I swear this is the last time you will have to answer my summons." He smiled at her and handed her a sealed envelope. "Please forgive me, Vashti. You are another man's wife. I should never have taken you from faithful Artebanus. I wronged you both. Being the king, I thought I could have whatever I wanted. I was selfish. But I have come to love you too much to keep you captive in my harem. This is my certificate of divorce. I have set you free. Go back to your husband. And may you and Artebanus be blessed with many children."

Vashti stood there, dumbfounded. She rubbed sleep from her eyes. She had no makeup to smear.

“Go, my dear. I will always love you! But you must never see my face again, lest you die.” He shooved her out. But as she left, he whispered, “If you meet Hadassah trying to take you with her to buy a farm for me, just tell her no. Tell her to return to me, for you already have a husband.”

Vashti grabbed his arm. “Thank you, O my king. This is the kindest thing you have ever done for me.”

The next afternoon, Hadassah entered the king’s court. He recognized her, for she still wore that blue satin gown. He raised his scepter to bid her approach the throne.

“Your Majesty! Live forever!” She bowed, then returned the bag of gold, adding, “I have failed you. Vashti is gone! I searched everywhere! Then Hegai said she’s not coming back. I am truly sorry. I was too late. She was there in the second harem only yesterday, for I saw her.”

Xerxes opened the bag and counted out the gold. It was all there. He smiled at her and nodded at his guards to move away so they could talk privately. “You were truthful to me when you told me your dreams, my dear. Now I shall be truthful to you in response. I sent Vashti away. Talking with you made me realize I was wrong in taking her, as she is another man’s wife. You showed me that true love wants the best for the beloved. My love for her was hurtful and selfish. Now I have given her my truest love. I set her free.”

“But... but why? I thought you wanted me to...”

“I was testing you, my love. I have fallen in love with you. No woman has ever spoken to me like you have. No one has ever touched my heart like you did last night.”

That blush, prettier than the finest makeup, again spread across her face, as Hadassah bowed to ask, “What then would you have me do, my lord?”

“I ask nothing of you, unless you care to take Vashti’s place as matron of the second harem. I would court you, but I fear to touch you, lest I harm you!”

So Hadassah scampered back to the harem, and took over the role as matron of the concubines who had already seen the king. Once there, the law stated that they could never come out unless the king called for them by name. Hadassah hoped he remembered her name!

An entire month went by, to January, 478 BC. Hadassah began to despair of ever hearing from the king again. Clearly, he had found others. He had forgotten her name. ‘Hadassah’ is a Judean name, difficult for a Persian tongue to pronounce. She should have taken a Persian name, as all the important people in the palace did. Even her uncle had taken a common Persian name, Mordecai, though he was of the line of Jair and the tribe of Benjamin. Hadassah wept inside, yet she faithfully did what her king had assigned.

Then one day Shaashgaz, the eunuch in charge of the second harem, called for Hadassah. “The king is in the entryway. He called for you by name!”

Hoping, half expecting, this, Hadassah had kept herself always ready. Yet the shock was so great she had to grab a mirror to double check. Yes, the thin gold band still tied back her hair. Her deep blue satin gown was still spotless. (She had seven of them, which she rotated daily. She wore nothing else, lest the king fail to recognize her.) She rushed out to the entry. But now she did not recognize him! For there in the entry to the second harem was a knight in shining armor, seated upon a white horse!

Seeing her there, the king leaped off his horse and pushed up his visor. It was indeed King Xerxes. Never before had the king himself come into this second harem. The ladies behind her gasped in shock, as Hadassah stepped forward to greet him.

But when she curtsied and bowed before him, the king dropped down upon one knee. He called out loudly, so every lady in the harem could hear, “Hadassah, daughter of King YHWH Elohim who rules from beyond the sea, will you do me the honor of becoming my queen? Will you accept this token of my sincerity?” He flipped open a tiny box. Inside lay a solid gold ring, flashing with diamonds.

“Your Majesty the King! There is nothing in the world I would like better than to give myself to you!”

He stood and installed the ring on her outstretched hand. Then he lifted her bodily and set her upon his horse, before jumping on behind her and riding out of the harem. They went out the back way and around the outside of the palace. All along the way people seemed to be gathering and clapping as if it were a holiday. When they reached the main gates, she saw a trio of heralds with trumpets blaring. Other white horses joined them, colored banners flying high. More heralds, just in front of a bevy of musicians, lined the formal entry to the king’s court. They were all playing joyously as if commemorating something.

The king neither paused nor slowed. He rode up the formal stairs and into the great entry doors between the pillars of the king’s court. Suddenly Hadassah realized what was happening, as a roar of applause burst from the packed courtroom. The crowd moved aside as they passed, and closed again behind as the king rode up to the throne. There he reigned his stallion to a halt and helped Hadassah dismount. Then he stood before her with a grin, held both her hands, and gazed into her eyes, while the traditional Persian wedding ceremony was performed on the spot. Finally he set a shining golden tiara upon her head and turned to address the crowd. “This is Princess Hadassah, a daughter of King YHWH Elohim who rules from beyond the sea. I now change her name to **Esther**, Star of Love, and take her as my queen forever, to replace Queen Vashti. I invite anyone who wishes to my banquet hall. For we shall celebrate our wedding with a great feast to last seven days. And all who come shall receive a gift.” Thus Hadassah’s daydreams came true, for the king had seen to every detail just as she had described.

Cyrus the Great had been a good judge of character. When he had conquered Babylon, he had been favorably impressed with Daniel and his Magi from the Judean exiles. He had dispersed them throughout his empire, where they became advisors to the satraps and governors in all his provinces. Such a one was Jair, grandson of Kish of the tribe of Benjamin. Now Jair's son Mordecai was old, but trusted and well-respected among the nobles of the Persian court at Susa, for he was faithful in all he did. Thus he sat at the palace gates with the king's advisors.

He too rejoiced when Hadassah, now known as Esther, was chosen as the queen of Persia. He came to the banquet, and received gifts along with all the rest. But the king did not recognize the connection between him and Esther. Esther beckoned him to the king's table to be introduced, but he shook his head to indicate that he preferred their relationship to remain secret. He was too well known as a Judean Magus. He did not want that to influence the king's relationship with his new queen.

So when the wedding feast was over, Mordecai went back to the palace gates, rejoicing secretly for his adopted daughter, and praising YHWH for her success. Alas, other nobles at the palace gates were not so happy. They too had entered daughters in the competition to replace Queen Vashti. They were of course partial to their own daughters, full-blooded Persian beauties, every one. They were angry that this foreigner, the daughter of some unknown king beyond the sea, had displaced them. Though the girls who had not yet been in to see the king had been thanked and sent home, the ones who had spent the night with him were forever locked in the 'second harem' as the king's concubines. Their fathers were furious with the king for not choosing their daughters instead. Two of these angry fathers, Bigthan and Teresh, sat at the gate with Mordecai.

He remained silent as he heard their bitter complaints, unwilling to give away his own secret. But when their grievance became a plot against the king's life, Mordecai sent a sealed message to Queen Esther to give the king.

Esther gave the message to the king without comment. Though he saw that it was sealed by his Magus Mordecai, again he did not make the connection to Esther. Xerxes grilled the two conspirators and had them executed.

Esther was everything the king had hoped for, and more. His loneliness and depression evaporated. Vashti was soon forgotten. In all the trials and tribulations of maintaining an empire, Queen Esther was the one bright light, the one true happiness in King Xerxes' troublous life. For she was never without her lovely smile and the peace and joy that radiated up from deep within her soul.

Still, the responsibilities of his empire at times weighed heavily upon him. Sometimes he woke up in the middle of the night, anxious and unable to sleep.

At such times Xerxes found that reading the historical records, the chronicles of his people, had a soothing effect, putting him back to sleep. He was doing that early one morning in 474 BC. He read of his ill-fated attacks on the Greeks in 481 and 480 BC. All his generals, Artaphernes, Artabazus, and Megabyzus, and even Artebanus his vizier had urged him on. Only that old Amalekite wizard Haman, his chief advisor, had warned him that the gods were against him and advised him to wait. Haman had warned three times, but the king had only gotten more stubborn.

Xerxes was appalled at his stupidity. He not only had refused to heed Haman's advice, he had even fired him and banned him from the palace. No wonder he couldn't sleep, with such a gross travesty of justice on his conscience. The next day he would surely right this terrible wrong.

So the king summoned Haman before him and offered him back his job as chief advisor. "I terribly wronged you in deposing you, my friend," Xerxes told him. "So I give you one week to decide what shall be done to right this wrong, to restore your honorable reputation in my court."

When Haman went home that night, he told his wife Zeresh and his ten sons the good news. He had his old job back, and the king wanted to honor him besides! They discussed together how best he could be honored. Zeresh urged him, "He said he wants to restore your reputation. How better to do that than to have all the palace nobles bow to you as you pass, every day for a whole month!"

"That is a great idea! And I shall wear my black wizard's shirt, with the image of Baal Amalek embroidered on it, so everyone who bows to me will be bowing to our god as well!" Satan, who inspired him, laughed himself silly.

The king bought the plan, and gave the orders. For one month, everyone in the palace must bow and give homage to Haman as he passed by, from the time he entered the palace gates in the morning, to the time he left at night. Only the king and his queen were exempted.

For a time, all went well. Haman strutted around the palace, gratified by all the recognition he was receiving. But sadly, as is often the case when a man is thrust into a position of great honor, it began to go to his head. When he was told that the Magus Mordecai at the palace gate was not bowing to him, he was furious. The next time he came in the gates, he watched for Mordecai. Sure enough, he was hiding behind other nobles, pretending ignorance. "What's the meaning of this, Mordecai?" he screamed out. "Why do you not bow before me? Have you not heard the king's command?"

Mordecai politely nodded his recognition. "I heard the king's command, Haman. I gladly grant you honor as the king's chief advisor. But as you well know, I am a Judean. My God, YHWH, prohibits from giving obeisance to any man. YHWH requires all worship be to Him alone. And I surely cannot bow before that image on your shirt."

“And what is the matter with this image on my shirt?” Haman was biting his tongue in his fury.

“It is an image of your god, thus an offense to YHWH.”

“I suppose you believe your God is better than mine.” Haman made it sound like such gross intolerance and prejudice was worse than murder.

Mordecai was cautious. “Every man believes his own God to be the best, your honor.”

Haman glared at him, then dropped it and strode on. But when he got home that night, he was livid with rage. He and Zeresh plotted what they should do to avenge his honor. “It’s not just that arrogant Mordecai, my dear. With the favor of the king which I now enjoy, I could easily have him executed for his disobedience. But Mordecai is just a two-bit Magus. It is his God, YHWH, and His impossibly intolerant laws, that really bug me. Just think how much better this world would be without such fundamentalist bigots looking down on everyone else! Why, it would be to the good of all mankind if we eliminated them from the earth!” Thus their evil plot was hatched. On the first of Nisan (March 24, 473 BC, the 12th year of Xerxes), Haman consulted his oracles and had them cast lots (Purim) to determine when and how it would be achieved.

Casting the lots took a long time, for his oracles claimed that every lot cast was somehow favorable to the Judeans! Finally the lot fell on Friday the 13th in the twelfth month, Adar (March 7, 472 BC). As a wizard / astrologer himself, he overruled the oracle, claiming that day and month were most advantageous to his purpose because (believe it or not), “Sol will be within Pisces, the fish, to swallow up the light of the Judeans; Mercury will be at the mouth of Pisces, about to be gobbled up; Venus will be drowning in the water from Aquarius; Mars will be pierced by the horns of Capricorn; Jupiter will be directly above the stinger of Scorpius; Saturn will be dangling right between the two horns of Taurus the Bull; and Uranus, the planet of death, will be directly within Leo, the Lion, the sign claimed by the Judeans as their own. How could anything be any more certain? The Judeans will all die on that date.”

To be ready by that date he needed to work fast. Haman came to the king with a huge bribe, saying, “There is a race of people scattered among your provinces which have become a problem. Their laws and customs are different from those of all other people, and they are very strict about them, which causes terrible friction in your empire. But worse yet, they refuse to obey your laws. They claim to be exempt, saying the God who gave their laws is even greater than you, O King! Therefore, it is not in your best interests to allow them to live in your empire. Please allow me to destroy them. I will contribute \$20,000,000 toward your expense in cleaning them out of your empire.”

Xerxes smiled. Haman was not his chief advisor for nothing. He knew how things got done!

Haman was holding out the money to him, a huge amount by any standard. “I accept your offer. Keep your silver, and use it just as you have said. This race of people is yours to dispose however you see fit. Here is my signet ring to seal the decree when you send it out across the empire.”

So Haman took the ring and went to prepare the letters. He hired 365 scribes to write them in every language of the empire. He sealed them with the king’s own signet ring. Then he hired another 365 couriers to carry them to every province, every people. The letters ordered that the king’s faithful servants, whether his noblemen, officers, soldiers, workers, peasants, or slaves, must hunt down and slay every Judean in the empire, young or old, man, woman, or child, free or slave, on the 13th day of Adar. Their assets were permitted as booty to recompense those who were obedient to the king’s command. Lastly, Haman’s letter was distributed in Susa and Persepolis. Then Haman sat down with the king at dinner, congratulating himself on a good day’s work. No one else in the palace was aware of the horrified consternation spreading across the empire.

Mordecai heard the news as he left for work the next morning. He tore his expensive Magi robe in two pieces, and put on sackcloth and ashes, mourning and wailing loudly all the while. But when he came to the palace gate he was not allowed in to take his seat, for no one is permitted in the king’s gate wearing sackcloth.

Queen Esther had assigned one of her maidservants to greet Mordecai every morning at the king’s gate, and thus to pass back and forth any messages that he and Esther might have. This morning, the maidservant returned to Esther with the news that Mordecai had been turned away from the gate because he had come dressed in sackcloth. Evidently he was in mourning, but nobody knew why. Esther was distraught. She called on her faithful attendant, Hathach, and ordered him to take Mordecai some decent clothes and find out what the problem was.

Hathach returned still carrying the clothes. “Mordecai refused them, my mistress. He says Judeans all over the world are fasting and praying in sackcloth and ashes, for your husband the king has sent out orders for them all to be slain!” Then he showed her a copy of Haman’s letter which had gone out under the king’s seal. “Mordecai begs you, please, for the sake of YHWH your God and all Judeans, go in to your husband the king to implore his favor and plead with him to spare our people!”

Esther sent him back to Mordecai with her answer. “Though I am queen, even I cannot barge into the king’s presence any time I wish. For if I enter the king’s court unbidden and he does not hold up his scepter to me, for any reason, I will immediately be put to death. For the last thirty days, I have not been summoned into the king’s presence. I don’t know why. Perhaps he has tired of me. Perhaps he has found another to replace me, as I replaced Queen Vashti. I dare not presume upon the king’s moods.”

Mordecai fired back his answer via Hathach. “Xerxes’ infamous bad moods are not the issue! Just because you sit in his palace, don’t think you will escape! If you fail to act, YHWH will still deliver us by some other means, but you and your father’s house will perish! For who but YHWH could possibly have known? Surely He raised you up to be the Queen of Persia for just such a time as this!”

Esther knew he was right. Only YHWH could have orchestrated her meteoric rise to royalty just in time to save her people. She wrote back to her uncle, “Assemble all the Judeans in Susa. Fast and pray for me. Do not eat or drink for three days and nights. I and my maidens will do the same. Then I will enter in unbidden to see the king, though it is contrary to the law. And if I perish, I perish.”

So prayers rose to the heavens for three days and nights. Mordecai’s prayer (considerably condensed) was this: “YHWH Elohim, who rules all things by the word of Your power, no one can oppose You or Your purpose to save Israel. For You created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. You are Lord of all. No one can resist You. You know all things; therefore You know that it was not in haughtiness or love of my own glory that I refused to bow to Haman. I would gladly have kissed the soles of his feet for the safety of Israel. But I did this that I might not set the glory of man above the glory of God, for I will not worship any except You, my Lord and my God. So now, Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, spare Your people! For our enemies are looking for our destruction. They have desired to steal away Your inheritance. Do not overlook Your own peculiar people Israel, whom You redeemed for Yourself out of the land of Egypt. Hear us! Turn our mourning into gladness, that we may live to sing Your praise and glorify Your holy name!”

Esther likewise put off her royal garments and wore sackcloth and ashes, praying, “Alas, Lord YHWH! We have no help but You! We are destitute! Danger is very near. From birth I have heard that You took us out of all the nations for Your perpetual inheritance. You did for us all that You promised. But we sinned; we honored the gods of the nations instead of You. So You delivered us into the hands of our enemies, even as You promised. Thus You are righteous, O YHWH. We deserve to be slaves in the foreign lands to which You have dispersed us. But our enemies are not content with the bitterness of our slavery. They have sworn by their idols to abolish the decree of Your mouth, to utterly destroy us! To take away Your own inheritance! To extinguish the glory of Your house and Your holy altar! To shut the mouths of them that praise You, but open the mouths of the heathen to slander Your holy name! And to glorify vanity, that a mortal king shall be honored above You! But You are the God of gods, the King above all kings. Do not let them rule over You. Do not let them laugh at our fall. Turn their counsel against themselves. Remember me now in my affliction. Put harmonious speech in my mouth and wisdom in my heart before the king.”

On the third day, Esther bathed and dressed again in her royal robes, with her royal crown and all the finery and jewels accorded a queen of Persia. But underneath, she wore one of her simple deep blue satin gowns. Likewise she wore her most joyful smile, for she planned to drop the crown, the jewelry, and the royal robes, so she could win back Xerxes’ heart with her smile as she had won it the first time. Putting on that smile was the hardest thing she had ever done, for her heart was breaking. But she had to pull it off – it was life or death for her people! She steeled herself.

So when Esther entered the portal to the king’s court, she was resplendent in beauty, radiant in joy, and glowing with the full flower of her youth. She confidently stepped into the dock to await the king’s scepter. Her right hand rested on the shoulder of one maid; a second maid carried the train of her royal robe. She rehearsed in her mind; *the little squeal of delight as she sang the traditional greeting; handing the crown and jewels to her maids; dropping the royal robe with her first step to reveal her blue satin gown; the eager, flowing dance to the king’s side; her winning smile; her intense interest in the king’s happiness.* She remembered it all as if it were yesterday.

But something went wrong. The king flew into a rage! Someone had offended him! He threw his scepter down, jumped up, and screamed at the miscreant, pointing and shaking the royal fist in his face. The unfortunate fellow was hauled off. The king scowled and looked to the dock for the next victim of his wrath. His eyes fell on Esther. She knew the danger of his bad moods better than anyone.

Her moment had come. Scepter or no scepter, she must go to the king, and if he does not pick it up and hold it out to her, she will perish. Her smile frozen on her face, she took her first step, dropping her jewelry and royal robe to her maids as planned. But the squeal of delight with her joyous greeting died in her throat, to be replaced by a sob. Then she fainted against the shoulder of her maid.

Logos was concerned. “Satan has deliberately filled him with wrath for this moment. He will try to re-direct that wrath against Esther, as he has done between husbands and their wives since the dawn of time. I cannot allow that. I must go down.” In that instant, Logos appeared between Satan and Xerxes. “Begone, Satan! Though you may have had occasion against Xerxes a moment ago, your occasion is past, for Xerxes has never abused Esther or treated her with evil intent.” Satan knew better than to argue with the King of kings. He fled the battlefield.

For once, Xerxes’ anger passed swiftly. He forgot the scepter and the standard courtroom protocol. He leaped from his throne and raced down the isle to catch Esther as she slumped to the ground. He picked her up, lovingly carried her back to his throne, and cuddled her there on his lap until she awakened. But then her look of fear reminded him. He called for his aide to retrieve his scepter, and touched it to her forehead. Esther’s life was spared.

“What’s wrong, dear Esther? Please, do not be afraid. You shall not die. My wrath was against another. I am sorry that I frightened you. What troubles you?”

But even hearing his kind words, Esther fainted again. He hugged her until she recovered, then repeated, “Tell me what troubles you, my dear. What is your request? Even to half the kingdom I will grant it.”

But after all her careful planning, Esther couldn’t think. Her forced smile was gone, along with her confidence. The color had drained from her face. She knew that she looked like a fool in the king’s arms. What now dare she ask? She couldn’t win his heart like this! And there was Haman, leering at her from behind the king. “O King, live forever!” she breathed, with a weakness she surely did not intend. “It is Haman! He... He...” she could not finish the thought. Her act was entirely ruined. “...and you... uh... I would like... if it please the king... Would you and Haman come this evening to a feast that I am preparing?”

Xerxes’ eyebrows raised quizzically. *In the six years he had known her, Esther had never shown any frailty; her strength of resolve and supreme confidence as a daughter of a mighty King had never cracked. Until now. Something had changed, and it was not just about some invitation to dinner! Of that he was quite certain!*

Now the color returned to Esther’s embarrassed face, with a rush that turned her lips and cheeks to scarlet. She climbed out of his arms to kneel at his feet, thinking fast. “My lord! I’m sorry! Please forgive me! I saw you in your mighty wrath as an angel of God, with judgment in your hands! My heart was troubled to behold your glory. My strength failed me as I saw your majesty! But now I see that you are wondrously kind, for your face is full of grace and peace. Please bring Haman and attend my dinner tonight.”

The king nodded his assent, and Esther fled to prepare.

But alas. She had not given her maids enough time. She wanted to try to duplicate that first feast, the one at which she had won his heart. But some of the foods were not available in time, some took too long to prepare, and she realized with horror that the entire setting was wrong! She had prepared her banquet in the queen’s dining hall, where the ladies usually dined separately from the men. She was still running about the kitchen when the king strode in, and hadn’t yet changed into her deep blue dress. Also, the king had brought several other nobles with him besides Haman. The entire effect was blown!

Still, they all enjoyed the meal. Esther slowly relaxed, listening to the pleasant though superficial conversation between the king and his courtiers. She realized that she must try again, to create the right atmosphere to win back the king’s heart. So when the meal was over and they were enjoying the wine, she was prepared for the anticipated question: “Now, my dear. What was it that troubled you? What is your request? Even to half the empire I will do it.”

“Only this, my lord. If I have found favor in your sight and in the sight of your chief advisor, Haman, please come to a second banquet that I shall prepare. This time I shall serve you in the king’s private dining room. But let the king and his chief advisor come alone, for it is secret, so I can only reveal my petition to the king and Haman alone.”

Haman went home that evening in a very good mood. He invited his friends over to share in his joy, and related to them how the king and queen had honored him, and how wealthy he had now gotten. “Even Queen Esther has selected me above everyone else, to accompany her and the king at a special feast in my honor today, and again tomorrow!” Then his face darkened. “My only regret is that I have not yet had time to deal with Mordecai the Judean for dishonoring me at the palace gate. My anger rises every time I enter the palace! I cannot wait until...”

“But my lord,” his wife Zeresh interrupted. “You have the favor of the king. You don’t have to wait another day. Mordecai is only one man. Order your servants to build a tall, imposing gallows out by the main thoroughfare. Then first thing in the morning, get the king’s permission to hang Mordecai on it. By tomorrow evening it will be done. Then you can go joyfully to the queen’s banquet.” Haman pictured Mordecai hanging high, with passersby stopping to look. The picture pleased him. He gave the orders to his servants to erect the gallows, and to make it 70 feet high!

King Xerxes awoke an hour before dawn. His thoughts were restless. He couldn’t get back to sleep. So he called for the historical records, opened them at random, and began to read. Normally that quickly put him back to sleep, but this night he happened to read the account of the plot of Bigthan and Teresh against his life. Mordecai had warned him just in time. He remembered it, and asked, “What honor was given Magus Mordecai for this?”

His royal historian shook his head. “Why, nothing, Your Majesty. Mordecai requested no reward. He said he was just doing his duty as a servant of the king.”

Xerxes settled back on his bed, planning how to right this injustice. He heard noises in the king’s courtroom. “Who is that in my court so early?”

His servants checked. “It is your chief advisor, Haman, Your Majesty. He merely awaits your rising.”

“Send him in.”

Haman entered the king’s bedchamber. “Thank you for coming so early, my friend and advisor. So advise me already. What should be done for a man whom the king desires to honor for his service?”

Who else could this man be but himself? Haman gleefully answered, “Dress him in the king’s own royal robes and set him on one of the king’s own royal stallions. Then let the king’s highest noble lead him throughout the city calling, ‘This is done to the man whom the king desires to honor!’”

Xerxes smiled and nodded. "That sounds pretty good, my friend. I accept your advice. Take quickly now the robe and the horse, just as you have said, and do this for my old Magus Mordecai the Judean, who sits by the palace gate. As my highest noble, you shall lead him through the city yourself, and do not fail to do all that you have advised."

Haman obeyed the king. What else could he do? But after returning Mordecai to the palace gate that evening, he rushed home, face burning with shame. When he told Zeresh and his friends and advisors what had happened, they were frightened for him. "Your plot against Mordecai and the Judeans is discovered. YHWH their God has arisen to defend Mordecai. Now that He has turned against you, you will surely fall! Repent and obtain the king's pardon for your plot against Mordecai and against his people!"

Even as they spoke, the king's servant came to the door to bring Haman to the feast that Esther had prepared. All the way to the banquet hall, he wondered what to say, what to do. *Should he throw himself on the floor before the king, even before the banquet begins, to beg the king's pardon? He loves him! And the queen does too! They will have mercy.*

But alas, Haman's pride was just too great. The king welcomed him with such warmth. He put his arm around his shoulder, and walked side by side with him into the dining room. His wife and friends must be wrong. His plot had not been discovered. Thus Haman deceived himself.

They entered together through the door which the king always used. King Xerxes screeched to a halt with a gasp, pulling Haman to stop beside him. This time, Esther had succeeded in recreating the scene, and it all came back to the king in a flash. She was facing the wrong door. He saw the long black hair, tied back with the simple gold ribbon. He saw the modest, unadorned blue satin gown. She stood beside the king's place as if she were a maidservant. She heard his gasp, and turned around. A big smile lit up her face, and a girlish squeal was cut short with the traditional greeting: "O King! Live forever!" She bowed and curtsied, then flowed eagerly toward them, hands raised to the king as if performing a graceful dance. "I am Hadassah," she sang, "daughter of the great King who rules from beyond the sea!" She stood tall, looked the king in the eye, and radiated the joy that welled up from deep within her soul.

Memories long forgotten were stirred again. All that the previous day's feast had failed to do, Esther achieved on her second try. Haman tried to ask about this 'Hadassah', but Esther ignored him, having eyes only for her king. Now, instead of the previous day's dialog among the men, Esther engaged the king in an animated conversation, all designed to bring back the memories he had forgotten. Even the items on the menu, she reminded him, were the same as on that day when she had won his heart. The king conceded, "I had forgotten. I had forgotten everything, even the food. I was beginning to take you for granted, my dear. You now remind me of why I fell in love with you!"

The meal was fabulous, fit for a king. This time the king remembered what he had eaten, as Esther stirred his heart. They sat back when they finished, sipping their wine and reaffirming their love for each other. Though right beside them, Haman was virtually shut out of the conversation. He was getting miffed at being ignored. Again he butted in, "I still want to know why you used the name Hadassah! And who is this 'King who rules from beyond the sea'?"

The radiant beams from Esther's smile cut off as with a knife. She turned to Haman and icily declared, "Esther is my Persian name. Hadassah is my original Judean name, and my Father who rules from beyond the sea is YHWH." She turned back to Xerxes and the smile blazed out again.

Haman's mouth fell open so far he nearly swallowed his wine glass. He realized he'd been had. The color drained from his face. Sweat poured off his brow. He loosened his collar. His eyeballs bounced between the king, the queen, and the exit. But King Xerxes was utterly oblivious to Haman's discomfort. His total focus and greatest delight were on Esther. "Again, I beg you, my beloved Esther, what is your request? Ask any petition, up to half of my empire, and I shall grant it for you."

Esther's smile faded. A faraway look crossed her face. Her eyes closed and for a few moments her lips moved silently as if in prayer. Then she looked into the eyes of her king to say, "If I have found favor in your sight, O King – if it please the king – may my life be given as my petition, and my people as my request. For we have been sold, I and all my people, to be slain. If we had only been sold as slaves, I could have borne it. I would have remained silent so as not to annoy the king. But we are given to be slaughtered, destroyed, even annihilated from off the face of the earth, both I and all Judeans, my people."

The king rose to his feet suddenly, his big, padded chair crashing over behind him. "What? Who is he? Who would presume to attempt this monstrous evil?"

"Our foe is..." she pointed, "this wicked Haman!"

Now a second chair crashed down, as Haman leapt to his feet to defend his honor. But after blubbing for a bit, it was clear that he had no defense. Xerxes drew his sword to slay him on the spot, but managed to restrain himself in time. (Even back then it was bad manners to splatter blood on the tablecloth.) He strode out to the king's gardens to compose himself and let his anger cool. When he returned to the banquet hall, there was Haman, on his knees before Esther's chair, his face on her lap and his arms gripped about her waist. He was pleading for his life, but to the king it looked much worse. "Will he even assault my queen in front of me? Guards!" he shouted. "Bring the death mask! Put it on Haman! He shall die this very day!"

So the truth came out about Haman's plots, including his plot to hang Mordecai on his gallows. In fury, the king ordered that Haman be strung up there instead.

The king's wrath was finally pacified, seeing Haman dangling from the gallows he had built for Mordecai, 'the one whom the king chose to honor'. Xerxes took his signet ring away from Haman and gave it to Mordecai instead. In addition, he assigned the title of chief advisor to Mordecai, and put him in charge of everything that Haman had once controlled. Also, the king gave Haman's substantial estate to Esther. She in turn gave it to Mordecai.

The next day, Esther returned to bow before the king. He extended his scepter. "If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, let letters be written to revoke those sent by Haman to destroy the Judeans in all the king's provinces. How can I endure to see this terrible calamity against all my people, the extermination of my kindred?"

Mordecai, now chief advisor to the king, was at his right hand. Xerxes turned to him. "Mordecai! This is your first task as my chief advisor. Write to the Judeans as you see fit. Sign it in my name, and seal it with my signet ring. Such a decree, so signed and sealed, cannot be revoked."

It was only Sivan 23 (our June 18). He still had plenty of time. Mordecai could not revoke the letter sent by Haman, but he could order that the Judeans be armed and ready to defend themselves against the threat. He sent letters to every province in the empire, everywhere that Haman's letters had gone, commanding in the king's name that the Judeans be given the opportunity to obtain weapons to defend themselves, and granting them the right to destroy and plunder any who tried to harm them or steal from them. Thus the dread of the Judeans fell upon the empire. Many people converted and were adopted into the family of Israel as a result. Thus there was great rejoicing among the Judeans as they armed themselves and prepared to defend themselves against their enemies.

Yet the enemies of the Judeans still hung on to the edict of Haman, for Satan had inspired them to slay the people of God. However, many of the satraps, nobles, and governors assisted the Judeans, for fear of Magus Mordecai, the king's new chief advisor, whom they knew to be a Judean.

On the evening ending the 13th of Adar, King Xerxes reported to Queen Esther, "The Judeans have slain 500 in Susa alone, including Haman's ten sons. Many thousands of your enemies must have died in the rest of my empire! Now, my dear, do you have any further request?"

"If it please the king let tomorrow also be granted for the Judeans, as I know there are several hundred more still trying to kill my people in Susa. Let the bodies of Haman's sons also be hung on the gallows as a sign to them."

So it was done. The Judeans were granted total victory. Mordecai was established as second only to the king, and in favor with all the people. So they rested and feasted on the 14th of Adar. Every year since then, Judeans celebrate this date as the Festival of Purim, which refers to the lots which wicked Haman had cast against them.

King Xerxes' life had been filled with regrets, stupid decisions, defeats, failures to listen to wisdom – at one time or another he had made nearly everyone in the world angry with him. The Babylonians hated him. The Greeks hated him. The Egyptians hated him. The barbarians on the northern steppes hated him. Now even many of his own people hated him, for taking the side of the Judeans.

But Logos was pleased with him. "Michael! After all his failures, Xerxes has finally found and accomplished My will! Return my covering of peace over him. Perhaps he will learn to love My ways and choose My wisdom. Except I will continue to let the Greeks trouble him, to test him, to see if he will heed My counsel or not."

So the next seven years were mostly peaceful for the Persian Empire. Xerxes mellowed out. His infamous vile moodiness and angry depression subsided. He enjoyed his wife Esther. He actually learned a bit about YHWH from her and her uncle Mordecai. When the Greeks troubled their northwestern border, Mordecai counseled him to let go of Ionia and give the Ionian Greeks their freedom. That was hard for him – and for his satraps there! But he did it.

It was a good thing he did. For in 478 BC, the same year he had first taken Esther as his queen, the Greek city-states had formed the Delian League (based on the Island of Delos) for protection from, and vengeance against, Persia! That had now become a powerful military alliance, led by Athenian General Cimon, son of General Miltiades (who had beaten Persia at Marathon). Cimon had distinguished himself against the Persians at Salamis in 480 BC. He had sworn to regain control of all Greek territory from their Persian overlords. In this, the Delian League had become quite successful. In battle after battle, General Cimon was victorious over the Persians, driving them first out of Greece and then Ionia. If Xerxes had tried to stop them, he certainly would have been defeated again – possibly killed. But instead, he heeded Mordecai, and enjoyed Esther, while the Greeks became the masters of the Aegean Sea and the coastlands surrounding it. By 466 BC Cimon had driven most of the Persian forces from western Anatolia, and the next year he drove them out of Thrace as well.

Many people in his own palace also hated Xerxes. All his generals hated him, not just for his losses to the Greeks, but now for failing to take decisive action to protect what Persia had won there. His old vizier Artebanus hated him. *He had forgiven him for taking his wife Vashti. He had even forgiven him for elevating Haman above himself (because he was so grateful to have Vashti back). But he couldn't forgive him for promoting that hated Judean, Mordecai, above him. He vowed vengeance!* But YHWH covered Xerxes, so for seven years, Artebanus could do nothing. Every time he began to plot against the king, Vashti wisely intervened. "Speak not so against our king, my lord. He gave me back to you! Our lives and our joy lie in faithfully serving him."

What changed? No one knows for sure. Maybe it was Xerxes' old drinking habits. Maybe he got lazy. Maybe he tired of Esther and began lusting after younger women. Maybe he got proud, and careless. With the empire in the capable hands of Mordecai, he lived a life of opulence and ease. Logos looked down and saw all these and more. He was disgusted with him. "He doesn't love My wisdom or My people anymore. All he loves is his own pleasure!" Logos began withdrawing his covering from King Xerxes.

Beginning in 467 BC, Logos assigned him two years' probation. He sent warnings. He spoke to him not just through Esther and Mordecai, but also in dreams, in rumors and threats of palace intrigues and plots against his life. But you know how it is, dear Reader. Once you've been covered by Logos, you feel invincible and refuse to believe anything bad could happen. I'm sorry. I hate sad endings.

So let's get it over with. Toward the end of 465 BC, Artebanus hatched a plot to overthrow the king. With two of the disaffected generals behind him (Artabazus and Megabyzus) he assaulted and killed the king one night after a lengthy drinking party. The crown prince Darius was there too, also stone drunk, so Artebanus managed to pin the blame on him. In the ensuing trial, Darius was accused of killing his father in a drunken brawl in order to take the throne for himself. He had been too drunk to remember what had actually happened, so he was quickly convicted and executed. His little brother **Artaxerxes I** became the new king, supported by Artebanus, his regent and the real power behind the throne. As his first official decree, Artebanus – in Artaxerxes' name – banished all Judeans from the palace, including Esther and Mordecai.

But these palace plots have a way of backfiring on you. Artaxerxes turned out to be no powder puff. It seemed that Esther and Mordecai had been very kind to him in his growing up years. When he argued with his regent about their banishment, all he heard was platitudes about their 'foreign influence' and their 'inplacable God YHWH'.

But Artaxerxes knew that was wrong! *YHWH is a kind and loving God* – so he had been taught by Esther. In December of 465 BC Artaxerxes challenged Artebanus to a duel over the matter. Though young and inexperienced, YHWH gave him courage. He defeated his regent and slew him with his own sword. Artaxerxes immediately restored Mordecai to his post as chief advisor, and brought Esther and his other Judean friends back into the palace as before. He could trust these Judeans! They were wise, honest, and faithful in their service to the king. Among the many Judeans he elevated into his service were **Nehemiah**, who became his cup-bearer, and **Ezra** the scribe (son of Seraiah grandson of Hilkiah), who became his official historian.

Now the failures of his father began to come home to roost. Remember, King Xerxes had appointed his younger brother Achaemenes as satrap over Egypt. Achaemenes' cruelty had earned Persia the Egyptians' undying hatred.

The Egyptians took advantage of Xerxes' assassination to execute the Persian tax collectors and start a rebellion. It was led by Inaros son of Psamtik III of Heliopolis, and Amyrtaeus of Sais. They allied with the Delian League and hired Greek mercenaries. In 460 BC the Athenian navy, under the command of Admiral Charitimidēs and General Cimon, came to their aid. He brought 200 warships and 100,000 troops. They defeated the Persian fleet of 80 ships led by the hated satrap Achaemenes. He and 100,000 of his 400,000 soldiers were slain at Pelusium, and the Persians were forced to retreat to Memphis. But the Greek and Egyptian forces were also hurt. Admiral Charitimidēs was killed; Inaros was injured in his thigh. Half their men were slain; many of their ships were sunk. They retreated to lick their wounds at Byblus in the Nile Delta. In fierce anger, they sent the dead body of Achaemenes back to Persia.

King Artaxerxes was shocked. The queen mother Amestris was furious; she had nursed a secret crush on her husband's brother ever since he was an admiral at Salamis. Esther urged caution. They asked Mordecai to settle the matter. What must be done about this outrage?

Magus Mordecai was wise. He would not give a snap answer. "Allow me a week, Your Majesty. I will ask other Magi in the province. Together we will obtain an answer from YHWH our God." He and his Magi friends then fasted and prayed for God's wisdom.

He returned to the king in a week. "YHWH has heard our prayers. He sees the wrongs that were done in Egypt, wrongs on both sides. Your father was wrong in allowing his brother Achaemenes to abuse the Egyptians so cruelly. But the Egyptians were wrong to rebel against your father and to hire the Greeks against you. So YHWH will grant you your revenge for your uncle's life. Prepare your army, and send General Megabyzus to Egypt. I promise that you will be successful over the rebels there, on two conditions. First, you must not slay Amyrtaeus, Inaros, or the Greek Admiral Cimon or his officers. Just discipline them, then return them home, for their countries need them. Second, you must give honor to YHWH for your protection in this battle, by returning the exiles of Judah to their homeland under Ezra the scribe, and by authorizing him to begin rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem."

Now, that was a tall order! Mordecai had not minced words. Frankly, not a person in the palace believed he could pull it off. Even the heavenly host held their breath. Artaxerxes was no powder puff. He would not be blown about by his nobles' hot air. "Just a minute, Mordecai!" He looked suspiciously at his friend and chief advisor. "Where in Sheol did you pull out that bit about Ezra and the exiles of Judah, and rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem?"

Mordecai handed him the book of Daniel. "It is right here, O King. Daniel, late chief of the Magi, prophesied that you would authorize the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem eighty years after King Cyrus." [See page 185.]

King Artaxerxes was stunned. *His name, in the holy book of the Judeans? How could Daniel have known about him before he was born?* It was now nearly eighty years since Cyrus. He took a deep breath and made his decision. "I will accept the blessing of your God YHWH. I will fulfill His conditions. Ezra! Gather from the exiles of Judah all who will go. I will give you a letter authorizing you to return to Jerusalem and rebuild its walls. I will provide the funds for your expedition. Now, General Megabyzus, begin to prepare your army for battle. In the spring of next year, you shall discipline the rebels in Egypt. But you are commanded to cause no harm to their leaders, Amyrtaeus, Inaros, or Admiral Cimon or his officers. Bring them alive to me. I will discipline them and send them home."

A gasp passed around the king's court. Nobody thought he could do it! If only they could have heard the joyous celebration in the heavenlies that very moment! But Satan came screaming to Logos, "That wasn't fair! I wasn't ready! You didn't give me a chance! I had hardly begun my work with him! He's just a kid! I was being easy on him until he settled into his job! Nobody can make his decision that fast! You've got to give me another chance..."

He would have run on, for Satan had the idea that many words win arguments. But Logos cut him short, saying, "Begone Satan! His decision is made. I cannot un-make it any more than you can. He has My covering until he decides otherwise. Go peddle your lies somewhere else."

So in the first month of 458 BC, the seventh year of Artaxerxes, Ezra the priest / scribe collected all the exiles who were willing from Susa and Persepolis and returned to Tel-aviv. There he found more, including some Levites and temple servants. They gathered north of Babylon at the head of the Ahava River (which flows out from the Euphrates and cuts across to the Tigris River basin). Ezra took inventory to be sure they had all they would need. The king had been very generous, supplying \$20,000,000 in gold and silver. All that Ezra had requested was granted.

Oops! Ezra had forgotten to ask for soldiers to protect them from bandits! Ezra was ashamed to go back to the king, after telling him, "The hand of our God is powerful to help those who seek Him, but His anger is against those who forsake Him." So he delayed an extra nine days while he carefully divided up all the valuables between his most trusted men. Then they had a time of fasting and prayer, seeking God for a safe journey. Finally he and 1754 exiles (plus their wives and families) left for Jerusalem.

Logos was very pleased, and blessed Ezra abundantly. Remember, Ezra was more than a scribe and a historian. He was a lover of God's Law! He studied it, practiced it, taught it, and copied it. There are some who claim he was as skilled in the Law of Moses as was Moses himself! Most will not try to make that comparison, but all agree that he was the right man to succeed Zerubbabel, who had died twenty years earlier at the venerable age of 87.

The trip took four months. Two different times, large gangs of bandits attacked the caravan, swords raised high. But each time, as they came close, the bandits slid to a halt, turned, and fled, screaming. Ezra realized that he had a mighty angelic host protecting them.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, the Judeans there excitedly welcomed the newcomers. They carried out old Jeshua, the high priest / king of the rebuilt temple. Now 119, he had been longing to rest in peace with his fathers. But he refused to die until he could anoint his successor, and YHWH had granted his dying wish. He poured olive oil on Ezra's head, crying, "Now, YHWH my King, let your servant die in peace, for I have beheld Your salvation in Israel! This one also shall be a king / priest of Your people, a type of Messiah!" He passed on to his reward that night.

Ezra stood before them to read the king's decree, "Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, scribe of the Law of YHWH God of heaven, perfect peace. You are hereby sent by the king and his seven counselors to Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your hand. All people of Israel who are in my kingdom who are willing may go with you. Bring all the silver and gold which the king and his counselors and others in the empire have freely contributed for the temple of YHWH in Jerusalem. With this money, first diligently buy sacrificial offerings, bulls, rams, grain offerings, and libations, and offer them on the altar of YHWH's temple in Jerusalem. With the rest of the money, do whatever seems good to you, according to the will of your God. Further, I, King Artaxerxes, decree to all the treasurers in my provinces beyond the Euphrates River, that whatever Ezra the priest / scribe of YHWH may require of you, it shall diligently be done, even up to \$200,000 in silver, 1225 bushels of wheat, 1000 gallons of wine, and salt as needed. Whatever is commanded by YHWH the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the temple of the God of heaven lest He be angry against the empire of the king and his sons. I also decree that there shall be no tax, toll, or tribute on any of the priests, Levites, singers, doormen or temple servants. And you, Ezra, by the wisdom of God, appoint magistrates and judges to govern all the people in the province of Judah, all who live by the laws of your God, that you may teach anyone who is ignorant of them. And whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, execute judgment upon him strictly, whether for death, banishment, imprisonment, or fine. Signed, Artaxerxes, Emperor of Persia."

Having heard the decree of the king, the people of Judea all accepted Ezra as their new governor and religious leader to succeed the late Zerubbabel and Jeshua. Ezra's first official act as governor was to order that everyone, man, woman, or child, gather each Sabbath morning while he taught them from the Law of YHWH. The people rejoiced as Ezra began to read to them the Law from the books of Moses, for it had not been read for a long time.

Ezra wanted to celebrate Sukkot (Tabernacles) but he knew the people would not be ready in time. So he planned a special feast for the 15th of Kislev and timed his readings to finish the books of Moses by then. He told the people, especially the leaders and priests, “Purify yourselves and be holy, according to all the Law you have just heard, so we may celebrate the feast with joy!”

After Ezra finished the final reading and sent everyone home, Shecaniah and a few other elders remained behind to talk. “Thank you for reading the Law. We really needed to hear it again. Ever since Zerubbabel died, we’ve had no one to hold our feet to the fire. Jeshua taught us, but he never disciplined us. We’ve kinda let it get out of hand.”

“Let what get out of hand?”

“Well, ever since the Samaritans began helping us with the temple, we’ve kind of allowed ourselves to intermingle with the people of the land.”

“Just what do you mean by, ‘intermingle’?”

“Ah... You know. They freely come and go among us. We trade goods and cultures, and they...”

“What? You mean you’ve let the heathen bring their idolatrous culture into Judah?”

Shecaniah hung his head. The elders there were all filled with shame, now that they had heard the Law and recognized how far short they had fallen. “It’s worse than that, Ezra. Many of our sons have married heathen women. Some of them have even brought their false gods into the city. And some of our leading men, our elders, have been the worst offenders!”

There was a stunned silence for a few moments, then the sound of tearing cloth as Ezra ripped his robe from top to bottom and then sat back in his chair, his face white with horror. Shecaniah joined him – then other elders, too. They were quiet until the time of the evening sacrifice.

Then, instead of offering the sacrifice, Ezra fell on his knees with his face in the dirt and cried out to God, “O YHWH my God, I am embarrassed and ashamed to lift my face to You! Our iniquities have flooded over our heads, and our guilt has grown even to the skies. Since the days of our ancestors, we have rebelled against You, so You gave us up to the power of the nations, to the sword, to plunder, and to open shame. But now for a brief moment You have shown us grace, to leave us an escaped remnant, and have brought us back to Your holy land, and have enlightened our eyes, and revived us from our bondage. Though we were not worthy, yet You extended Your mercy in the sight of the kings of Persia, to raise up Your temple and to restore the walls of Jerusalem. Yet, even after all this, we have forsaken Your commandment, in which You said, ‘The land you are entering, which I gave you to possess, is unclean. It is filled from one end to the other with the abominations of the nations. Therefore do not give your

daughters to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons. And never lust after their culture or their wealth, nor seek their peace and prosperity, that you may be strong, and eat the good of the land, and leave it as an inheritance to your sons forever.’ Now, after all the punishment we have already received for our sin (which is less than we deserved, for You left us a remnant) shall we again break Your commandment, and intermarry with the idolatrous people who commit these abominations? Will You then be so angry with us that You destroy even the remnant to leave none who escape? O YHWH God of Israel, You alone are righteous! Behold, we fall before You in our guilt, for not one of us can stand before You now.”

As Ezra was praying, crying out loudly, a large group gathered around him from all Judah, men, women, and children, all weeping bitterly. Shecaniah called out to the assembly in response to Ezra’s prayer. “We have been unfaithful to our God, and have married heathen wives, and brought their idols and their pagan culture into our homes. Yet now there is hope for Israel, because of our spirit of repentance. So now, let us make a covenant with our God, to put away every heathen wife and her children, according to the Law of YHWH.”

So they arose that very night, and made all the priests and leaders of the people swear an oath to do as Shecaniah had proposed. They were not ready to celebrate the feast to YHWH. Instead they made a proclamation throughout the land, to assemble all the Judeans back to Jerusalem in three days. Any refusing to come would have his possessions taken, his land forfeit, and he would be excluded from the assembly. Needless to say, they all came.

A huge crowd gathered in the open square before the temple. They were trembling for their sins, and shivering because of the heavy winter rain. In spite of the miserable weather, Ezra led them in prayers of repentance and vows to separate themselves from their heathen wives. Then the elders had mercy on the people and sent them home, with a schedule for each of the heads of the households to bring their families back over the next four months to actually take care of all the divorces. By the first of the year, nearly all who had married a heathen was divorced. The pagans were all sent back to their homelands with their children. The guilty Judeans offered a ram to atone for their sins.

Frankly, it was a dreadful mess. There were a lot of hurt feelings and angry people. Many had borne children by their foreign wives. Some of the foreigners had discovered they loved their family more than their paganism. They got together and presented a rather emotional appeal to Ezra.

He acquiesced. After they publicly gave up their idols, renounced their paganism, and went through the required rites of purification, Ezra allowed them to be adopted into a Judean family to become true Israelites, so they could then remarry the one whom they had so recently divorced. This helped heal some of the hurt feelings.

General Megabyzus brought his army, together with the army of General Artabazus, to Byblus in the Nile Delta. They were amazed to still have their jobs. They'd actually sided with Artebanus in the plot against King Xerxes, though they had later stopped Artebanus from killing Artaxerxes, too. But when the plot was investigated and their part in it was uncovered, King Artaxerxes had been so grateful for saving his life that he had pardoned them, restored them as his generals, and made Megabyzus satrap of Syria and Artabazus satrap of Phrygia. Now they had one more chance to prove their worth and their loyalty.

So pure worship was re-established in YHWH's temple. The people were cleansed. The regular cycle of Feasts was restored. The newly returned exiles finally got settled in. Ezra ordered the workers to gather on the day after the Sabbath (our Sunday) to begin work on Jerusalem's walls, according to the decree of King Artaxerxes. The men came early in the morning, eager to start. They desperately needed those walls! Ever since they had divorced and sent home their foreign wives and stopped the flow of pagan wares into Jerusalem, they had been sorely harassed by the Samaritans, who were furious at being shut out of the city.

Shortly after dawn, Ezra stood in front of the temple to read King Artaxerxes' decree once again. Some Samaritans were already there to bug them. He wanted to make sure they knew this was legal. But when he finished reading the decree, there was a stunned silence among the Judeans. Nowhere in it did the king mention rebuilding the walls! How absurd. Everyone knew it was there. That was what Mordecai had advised the king, and he had agreed!

Ezra read it again. It simply wasn't there. Now the Samaritans began laughing at them! "Ha! Go sacrifice to your God, as the king commands! But you don't have a permit to put up any walls! And you can't keep us out!"

This was a shocking tragedy. Ezra had been so sure it was there. But everyone had read into it what they wanted to see. The king had forgotten the most important part. The Samaritans laughed them to scorn. From that day on the persecution from the surrounding nations increased – dramatically. Ezra sent letters to Tel-aviv, Persepolis, and Susa, pleading for someone to get the king's permission to rebuild the walls in accord with Daniel's prophecy.

It took Megabyzus over a year. The Persians were not used to fighting in the marshes of the Nile Delta, and Byblus was well-defended with Egyptians and Greeks. But YHWH blessed their efforts and by 454 BC they succeeded in putting down the revolt and capturing all the leaders except Cimon. He took his fleet back to Cyprus and attacked the Persian stronghold there. Megabyzus sent the captured leaders to Susa, then ordered the Persian navy after Cimon, with orders to wipe out his fleet. The great General Cimon died in the battle, and the remnants of his fleet fled to Greece. Once again, the Persian navy was supreme all across the Mediterranean Sea.

King Artaxerxes was still determined to get YHWH's blessing. The old queen mother Amestris demanded her revenge for her beloved brother-in-law's death, but the king protected the prisoners. He sentenced them to two years in prison for rebellion. After their discipline, they must be set free as Mordecai had advised.

But motor-mouth Amestris was not one to be put off. Two years was not sufficient punishment for the death of her 'brother'! She had loved him, for in many ways she was rather like him, cruelty and all. Being queen mother, she packed a lot of influence in the palace. After nagging and badgering her son the entire two years, she got her way. The prisoners' sentences were extended three more years.

The five years ended, but the queen mother's bitterness and thirst for vengeance did not. Her thugs managed to capture Inaros right after he was released to return home. They impaled him on three stakes like a chicken on a spit.

Megabyzus got angry at that. He had promised that the captives would not be harmed. He went to King Artaxerxes pleading for justice to clear his name. They had a lengthy trial, which exposed the wickedness of Amestris. In late 449 BC the old queen mother was convicted and executed. The world was finally rid of one of its most evil people.

The rest of the captives returned home, to the delight and gratefulness of their countrymen. But Artaxerxes was fearful. He had promised Mordecai that Inaros, Cimon, Amyrtaeus and the other leaders would not be harmed. But both Inaros and Cimon had been killed! What must he do in penance to have YHWH's blessing on his kingdom?

Mordecai again asked a week to go to YHWH in prayer. His response was very short. "YHWH simply says to give Egypt and Greece their freedom, Your Majesty."

Again to the amazement of the heavenly host, King Artaxerxes agreed. He traveled personally to Egypt to apologize for the cruel behavior of his uncle Achaemenes and for the death of Inaros. He retained the title of 'King of Egypt' and promised continued protection of the Persian empire, but rather than assigning another Persian satrap over them, he allowed Amyrtaeus of Sais to govern them, according to their own customs and laws. For the next thirty years, Egypt prospered under that arrangement.

Artaxerxes then sent to Athens, inviting the Greeks to Susa to negotiate a treaty of peace. Their ambassador was Callias, a warrior priest and patriot who had distinguished himself at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC. Artaxerxes humbly apologized for General Cimon's death. The treaty they signed was stunningly generous to Greece, giving full autonomy to Ionian states in Asia Minor and prohibiting any Persian satraps anywhere on the islands or coastlands of the Aegean Sea or the western half of the Black Sea. In return, Callias agreed that Greece would not interfere with Persian possessions anywhere else in Asia Minor, Cyprus, Libya, or Egypt.

This Peace Treaty of Callias in 448 BC was a remarkable achievement. But even so, the fiercely independent Greek city-states didn't like it. Many Athenians were angry with Callias, claiming he had surrendered too much to Persia. They put him on trial and fined him for being a traitor to the Delian League (which Athens led). Many nations had begun to look on Greece as an 'Athenian Empire', as many of the other Greek city-states had been reduced to a status of tribute-paying subjects of the Delian League. Now all that had changed, so the Athenians were naturally upset.

Other Greek city-states didn't like it either. Ever since 460 BC the Spartans and the Athenians had been bickering over control of Peloponnesia. The ambitious Spartans wanted to control the weaker city-states, to make it all a Spartan Empire instead of an Athenian Empire. What right did Callias have to sign away their rights with his silly peace treaty? They were warriors, not peacemakers!

But in time Callias was vindicated. The Delian League was pretty much wiped out anyway, after the death of General Cimon and the destruction of his naval fleet in Egypt and Cyprus. Callias was a true patriot, who loved his country more than his city or even his life. He went to Sparta to negotiate another peace treaty in early 445 BC, giving back some of the lands that Athens had taken. It was called the 'Thirty Years Peace', although it only lasted for thirteen years before the old bickering between Sparta and Athens renewed. But the transformation of Greece from a bunch of scrappy independent city-states into a powerful and prosperous nation had begun.

Old Mordecai was pleased with the amazing response of King Artaxerxes. Everything he had advised, Artaxerxes had taken as a command from YHWH. The whole world was now benefitting from the king's obedience. Just ten years earlier, peace with Egypt and Greece had sounded like an impossible dream. Now it was a reality. And finally sending Ezra with orders to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, in accord with the prophecy of Daniel – wow! Now the countdown had begun toward Messiah! Mordecai was overcome with joy and gratefulness.

He spent his days praising God. *That he should live to see this day!* But he had one minor problem. Very minor. He almost did not want to mention it. But Mordecai was a stickler for exactness. Daniel had written, "80 troublous years from the decree of Cyrus, Artaxerxes will issue a decree to rebuild the walls." Mordecai counted up the years. Then he counted again, and again... It was only 79. Or 78.8 to be exact. It bugged him. He prayed about it.

Could Daniel's prophecy be off? What does that imply about the coming of Messiah? In fact, if the prophecy is off at all, what does that say about its Source? If it is a true prophecy from YHWH, it can't be off, even by one year! The more Mordecai thought about it, the worse it bothered him. He began to earnestly seek YHWH about it. But he received no answer. The years passed by.

Jeshua the high priest had died after anointing Ezra in 457 BC. His oldest son **Joiakim** had already been high priest in his stead for almost 20 years, as Jeshua had been too old to perform his duties. Now in 447 BC, Joiakim mysteriously died! **Eliashib** his oldest son became high priest. These were godly men, zealous for the Law and the temple of YHWH. However, each succeeding generation had become more tolerant of the Samaritans now living among them, especially after they had helped finish the temple. (Governor Tattenai had temporarily raised their taxes to fund the work, so they were eager to get it done.) Eliashib's oldest son **Joiada**, next in line to be high priest, had even allowed his oldest son (and heir) Manasses to marry a Samaritan girl named Shanah.

Sanballat, Samaria's new governor, lived in upper Beth-horon. He was a military commander. He had been one of the primary instigators encouraging free trade and open borders with the Judeans before Ezra had come. He had initially opposed rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, but his old boss, Tattenai, had changed his mind. Now that he was governor, he saw the benefits. So, like all kings and governors of those days, he sought alliances by marriage. Thus he had given his second daughter Shanah in marriage to a Judean priest (Manasses), and his youngest daughter Belle in marriage to a son of a temple gate-keeper.

But then along came Ezra, demanding these mixed marriages be terminated. Governor Sanballat was angry. He raised a big stink, refusing to let his daughters be divorced. It just wasn't right! Instead, he invited Manasses and Shanah into Samaria to become the high priest and priestess of his own pagan temple on Mount Gerizim. Manasses accepted. Eliashib and Joiada were appalled and deeply hurt. They disinherited Manasses. Joiada's next oldest son **Johanan** became his heir in the high priestly line. Eliashib mourned the loss of his grandson.

Then Ezra pushed the Samaritans out of Jerusalem and stopped the trade between the Judeans and Samaritans. Sanballat was furious. Ezra would pay for this outrage! Sanballat plotted to undermine Ezra's leadership.

Sanballat had other alliances as well. His oldest son was married to a daughter of Tobiah, the Judean-Ammonite half-breed who was appointed by Persia as governor of Ammon. And Sanballat's oldest daughter had married Geshom, an Arabian prince appointed by Persia to be the governor of Moab. In the heady days of free trade with the returned exiles, Sanballat had encouraged his friends to likewise intermarry with the Judeans. Tobiah had married a daughter of Shecaniah son of Arah of the line of David. Tobiah had also encouraged his oldest son Jehohanan to marry a daughter of Meshullam son of Berechiah son of Meshezabel. Geshom's two daughters had married two of the sons of Bani. They also were outraged at Ezra when their wives had been divorced and returned to Moab.

Sanballat met with Tobiah and Geshom in Samaria to discuss the problem. The Judeans were no threat to them as long as their pagan culture was tolerated and their gods accepted in Jerusalem. They would eventually absorb the Judeans! *But now that Ezra had proved to be such a pig-headed, intolerant bigot, something must be done.* Just as alliances between kings were formed by intermarriage, so these divorces enforced by Ezra seemed like a declaration of war! They, together with Satan, formed a secret league plotting to undermine Ezra's administration. Tobiah and his son Johanan had refused to divorce their Judean wives, and had secretly poisoned old Joiakim for trying to make them. Tobiah was half Judean, anyway, so Sanballat decided to turn that to their advantage. Under the pretense of 'visiting their in-laws', they began living in Jerusalem. From there, they did all they could to force Ezra to give up.

But Ezra would not give up. His letters had never gotten through, so he finally sent a personal report with Hanani, the brother of Artaxerxes's cup-bearer, Nehemiah. Hanani left for Susa in December of 447 BC. He reached Nehemiah the next April with his report: "Those few in Judea who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach. The king's letter authorized everything we needed, except he forgot the permit to rebuild the walls! Pagan influences of the surrounding nations have flooded into the land, and Ezra can't keep them out. The walls of Jerusalem are still broken down; the gates burned and useless. We can't rebuild them until we get permission from the king."

When he heard the sad report Nehemiah broke down and wept, mourning for days. He would not let Hanani deliver the letter to the king, until he had first fasted and prayed about it. So he sent a message to the king asking for a few days of sick-leave, and poured out his heart to God.

"I beseech You O YHWH Elohim God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenants and grants mercy to all who love Him and obey His commandments. Let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open to the prayer of your servant, which I pray to You day and night on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants. I confess the sins of the sons of Israel, which we sinned against You. I and my father's house have sinned. We acted corruptly against You, by not keeping Your laws which You gave through Your servant Moses. But remember what You told Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples, but then if you return to Me and begin to keep My commandments, to obey them, though you are scattered to the remotest parts of the universe, I will gather you from there and will bring you to the place where I have chosen for My name to dwell.' Remember now, I pray, these Your servants, Your own people whom You redeemed by Your great power, for they have cried out to You in sore distress. I beseech You, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your holy name! Make Your servant successful today, and grant him favor and compassion before heathen King Artaxerxes."

Then Nehemiah washed, put on clean clothes, and returned to the king's service. As cup-bearer, he was responsible for tasting everything the king drank, to be sure there was no poison in it. But he was also expected to encourage the king, cheer him up, and even advise him at times. So he had never before appeared sad in the king's presence. Artaxerxes himself was, of course, oblivious. But his wife, Queen Damaspia of Persepolis (mother of Crown Prince Xerxes II) immediately noticed something wrong. She whispered to her husband. Finally he noticed, and asked, "Are you still sick, my friend?"

"I am quite well, Your Majesty."

"Then why is your face still sad? My wife thinks you may be sick at heart. Tell me about it."

"Yes, Your Majesty. How can my face not be sad, when the beautiful city, the place of my ancestors, lies desolate, with its walls broken down and its gates consumed by fire? My kindred there tremble in fear, for their enemies harass and taunt them unmercifully, day and night."

"What do you need? Is there anything I can do?"

Nehemiah sensed that the moment of decision had come. Artaxerxes had been very kind, but this was asking a lot. He sent up a flare prayer to YHWH, and responded, "If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, please send me to Judah, to Jerusalem the city of my ancestors, that I may rebuild it and repair its walls."

Artaxerxes looked at Damaspia. She nodded. So the king turned back to Nehemiah. "The queen and I want to assist you. What do you need? When will you return?"

"Please give me one year, Your Majesty. I need nothing except your permission and the protection of some of your soldiers – just until the walls and gates are restored."

"Didn't I already authorize the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem? Mordecai told me I needed to do that, to get the blessing of your God YHWH. I sent Ezra there twelve years ago with an official letter, as I recall."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Your letter was very generous. But it did not actually authorize them to rebuild the walls. My brother tells me that the governors of Samaria, Amon, and Moab have stopped Ezra from working on the walls, by claiming that he doesn't have your permission, O King."

Artaxerxes couldn't believe it. He ordered a copy of the decree from the archives and read it himself, twice. Sure enough, the walls of Jerusalem were not mentioned.

So he rewrote the same letter, replacing Ezra's name with Nehemiah's, and adding, "I further decree that the walls of Jerusalem shall be repaired and the gates re-hung. Then the city shall be rebuilt so the people of Judah can be secure in their dwellings. I further order my soldiers to protect the work until the walls are completed and the gates re-hung. After that my soldiers will be sent home."

The date was April 4, 446 BC. Daniel's prophecy was finally fulfilled. The clock started for Daniel's seventy sevens of years until the anointing of the temple with the presence of Messiah, beginning His everlasting Kingdom on earth.

Artaxerxes handed the letter to Nehemiah, together with money to cover his expenses, and ordered soldiers to accompany him to Judah. At that moment a celebration broke out in the heavenlies. Logos shouted joyfully, "Michael! Gavriel! He did it! Everything I asked of him. Artaxerxes has ruled for twenty years. Cover him. Protect him, his family, and his empire for another twenty."

Thus Artaxerxes had prosperity and peace all over the Persian Empire for the next 20 years. *Except a little testing from Greece.* However, he did manage to avoid getting entangled in the Peloponnesian Wars (431-404 BC).

As Nehemiah prepared to go and gathered the exiles who wanted to go with him, we must return to Mordecai. He of course was indignant and angry to hear of Ezra's troubles. He had such high hopes that the walls would already be built and Jerusalem restored! That was how the prophecy of Daniel had read to him. He began fasting and praying in earnest for answers from YHWH. Whatever happened to the eighty years? At first he had thought the decree of the king to Ezra was a year early, but now it looks like that was the wrong decree. *This new decree given to Nehemiah is eleven years late! What is going on here?*

The celebration in the heavenlies was still in full swing at the victory of Artaxerxes. But now Logos told Michael, "Achaiah [*Hebrew name of Mordecai*], My righteous one, is demanding to meet with Me. Continue the party; I never like to cut short the Dance! But I must go to him."

"Yes Logos, though it is never the same without You. You are the entire inspiration for the Dance! What right does Achaiah have to demand anything from You? He's old. He'll be with us soon enough."

"As much as I love the Dance, I love my people more. Achaiah is righteous in his generation – My son, in whom I am well pleased. And he demands only according to My own Word. How can I refuse him? Besides, I have need of him now." Logos took the form of a bright angel and unveiled Himself beside Mordecai's prayer closet.

Now if you, dear Reader, have never experienced this, bear with me. It's a bit tricky to describe. Imagine yourself in a dark closet, your back to the wall. You have prayed on into the night, so any light coming in under the door has ceased. Your knees are sore, so to shift your weight, you alternately bow your face to the floor, then lift your arms and eyes to the ceiling. You know no one can hear you, so you shout, or cry, or whisper, or groan, as your spirit leads. You are determined that you will not leave that closet until you hear from YHWH, no matter how long it might take. But in the utter blackness and the agony of your desire, your eyes begin to see strange things.

So it was with Mordecai. Three walls remained black. But the fourth wall began to de-materialize. It was replaced with a misty blue / green land that was bright and colorful, yet still easy on the eyes. The colors swirled in a fog, so Mordecai was quite sure it was all a hallucination. He was under too much stress. Perhaps it was his body's demand for food or water – he'd had none of either for three days. He lowered his face to the floor and relaxed. He must rest his eyes before continuing his prayer.

After a few minutes Mordecai looked back up. His eyes were rested, focused far off rather than on the wall of his closet. But now the swirling colors were clear. He saw a man standing a small distance away, facing him, waiting. With a sudden thrill, Mordecai knew that the only one who could possibly be in his prayer closet was YHWH. "Thank You my Lord and my God, for coming to answer my prayer. What has my Lord to say to His servant?"

Mordecai fell on his face again, but Logos came quickly to lift him up. They stood together in the heavenly realms. The dark closet was gone; here grass, flowers, trees, and animals abounded. Everything was brilliantly lit, though there was no sun; only the One shining before him.

Mordecai was overwhelmed, wanting to fall on his face again, but Logos held him steady and strengthened him. "Now, Achaiah, what is it you wish to ask Me?" [*Logos used his original Hebrew name instead of the Babylonian name given by the king. The name 'Mordecai' has the pagan god Marduk as its root, so it is an offense to God.*]

"You know, my Lord."

"I know, but I love to hear your voice."

"Yes, Lord. It's Daniel's prophecy. Is it a true prophecy? Does it truly speak of Messiah's coming? If so, then why does the timing seem all wrong?"

Logos laughed, a musical, delightful laugh that brought warmth and joy to Mordecai's heart and helped calm him down in this awesome Presence. "Perhaps it is because I enjoy a good joke! I relish riddles! They encourage My precious ones to dig deeper into My Word. Perhaps My Words are hidden for all except those who love Me enough to wrestle with their own understanding. Perhaps I want My people to live by faith in My promise, trusting Me for the fulfillment when it is time. If you knew all the details of your future, you would not strive to excel in your present! But to you, dear Achaiah, I love to reveal the hidden things, for you know My name and love My wisdom. Yes. Daniel's prophecy is true. Yes. It truly speaks of Messiah's coming. The timing seemed wrong to you because: first, I gave the prophecy in 360 day years, as the world turned in the times of David My king. 80 360 day years equals 78.8 365.25 day years. And second, because everything, even My prophetic word, is subject to change if My people repent, or if (as in this case) having repented they turn away from Me again. As with Jonah, repentance changes everything."

“O no, Lord! Have Your people turned away from You again?” Mordecai was shocked. But even as he asked the question he remembered what Hanani had said about their intermarriage with their pagan neighbors. “But Ezra made them divorce their heathen wives! They repented!”

“Yes. Some repented. But many did not, and still work against Me, to bring paganism into My Holy City. They have extended it by twelve years.” Tears came to His eyes. “There are six ways in which they have turned away from Me. Are you willing to warn them from Me, Achaiah?”

“Of course, my Lord. Just tell me what to say. I can’t believe they have turned away and rebelled, so soon after the exile! Just as You are beginning to restore us! And after You promised to send Messiah! How can they turn away?”

“That is what I keep asking Myself, Achaiah. How can they turn away, after all I’ve done for them? Yet in your generation I still have a few, Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Ezra, Nehemiah, and yourself. Perhaps We can turn them back. Get a pen and paper, and write for Me as I direct.”

The vision started to fade. “Wait, Lord! What shall I call myself? Everyone knows me only as Mordecai. I had even forgotten my old Hebrew name until You used it now.”

“I love you, Achaiah! But I do not love the name given you by the king of Babylon. He intended to honor you with the name of his god, but it is no honor to bring the names of pagan gods into My holy presence. You are correct, no one remembers your Hebrew name; not even Hadassah. So do not use your name at all. Just call yourself ‘Malachiah’, meaning ‘the messenger of YHWH’, or ‘**Malachi**’ for short. Then everyone will realize that you are only My messenger – I am the actual Author of your letter.”

The vision faded. Mordecai was back in his prayer closet. But he was filled with an urgency. Somehow, he had to finish this prophecy in time to give it to Nehemiah before he left for Tel-aviv. Inspired, he wrote furiously.

“The oracle of the Word of YHWH through Malachi. YHWH says: I have loved you with an everlasting love. You dare to question that? Look at Esau, Jacob’s own brother. Jacob I loved, yet Esau I hated! His hills are a desolation forever, his cities are haunts of jackals, just as I warned through My prophets. But even though you clearly saw how King Nabonidus fulfilled My Word against Edom, and then how King Cyrus fulfilled My Word for you to return you to Jerusalem, yet where is My honor? Even a son respects his father. So where is My respect, you priests who despise My name? You ask, ‘How have we despised Your name?’ You present defiled sacrifices upon My altar! You offer the blind, the lame! You bring the sick, or even an animal that has been stolen. Would you give it to your governor? Would he be happy with you if you did? I would rather you shut and padlock the gates of My temple, so no one would uselessly kindle fires upon My altar, for I will not accept such an offering from you!

“From the rising of the sun to its setting, My name will be great among the nations! In every place under heaven, incense will be offered in My name, along with a pure meal offering. Cursed be the swindler who offers a blemished animal to Me, for I am a great King! My name is feared among the nations! Therefore, O priests, if you do not take it to heart to honor My name, then I will send a curse upon you! I will even curse your blessings – indeed, I have already cursed them! Thus I will rebuke your children; they will be carried away with the refuse of your feasts. Then My covenant will continue with the house of Levi, My covenant of life and peace, for he revered Me, and stood in awe of My name. True instruction was in his mouth, and righteousness on his lips; he walked with Me in peace and godliness, and turned many from iniquity. That is the job of the priest, to preserve the knowledge of righteousness, that men would seek instruction in the law from his mouth. He is YHWH’s messenger! But you priests have done the opposite, and have caused many to stumble.

“Judah has dealt treacherously with Me! Judah has committed abominations in Jerusalem, and has profaned My holy temple, by marrying daughters of foreign gods. When Ezra confronted you with this, you covered My altar with tears, with weeping and groaning. But you did not listen to Me, to do as My wisdom directs.

“Instead, you thought you could solve the problem with wholesale divorces! Don’t you know that a second sin cannot correct the first! I hate divorce! I hate the breaking of the covenant, turning aside from your vows! I stood as a witness when you married! Your covenant was with Me! I gave you children, for I seek parents who will raise up godly offspring unto Me. I bear witness against you who have dealt treacherously with the wife of your youth, your companion by covenant. Divorce cannot solve the issues of one who is self-centered or idolatrous at heart. Instead of divorce, walk by My Spirit, and I will show you how to overcome self-centeredness and paganism with no need to divorce. Many troubles and sorrows can thus be avoided.

“In all your troubles you cry, ‘The evil man and the good man are treated alike! Where is the God of justice?’ Behold, I first send My messengers – men like Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Ezra, Joiakim, Malachi, Elijah, and John – to clear the way ahead of Me. Then Messiah, whom you seek, and in whom you say you delight, will suddenly come to His temple as the bearer of a renewed covenant! But who can endure the day of His coming? Who can stand when He appears? He is like a refiner’s fire, like laundry soap! He sits as at a smelter, to purify the sons of Levi, to refine the sons of Israel like gold and silver, so they may present to YHWH offerings in righteousness. After that I will draw near to you in judgment, to witness against the sorcerers, the adulterers, the liars, and those who oppress the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the alien – against all who do not fear My name. It is only because My character of love and mercy does not change that you are not consumed!

“From the days of your fathers you have turned away from My commandments. Repent! Return to Me, and I will return to you. You ask, ‘How shall we return?’ Can a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me, in tithes and offerings. You are cursed, the whole nation of you. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so there will be food aplenty in My temple. Test Me now in this, to see if I do not open the windows of heaven and pour out upon you a blessing, until there is no room for more. Thus I will rebuke the devourer for you, so he cannot destroy the fruit of the ground, nor shall the vine in your field cast its grapes or the tree its buds. And all the nations will call you blessed, for then Israel shall become the Beautiful Land.

“Your words against Me have been arrogant. You ask, ‘What have we ever spoken against You?’ You say, ‘It is fruitless to serve YHWH, for what profit have we who have kept His Law, over the wicked around us?’ So now you call the wicked, blessed? Thus the evil man is encouraged to thumb his nose at God and laugh it off. But I see those who fear Me as they assemble to worship My name. I hear them speak secretly to one another to honor My name. I have written a book of remembrance of all those who fear Me and esteem My holy name. They are Mine! And on the day I prepare My own possessions, I will spare them as a man spares his own son whom he loves. Thus on Judgment Day everyone in the universe will finally be able to distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between the one who serves God and the one who does not.

“For behold, that day is coming! It burns like a furnace. All the arrogant and self-consumed – all the wicked – will be like chaff, which that day will set ablaze, leaving them neither ancestors nor descendants. But for you who fear Me and esteem My holy name, the Sun of Righteousness will arise as a mighty angel, with healing on His wings! Then you will go forth, to skip about like calves set free from the stall. You will trample down the wicked, for they shall be ashes under your feet on that day which I prepare. Only remember to observe the Law of Moses My servant, which I gave on Mount Horeb for all Israel.

“I have sent My messengers the prophets to warn you of My coming. So you have no excuse if you fail to get ready. Behold, I will send one more messenger to prepare the way for Me. He will come in the spirit and power of Elijah the Prophet, just before the great and terrible day of YHWH. His name will be John. He will call you to repentance, to restore you to the heartfelt faith of your fathers, and also to enable you to pass on a godly heritage to your children. All who heed John’s message will welcome Messiah when He comes. But those who reject John’s message will not even recognize Him as Messiah, and will try to kill Him. Thus I make a distinction between the righteous and the wicked on the great and terrible Day of YHWH!” Old Mordecai finished just in time. His life’s work done, he snuck the final prophecy into Nehemiah’s luggage just before he left Susa for Tel-aviv. No one ever discovered it was from him.

Nehemiah gathered all the remaining exiles who would go with him, most from Judah, but some from Ephraim and Manasseh as well, and a few from the northern tribes who had been scattered. He picked up more exiles from Tel-aviv in Babylon. He didn’t have a lot; most who had been willing to go had already gone. The king’s soldiers with them were more than enough to protect them.

They reached Samaria. Nehemiah presented his letter from King Artaxerxes to Governor Sanballat in Samaria. *He and his friend Tobiah, governor of Ammon, had been working to weaken Ezra’s government, but now Artaxerxes was sending reinforcements?!* They glanced over the king’s letter. They could see that the king’s soldiers were there to enforce it. So what else could they do? They let him pass.

But Nehemiah could tell they weren’t happy with him. So he snuck out to inspect Jerusalem’s walls at night, when none of the Samaritans were there. The next morning he gathered Ezra, Eliashib the high priest, and a few other elders of Judah to report his findings. “We have a rather perilous situation here. The walls are broken down, the gates have been burned, and Jerusalem is desolate. But now we have the authority to fix it. Let us agree to rebuild the walls without delay, so we will no longer be a reproach among the nations.” Then he reported to them all the ways that God had led him, and how the king and queen of Persia had agreed to support him. “We cannot fail, for both God and the king are with us.”

Ezra was delighted. “I have tried to be both priest and king here. Frankly I’ve not done a very good job of either. Now that the king has assigned Nehemiah as our new civil governor, I will go back to being only a teacher of the Law. I hereby declare my full support for Governor Nehemiah, and I urge all who have supported me to now throw their full support behind him as well.”

Pethahiah, whom Artaxerxes had appointed as the civil governor to assist Ezra, added, “They are a stubborn and rebellious people, Nehemiah. They are more interested in building their own houses than in building the city walls. Ezra tries, but the people don’t want to contribute toward the re-building. They don’t seem to understand about working for the common good. I gladly throw my support behind you if you can get them to work together.”

Nehemiah shook his head. “Not I, Pethahiah. Only YHWH can do that. He assured me of success, for this is His work. Put out an urgent summons for all able-bodied men to show up for work right after the Sabbath.”

Having so many relatives in the city, Sanballat of course heard about the summons. He showed up, with Tobiah and Geshom. “What are you trying to pull here, anyway? Are you rebelling against the king? I saw the edict. It is just a copy of Ezra’s edict. It gives you no authority to rebuild any walls. It doesn’t even mention the walls.”

“My authority is direct from YHWH, almighty King of heaven!” Nehemiah thundered. “He will give me success, and we His servants will arise and build! But to show you that you have no authority here, I will read the king’s edict.” As he read, the pagans smirked, for they had heard all this before. The only change seemed to be Nehemiah’s name inserted where Ezra’s name had been in the first edict. But when he finished, they were silenced. King Artaxerxes had fixed it. Now the Judeans cheered, while Sanballat and his friends were put to shame. It gave the workers an amazing boost of energy.

Nehemiah was an organizer. He divided the wall into sections and assigned one to each family head. “Each assignment is small, a single gate section, or a short section of wall, according to the number of workers in your family group. You each will finish your own section. If you are slow, you will end up working twice as hard to match your section into the sections on either side of you. But if you keep up with the sections on each side of you, the courses you lay will mesh easily into those on either side. So it is to your own advantage to keep up. It’s like a race, but it’s a race in which everyone wins if you work evenly side by side and keep an eye on your neighbors.”

A good organizer always has the materials ready as needed, and Nehemiah was no exception. He had already gotten permission from the king for timbers from the king’s forests, and stone from the king’s quarries. He sent the Persian soldiers to enforce the orders and have the materials delivered at once. Now it was just a matter of clearing off all the burnt rubble down to the solid stone, then reconstructing it as it was before. By noon the first day, Nehemiah had all the groups settled down in their assigned spots, working as if their lives depended on it.

Suddenly he realized that the miracle he’d prayed for had happened! The men had a heart to work! Only God could have changed their hearts. The vast majority of these men had homes and farms in the surrounding countryside – they didn’t even live in Jerusalem. One day before, they didn’t care if the walls got rebuilt or not. Now, they were working like a team, racing to finish with all their energy. It was awesome! Nehemiah went around singing YHWH’s praises even as he directed the workers.

Someone else noticed the miracle. Satan had inspired the league Sanballat had made with Tobiah and Geshom. Now he realized that his Enemy had inspired the Judeans. He was furious! He must regain control!

Satan entered Sanballat’s dreams and told him what to do. The next day Sanballat called for Tobiah and Geshom. They went to Mount Gerizim and spent the day there in worship at the altar of Baal, pleading with him to fill them with himself and his power. The satanic ritual culminated as Sanballat and Tobiah each offered one of their sons as a sacrifice to Baal. Manasses was horrified, but Sanballat and Shanah insisted it was the only way to stop the Judeans.

The burnt rubble had been cleared away, and the first course of the walls prepared for new stone. Governor Sanballat called together all the leading men of Samaria. “Have you seen what those feeble Judeans are doing? They seem to think they can fortify Jerusalem! They want to keep us out! Then they hope to elect a king, raise an army, and rebel against the authority of King Artaxerxes! But they are weak. They’ll never finish. There is no way they can revive the burnt stones from the dusty rubble to finish their wall. And we must make sure of that!”

Tobiah chimed in, “Their wall is so weak that if even a fox jumps on it, he would break it down!”

That got a laugh from the people. Sanballat continued, “They must not be allowed to finish! They have a new ruler there who hates our customs and our gods. If he succeeds with the wall, he’ll not only keep us out, he will form an army to attack us! Every one of us must do all we can to demoralize the workers and force them to give up.”

They plotted a strategy of mocking and harassing the workers. If Nehemiah could get organized, so could they. They assigned a time and task for each man, to keep the pressure up continually. But alas! The Judeans ignored them! They didn’t respond when taunts were hurled or rocks were thrown. Their walls were actually going up. The stone was laid as fast as the soldiers could deliver it.

“The 9th of Av!” Satan inspired Sanballat. “Their leader pronounced a curse upon them on the 9th of Av. Attack on that day, and they will be defeated!”

But Nehemiah knew his history. He was prepared for the day that Moses had cursed the people for their worship of the golden calf on the 9th of Av. He and Ezra planned special sacrifices and sin offerings for that day. And when the people gathered for work, he led them in prayers of repentance for their sins before they started. Satan could not break through the protecting wall of humble prayer.

So the work went on. By the end of Av, the wall was already seven feet high! Sanballat realized his opportunity was slipping away. He was furious! He called together all the leading men of Samaria once again. “This has gotten serious! The Judeans are more determined than I thought! Harassment is not working. We must gather all our forces and attack! Mobilize our army! Tobiah, get the Ammonite army over here. Geshom, get your Arabians and Moabites over here. It will be easy. First kill the Persian soldiers, then all the Judean leaders. We will attack in two weeks, on the morning of the Sabbath while they are resting.”

Until now, the Judeans had worked six days and rested on the Sabbath, according to the Law. Sanballat expected to catch them in bed. But the evening before, as they ceased their labors to begin their Sabbath, YHWH had warned them of the pending attack. So when Sanballat’s armies arrived, the Judeans were quietly waiting for them, armed and ready, with the king’s soldiers supporting them.

This was supposed to be easy? Sanballat didn't know the Judeans had weapons. His armies were still stronger, but the Judeans now had partially finished walls, and he had lost the element of surprise. He called off the battle. The Judeans finished their Sabbath in peace. But he was filled with wrath that his plan had failed. He ordered his men to go throughout Judea, terrorizing the countryside and attacking any undefended Judeans they could find.

By noon of the next work day, Nehemiah had received ten reports of attacks in various places. Even women and children were being attacked, and their homes burned. Ezra heard other reports. He came to Nehemiah saying, "The strength of the laborers is failing. They are fearful for their families. They claim the work here is too hard, the rubble is too great, and they are unable to finish. They claim they must return home to protect their families."

Nehemiah realized he needed a quick change of plans. He ordered an emergency gathering. "Do not be afraid of them. YHWH our God is great! He is awesome! He will fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes. But from now on until the wall is finished, no one will go anywhere without a weapon in his hand. The city is large and we're all spread out. So bring all the exiles into the city; I know, most of the houses here are not yet rebuilt, but everyone will have to set up camp here until the walls are finished and the gates are re-hung. Each leader will be given a trumpet. If you hear five quick blasts of the trumpet, like this (his trumpeter demonstrated) the strong among you rush to defend that section."

"Wait! What about our homes? our farms?"

"I am sending the king's soldiers to defend the rest of Judah. They are trained; they can protect your homes and farms. In fact, they can do it better if they don't have to worry about your wives, sons, and daughters being taken hostage. I assured their captain that if he will defend the rest of Judah, we will defend the city by ourselves. The wall is half up. Only the gates are still open. We should be able to defend them if we are quick to respond to the sound of the trumpet. Now go back to work. Keep your knife or sword strapped to your side. Work in pairs; let the one who is resting hold your spears and shields, to cover the one who is laboring. Then trade off when he gets tired, so the work will not cease. For YHWH our God will fight for us!"

So the work on the wall continued. But now they began to suffer famine, for the time of harvest was upon them and they had no workers in the fields. Again Nehemiah had to make a change in plans. He sent the farmers out to bring in the harvest, one field at a time. He ordered them to keep together, weapons ready. He asked the king's soldiers to help guard them. Once again the crisis was averted, and the work continued. But almost immediately a new crisis reared its ugly head, for Satan was raging, knowing his time was short. This time it was the owners of the fields being reaped to feed the group.

"All our harvest is being used to feed the people!" they complained. "Some of our harvest is already mortgaged to pay the governor's taxes. Besides, we have large families. If our grain goes to feed the workers, we won't have any left to feed our own children. We'll have to sell them into bondage to pay our debts. We can't continue here! We've got to go back to our farms and bring in our own harvest."

If it's not one thing, it's another! Nehemiah was trying not to be frustrated. Rather than lash out angrily at the complainers, he bowed his head. "Give me Your wisdom, O YHWH. Give me grace. Give me understanding and patience to answer their complaints according to Your perfect law of justice." As he prayed the word 'justice' he was reminded of the place in the law where taking usury between the sons of Israel is forbidden. He got suspicious. "Tell me," he asked. "In these mortgages and debts, has any of you been charging interest against your brothers?"

"Of course we do! Everyone charges interest. Why would anyone make a loan if he couldn't charge interest? How could he make a living?"

"Ezra!" Nehemiah called. "How says the law?"

"YHWH's law says that you may loan money at interest to pagans, but not to your fellow Israelites. If your brother has needs, you are to give up to 10 percent of your income to help him, without asking anything in return. And if..."

"What? That's insane! We're all poor, here. No one has money to just give away! That old tithing law only applies if you're rich! We're all struggling!" The hubbub began to grow, until everyone seemed to be shouting at Nehemiah. "If I don't get the interest on the loans I made, why... Well, I couldn't feed my own family!" "We've made a contract. Don't you dare try to change it!" "The land was my father's, but I had to go into debt to buy it back." "The king is taking too much tribute!" "Governor Pethahiah took more from us than the king authorized." Nehemiah was disgusted with them all, until he heard that last complaint.

"What about that, Pethahiah? Did you take more from the people than the king authorized?"

"Oh, no sir... well... a little. He authorized \$100 per landowner each year. I only added a little bread and wine, plus an extra five percent for the temple service."

Nehemiah held up his arms for silence. "Everyone, go back to work. After the wall is finished, I will take care of your debts, I promise. I know now what the problem is. You have not been tithing. If you begin tithing right now, it will go easier with you when I straighten out your debts."

So the problem was put off. Once again the work on the wall resumed. Nehemiah kept his priorities straight. He knew nothing would really be solved until they had walls. He was determined to finish them before the rainy season; before the Feast of Tabernacles. But Sanballat was just as determined to stop him. He decided to try a new tack.

He arranged a 'summit conference' among all the kings and governors of the Levant. Nehemiah got a copy of his summons. It looked official, demanding that all the king's representatives of the provinces beyond the river meet together on the Plain of Ono just south of Joppa beside the Great Sea. But Nehemiah was suspicious. To get there from Judah, one must use a narrow road between upper and lower Beth-horon. There are plenty of places where bandits can hide out along that road, and if he were mugged there, no one would be the wiser. He politely declined to attend the summit. "I am in the middle of an important work here," he insisted. "I cannot come down."

After the fourth such summons was likewise rejected, Sanballat got insistent. "Geshom king of Moab tells me that you have been reported to King Artaxerxes! The report accused you of planning to rebel – that you are only rebuilding the wall in order to declare yourself king and to claim independence from Persia! The report even says you have hired prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem, 'There is a new king in Judah!' These are serious charges. We really want to help you defend yourself. You must come down to our summit meeting in Ono, so we can take counsel together regarding these charges."

"Great play, Shakespeare!" Nehemiah fired back. "But it is all a figment of your own mind. I've done nothing of the kind, as you well know. So stop trying to frighten me."

Satan had an ace up his sleeve. He reminded Sanballat of his son-in-law Delaiah. He had married his daughter Belle back in the early days when the Samaritans were helping the Judeans build the temple. Delaiah was the son of Mehetabel, who had been a temple gate-keeper, but was now confined to bed by old age. Delaiah and Belle's son, Shemaiah, was one of the workers on the wall! Sanballat instructed Belle, who instructed her son Shemaiah.

Shemaiah sent a top-priority message to Nehemiah. "I've just received an urgent message for you from YHWH. I am at my father's house caring for my aged grandfather. Please come see me at once."

Nehemiah always wanted to hear from YHWH. So he and his bodyguards came to Delaiah's house. Shemaiah whispered to him, "YHWH warned me of a plot against your life. YHWH said that some evil men are planning to kill you tonight. You and your bodyguards must go into the temple to hide. YHWH will save you there."

Nehemiah smelled a rat. "None of us are priests. Only priests can go into the temple. YHWH would never tell me to violate His own law, even to save my life. I will not go!"

Suddenly his eyes were opened. He looked around the house and saw the pagan influences. He recognized them as Samaritan. "Sanballat has hired you to incite me to sin, just so he can bring accusations against me and throw a cloud over my governorship!" So he told his bodyguards to throw Delaiah, Belle, and Shemaiah out of the city.

Nehemiah's dogged determination to plow through all obstacles and reject all distractions paid off, early. The walls were finished and the gates re-hung by the 25th of Elul (our September 13th), five days before the Feast of Tabernacles. That gave him time to assign gate-keepers, watchmen, and guards, and to set up a trial for those who were collecting interest from their fellow Israelites.

As everyone was gathering for the big trial, a young lad came up to Nehemiah with a sealed clay jar. "I found this when I was clearing away the rubble. It looks important. I thought I'd better give it to you."

"Thank you, son. Now, please go back to your parents." Nehemiah didn't want to be bothered. He had done a lot of praying about this day, and was preparing to make some startling changes. The people were all there. It was time for his opening speech. "Ahem. Thank you all for coming. As Governor of Judah, I hereby call this trial to order. I have listened to the complaints from thirty-five poor farmers. They claim that your previous governor, Pethahiah, together with some of his friends, abused them by loaning out money at interest, causing them to mortgage their farms. It even forced some of them to sell their daughters into slavery. Pethahiah has agreed to speak in defense of himself and his friends."

Pethahiah had considered himself a good governor. He was saddened that it had come to this. "I am deeply sorry for the poor farmers, sir. I wish I could make it up to them. But as governor, I had to think of others as well. The priests had nothing, for virtually no tithes were coming in. I had to get money from somewhere to support them. I swear I did not take any extra for my own pleasure! My friends were just following my orders. None of us is rich, as you can see. But we were forced to take measures to keep my government functioning and the priests from starving."

All the time he was talking, Nehemiah had this nagging thought that he really ought to open up that clay jar the young fellow had given him. He ignored it. It was just one more distraction. He had more important things now.

"As your current governor, I understand completely. However, it is still wrong. The people can't tithe because they are too poor, so you force them? Then you make it worse by exacting interest from them which they cannot pay? What is next? Putting them into slavery and taking their lands for their debts? We have just come back from the nations, having redeemed our brothers who were sold into slavery. Shall we now put ourselves right back into slavery? This is not right! We must instead walk in the fear of God, to obey His Law. If we do not, we will again become a reproach among the nations and will get an evil report among our enemies. I'm sure that what you did seemed necessary at the time, but now I beg you to stop collecting interest from your brothers. Give the farmers back their fields. Cancel their debts. Return the grain, wine, and oil you have taken. Set them all free."

It was a good speech. But the obvious question came up. “How then can the priests be supported? They don’t have fields to work. They’ll starve! They’ve been starving!”

“Let everyone begin to tithe! Don’t you see? That is God’s way! The reason you’re all poor is, you haven’t been tithing. The tithe belongs to YHWH. You’re robbing Him!”

He got a good deal of grumbling over that, especially from the farmers. “We’re up to our eyeballs in debt. There is no way in Sheol we can afford to tithe!”

“You can’t afford NOT to tithe! YHWH has put a curse on you, because you have robbed Him of His tithe! That’s why you’re losing your farms.” Nehemiah started getting excited. “I swear if you will all begin to tithe, YHWH will bless your farms, your vineyards, your orchards. If you live according to His principles, He will rebuke the devourer and place His covering of mercy and protection over you, so you will have no lack. It all starts with the tithe.”

“Ha! You are just an administrator. You’re no prophet. You can’t tell us what God is saying or what He will do. There is not a prophet in Israel who will agree with you on that. Try to find one. I dare you!”

Nehemiah couldn’t see a single person on his side. His heart sank. He didn’t remember any prophets among the returned exiles. Not a one. No one would stand with him. Except faithful Ezra, who spoke up now. “I’m no prophet, but I saw a young fellow give you a sealed clay jar. I have the feeling that YHWH will speak to us through it. Why don’t you open it, Nehemiah?”

“What could a silly jar possibly have to do with this?” Nehemiah snapped at his old friend, then was instantly sorry. He backpedaled, “Nevertheless, YHWH sometimes speaks in strange ways. I, too, have had a strange inner urge to open that clay jar, all during the trial. So thank you for suggesting it.” He broke the seal. Inside he found an official-looking document. It was the title deed to a rather substantial farm just outside the city. It was signed by Baruch, a well-known scribe from the time of King Josiah. Nehemiah read it. It declared that Hanamel son of Shallum had sold the farm to his nephew, Jeremiah the prophet. That was just before Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. But Jeremiah had no descendants among the returned exiles to claim the land, so what was the point? Nehemiah glanced at Ezra, who shook his head. Neither one could see any connection to their present problems. But as he went to stuff the deed back in the jar, Nehemiah saw another page.

It read: “Jeremiah the Prophet, to whomever unseals this jar. Greetings! I see YHWH’s temple already restored, and you’ve come to rebuild the Holy City! I commend you! You have my prayers and gratitude. I have just bought the land described in the enclosed title deed. I am long gone. But with this letter, I bequeath all my land to the priests serving in YHWH’s temple, to be their possession forever, and to be administered by the high priest of YHWH.”

Nehemiah gasped, and looked up. This could be the answer to the immediate need for the support of the priests! The farmers were grinning. Maybe they won’t have to tithe to support the priests after all! But Jeremiah had written one more paragraph. “To the one reading this letter, I sense that you are in need of a Word from YHWH. I’m sorry. YHWH hasn’t given me anything for you. And true prophets will be scarce in your days. But I know there will be one last prophet, of your own time, who knows you and your situation. *I see him! He is writing out his prophecy, and hiding it in your luggage.* Go find it now. May YHWH bless you, sir, and your efforts to restore the Holy City!”

Pandemonium reigned in the court as Nehemiah ran to search through his luggage. Sure enough, he found the prophecy that Mordecai, as ‘Malachi, the Messenger’ had hid there. He brought it back and read it out loud, the entire prophecy. Every word rang true, especially the part which said, “Can a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me, in tithes and offerings. You are cursed, the whole nation of you! Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so there will be food in My temple! Test Me now in this, to see if I will not open up the windows of heaven and pour out upon you a blessing, until there is no more room. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so he cannot destroy the fruit of the ground or make the vine in your field cast its grapes.”

Nobody knew who this ‘Malachi’ was, but every man in the group was awed. “It is YHWH Himself! He has spoken through His messenger!” The priests bowed in worship and gratitude. YHWH had already provided! The farmers swore they would tithe the first and best of their harvest, even though they were poor. Pethahiah and his friends swore to give back all the lands, cancel all the mortgages and debts, restore the grain, wine, and oil they extorted, and never charge interest from their brothers again.

So their ‘trial’ turned into a worship service. Everyone re-committed himself to do things God’s way instead of the ways they learned from the heathen nations where they had been dispersed. And up in the heavenlies, Logos, Jeremiah, and the angelic host celebrated with the Dance over this glorious victory for the Father’s Plan of the Ages.

The next day, the people all gathered as one at the city square in front of the Water Gate. It was the first of Tishri, our September 18th, 446 BC. They were ready to celebrate the Feast of Trumpets, really for the first time since before the exile. But they hadn’t come just to party. “Please, Ezra, before we eat, will you read to us from the Law of YHWH?” they pled. So they stood, respectfully and attentively, from dawn until noon, while Ezra read from the book of Moses.

Ezra concluded, “We bless You and praise You, YHWH our God, for giving us Your Word! May Your Spirit also give us understanding and grace, and a heart to obey!” All the people shouted, “Amen! Amen!” and bowed to the ground in worship. It was all so satisfying, gratifying. But now it was time to celebrate the Feast.

The trumpets were blown; the sacrifices were offered; and the feast was ready to eat. But the people were still on the ground, facedown, bawling and repenting of their sins. Ezra realized that they had to hear Malachi's prophecy again. He quieted them down and reread it, emphasizing that last part about Messiah and His messenger John, who would restore them to the faith of their fathers so they could pass on a godly heritage to their children. Now they began to smile. Ezra closed with one last encouragement. He held out his arms over them and quoted the famous Messianic prophecy of Jeremiah. "I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I drove them, and will bring them back to their pasture in the Beautiful Land. There they will be fruitful, and multiply. I shall also raise up shepherds over them to tend them. Then they will be afraid no longer, nor will any be missing, declares YHWH. For behold, the days are coming when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch. He will reign as king over My house. He will act with wisdom, and He will execute true justice and righteousness in all the land. In His days, Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell securely. His name is 'YHWH our Righteousness'. So you will no longer swear 'by YHWH who brought us out of Egypt,' but 'by YHWH who restored us from our exile.'"

Now the people were ready to feast. They knew that the whole purpose of the Feast of Trumpets is to prepare for the coming of Messiah. "This day is holy to YHWH our God!" Nehemiah shouted. "Put away your mourning and weeping. Eat of the fat. Drink of the sweet. Give portions to those who don't have enough. Grieve no longer. We have repented. YHWH has heard us. His joy is our strength!" What a party they had! Logos came and celebrated with them, and all the heavenly host with Him, for Logos loves to party more than anyone in the universe.

When it was over, nobody wanted to go home, so the party continued. Day after day, Ezra read the Law to them all morning, then everyone spent the afternoon feasting. They read through all the laws of the seven Feasts unto YHWH, as commanded in the Torah, only to realize how far short they had fallen. On 10 Tishri they celebrated the Day of Atonement in repentance and fasting just like the Law commands. Finally, on the 15th, everyone gathered branches and made their booths. This time, they were determined to celebrate the Feast of Sukkot (Tabernacles) God's way, instead of according to the various confusing traditions that had been passed down by their fathers. Thanks to old Ezra's careful instruction, they succeeded. The three fall Feasts of YHWH had not been observed so perfectly since the times of Moses and Joshua!

Logos met with them as the Holy Spirit of YHWH. His people were cleansed and restored. Not since Solomon's time had He so greatly enjoyed partying and dwelling with His people! His love, joy, and peace flowed over them in waves. It was all so wonderful they could hardly bear it. *The purpose of the Feasts was fulfilled.*

The Feast of Tabernacles concluded. The eighth day, the Last Great Day of the Feast, was celebrated by the final Festival of Lights, and then the next morning by the final Water-drawing Ceremony. That was followed by another solemn assembly. They sang more of the Psalms, everyone worshiped awhile, and Ezra read God's Law. He again selected some grand passages from Genesis to Malachi which speak of the coming of Messiah.

Ezra told them, "All the fall Feasts we've celebrated this month speak of Messiah and His promise to come to us, redeem us back to Himself, cleanse us, transform us into His own nature, and dwell with us forever – as He swore by His own name! Daniel prophesied that He will return to the most holy place in His temple after seventy weeks from the time that King Artaxerxes gave the decree to rebuild these walls. He wants to end sin and bring everlasting righteousness. But will we allow Him? Daniel implied that we might still reject Him! He cannot dwell with a wicked and rebellious people. That is why we celebrate the Feasts, to cleanse us and prepare us to meet our Messiah. So if any of you are hiding your sins, like Achan, now is the time to repent and be cleansed, so we will become a people with whom YHWH wants to dwell."

Ezra closed with the Aaronic Benediction to send the people back to their homes and farms. Now that the wall was complete, they weren't needed in Jerusalem anymore. But before they left, Nehemiah added, "I now assign my brother Hanani as the mayor of Jerusalem. When I return to the king, Pethahiah will be your civil governor again. Of course the king's soldiers must return with me, so there are a few things we need to do before I go. The most important is to dedicate this new wall to YHWH, for our protection. Everyone gather back here on the next Sabbath morning for a Wall Dedication Service. The second thing is, though YHWH is our protection, we must not presume upon Him. He will not protect us if there is sin in the camp. Though every Sabbath we offer sacrifices for sin, yet we still need warriors guarding the gates. Either we will need a lot of volunteers among the strong men to remain in Jerusalem, or else we will have to 'volunteer' some of you. It would be futile to go to all this work building the wall, then leave the city undefended while we all go out to our farms."

So on the morning of the Sabbath (the 24th of Tishri) all the people gathered to dedicate the wall. But when they came, they were weeping, fasting, repenting, clothed in sackcloth, with ashes on their heads. They had taken to heart what Ezra had said, to realize that they still were not ready for Messiah's return! After Tabernacles, they had discovered other pagans and their idols among them, and had spent the last two days getting rid of them. They stood for a quarter of the day while Ezra again read the Law, then they repented and worshiped until noon. After that, their leaders prayed a grand prayer (recorded in Nehemiah 9) which was written out as a covenant and signed by all the leaders and priests.

Finally, they joined together in a solemn vow to keep all the laws of YHWH, which they listed on their signed oath: the laws about not intermarrying with the heathen around them, rejecting idolatry, keeping the Sabbath holy and refusing to allow commerce on it, and bringing the firstfruits of all their produce so they will never again neglect the temple of YHWH and the needs of the priests.

This was a serious oath! Nehemiah was pleased, and Ezra was awed! Clearly, the time spent with YHWH during the Feasts had changed the hearts of the people! Now they really wanted to do the will of God! So when Nehemiah asked for volunteers to live in Jerusalem and guard the gates, Ezra said, "No. They're all willing! Let us cast lots to see whom God has chosen." Everyone agreed, so he did, selecting one in ten for the task. Those not chosen prayed to bless the 'volunteers'. Finally they finished. But that all took so long, there was no time left to dedicate the wall.

The following morning (our Sunday) they finally got to dedicate the wall. They sacrificed a perfect ram, sprinkled the wall with its blood for purification, and anointed it with oil for the dedication. Then the people threw another party. The musicians played with all their hearts. The rest of the people formed two choirs which sang and danced around on top of the wall, one to the right and one to the left. They met back at the temple, where they again sang and shouted for joy. So great was their joy that the shouts were heard clear up in Samaria! *Frankly, it terrified them. They realized that after all their efforts, they had lost.*

Since everyone in Israel was assembled at Jerusalem, Nehemiah ordered his brother Hanani to take a census of all the men by their tribes and the heads of their father's households. Everyone traced his genealogy to verify his Israelite roots. Most had kept good records, but anyone who couldn't prove his ancestry went to the priests for confirmation. No more would they tolerate intermarriage with foreigners! After the census, they collected the tithe. Nehemiah was glad to see that the people had done as they had vowed. The collections for the work of the priesthood were abundant, from nobles and farmers alike.

Thus all was successfully accomplished. The wall had been completed in an amazing fifty-two days, in time for the Feasts. Now with the dedication, everyone's signed vows to keep the Law of YHWH, the census, and the tithe, Nehemiah was ready to take the king's soldiers and return to Susa. Amazingly, he was early. He had asked for a year; he made it back in about 10 months. The king was pleased.

Their Samaritan, Ammonite, Moabite, and Philistine neighbors were not happy about how it all had turned out. After being banned from Judah, they returned to their homes in defeat. But Satan would not give up. Tobiah told Sanballat and Geshom, "We've lost for now, but I have a large family, with many family ties in Jerusalem. We look like Judeans. I will find a way to work my family back into the city, just as soon as that pigheaded Nehemiah leaves!"

So Nehemiah returned to his duties as cupbearer to Artaxerxes. The king was delighted with the successful report and Nehemiah's faithfulness. This was a time of peace and prosperity in the Persian Empire. For many years Logos protected the entire empire for the sake of the king's obedience. Satan had no access. Everywhere he tried, he was met with a wall of angels telling him, "You have no occasion here! Begone, Satan!" Even the ever-scragging Greeks only argued among themselves. Egypt was at peace. Italy was at peace. Even China, India, and the barbarians on the northern steppes were at peace. King Artaxerxes had learned the most profound lesson of all: contentment and acceptance of God's established order. Peaceful trade is better than the glory of violent conquest.

Satan came back to Judah. There had been so much repentance and heavenly celebration there that he simply couldn't handle it. But now with Nehemiah gone, Satan figured he could get somebody to listen to him. The people were all pretty well covered. Even getting individuals to fall into sin had no long-term effect, since everyone was now keeping the Sabbath and their priests were faithful with the sin offerings. Satan knew he could get nowhere unless he could tempt one of the leaders to stumble, and thus bust open a hole in their spiritual covering. *Leaders are usually pretty easy, especially governors and high priests, who are always proud of their position.*

Ezra the priest / scribe was an old man. He had been nearly 60 when he had come to Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes. When Nehemiah left, he was over 70. He was intensely zealous for the Law. His copy of Torah, the books of Moses and the Prophets, was the only copy to survive the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile. So he had made more copies, and had singlehandedly restored the written Word of God to Israel. He did not want to be high priest; he did not want to be governor. No, he was higher than either. He held Eliashib the high priest and Pethahiah the governor accountable to the Law of God. He read Torah to the people every Sabbath, and he was quick to point out when anyone was not keeping it.

So Satan started work on the people's covering – Ezra! It would be tough, for he had an impenetrable wall of angels around him at all times. But Satan had dealt with this kind of leader before. He went to the people to plant a suggestion in their minds: *honor Ezra for his faithfulness in restoring the Law to Israel! Throw a big party; perhaps build him a nice monument or a statue; and present him with an official certificate of appreciation from the governor.*

But an argument ensued. Even the best of leaders steps on a few toes. Some who had been required to divorce their pagan wives were still miffed at Ezra. They complained, "No! Ezra should be censured, not commended! He went too far when he ordered the wholesale divorces!" They pointed to the prophecy of Malachi. "God hates divorce!"

It would have turned out okay if only the leaders had stuck together. But while Pethahiah argued vehemently for the commendation, Eliashib took the other side, as he was still angry about losing his grandson Manasses to the Samaritans because of his marriage to Sanballat's daughter Shanah. Ezra was appalled at the dissension. "Brothers! Stop your fighting! I don't want a certificate of honor, and it would be an abomination to God to create a statue of me. And I'm sorry now that I ordered the wholesale divorces. It's easy to look back and see how I should have worked harder to eliminate the idolatry instead, but at the time I got too upset at those who broke the Law of God. It seemed easier to just get rid of the foreigners than to weed out their idols and their heathen influences. I realize I was wrong. Please forgive me. Let's just agree that I've done some good things and some bad things in my life and leave it at that. I'm no better than any of you. I need the lamb offered for my sin just like you. So just forget the whole thing."

It was a good speech. They stopped bickering. Ezra's apology was accepted, even by Eliashib. "I'm sorry, Ezra. It wasn't your fault. I should have never let Manasses marry Shanah in the first place. I was wrong. I can't blame you for driving away my grandson." So now the problem went the other way. Eliashib changed his mind. He urged everyone to award Ezra the certificate of commendation, even though he had said otherwise. They had the big party. Everyone stood up and said nice things about Ezra. All the while, Satan worked his subtle pride beneath the surface.

Thus later, when Eliashib (and others) came to Ezra to get permission to adopt their pagan relatives into Judah and bring them back into Jerusalem, Ezra agreed! The accusation that he had been wrong in demanding the divorces still stung. Now that everyone had forgiven him and honored him, he felt like he needed to give a little, too.

The laws are very stringent about adopting pagans into families of Israel before they can marry an Israelite. There are tests to prove they are repentant and have renounced their idolatry and paganism. Ezra didn't change the laws. But he became more tolerant about how he enforced them. The adoption process became more of a formality. Many half-breeds were adopted into Judah and allowed back into Jerusalem. Many of the pagan intermarriages were restored. In the following years, more intermarriages were allowed, with outwardly repentant pagans. It was sad. Logos saw that old Ezra was losing his effectiveness and holy zeal. He took him home in 440 BC, at the age of 76.

As the high priest, Eliashib set the religious policy for the nation. He went along with it, for the sake of his grandson. He went to Mount Gerizim to ask Manasses to return.

Manasses was eager to do so. He'd gotten more than a belly full of the abominations common in a pagan temple, especially the human sacrifices as Sanballat and Tobiah had killed their own sons. But he didn't want to give up his wife, Shanah. Eliashib compromised, and agreed.

Shanah rather liked her office as high priestess in the pagan temple. She was raised with this stuff, and it didn't bother her a bit. But Sanballat, her father, took her aside to talk some sense into her. "Shanah, you've got to look at the big picture, here. Any of my children can run the temples to the Baals in Samaria. But you married the high priestly line of Judah! You have a unique opportunity awaiting you in the temple of YHWH! With your influence, the Judeans will become more tolerant of our gods. Then their God, YHWH, who is filled with wrath and indignation of any mention of our gods, will be angry at the Judeans and will disown them, so we can absorb them into our culture!"

Shanah obeyed her father to return to Jerusalem with her husband. She went through the now all-too-routine motions of renouncing her paganism, and got herself adopted into the tribe of Levi. Her marriage to Manasses was officially recognized. Then Eliashib was able to put them up in a small apartment in the temple.

That opened the floodgates. Sanballat had told Shanah what to do. So as soon as she got settled in, she began a campaign to get her sister Belle also adopted into Judah. Eliashib couldn't very well refuse, as the precedent was already established and Belle was still married to Delaiah, the son of a temple gatekeeper. Soon her family was living in a small apartment next to Manasses and Shanah.

But it didn't end there. Sanballat and Tobiah both had large families. Sanballat's son Shelamiah was still married to a daughter of Tobiah. And Tobiah's son Jehohanan had married a daughter of Meshullam of the clan of Zerah of the tribe of Judah. Tobiah himself had married a daughter of Shecaniah of the line of King David. Over the next six years, Shanah managed to get nearly the entire family of Tobiah moved into the temple of YHWH in Jerusalem!

How could there possibly be room for them all, you ask? Well, from the day Eliashib had brought Manasses and Shanah back to live at the temple, YHWH's blessing had left. The tithes and offerings which the people had sworn to bring were no longer coming in. The people all got busy restoring their own farms and cities, and the Levites in Jerusalem were forced to go out and work the large farm that Jeremiah had bequeathed to them. Thanks to Jeremiah, the Levites didn't starve, but neither did they need that large storeroom that had been built to house all the tithes and offerings for the priests. Now, many from Tobiah's large family lived there instead.

Nehemiah had not been back to Judah for twelve years. But his heart had never left. He continually prayed for his countrymen, and wrote many letters to encourage them, especially after he heard that old Ezra had died. For a while, Eliashib responded to his letters. Then years went by with no word at all. A heaviness settled over Nehemiah. He couldn't shake it. He finally went to King Artaxerxes and pleaded for leave to go and see what was wrong. That was 433 BC, when Nehemiah was 55 years old.

As always, King Artaxerxes agreed to meet his faithful friend's desires. "You have served me well, for 32 years. Never once have you failed in doing all that I asked of you. Now, I shall do something for you, for I see that your heart lies in Judah. Go! I now release you from my service here. I will give you a letter appointing you as governor of Judah. You may live out the rest of your days in the land you love."

There was a glorious celebration at Susa. They awarded Nehemiah his 32 year pin. King Artaxerxes presented him with a year's pay for his retirement. In return, Nehemiah and his wife officially offered their oldest son Ned and his wife Nell to the king. "This our son is trained to replace me here as your servant, O King. Ned and Nell love YHWH, love this prosperous and blessed empire of Persia, and love you, O King, for they have observed your generosity to me. Ned will serve you even better than I have, I know."

And up in the heavenlies, Logos and the angelic host also were joyfully celebrating, for once again the pagan emperor of Persia had worshiped the Holy One of Israel by obeying the prompting of His Spirit.

Nehemiah headed out the door with his letter again appointing him governor of Judah. But from the doorway, he turned back. "O King, my heart is overflowing with gratitude for your kindness. We Judeans have a tradition to express such gratitude as a blessing from YHWH our God. Would you be willing to receive such a blessing from YHWH through me?"

"I was hoping you would ask! I gladly receive anything that YHWH has for me, for I fear Him more than all the other gods throughout my empire."

Nehemiah returned to stand before the king, who invited him up onto the dais with him. Nehemiah pulled out a little bottle of olive oil mixed with the traditional anointing fragrances. With his son by his side, and with all the nobles of the king's court watching on in wonder, he anointed the king on his forehead. Then he proclaimed the traditional Hebrew blessing, and added, "In the name of YHWH, God of gods, King of kings, Creator and Sustainer of the universe, I anoint you as a true Israelite! I bless you with power, glory, authority, wisdom, and honor. I cover you with the peace and protection of YHWH's angelic host. For in humility and love you served YHWH's people; therefore He has lifted you up over all the world!"

The thunderous applause went on and on, for everyone loved their king. Logos was just about to respond from the heavenlies, but Satan showed up. "You can't do that! You are holy, and he is filled with sin! The universe will cease to exist if you go to him! Look at how Zoroastrianism has perverted his mind and stained his soul. Look at the gross immorality he tolerates in his pagan empire! Look at..."

"Begone, Satan! Since when are you concerned about someone being too sinful? I love to come to the sinner who seeks for My blessing with even the tiniest bit of true faith."

"I know, but... Your glory! You can't share Your glory with him! He has no sacrifice for sin! You..."

"I said, begone! Though his sacrifice for sin is yet in the future, I see his deeds and his faith, and reckon it done." Satan fled. Logos descended in splendor and majesty, and covered the Persian throne with a cloud of glory. Suddenly the nobles of the court saw into the heavenly realms. Their eyes were opened to see the glory of God covering the king. They saw myriads of angels shining in their strength. The brightness of the heavenly scene overwhelmed their senses, and to a man they fell on their faces before Him.

Nehemiah did not see it. He had but done his job. He bowed before the king and took his leave, clutching his letters in his hand. Nehemiah's son Ned gladly replaced him as the king's cupbearer. The rest of the palace nobles remained on their faces before the king all afternoon. Never has any pagan king been more honored and feared.

Satan was furious. He could do nothing in the entire Persian Empire. So he went to Greece to stir up trouble, in what we know as the Peloponnesian Wars, which blew up in 431 BC and festered on and off for 27 years. Somehow, King Artaxerxes managed to stay mostly out of it, though Satan worked desperately to turn it into a world war.

Nehemiah reached Jerusalem, eager to take over as governor from Pethahiah. But before he even entered the city gates, he saw Levites working the fields of Jeremiah's farm. He grilled them, to find that there were insufficient tithes coming in to support them. So instead of going to the governor's mansion to talk to Pethahiah, he headed straight for the temple. Alas! It was virtually empty! There was no gatekeeper by the door, no singers in the temple court, no priests at the altar – even the eternal fire at the altar was nearly out. He was appalled!

He found a large family living in the temple storeroom. He grilled them, but of course they all swore to be Levites. "Why then are you not doing the work of Levites? Why do I see no one at the temple gates? No one at the altar? No one singing the praises of YHWH in the temple courts?"

He found that they were all related to Sanballat, and Tobiah the Ammonite king. They were just half-breeds, Samaritans. Of course they had no care for the temple or the service of YHWH! He took a whip, and in a rage he drove them from the temple. Then he and his bodyguards carried out all their possessions and dumped them on the pavement beyond the temple gates.

When the true Israelites came in from the fields that evening, Nehemiah ordered them to cleanse the temple. While they were working on it, he called on Pethahiah, and ordered him to gather all the nobles and give an accounting of their service. He showed them his letters of authorization, and demanded, "Why did you allow the temple of YHWH to be forsaken?" Old Pethahiah couldn't answer, so Nehemiah deposed him for dereliction of duty.

The nobles of Jerusalem were properly repentant. “We never turned against YHWH. But after Ezra died there was no one else to read God’s Law to us each Sabbath. So we drifted away. The priests got busy taking care of their farm, and we forgot about the service of the temple of YHWH.”

So Nehemiah called for all Israel to come to the temple the next Sabbath. There he read to them from the book of Deuteronomy. All morning they listened with shame at all the things they had done, or failed to do, against the Law of Moses. It wasn’t just failing to bring the tithes to support the Levites, or allowing the pagans and half-breeds to live in the temple, or even profaning the Sabbath with work or shopping. More than that, Nehemiah discovered that they had been intermarrying with the Samaritans, Moabites, Ammonites, and even the Philistines – again!

So once again, there was a big purge of the paganism. Nehemiah went through the registry and expelled from Israel the pagans who had intermarried with Judeans. But he didn’t demand wholesale divorces, as Ezra had done. Nehemiah used wisdom, discerning between those who had truly repented and fallen in love with Israel and her God YHWH, and those for whom adoption and marriage into Israel was only a sham to infiltrate Israel with their heathen culture. Thus he purified the land.

He assigned guards to enforce his commands to keep it pure, too. Logos was pleased with Nehemiah, and blessed his efforts. Soon the tithes were again filling the temple storeroom, enabling the faithful Levites to perform their duties as required in the Law of Moses.

Nehemiah finally got settled in to the regular job of governor. He had removed Tobiah’s pagan family from the temple and restored the temple worship, posted guards at the city gates to keep them shut and keep the markets closed on the Sabbath, and dealt righteously with all the intermarriages. So now he was shocked to hear children playing in the streets calling to each other in the language of Ashdod of the Philistines! He spoke to them in Hebrew but they couldn’t understand him. Again, he was furious!

It turned out that some Judeans who had intermarried with foreigners, even influential men in the city, were allowing their wives to raise their children in the language of their homelands! Nehemiah called them together once again and jumped all over them. “Have you not read how Solomon, the greatest and wisest king in history, whom God loved, still fell into sin on account of his foreign wives? Yet you have married foreign wives, and instead of ensuring that they forsake their idolatry and their pagan culture, you are allowing them to teach your children in the language of the heathen nations from which they came! I only let your wives remain in Israel because they swore allegiance to YHWH. But it is your responsibility to teach them the ways of YHWH, and to teach your children. You cannot let your wives drift back to the paganism from which they came. They would take your children, too.”

Manasses son of Joiada stood in their defense. “Sir, my wife Shanah is faithful to me and to YHWH. She gave up being the high priestess of Baal at Mount Gerizim to live and support me here at the temple. She swore allegiance to YHWH, and has kept her word all these years. She is not drifting back into paganism. She is merely teaching our children her language and her culture to benefit them as they grow up. We live among these nations. It is to our advantage to have those among us who understand them and know their language. My older children now are totally bi-lingual and multicultural! They have learned the best of all the surrounding cultures, and it enriches our own culture! They have grown up to be broad-minded, understanding, and tolerant! Nehemiah, you need to get a life. I would-to-god all children in Israel were so blessed!”

Nehemiah was enraged. He lost his temper and began to curse Manasses. He even jumped off the platform and yanked out two fistfulls of his beard. “You vile pervert! How dare you try to defend the creeping paganism and tolerance of idolatry that troubles Israel?! We are not called by YHWH to be tolerant of evil! We are called to be holy, even as He is holy! Don’t you know that holy means set apart, different from the nations? How can we teach the nations about God’s holiness if we become like them and merge their culture with ours?” So Nehemiah drove Manasses and Shanah out of Israel. They took their family and moved back to Mount Gerizim, where they again took over as high priest and priestess of the pagan altar there. Thus Nehemiah finally cleansed the land of idolatry. He reigned in Judah for another 27 years. Logos was pleased.

Eliashib and Joiada repented. They had thought they could reform Manasses, but didn’t realize the awful power of Satan’s grip on him through Shanah’s father, Sanballat.

The years flowed by. They were years of prosperity and peace in the Persian Empire. In 425 BC old Eliashib died; his son **Joiada** took over as high priest. Satan gave up on Nehemiah, as he could find no holes in his spiritual umbrella. He returned to Susa to see if there was some way he could get past the angelic covering over Artaxerxes.

Sadly, by the end of 424 BC Satan found a way. As is often the case when a man has lived a whole lifetime under the covering of YHWH, Artaxerxes began to take it for granted. He was blessed! He was invincible! He could do no wrong! It is a subtle pride, Satan’s specialty, and the king fell for it. He was out hunting lions for sport. His wife was with him in the basket high atop his royal elephant. They knew they were totally safe there. *No lion can jump that high!* Right. Try to tell that to the lion.

Artaxerxes was old; his arm had gotten weak and his aim was poor. He threw a spear, but it only glanced off the lion, who let out a fearful roar of rage at the king. The next spear missed entirely. It all happened so fast. The lion leapt into the basket. Artaxerxes was too slow drawing his sword. The king and his wife were quickly slain.

King Artaxerxes and Queen Damaschia (the mother of Xerxes II) died on December 25, 424 BC. He had ruled for 43 good years. Crown Prince **Xerxes II** became king in his place. But he had neither the character nor the fear of YHWH that his father had. He ruled for 45 days, mostly spent in mourning his greatly loved father and laying his body to rest. The next month he threw a royal coronation celebration, at which he got himself stinking drunk.

His half-brother **Sogdianus** (son of a concubine named Alogyne of Babylon) saw his chance and assassinated him, to take the throne for himself. That didn't last very long. Another half-brother, Ochus the Bastard (son of a harlot named Cosmartidene of Babylon who had become another concubine of Artaxerxes), plotted against Sogdianus. He married his half-sister Parysatis, (daughter of yet another concubine, Andia of Babylon), and felt he had more right to the throne than his half-brother. His cavalry Captain Arbarios assassinated King Sogdianus six months fifteen days after taking the throne, and Ochus declared himself king. He took the throne name of **Darius II**, but everyone appropriately dubbed him **Darius Nothus (the Bastard)**.

Just as everyone had loved his father, everyone hated Darius Nothus and his wife Queen Parysatis. She was cruel, scheming, and ambitious. He was a corrupt party boy and a world-class moral pervert. She pretty much ran the empire, since he was never able to properly manage his own zipper. His palace was filled with intrigue, blackmail, and murder. Rebellions and populist revolts became all too common. The covering of peace and prosperity which YHWH had placed over King Artaxerxes was long gone.

At first Darius Nothus ignored the scrapping Greeks. His father had always insisted, "Don't attack the Greeks!" That was fine with him. *The Peloponnesian Wars had been going on for fifteen years, and it looked like they would last another fifteen, so why not allow the silly Greeks to just kill each other off? Hey ho! Let the parties roll on.*

At this point the Greeks were pretty much divided into two major factions: the Ionian Greeks led by Athens, and the Dorian Greeks led by Sparta. In year seventeen of the war, the Athenians got word that one of their allies in Sicily was under attack from the Dorian city of Syracuse in Sicily. The Athenians used this excuse to attack the Dorians in force, hoping to conquer not only Syracuse, but all Sicily.

Two years of foolish blunders and 'bad luck' followed, after which Athens was decisively defeated by an alliance between Syracuse and Sparta. The Athenian fleet was wiped out and most of their military was slain or enslaved.

Finally foolish Darius Nothus began to take an interest. Remember, Athens controlled all of Ionia and Caria, along the western coast of Anatolia, as a result of that famous Peace Treaty of Callias in 448 BC. *But with Athens now defenseless, helpless, 'twas a tempting plum!*

So Darius ordered his satraps in Asia Minor to begin collecting tribute from all the Ionian Greek provinces in Anatolia. Of course that violated the Treaty of Callias and started a war with Athens. So Darius allied with Sparta against them, sending both money and ships. Eventually he succeeded; Athens was defeated and Ionia recovered for the Persian Empire, but at what cost? From then on Persia was embroiled in wars with the scrapping Greeks!

In the meantime, Amyrtaeus II (son of the Amyrtaeus who had wisely governed Egypt under King Artaxerxes) had rebelled against Persia, due to the inept, amoral, and corrupt rule of King Darius II Nothus. Hyrcania also revolted and the next year (409 BC) even Media revolted. The empire was a mess. Queen Parysatis was still trying to run things and King Darius Nothus didn't have a clue.

In 408 BC, Darius finally sent his son Cyrus the Younger to carry on the Greek war with greater energy, making him the satrap of Lydia, Phrygia, and Cappadocia. Cyrus allied with General Lysander of Sparta against Athens.

In 406 BC, Governor Nehemiah died in Judah, in the land he loved. He had kept it prosperous and safe for forty years. Joiada also died; his son **Johanan** took his place as high priest. Judah's new governor was **Baghoi**. But neither Johanan nor Baghoi had the same zeal for God's Law as Nehemiah or Ezra. Life went on, but the Judeans' close relationship with YHWH was broken. Their religious exercises were in danger of becoming just an empty ritual.

In 404 BC, foolish Darius Nothus died a painful death of venereal disease. All the wealth of his empire couldn't save him from his own profligacy. He had ruled for nineteen miserable years with not one good thing to his account. Well, maybe one. His son Cyrus the Younger had faithfully obeyed his father's orders to control the scrapping Greeks. His General Lysander decisively destroyed the Athenian navy at Sestos, eliminating Athens as a world power.

The oldest son of Darius and Parysatis was the crown prince Arsaces. Upon his father's death he took over as **Artaxerxes II Mnemon**. He inherited all his father's wars as well as all his vices. When he took the throne, Pharaoh Amyrtaeus II saw his chance, and declared independence from the Persian Empire. Artaxerxes II was too busy with internal rebellions and palace intrigues to care. As with his father, his first priority was his harem, which was big and growing. *And they thought his father was a moral pervert!* Cyrus the Younger, an honorable man, was disgusted with his degenerate brother. Surely the mighty Persian Empire deserved a more respectable king! Now that the Athenians were subdued, Cyrus decided it was up to him to take the Persian throne. He gathered his Greek Allied troops under General Clearchus, plus 10,000 from Asia Minor under General Ariaeus, and moved in toward Babylon to attack his brother in 401 BC. However, Tissaphernes, Artaxerxes' satrap in Lydia and Caria, managed to warn the king. Artaxerxes II was ready for him at Cunaxa near Sippar.

The two mighty armies met on the left bank of the Euphrates River, about 50 miles north of Babylon. Cyrus was no dummy. He knew that his only task was to kill his brother and the battle would be over. So he ordered his generals to follow his lead as he attacked the center of the Persian forces, to pierce through to the king. He would have succeeded, except General Clearchus, in arrogant disregard of orders, fell for an old trick. The Persian left flank feigned and pretended panic, fleeing from before the Greeks and drawing General Clearchus in their direction. Terrible mistake. It left Cyrus and General Ariaeus in the thick of the battle without the mighty Spartan soldiers beside them. The Persians surged forward. Cyrus was killed, and the rebels from Asia Minor quickly scattered. Sure, the Greeks soon came back to reform and hold the line against Persia, but it was far too late for poor Cyrus.

The Persian troops attacked again and again. They tried every trick in the book. They circled around to the Greek encampment and burned their tents and supplies. They massed to the center in an attempt to break through to General Clearchus. They threw everything they had against the Greek invaders. In the end, the Persians were decimated and the Greeks were still standing there waiting for the battle to begin. General Clearchus didn't lose a man. Well actually, history records that one of his men slipped and sprained his ankle. Hey! It was a bad sprain! They carried him off the battlefield, to the cheers of the beleaguered Persian soldiers.

King Artaxerxes II remembered an old maxim his grandfather use to swear, 'Don't attack the Greeks!' It had been passed down for generations. Now he understood why. He sounded the retreat and pulled all the way back to Babylon in utter, ignominious defeat.

General Ariaeus gathered his scattered troops to meet with his ally, General Clearchus. Then the Greeks learned that Cyrus had already been killed. Their expedition to install him on the throne of the Persian Empire had failed. Their overwhelming victory was now irrelevant. They were in the middle of a very large empire with no food, no employer, and no reliable friends. What to do now?

General Clearchus wanted to simply move in, take over the empire, and install General Ariaeus as the new king, but he refused. "Though I am Persian born, yet I am not of royal blood. I could never win over the Persian nobility. So I would be assassinated as soon as you left for Greece." They remembered how easily his men had recently been scattered by the Persian army. Clearchus had to agree.

"Well, what about Tissaphernes? Surely he hates evil Artaxerxes as much as anyone. We'll make him king. Then he'll supply us with food for our return journey." This was the second big mistake of Clearchus. He totally misjudged Tissaphernes, who was bitter at Cyrus for taking control of Ionia, and still loyal to King Artaxerxes. But he welcomed the opportunity to parley with his opponents.

Tissaphernes feigned friendship with them. He expressed deep sorrow that Cyrus had been killed. He ordered that food be quickly supplied to the hungry Greek soldiers. "No, I myself can't be king, for I also am not of royal blood, but if you can find someone of royal blood, I certainly will support him in deposing that evil King Artaxerxes!" So, in friendship and trust, he sent General Ariaeus back to Anatolia, and promised to send guides to show General Clearchus the way the Black Sea, where they had planned to meet up with their troop ships.

Once he had won their trust, he invited the great Greek general and his captains to a feast in honor of the Greek victory. This was General Clearchus' third and final big mistake. When they were all drunk, Tissaphernes brought in his soldiers and took them captive. He hauled them off to Babylon, where they were sorely abused and eventually all decapitated by King Artaxerxes II.

The Greek army was now leaderless. But after their amazing victory over Persia, no one dared to attack them. They elected five new leaders, plus a new Spartan general named Chirisophus. They marched north across enemy territory, 600 miles to the Black Sea to meet their ships. History records this as, 'The March of the Ten Thousand'. It took them nearly two years to get home, and by then their numbers had dwindled to more like 6000.

The news of their victory reached Greece long before they did. It electrified the world. Even on its home turf, the mighty Persian army was completely overcome by a mere 10,000 Greeks! In the years to come, this news would have major repercussions. However, it would be a long while before Greece could actually take advantage of their good news. Sparta had established itself as the dominant power over all Greece. But the Peloponnesian Wars had ruined Greece. The land was devastated and poverty stricken, especially Athens, which had been reduced to a state of subjection. It never recovered its pre-war supremacy.

The fiesty Spartans were furious with Persia for their duplicity in annihilating all their best commanders at Cunaxa. In 396 BC they mobilized their forces to attack Asia Minor, under General Agesilaus II. His goal was to liberate the Greek cities of western Anatolia from Persian domination. King Artaxerxes II would surely wish that his foolish father had never annoyed the Greeks! Agesilaus walked through Anatolia, capturing Phrygia, Caria, Lydia, and most of Ionia, again without losing a man. Terrified Tissaphernes was totally overwhelmed. He later lost his life as punishment for his failure to defend his provinces.

From here on it got really nutsy. Artaxerxes II provided support to Athens, Thebes, Corinth, and Argos against Persia's former ally, Sparta, beginning what is now known as the Corinthian Wars in 395 BC. But later, when Athens began to get too strong, King Artaxerxes changed sides again. He didn't want either side to actually win. He had a tiger by the tail and didn't dare let him go!

So for eight years the scrapping Greeks lived up to their well-earned reputation, while Artaxerxes II gloated in his rather unorthodox method of keeping them too weakened and too busy fighting each other to attack him.

One good thing about the wicked, irresponsible King Darius Nothus and his foolish son Artaxerxes II was the effect they had on the remaining exiles from Israel. Many thousands of them had settled happily and peacefully all across the Persian Empire under the wise and kind rule of Cyrus, Xerxes I, and Artaxerxes I, the ‘chest and arms of silver’ from Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. But the wickedness of the following kings of Persia had troubled the land. As always, Satan incited the nations to blame all their troubles on the Israelites, everywhere they had been exiled. From the beginning this has been his way – to spew out his hatred for Logos by tormenting the earth – then blame it all on God’s people, thus instigating hatred and persecution of the Israelites among the nations. This Satan did with a purple passion, starting on the very day that godly King Artaxerxes I and his Queen Damaspia were killed by the lion and Logos’ covering was removed from the land.

But Satan’s plan backfired. The very persecution itself became a powerful motivating force to drive the Israelites back home. They came in a flood; whole cities packed up and moved back to the Beautiful Land! Within twenty years after the death of Nehemiah there was no more need to worry about tithes to support the Levites, and no more need to worry about defending the walls to protect them from the scheming, spiteful Samaritans. Israel quickly became a strong and prosperous nation once again. They were at peace. Their enemies were subdued. The Beautiful Land once again yielded of its strength to God’s chosen people. The cities were restored, the rains returned, the barren wastes blossomed, and the good Word of YHWH for His beloved Bride began to be fulfilled once again.

YHWH had promised through the prophet Jeremiah, “At that time, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and you shall be My people. For I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you back with lovingkindness. Again I will build you up, so you shall be rebuilt, O virgin daughter of Israel. Then you will lift your tambourines and go forth to the dance with joy! Again you shall plant vineyards on the hills of Judea and Samaria, and shall enjoy the fruit. Again the watchmen shall cry out on the hills of Ephraim, ‘Arise! Let us go up to Zion, to the temple of YHWH our God!’ Sing with gladness for Jacob! Shout among the nations, ‘O YHWH, save Your people, the remnant of Israel!’ For I am bringing them from the north countries, I am gathering them from the remote parts of the earth. Everyone, young and old! Even the blind, the lame, the mother with her children, the pregnant woman – a huge company! They shall embark with weeping; with supplications I will lead them. They shall walk on an easy road along the river, on a path in which they shall not stumble. They shall return here, to My Beautiful Land.

“O nations, hear the Word of YHWH! Declare in the far-off coastlands! He who scattered Israel will gather him back, and keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock. For YHWH has ransomed Jacob, and redeemed him from nations mightier than he. So My people shall arrive with shouts of joy on the heights of Zion. They shall be radiant because of the bounty of YHWH – the grain, the new wine, the oil, the young of their flocks and herds. Their life shall be like a watered garden. They shall never again languish in despair. Then they shall rejoice in the dance, the virgin maiden, the young men and the old, all together. For I will change their mourning into joy, their sighing into singing. I will comfort them, and give them jubilation instead of sorrow. I will fill the soul of the priests with abundance, so all My people will be satisfied with My goodness.”

The Exile was past. No longer was Israel a barren wasteland troubled by enemies on all sides. Once again it was the Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey. YHWH put His covering over it, waiting to see if, this time, His Bride would remain faithful.

Gavriel came to Logos. “My Lord and Master, Your Bride is home, but without a spiritual leader. Ever since Achaiah, Ezra, and Nehemiah returned to You here, there is no one, neither prophet nor priest, by whom You can lead Your people. They could begin to drift away from You. Is it not time to raise up another in this generation who zealously walks with You, a true prophet who knows Your voice, seeks Your face, and obeys Your Word?”

Logos smiled sadly at his friend. “Gavriel, thank you. Truly you know Me as no other. You understand My desires, My heart. I long for one who knows My voice and seeks My face. I long for one who will speak My Word and hold My righteous standard up before My precious ones with the zeal and passion of Achaiah, Ezra, or Nehemiah. But now is not the time. I have disciplined My people as never before. Now that I’ve restored them to My land and My temple, I must test them to see what they have learned from My discipline. That is why I withdraw from them. If they have learned their lessons – if they continue to obey Me, to keep My commandments, and to keep themselves pure from the wickedness that surrounds them – then they will be prepared to receive Messiah when I come to them. Then I can come in triumph, to claim My Bride! For My Bride will then be mature, tested, purified through the fires of My discipline, worthy of My holy name. Thus I shall never be lonely again! But Father has not shown Me what will actually happen. Father hides it from Me, as if she might... fail the test and turn away from Me! That is why I seem sad, dear Gavriel. To think that after all we have been through together, she might again fail Me... that we may have to go through the discipline all over again... It is almost more than I can bear. She has no idea how much I have suffered... what her rebellion and self-centeredness has cost Me. Perhaps it is in the Father’s Plan that I must demonstrate My pain to her, somehow...”

Logos paused to wipe off the tears. “You suggest I raise up another to know My voice and seek My face, but I desire more than that, dear Gavriel. I want a whole nation who knows My voice and seeks My face! I have had one or two in each generation. It is time for My Bride to be mature – to love and trust Me. They have My Law, they have had almost 5000 years of history to learn My ways. I will baby them no longer. It is time for them to step up to the plate and live victoriously in all that I’ve taught them. There will be no more miraculous intervention until Father sends Me to them as their Messiah. No more prophets until John, the one Father sends to prepare for My triumphant return. Then we shall see if they are really ready to accept Me, or if they will turn away once more.” He wept at the thought.

Magus Ned and his wife Nell have served in the court of the kings of Persia at Susa for 45 years. Through good kings and bad, Ned had been the king’s cup-bearer ever since his father Nehemiah left for Israel in 433 BC. He stood always by the king’s right hand, constantly on guard to protect the king from whatever may be offered him. Nell stood beside her husband, constantly on guard to warn the king of deceivers. Her discernment and intuition had no equal. They have faithfully served five kings, so no one in the kingdom was more trusted. But now they were old. They too sensed the pull toward the Beautiful Land, for it was a pull of Spirit.

Artaxerxes II heard reports from many places across his empire, both of the persecution of exiles from Israel, and of their flight back to their homeland. Jack, his chief advisor, told him to clamp down on them, to discipline them for fleeing to Israel without the king’s permission. “What do you say, Ned my old friend?” The king asked.

Even knowing he had the king’s total trust, Ned was cautious. “It is neither those who persecute them, O King, nor anything you have done, but it is YHWH our God who is drawing my people to the land of their fathers. If you try to prevent them, you could be seen as fighting God. You know that would not be wise. I suggest you let them go.”

Wicked Artaxerxes II was in a surprisingly good mood. “I accept your counsel, my friend. Frankly, if I were being persecuted I too would try to flee to the land of my fathers. What about you, Ned? Is your God drawing you to Israel?”

Ned glanced at his wife. It would be a dream come true! “Your Majesty! My place is here by your side. I will serve you until you have no further need of me. But after that, yes. My heart yearns to return to the land of my people.”

“You have served me well. Now you are old. Go now, while you can enjoy it. Take your wife and family, and ask your God to bless me also.”

So, in an amazingly swift turn of events, Ned and Nell were packing to leave for Israel the next day. But Nell had reservations. “Ned, I didn’t like the look I saw on Jack’s face yesterday. He is in on this. I smell a rat.”

“What is it, my dear? What sort of rat?” Ned was good at listening to his sensitive, perceptive wife.

“He dropped it too quickly. He didn’t even try to argue with you. I think he instigated the whole thing. I saw him grin afterwards, while you were looking at the king. He’s got something up his sleeve, just waiting for you to leave.”

“You think he might try to harm the king?”

“Ned, you know everyone hates the king. His enemies are everywhere. That is why he has kept you so close. You’re about the only one he can trust! I don’t know why he was so quick to let you go.”

Ned froze with his suitcase half open. He had so deeply longed to retire in Jerusalem! But suddenly he realized he couldn’t go. He took his suitcase and dumped it back out on the bed. “I’m sorry, my dear. You’re right. I cannot go to Israel without knowing the king is safe. We must return to his service until we know he has a reliable replacement.” Nell agreed, and they hurried back to find the king.

Artaxerxes II sat at lunch, about to take a sip of wine with his meal, when Ned rushed in. “Wait, O King! Don’t drink it! I haven’t tasted it!” He ran up and grabbed the goblet from the king’s hand.

“Oh, Ned. We thought you were gone. But no worries. My faithful advisor and friend Jack here has already tasted everything for me. I can trust him.”

Ned swirled the wine around the crystal goblet, sniffing it. It smelled fine. As he put it to his lips, Nell screamed, “Stop! There is poison in the goblet! I see it in Jack’s eyes!”

“No, no, my dear.” The king patted her playfully on her rather plump behind. “Jack has served me for fifteen years. He would never try to deceive me.”

“Then ask him to drink it!” Nell demanded.

“My, my. Are we getting a bit paranoid in our old age?” Jack sneered. But Nell saw sweat on his brow.

“It’s not called paranoid, if the threat is real!” Nell snapped back. “Drink it! Then I will humbly fall on my knees to beg your pardon – if you are still alive!” She grabbed the goblet and thrust it at Jack’s face.

Now a faint look of horror crossed his eyes. For a moment he froze. Then, without another word, he turned and ran from the banquet hall. Of course they caught him. The truth came out. Jack had indeed conspired to poison the king. He and some other advisors and nobles, who hated him for his self-indulgence and his erratic politics, had selected a young son of his to take his place. Jack would then run the empire as regent to the new king.

Well, the conspirators were all executed. Ned and Nell returned to their post. Artaxerxes expressed his thanks. “I’m sorry you didn’t get to retire in Israel, but I am most grateful! You saved my life! Ask whatever you will!”

“We are in need of nothing, O King. You provide for all our desires. We are happy to be of service.”

“Surely there is something I can do; some policy that I can change for you – I know! I will reduce the taxes on your province, Israel! And I will issue an edict granting my royal permission for your people, all over the empire, to return to Israel if they choose. I’ll make it a crime to try to stop them! What do you think? Would you like that?”

Ned and Nell bowed in grateful agreement. This was far more than they had dared to hope. They would joyfully remain here beside the king to their dying day for such a blessing to their people and the land they love.

Thus the restored land of Israel was doubly blessed. With the reduction in taxes, prosperity exploded, and with the royal permission to return, Israelites flooded back into their homeland. The Samaritans were overwhelmed with Judean settlers all around them. Soon the hills of Ephraim and vineyards of Samaria rang with their laughter, just as Jeremiah had prophesied. The Feasts were held with greatest joy. There was dancing in the streets of Jerusalem, dancing in all the cities of Judea, dancing in the vineyards of Samaria, and dancing on the hills of Ephraim. *Logos longed to join them in the Dance, but alas, He was rarely invited.*

But there is one place where He was invited. Ned and Nell were on their faces thanking God for turning the king’s heart toward Israel. Logos entered their apartment, dancing to the cadence of pure worship, filling them with His love, joy, and peace. And that night as they slept He filled their dreams with visions of Himself and His Word.

The next day, Ned was hesitant. The king noticed and asked why. “Well, Your Majesty, I’m not a prophet, and I’ve not directly heard the voice of YHWH our God before, so I’m not sure. But I think He came to me in my dreams last night, saying that He’s grateful for what you did for us. He offers you His wisdom regarding the Greeks.”

King Artaxerxes II was rather skeptical. “I don’t need your God’s wisdom regarding the Greeks. I’m doing fine. I play one city-state against the other so they duke it out among themselves and never get strong enough to attack me!” He was very pleased with himself. Too pleased.

“As you wish, O King. But if you ever desire the wisdom of YHWH our God, please let me know.”

The days passed. The king kept telling himself he was doing fine with Greece and didn’t need YHWH’s wisdom, but the more he thought about it, the more it bugged him. He couldn’t sleep. Finally he told Ned, “I’ve decided I do wish to hear YHWH’s wisdom regarding the Greeks. It may not change my mind, but I will listen to it and decide.”

“I warn you, O King. YHWH is the King of the Universe. Don’t take His Word lightly. Once you hear it, you will be responsible for what you have heard.”

“You said you weren’t even sure it was YHWH’s Word in your dream. Just tell me. I’m the king! I’ll surely know whether it’s a good word or not.”

“As you wish, O King. YHWH says that your policy of pitting the Greeks against each other is a bit short-sighted. Yes, it’s true they’ve weakened each other, destroyed each other’s armies and navies, and ruined their economies in the process. But they have been training to fight! They are becoming the best warriors in the world! If they ever cease their bickering among themselves, join together, and turn against Persia, no one will be able to stop them.”

The king remembered the attack of the Greek forces under General Clearchus at the Battle of Cunaxa. He had thrown everything he had against the Greeks, but it had been like water off a duck’s back. Ned was right! Suddenly he was afraid. “O my god! They are the best warriors in the world already! What does YHWH say I should do?”

“They are very weak right now because of their foolish squabbling. Demand that they make peace, and swear to them you will destroy any city that violates the peace. You surely do have the power to enforce the peace, O King! They fear you. They will obey.”

“Yes, yes. Now I understand. I will... But wait... if they’re at peace, they’ll get strong again! Then they’ll attack me! What do I do when they get strong?”

“They will not attack you if you are their friend, their ally. Send them money, supplies, cargo ships; help them to rebuild their ruined cities; restore Greek sovereignty over all the lands you have taken from them; Thrace, Ionia, Phrygia, Caria... remove your satraps. Help them set up their own governments. Enforce the peace among them without having to tax them or control them. Trade freely with them as equals. Teach them the benefits of peace and free trade. They are young, foolish, and hotheaded, but they will become a great nation someday! And you surely will want to be counted among their allies when they do! If you are not, the Persian Empire will be destroyed.”

That was a hard word for a proud and rich world emperor. He had to wrestle with it. But the first part was easier. In a sudden policy change that stunned the world, Artaxerxes II stopped promoting wars and demanded all the Greek city-states make peace. He even gave them Thrace! But as to giving them Ionia, Caria, or Phrygia, he couldn’t do it. “Ned, why?” he argued. “Why can’t I keep Anatolia and make the Aegean Sea our boundary? I would be stupid to leave them a toehold on the mainland. When they grow strong, they are certain to use it to advance against me! Give me one good reason to let them!”

Ned had good reason. He showed the king Daniel’s prophecy of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. “Greece is the belly and thighs of bronze. You cannot stop them, O King! This is why you ‘Don’t attack the Greeks!’ Your only hope to survive is if you ally with them – keep them on your side.”

But no. Evil King Artaxerxes did not know YHWH and did not trust the ancient prophecies of the book of Daniel. He enforced the peace, and even helped the scrapping Greeks to become a little more civilized. But he would not give them western Anatolia. Never in a million years.

Admiral Antalcidas, commander of the Spartan fleet, was summoned to Susa to negotiate the terms of peace. He sent his ships up to the Hellespont, blockading the trade route until Athens, still weak from their disastrous defeat in 404 BC, capitulated and agreed to halt their feud. Her allies Thebes, Corinth, and Argos couldn't continue the fight without her. Thus the 'King's Peace' was signed in 387 BC, ending the Corinthian Wars. This treaty declared that Persia would own all of Ionia, Anatolia, and Cyprus, and all the Greek city-states would become independent. Sparta would be the guardian of the peace. If it failed, Artaxerxes swore to destroy the city-state that violated it.

Artaxerxes was pleased with himself. He had forced peace upon Greece at little cost to himself, and had gained undisputed control over Ionia and all of Anatolia. But Logos, who had truly wanted to bless him, grieved for him. He hadn't listened to wisdom. Almost from the start the Spartans abused their status as guardians of the peace, throwing their weight around whenever it was to their advantage. Everyone likes the idea of peace when he's on top! And Sparta was on top. Boy, did they ever enforce the peace! But they infuriated the other city-states with their selective enforcement, and within only a few years the scrapping Greeks were back at it again.

Old Magus Ned and his wife Nell died at Susa, still by the king's side. Artaxerxes II never fully comprehended his loss in rejecting the wisdom of YHWH from them. But from then on he suffered wars, discontent, rebellions, and palace intrigues throughout his empire. Twice Artaxerxes tried to recover Egypt for the empire (in 395 and 374 BC). Both times he failed miserably. Rebellions regularly flared out in Ionia and various other parts of western Anatolia. Media revolted again. The strife just never ended.

Having rejected the wisdom of YHWH, Artaxerxes II soon went back to his old methods of playing one against another, back-stabbing, and treachery. Worse, he further polluted the religion of Zoroaster and Daniel (which had prohibited any use of images or idols to represent God – Ahura Mazda was represented only by fire), by building statues of the ancient Persian god Mithra (sunlight) and his consort, the fertility goddess Anahita (Astarte).

But King Artaxerxes II suffered the greatest in his own family. He had inherited his father's inclination toward moral depravity. We won't go into details here, except to say he had roughly 350 wives or concubines, and nearly as many children. As he aged, his sons fought over the right to succession, resulting in some being executed, some committing suicide, some killing each other off. It was a mess. God's design for marriage is a whole lot better.

Seeing his own foolishness in his children, Artaxerxes II died in 359 BC of a broken heart. A mad power struggle rocked the palace at Susa. His son Ochus, commander of a legion of Persia's finest, arrived the next year with his army. He stormed the palace, assassinated eight of his brothers, and took the empire under the throne name **Artaxerxes III**. He promptly murdered every remaining brother to secure his throne. That made roughly a hundred murders his first month. So you know what a fine, peaceful reign his will be!

Little of note occurred during his pitiful reign other than wars, bickering, treachery, and revolts. Not just the Greeks, but Egypt, Anatolia, Cyprus, Phoenicia... Artaxerxes III spent his entire reign trying to get everything under control. He had both defeats and victories, but even his victories became defeats for the Persian Empire because of his cruelty and the ruinous policies he imposed on his abused subjects.

Amyrtaeus II had rebelled against foolish Darius Nothus in 410 BC and had won Egypt's independence from Persia by 404 BC, so Egypt was self-governing. The Persians still liked to think of Egypt as theirs, but both campaigns of Artaxerxes II to subdue them had failed. Artaxerxes III's first campaign against Egypt in 350 BC also failed, because then Pharaoh Nectanebo II had hired two battalions of Greek mercenaries.

Sidon declared independence in 343 BC. Artaxerxes III invaded with such overwhelming force, that King Tennes repented and opened up his city, begging forgiveness. King Artaxerxes III simply massacred everyone and burned their city to the ground. 40,000 people died in the conflagration.

After annihilating Sidon, Artaxerxes III moved down to subdue Egypt. With his 330,000 man army, he succeeded. This time, he had 10,000 Greek warriors fighting with him; only one thirtieth of his total force, yet they made all the difference. Egypt was defeated. Pharaoh Nectanebo II fled to Ethiopia. Artaxerxes III took over the country, conducting a reign of terror designed to reduce mighty Egypt to poverty. He broke down walls, raised taxes, looted and destroyed temples, persecuted priests, stole their sacred books, and gained the fear and undying hatred of virtually everyone in the empire. Any Judeans still alive in Egypt were exiled to the Caspian Sea. King Artaxerxes III now had total control of the Persian Empire. No one else dared revolt! *Yeah. Right...*

Within five years, Bagoas, his own vizier, who had made himself exceedingly wealthy by selling the sacred texts back to the persecuted Egyptian priests, staged a coup d'état. He poisoned the king and killed the entire royal family except for Arsēs, the youngest son of King Artaxerxes III. Bagoas figured he would be easy to control. Thus Arsēs became the puppet king **Artaxerxes IV**, with Bagoas pulling his strings.

However, Arsēs didn't like being a puppet. After two years he plotted against Bagoas, but the cunning vizier moved first, poisoning Arsēs in 337 BC. Bagoas put his cousin **Darius III Codomanus** on the throne instead.

But before we tell the story of the brief, miserable rule of Darius III, we must step back and view the overall picture. The once great Persian Empire had been weakened by a series of foolish, wicked kings. Egypt and Phoenicia were devastated. Anatolia was a mess of conflicting loyalties and Greek uprisings. The scrapping Greeks still bickered among themselves and sent troops to whichever side hired them.

India, once subject to Darius the Great, had been left behind in the development of civilizations. Its wealth in silks, spices, precious stones, pearls, and ivory had enriched the rest of the world, but its caste system and its demonic pantheistic religion (in which pretty much everything is a god) had bound India in perpetual poverty. Imagine living in a country in which you cannot kill even a mosquito or a fly that bothers you, for fear of killing your long dead grandmother? Or, worse, where people will starve before killing an animal for food? They even pray to the cow dung before picking it up to burn it for fuel! I'm sorry; I'm sure I need more compassion. It seems to me that such a foolish people deserve to live in the abject poverty they have created.

The ancient civilization of China had been pretty well isolated by the Himalaya Mountains for most of its history. In contrast to the foolish Indian people, the Chinese are brilliant and energetic. Every invention and development of civilization since Noah, was achieved first by the Chinese. For thousands of years, they retained a healthy perception of God as the Creator, Sustainer, Life-Giver, and Law-Giver. For the most part they followed His laws, and reaped the benefits of peace and prosperity. But yes, they too, drifted from their original faith. God tested them by sending the Tartars, Huns, and Mongols over their northern borders. They sadly failed those tests. From then on, their religion became man-centered, paving the way for Confucius, who lived 551 – 478 BC. His extensive writings replaced the laws of God with an agnostic and analytical culture of tradition, custom, and personal morality. This became the religion of Taoism, in which man's reason is supreme. China became enslaved, not by outward conquerors, but by the need to conform to an impossible standard of external righteousness, which began to stifle creativity and innovation. Thus China was weakened by the very morality they thought would keep them strong. They were bound to the greatness of the past, unable to meet the challenge of the present.

The chest of silver in Nebuchadnezzar's statue had tarnished. Thus the world stage was set for a new conqueror. It was time for the belly and thighs of bronze. The scrapping Greeks had long been preparing for this day. Each Greek warrior was mightier than ten of other nations. In the east, monarchs were absolute and their people obeyed passively. But in Greece, liberty, patriotic ardor, freedom, and zest for life inflamed the hearts of the people with zeal and passion. But surprisingly, the new conqueror did not arise from among the great city-states of Greece, Sparta, Athens, Argos, Corinth, or Thebes, who had so foolishly fought each other for dominance and independence in the Corinthian Wars.

Bear in mind, the Greeks did not call themselves Greek. They were Hellenes. Whatever land they settled was Hellas. Nations whose speech they didn't understand were simply barbarians. I will continue to use the term 'Greek' to avoid confusing you, dear Reader. But all Greeks were not alike. Their peninsula was cut up by a zillion mountain ridges extending out to the sea, creating beautiful bays which are wonderful for a sea-faring folk, but difficult to travel by land even to the next city. This resulted in the independent city-states and many separate cultures, mostly from four related tribes: Ionians, Aeolians, Achaeans, and Dorians. But times were changing. The flexible, hot-blooded Greeks were up to the challenge – with a unifying force called civilization.

One link among the Greeks was Homer's heroic poetry. It became a 'bible' of sorts to tie their heritage and cultures together. The second was the famous temple at Delphi, with its statue of Apollo and the oracle where all Greeks sought wisdom. A third was the games at Olympia, held every four years since the first Olympiad in 776 BC. A religious festival, the Olympics celebrated their god Zeus in honor of his defeat of Chronos and succession as ruler of the heavenly throne and peacekeeper among the planetary gods. A fourth was the Amphictyonic Council, a league of religious elders from each city who still gather at the temple of Demeter near Thermopylae in the spring, and at the temple of Apollo in Delphi each fall. As with all religious groups, they exerted as much political influence as possible. Their gatherings, like these other unifying links, helped to keep the passionate, fiery Greeks from hurting themselves. [See map, page 309.]

Only Macedon (Macedonia) was different. With no great cities, they had a more pastoral society, dwelling all around the countryside. Beginning in 359 BC, they were led by King Philip II, who ruled from Pella. In 356 BC the neighboring Phocians rebelled against the heavy taxes imposed upon them by Thebes, and seized the temple at Delphi, using its riches to build an army and attack Boetia and Thessaly. The Amphictyonic Council was appalled, and declared holy war against Phocis. This was King Philip's chance. He supported the council's decision with his army, driving the Phocians out of Thessaly and eventually gaining the victory over the rebels and control of the area. This was but the first stepping stone in Philip's ambition to gain control over all Greece.

Also in 356 BC, his favorite wife Olympias (an Epirote princess) bore a son, **Alexander**. On the day he heard of his son's birth, Philip was just claiming victory over Potidaea in Chalcidice, which he had just conquered. The same day, he heard that Parmenion, his favorite general, had conquered all of Illyria (his neighbor to the northwest). The third bit of news he heard that day was that his racehorse was victorious in the Olympics. The ancient prophecy was fulfilled, that a man whose birth coincided with three victories would prove invincible in battle. Then Philip heard that the Greek temple of Artemis at Ephesus had burned to the ground the same day. It was a sign! Philip was inspired. *He would conquer all of Greece, and then go on to kindle the flame throughout Asia.*

By 340 BC Philip II had conquered all of northern Greece to Byzantium. When he was absent from Macedon, his son Alexander was his regent. Though only 16, he distinguished himself with his mature, friendly, and confident manner. His peers recognized his leadership abilities, and honored him as much as his father. But Alexander was impatient. “Boys, it looks like my father will conquer the entire world, leaving nothing great left for you or me to accomplish!”

In 339 BC, King Philip took a fifth wife, Cleopatra, a true Macedonian. This was a challenge to Alexander’s status as heir to the throne, as his mother was from Epirus, a province conquered by Philip. During the wedding feast, Cleopatra’s uncle gave a toast for the marriage to result in a ‘legitimate’ heir to the throne. Alexander was furious. He threw his wine goblet at the uncle, shouting, “What am I, then? A bastard?” Philip drew his sword and headed for Alexander to defend his new wife’s honor, but he fell in a drunken stupor over the couch. “Here,” declared Alexander, “lies the great king bent on conquering the world from Greece to Asia, but he cannot even get from one table to the next!” Alexander turned in rage and left the wedding feast. He fled with his mother back to her father’s palace at Dodona in Epirus.

After he sobered up, King Philip was sorry at what had happened. He greatly admired his son. He promised that Alexander would be his successor to the throne. He offered him the command of his best troops, his most experienced generals, and the famed ‘Companion Cavalry’. Alexander accepted the apology and took his offer, though his mother Olympias remained in Epirus.

Many Athenians saw King Philip’s rapid conquest of the northern barbarians as favorable. And if his ambition was to conquer the Persian Empire too, all the better. It seemed that only Demosthenes, the Athenian orator, was clear-headed enough to sense the potential danger to themselves. His eloquent ‘Philipics’ roused his countrymen just in time. Philip had brought peace to Greece, but he had threatened their liberty! War became inevitable. Athens joined their army with the Theban forces and met Philip and Alexander on the battlefield at Charonea in Boetia on August 2, 338 BC.

This would be a decisive battle. It was for all the marbles. In its outcome rested the destiny of the world. The Thebans’ ‘Sacred Band’ of warriors were thought to be invincible. They were 150 matched pairs of homosexual lovers. Everyone believed no attack on them could be successful, so fiercely did they defend their partners. They were the best of the best, the very pinnacle of military development, hand-picked from among the very best warriors in the world.

Alexander led Philip’s left flank, facing those Thebans. Philip took the right flank, facing the Athenians. For a long time, neither side gave an inch, and the battle appeared to be a stalemate. The battle lines remained an unbroken wall of spears and shields; therefore no offense, thus no victory, was possible. To break the stalemate, Philip suddenly ordered his troops back. The eager Athenians surged forward.

But the Thebans were still blocked by Alexander. When the Athenians moved ahead, he saw his chance, as his father knew he would. He instantly led a charge right into that break in the line between the Thebans and the Athenians. Once behind their line, Alexander went berserk, oblivious to his own safety, unaware even that his courageous band of brothers had followed him behind the battle line. Some of the Athenian warriors – remember these are the best in the world – turned their heads briefly to glance at the ruckus. Philip saw them flinch, and he charged for all he was worth. Now that their focus was broken, it quickly became a rout.

As Philip mopped up the Athenians, Alexander attacked the Sacred Band of Thebes. The rest fled, but not the Sacred Band. They stood firm. They had a reputation to protect. 254 of them died there on the battlefield. The last six were wounded, captured, and eventually died as well. With this victory, Greece belonged to Philip, as there were not enough soldiers remaining in the land to challenge him in battle.

But King Philip II was surprisingly generous to his fellow Greeks. He allowed the Thebans to erect a statue of a lion to honor their dead Sacred Band. He sent eighteen-year-old Alexander to Athens to negotiate an equitable end to the fighting. He offered his former enemies an alliance. If they would join him in fighting the Persians, all who had opposed him would be pardoned.

The Greek city-states jumped at the merciful offer. By that winter, Philip had formed what we know as the League of Corinth, which for the first time in history, actually joined all the scrapping Greek city-states into a lasting peace. Under King Philip’s leadership, they built a unified military force. *Now he is ready to take on the cruel Persian Empire!*

But for all of King Philip’s courage and ambition, it was his young son Alexander who had captured the admiration and fear of the civilized world. For rumors circulated that in his insane charge, he had slipped behind the Sacred Band of invincible Theban warriors and singlehandedly dispatched all 300 of them. It wasn’t true, of course. His courageous little band of brothers had followed him through the gap. But when stories of great battles are told, legends are born; heroes are made. Such was Alexander that day.

In 336 BC, Philip was ready to assault the Persian Empire in Asia Minor. But before he went, he had a family matter to attend to. Philip regretted marrying his fifth wife, Cleopatra of Macedon. He missed his fourth wife, Olympias, whom he truly loved. She had borne him Alexander and Cleopatra, both the delight of his eyes. In an effort to get his precious Olympias to come home, Philip deposed her uncle Arymbas and elevated her brother (also named Alexander) to the throne of Epirus at Dodona. But that still didn’t get Olympias home; just the opposite. She was furious! She tried to get her brother to declare war on Philip! But neither wanted war. Instead, he agreed to a marriage alliance with Philip’s daughter Cleopatra. Olympias would return to Macedon for a wedding between her own brother and daughter, surely!

She came, all right. As the wedding festivities were going on, Olympias seduced one of Philip's seven bodyguards, Pausanias, in a torrid love affair. She swore she adored him. If he would just assassinate her first husband, she would make him king in his place. The poor fool bought it – how, I don't know, but lust does strange things – and dispatched the king on his way into the town theater after the wedding.

Pausanias was caught and executed. To deflect suspicion upon herself, Olympias claimed that Pausanias had been Philip's homosexual lover, and blamed Philip's fifth wife Cleopatra of Macedon of instigating the assassination out of jealousy after catching Pausanias in bed with Philip! The outrageous claim stuck. Olympias then took out her wrath upon Cleopatra's infant children, Caranus and Europa. She forced Cleopatra to watch the bloody murders, driving her to 'suicide'. Yuk. And it got worse. But I'll drop it after one more touching little scene. Nobody yet knew who really had instigated the assassination of King Philip, but Alexander became suspicious. He approached Olympias. "Mother, have you ever had any lovers other than my father?"

An innocent enough question, but Olympias was no dummy; she knew what was behind it. In fact, she'd had many other lovers, most of whom she preferred to Philip. At twenty, her son was too perceptive to believe a blatant lie. "Yes, Alexander, I have. Before you were born, your father and I had a spat and I fled back to my father in Dodona. While I was there, I spent my days worshiping and praying in the temple of Zeus, for I was crushed at my husband's rejection. Zeus himself came to me and made love to me as I slept under his sacred Oak! When I found I was pregnant, I told my father. He rushed me back to my husband, so the world would think that the child was his. Now only you, my father, and I know the truth. Nobody else, even Philip, ever knew that... that your true father is Zeus!"

Zeus?! What a crock. But Alexander believed her, and it distracted him from discovering that she had killed her own husband. He had already heard the prophecies and tales of the miraculous circumstances of his birth and his invincible destiny. Besides, back in those days they all swallowed that hokey about the Greek gods cohabiting with humans.

So at the age of only twenty **Alexander** took over the rule of a unified Greece. But he was vain and egotistic. Some wouldn't support him. Demosthenes feared him even more than he had feared his father, and preached out against him.

And now we finally can return to King **Darius III Codomanus**, who was recently put on the throne by the conniving vizier Bagoas. When the young King Darius heard that Greece was preparing to attack Persia, he immediately sent envoys to various cities in Greece and Asia Minor with large bags of gold coins for the purpose of bribing any who could be bribed to side with Persia. As the last surviving legitimate descendant of the Achaemenid royal dynasty, King Darius III had experienced enough palace intrigues to appreciate the value of a good bribe.

Bagoas was furious with him. Darius III was a puppet king. He was not supposed to take any initiative; he was supposed to do nothing without permission from Bagoas. In the spat that followed, Bagoas determined to poison Darius, too. He had gotten very good at this.

But this time, he met his match. Darius turned the tables on him and made him drink his own poison.

Thebes, the largest and mightiest city in Boetia, lay just north of Attica, where Athens was supreme. The Thebans listened to Demosthenes. They hated Alexander for what he had done to their Sacred Band. So they accepted the bribes Darius had sent and declared their intentions to ally with Persia. They sent envoys through central Greece, urging Athens and other major city-states to rebel against Macedonian rule and join Persia against Alexander.

Some did, including Athens, who saw Alexander's youth as an opportunity to regain full independence. By the time he figured out how to use his new power, they would be prepared to defeat him. But King Alexander hesitated not a moment. He led his battle-hardened Macedonian troops down to Thebes and demanded their surrender, or else! They surrendered. They had no choice; their army still had not recovered from the last defeat. So now Alexander demanded an assembly of all the central Greek powers. They met in 336 BC at the Isthmus of Corinth. They elected Alexander as 'Commander of the Greeks against Persia'.

However, Alexander could not attack Persia without first consulting the Oracle at Delphi. When he got there, the high priestess refused to go to the shrine, as it was an 'unlucky day'. Alexander would have none of that. He grabbed her arm and began to drag her there. The old witch exclaimed, "*Oh god, you are irresistible!*"

"Enough!" said the delighted King Alexander, "I ask no other reply!" and he happily let her go. Now he had one more visit to pay: the famous Greek cynic-philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, who had made a virtue out of extreme poverty. He lived in a large clay tub, and walked the streets carrying a lamp 'looking for an honest man' or 'looking for a decent human being'. Alexander asked Diogenes if he could do a favor for him. "Yes," Diogenes replied. "You can stand a little further to the left. You're blocking the sun."

Afterwards, his soldiers joked about the incident. King Alexander responded that if he were not Alexander, he would most like to be Diogenes. *How strange that the one who wanted to conquer the world so admired the one who wanted nothing to do with it – so much that they both died on exactly the same day; Alexander at 32 and Diogenes at 90.*

Before he could attack Persia, Alexander had to secure his northern borders, Thrace, Edonia, Illyria and Paeonia. The Scythian barbarians along the Danube also needed a lesson. It was all easy, except the Illyrians had prepared a trap. Alexander was lured into it. He and his elites were cut off from their main force and were sure to be slaughtered!

CHAPTER 46 – ALEXANDER’S WARS

Not a man thought he could escape that trap. But the ‘invincible’ Alexander did not lose his nerve, even for a moment. His men were crack troops, the best of the best. Alexander ordered them to execute a series of parade drills in total silence. The precision marching, with spears going up and down in perfect unison, was stunningly beautiful and bewitching. The attacking Illyrians were spellbound. As soon as he saw they were hypnotized, Alexander ordered his cavalry to attack, while his trapped troops banged their swords loudly against their shields and screamed the Macedonian war cry. The shocked Illyrians fell into chaos, and were quickly routed and slaughtered.

But those belligerent Thebans had rebelled again, still encouraged by the bribes of Darius III and the preaching of Demosthenes. This time Athens and Sparta both joined them. They despised the Macedonians as little better than barbarians, and in their fierce love of freedom, they hated Alexander for his egomaniacal efforts to conquer them. Twice Thebes had incited rebellion. Alexander’s response was swift and decisive. He demanded they hand over the instigators. When they refused, his army promptly razed the city to the ground, slew its leaders, and took its citizens to be sold as slaves. He left nothing standing except a few temples and the home of Pindar the Poet. That eliminated any further dissent in Greece. To be sure, Alexander left 13,000 troops there with his father’s general, Antipater.

It was time to invade the Persian Empire. Alexander crossed the Hellespont from Sestos with 32,000 troops and 5,100 cavalry. Nearing Abydos, he threw his spear ashore, swearing, “The gods have promised me all of Asia with only my land forces!” So he sent his navy back home.

Darius III was busy trying to subdue another rebellion in Egypt. He had totally underestimated Alexander. First, he thought he was still tied down with endless squabbles in Greece. Second, he didn’t believe any army could move that fast. Third, he didn’t think young Alexander would dare attack the mighty Persian Empire. And fourth, his satraps in Anatolia were surely strong enough to stop him.

They gathered beside the Granicus River to meet him, in May, 334 BC. They had about 10,000 Persian troops, 10,000 cavalry, and 16,000 Ionian Greek mercenaries.

On the day they met the Persians, Alexander’s General Parmenion suggested they wait, cross the river upstream during the night, and attack the next day. But Alexander couldn’t wait. He attacked with his Companion Cavalry into the center of the Persian line, aiming for the nobles. He caught them off guard and drove into their ranks, oblivious to personal danger. He believed he was a god.

He was not. His horse was slain under him and he was knocked silly by an axe-blow from a Persian noble. It might have ended right there, but General Cleitus the Black intervened to save Alexander’s life.

As the Persian was striking the fatal blow, Cleitus sliced off his raised arm. Cleitus then grabbed the unconscious Alexander, threw him on his own horse, and rushed him out of the battle. With their leader fallen, the Macedonian charge crumbled, badly mauled. They fled back across the river. It was an utter rout; *Alexander’s first defeat*.

That night his Generals Parmenion and Black Cleitus discussed their options over Alexander’s unconscious body. It was not until his physician claimed, “His wounds are serious, but not fatal. He will recover,” that they decided to strike again. But this time they would do it Parmenion’s way. His infantry was still fresh. He took them upstream, to cross the river unseen by the Persians. The cavalry crossed the river at dawn to attack as before, led by General Cleitus. But this time, as they engaged the waiting Persians, General Parmenion swept down with his heavy infantry. The Persians, overconfident from their earlier victory, were stunned, overwhelmed, and routed.

The 16,000 Ionian Greek mercenaries, upon whom the Persians had pinned their hope, were vanquished. Their commander, the famous General Memnon of Rhodes, fled to the safety of the Persian naval fleet waiting offshore. The remnants of his troops surrendered and offered to join the Macedonians. Alexander, furious to be seen injured, foolishly rejected their offer. He ordered them all slain for their treason in fighting against their own countrymen. 14,000 were slain; the other 2,000 were sent to Macedonia as slaves. Alexander later regretted his rash anger.

Alexander’s ego would not admit to even a temporary defeat. While recovering, he told his historian to rewrite the story of the battle to make his initial charge victorious. He himself blocked his near-miss with death out of his mind and ordered that no one ever mention it again. However, Black Cleitus now became Alexander’s closest friend.

The late King Philip’s troops in Asia had succeeded in liberating the Greek cities in much of western Anatolia, under the command of General Attalus. With the death of King Philip, their campaign had been suspended while Alexander solidified his rule. Now they joined with King Alexander. He had only lost 120 troops at the Granicus; he now had 47,000 infantry and 7,000 cavalry. He led his army slowly through western Anatolia. They had heard of his victory at the Granicus; no one refused him. Indeed, many hailed him as their liberator from Persian tyranny.

Since Alexander had no navy, Memnon and the Persian fleet tried to discourage him by taking the Greek island strongholds down the Ionian coast. Memnon threatened to take the Persian fleet back to Macedonia, to strike at the heart of his enemy. Demosthenes, hearing of Alexander’s success, convinced Athens and Sparta to aid Memnon’s planned invasion. But first Memnon attempted to defend the vital Persian-held city of Miletus in Caria. Alexander’s forces liberated Miletus, but refused to engage Memnon’s navy, so Memnon sailed south to defend Halicarnassus.

Orontobates, though related by marriage to the sons of Hecatomnus, the legitimate rulers of Caria, had betrayed his country, slain the royal family, and surrendered Caria to the Persians, gaining for himself its satrapy from King Artaxerxes III. When Alexander's forces liberated Miletus, Orontobates fled to join Memnon at Halicarnassus. Only one of the royal family had survived: Ada, widow of the slain Idieus son of Hecatomnus, had locked herself up in the fortress of Alinda. When Alexander's army reached the fortress, she flung open the gates and rushed out to them, welcoming the Macedonians as liberators. At Alexander's approach, she ran to him and fell at his feet, bewailing the brutality of the Persians against her family and offering her undying allegiance to him. He bent down to lift her up, whereupon she threw herself upon him, smothering him with kisses and hugs, and weeping upon his shoulder.

Somehow Ada's utter dependency struck a protective chord with Alexander, who normally despised weakness. Ada was the exact opposite of the proud, fierce, immoral, fiesty, conniving, snake-worshipping Olympias. He never stopped loving his own mother, for that was his filial duty. But now he had found a new mother who was a lot easier to love. Alexander established Ada as the queen of Caria, gave her loyal governors to protect her, and promised her his full support. In turn, Queen Ada formally adopted Alexander as her own son, thus ensuring that Caria would belong to him upon her eventual death.

The battle at Halicarnassus became a long siege. King Alexander lived with Ada at Alinda, covered by the mother's love that he had never known, while his men broke the Persian blockade and forced them to retreat by sea. Memnon and Orontobates took the Persian fleet north, intending to lure Alexander out of Asia by invading Macedon. But alas, the mighty General Memnon caught the sniffles. So he halted the Persian fleet to over-winter at Mytilene on Lesbos Island. There he died of pneumonia.

Alexander had become battle hardened, merciless and cruel. The pure love of Ada for her new 'son' touched his heart in a way that nothing else ever did. The rest of his life he never forgot her, nor she him. She gave him her best cooks, sent him sweets and notes of encouragement, taught him to care about his people, and brought out the best in him. Now, as he moved through the Persian Empire, instead of appointing tyrants and despots to control his defeated subjects, he had compassion on them for his 'mother' Ada's sake. In each province he set up satraps who would care for their own people, rather than trying to force Greek customs on them. He stopped the onerous Persian taxes. He restored their democracies. He invited them to join the League of Corinth, and offered them the privilege of supporting his war of liberation from the heavy-handed Persians. Rather than just storm cities to wreak havoc and destruction, he invited them to join him in his 'righteous quest', promising them peace and freedom. Many accepted. All this was due to sweet Ada.

During the siege of Halicarnassus Alexander deeply regretted killing the Ionian Greeks at the Granicus. Ada urged him to seek wisdom from the oracle at nearby Telmessos. She said that every ruler of Asia had consulted there, including Midas, Croesus – even Cyrus the Great. Alexander would do anything for his 'mother'. The oracle told him, "If you would be king of Asia, you must first solve the puzzle of the knot at Gordium in Phrygia." That meant nothing to him, except that it seemed to please Ada. Alexander moved his forces on around the coastal cities of Lycia and Pamphylia, then headed inland into Phrygia. Near the end of 334 BC he reached Gordium, the capital of Phrygia, and decided to winter there.

Once he had taken control of the area, the priests and priestesses of the city begged an audience with him. They related this legend concerning the founding of their city. Their ancestors were a pastoral people, without any king. When they determined that they needed a king, no one wanted the responsibility. So the elders went to the city of Telmessos to consult the oracle, a witch named Galatia. She saw her opportunity. She bade them wait, while she plotted with her flirtatious teenage daughter, Ianah.

It happened that a penniless young peasant by the name of Gordias came to Telmessos seeking his fortune, driving his dead father's ox cart. Entering the city, he looked behind him to discover an eagle perched on the tailgate of the cart. Ianah, standing nearby, pointed at the eagle and prophesied as her mother had taught her. "Brave sir! It is an omen of royalty! If you offer it in sacrifice to Zeus, you will become a king! So the prophets have foretold. Please let me come with you," Ianah brazenly threw her arms about Gordias. "I can aid you with the sacrifice and help you obtain the kingdom that is your destiny!"

The heart of Gordias skipped a beat. He was instantly smitten by this bold damsel, and he too sensed royalty from the eagle. "You appear wise and considerate. I will do as you say. However, if you would accompany me, you must marry me and share my destiny!"

She readily agreed, for this had been her desire ever since she had first spotted him. Together they caught the eagle and offered him to Zeus, then ate the carcass. While the sacrifice was being offered, Ianah's mother returned to the waiting Phrygians. "Go home," Galatia told them. "Your king and queen shall come to you in just a few days, riding upon an ox-cart."

"What happened to your beautiful pet eagle, who was perched here by your side yesterday?"

Galatia smiled. "My eagle has been sacrificed to Zeus, in exchange for his oath to grant you a worthy king. Zeus has heard my prayer."

So Gordias and Ianah married. In a few days they rode away on the ox-cart. "Whither shall we go to establish our kingdom, Ianah?" asked Gordias.

“Wherever the spirit of the eagle leads me,” she responded, a sly smile on the tips of her cheeks.

The Phrygians gathered at the crossroads of their town. The elders said, “The oracle at Telmessos offered her eagle in sacrifice to Zeus, saying that our king and queen would come to us in an ox-cart. Prepare to welcome them.”

So when the ox-cart came plodding up the road, they were ready. Gordias and Ianah were crowned king and queen of the Phrygians. In their honor, they renamed the town Gordianah (since shortened to just Gordium). It became the capital of Phrygia. They built a palace and a royal acropolis to Zeus. The peasant’s ox-cart was secured to the statue of Zeus with an intricate knot which no one could untie. Under it they inscribed, “Let him who would be king here first solve the puzzle of the Gordian Knot.”

After hearing the legend, Alexander understood the prophecy from the oracle at Telmessos. So he demanded to see the knot. The high priest warned, “If you fail to solve the puzzle, you must return the kingdom of Phrygia to the descendants of Gordias and his son Midas.”

“Kingdom of Phrygia? Ha!” muttered Alexander. “I am the king of all Asia! Phrygia will gladly bow to me!”

The Phrygian priests smiled smugly. “You may be king of the whole world if you wish, but you will never be king of Phrygia unless you can solve the puzzle, for so the ancient oracle has decreed.”

Again Alexander’s monumental ego suffered a near fatal catastrophe. He couldn’t untie the knot! He wrestled with it all day and night. Early next morning the Phrygian priests came to him with their ultimatum: he had failed. He must leave the city or be slain by the priests of Zeus.

Alexander wearily stood up and looked around. There were many of them and they were all armed. He was alone; his bodyguards had given up and gone to sleep. He drew his sword and held it high. “By my sword I conquered the land, and by my sword I solved the puzzle!” he shouted, slashing at the knot. His stroke, accurate and powerful, parted the key strands, and the knot fell at his feet.

Alexander whirled back to face the priests. “Now, let him who would deny me the kingdom taste the sword that won it!” he declared. For a few moments the priests froze, then melted quietly away.

With the defeat and death of Memnon, Darius III finally got concerned about Alexander’s impudent conquests. He told his best general, Karademas, to take Memnon’s place, and ordered him to attack Alexander directly. But Darius’ other generals didn’t know Karademas. They refused to serve under him. They wanted Darius himself to lead the Persian army against the invaders. Karademas got into a big argument with them. *He was Greek. He understood Greek warfare. So he was the only one qualified to lead the Persians into battle with them.* Or so he insisted.

Some hot words followed. The Persian-born generals were offended by his remarks, and said nasty things about his Greek ancestry. Karademas in turn made a few unkind remarks about Persian culture, the weaknesses of Persian soldiers, and the canine species to which he believed the generals’ mothers were all somehow related. King Darius was furious, and ordered Karademas executed. But as his order was carried out, he regretted his hot temper. He had just executed the only competent Greek general he had!

Alexander marched southeast through the mountains of Cappadocia toward Cilicia. Rather than try to stop him, Ariarathes I, the satrap of Cappadocia, had his army strip the land ahead of Alexander, removing all traces of food and water from his route. Ariarathes was too spineless to confront him, choosing instead to discourage his army in the hope that they would go home when they found no sustenance. *He had been at the battle of the Granicus. He had heard General Memnon describe his ‘scorched earth’ policy in glowing terms. Nobody else had believed Memnon, but soon Persia would discover his wisdom!* Yeah. Right...

No Persian yet had comprehended the magnitude of Alexander’s ego! He would die before turning tail and going home. He continued with his army for 100 miles with no food or water, an amazing feat. His army was nearly fainting as they crossed the narrow defile called the Cilician Gates, which could easily have been defended, and would have been if Ariarathes had not been so chicken-hearted. But no, the majority of his army was still ‘scorching the earth’, and the few he left defending the Cilician Gates were easily overcome.

Just past ‘the Gates’ is mighty Mount Taurus. The icy Cydnus River rushes down it toward the sea. Alexander, near fainting from thirst, stripped and dove right in. He promptly suffered cramps in both legs, as the swiftness of the river washed him down the mountainside. By the time his men had hauled him out, he was nearly drowned and suffering from convulsions. The shock to his body was too great. He contracted pneumonia and lapsed into a coma. One by one his physicians examined him and shook their heads sadly. They agreed he could not survive.

Except Philip, his old doctor / friend who had been by his side since childhood – he would not give up. He nursed Alexander slowly back to health.

During this time, Alexander got a warning letter from nearby Tarsus, claiming that King Darius III had bribed old Dr. Philip to poison him! Just as he finished the letter, Philip came in with his morning medicine. Alexander handed him the letter and took the medicine, draining it at a gulp before his friend could say a word. Afterwards they both had a good laugh over the fake warning. “I cannot trust my own father or mother; that is why I call Zeus my father and Ada my mother. But if the day ever comes when I cannot trust you, my faithful friend who has cared for me since birth, then I deserve to be poisoned!”

Alexander returned to the coast and to abundant food and water. He wrote to his beloved 'mother' Ada in Caria, "I have never been so lucky in my entire life. One more day without food and water or one more dog defending the Cilician Gates and all would have been lost. And so nearly did I approach death after my convulsions in the mountain stream, that my physicians refused to treat me, certain I would not recover. Surely your love and prayers were with me, for again the gods have favored me."

At Tarsus on the coast below Mount Taurus, Alexander slowly recovered from his near-fatal swim. It was there he heard the warning that at last King Darius had taken him seriously. He was massing a huge army at Babylon to stop him. Alexander was still not well. So he sent Parmenion on ahead with half the army, to prevent Darius from joining up with his Mediterranean fleet at the port city of Issus. Parmenion captured Issus, then continued around the coast to the Pass of Jonah where he could block the advance of the Persians coming up from Syria.

In the fall of 333 BC, Alexander heard reports that the Persian forces had reached Syria. The numbers he heard were stunning – probably between 400,000 to 600,000 men from all over the Persian Empire, including 10,000 Persian Immortals, 10,000 Greek heavy infantry, and 11,000 cavalry. At that time Alexander had only about 40,000 left, including 5,800 cavalry. Their only hope was to catch them in a narrow pass where their overwhelming numbers would not help them. Alexander moved on through Issus with the rest of the Macedonian army and joined General Parmenion at the Pass of Jonah.

King Darius III discovered their ambush. He changed plans to come around from the north through Cilicia instead of through Syria. Before Alexander could stop him, he had occupied Issus and cut off his source of supply. With no source of supply, the Pass of Jonah had turned into a trap for Alexander! He rushed north to try to retake Issus. The massed Persian forces continued south, hoping to bottle up Alexander's men in the pass and starve them out. The two armies met on either side of the Pinarus River. That evening the Persians confidently drank to their certain victory. The gravely outnumbered Macedonians prayed to all the gods for a miracle. His friend Black Cleitus asked Alexander, "Have you fully recovered?"

"Not fully. But I will fight tomorrow, anyway."

"Has Zeus finally taught you the fear of god?"

Alexander laughed. "You mean the fear of men? Do you fear that sea of Persians facing us? They are fools. They will stumble all over themselves to flee when we attack. I fear neither god nor men, but only that I will not again see Ada, who is praying for me."

"Yes, her prayers, and many others, have kept you alive through more miracles than I can count, my friend. I do believe the gods are with you."

The others went to their tents. Alexander went to Bucephalus, his favorite war horse. He brushed him down and gave him some extra oats. "Now, get some sleep, old boy. Tomorrow will be a big day. I'll be counting on you to save my life. For if you fail me, we both shall die, and all of my army besides." That night he fell asleep dreaming of that slender lad he had been long ago. He had gone with his father to see the finest stallion ever sired, a gift for King Philip – if he could find a warrior man enough to ride it. *Young Alexander was entranced! Such a mighty steed was surely worthy only of the king of the world!* But alas. None of his father's horsemen were able to tame it. "Father," the lad asked. "One day I shall rule the world. That is my horse. Give me leave to ride it now."

"No, son! You are but twelve! You have never ridden a horse that I haven't trained to obey you. This horse is wild! He has thrown all my best horsemen! You cannot..."

"I can," the twelve-year-old lad stated confidently, and walked out into the arena. He approached the stallion from the sunward side, for he had noticed in him a fear of his shadow. He quieted the horse, rubbed his muzzle, and scratched behind his ears, all the while telling him what a wonderful horse he was and what good friends they would be. Then in a flash he flung himself up on the magnificent animal's back and rode lightly into the sun. From that moment on Bucephalus was his, and his alone. Except for that battle at the Granicus (which Bucephalus had missed due to a minor hoof injury) they were inseparable.

At dawn Alexander arranged his soldiers in a defensive line. General Parmenion led the Thessalian Greek cavalry on the left by the sea; his heavy infantry lined up along the river in the middle; and his Companion Cavalry stretched out on the far right, up into the hills. He waited.

Darius matched his lines and then doubled and tripled them at every point, except the king did not want his horses up in those hills. *What a foolish waste of cavalry. Surely Alexander has made a big mistake. His mounts will be useless in that rugged terrain.* Instead, Darius deployed an extra 20,000 heavy infantry above Alexander's right flank, to trap his Companion Cavalry in a giant pincer. At this point, he had troops to burn. *Alexander would not escape!*

Still Alexander waited. Darius laughed at him. *Now that he faces a real army, he has lost his nerve. Well, this is it! This battle is for all the marbles! Not one shall escape! Thus shall be done to any rebel who dares come against the mighty Persian Empire!* King Darius ordered his cavalry to attack Alexander's left flank, wipe out Parmenion's cavalry, then circle around behind the Macedonian infantry to attack Alexander's Companion Cavalry from behind. At the same time, he ordered his 20,000 heavy infantry to come down from the hills to prevent Alexander from escaping. At that point, his massed phalanxes all along the line would surge forward in unison. *The rebels will be totally surrounded and squashed like a grape.*

As expected, Parmenion could not face his cavalry charge. He fell back, way back, in obvious confusion and fear. A mighty cheer arose from the throats of 400,000 men as they saw the Macedonians retreat. But Alexander had been watching their eyeballs. At the moment their focus was distracted, he mounted his beloved Bucephalus and signaled a silent charge of his heavy infantry into the very center of the line, right at the thickest and strongest of the Persian forces, those protecting King Darius himself. Nobody expected him to attack there. Indeed, the Persians didn't really expect Alexander to attack at all – only to try desperately to survive to fight another day. But attack he did, directly toward the famed Persian Immortals and the elite forces protecting the king. Darius laughed again. *How amusing! It was clearly a suicide attack. What could he possibly hope to accomplish?*

But the Persians, distracted by the seemingly victorious cavalry charge to their right and stunned by the audacity of that attack in the center, faltered. Their line wavered. At that moment, Alexander, again without a word, leaned forward in his saddle to give Bucephalus the lead. The great horse knew what to do. This is what he was created for. As he raced into the Persian line, Alexander recalled the words his father had told that thin twelve-year-old lad when he had first won the horse: “My son, you must find a kingdom big enough for your ambitions! My kingdom of Macedonia is much too small for you!”

King Alexander's unthinkable bold charge, with his Companion Cavalry close behind, pierced through the Persian lines like slicing butter. Alexander kept silent no longer, shouting the Macedonian battle cry at the top of his lungs as he broke through and turned down to aim for the king. The two stallions pulling the king's chariot shied, nearly throwing Darius to the ground. He couldn't control them, so he jumped off, threw down his diadem and his royal robe, mounted another horse, and fled for his life.

Alexander couldn't afford the time to give chase. His center and left flank were in deep yogurt, overwhelmed by the numerical superiority of the Persian forces. He led his Companion Cavalry in slashing at the rear of Darius' line. That got their attention! When they turned and saw their king gone, they abandoned the fight to flee in panic.

It was a total massacre. The carnage was beyond belief. The river ran red with blood. Persian bodies filled the valleys and ravines so a horse could cross stepping on nothing but bodies. Alexander's cavalry chased the fleeing Persians on into the night. They didn't quite capture the fleeing king, but they did seize his base camp, all of his supplies, a significant amount of treasure, and, to top it off, his wife, his two daughters, and his mother!

King Darius was appalled at the slaughter. He wrote to Alexander, conceding to him the provinces he had already conquered and offering Alexander a ransom of \$750,000 for his family and his prisoners of war.

Alexander's response was stern. “King Alexander to Darius. Since I am now king of all Asia, it is not up to you to dictate which lands I shall rule. If you wish anything from me, you shall address me as ‘King of All Asia’. I shall address you as the vulgar usurper that you are. It was your tyranny and your cruelty against the Hellenes that caused my father to challenge Persia, which resulted in his death. So in righteous vengeance I claim the throne of Persia. If you wish to dispute that, stand up and fight. If you flee like a dog again, I shall pursue you and slay you in your own filth. You cannot buy me off with a ransom – the entire Persian Empire is already mine. However, your family is guiltless for your vile deeds. I return them with this letter.”

The Battle at Issus was the first time Alexander had actually faced King Darius III of Persia. It was also the first time that he openly declared his intentions to take not just Asia, but the entire Persian Empire. In his mind, it was already his. From this moment on, the Persian Empire inexorably faded, to be replaced by the rule of Macedonian Greece. As prophesied, King Alexander abruptly become the belly of bronze in Nebuchadnezzar's statue.

But his huge ego still had some humbling ahead. He continued down the Mediterranean coast, for he still had to defeat the Persian navy, and to do that without a navy of his own, he needed to take every seaport to which they came for harbor. The next was Arvad, an island kingdom just off the coast of Syria. Arvad's King Strato, hearing the reports of Alexander's exploits and his kindness to those who submitted to him, readily joined in alliance, offering him the use of his small navy to help his cause. Byblos and Sidon likewise eagerly capitulated to Alexander.

Tyre was a different story. Fiercely independent, they had been conquered but never totally defeated by King Nebuchadnezzar, because of their island fortress. They had also been conquered by the Persians, but had never submitted to them, either. They certainly weren't about to submit to this young upstart who didn't even have a navy!

They evacuated their mainland city, sent their women and children off to Carthage, and stood inside the strong, high walls of their island fortress thumbing their noses at Alexander. When he sent ambassadors seeking peaceful acknowledgment of his authority, instead of capitulating like so many other cities in Asia, the Tyrians slew his envoys and heaved their bloody bodies over the walls.

They should have accepted the peace. Their pride had reached to heaven; their wickedness was full. It was time to fulfill Ezekiel's prophecy, in which God had said, “Behold, I am against you, O Tyre! I will bring ruthless nations against you. They will destroy your walls, pull down your towers, and scrape the debris into the water to make you a bare rock, a place for spreading of nets. So you will become spoil for the nations. You shall be built no more. The kings of the coastlands will be appalled at you. People will hiss and wag their heads in horror at your fall.”

Alexander didn't know the meaning of 'defeat'. Persia was his! He blockaded Tyre (which had no effect, as they were resupplied by sea), and began building a 1000 yard causeway stretching out to the island, using stone from the smashed walls of the mainland city. In the process, he scraped the rocks clean of debris and threw it in the water just as Ezekiel had prophesied.

When he got within 100 yards of the island, the attacks from the Tyrian navy and the defenders on the walls grew too fierce to continue. So Alexander built two siege towers and moved them up the causeway to protect his men. But the Tyrians sent flaming ships against them to burn up his towers, and more ships to harass his workers. These cat and mouse games went on for months. He was frustrated at the delays and loss of men. He needed more ships!

Now Alexander's earlier carefulness to conquer every seaport along the coast paid off. Many of those cities were home ports to ships of the Persian navy. When they returned to port for supplies, they discovered that, like it or not, they now belonged to Alexander's newly formed navy. So he finally had the means to effectively blockade Tyre's fortress island. He mounted battering rams on some of his ships, using them to pound on the walls. Eventually he broke through and conquered the city.

It all took seven months. *He had hoped to have half the empire by this time!* In a rage, he destroyed half the city, executed 8,000 nobles and warriors, and sold 30,000 commoners into slavery. Alexander was a very religious man. Some Tyrians, including King Hiram and his family, had taken refuge in the temple of Heracles. Alexander spared the temple and pardoned those inside. King Hiram became a servant to the remnants of his people. He had been so proud of his city! Now he too learned humility.

Alexander moved along down the coast. All the other seacoast cities quickly surrendered and were spared the fate of Tyre, except the Philistines. Batis, the Philistine king of the hilltop fortress of Gaza, had made himself very rich controlling the trade from Syria into Egypt. But he underestimated the fierce determination of Alexander. He believed his mighty walls and Philistine warriors couldn't be defeated. Batis abandoned the weaker cities of Ashdod and Ashkelon and gathered all the Philistines at Gaza for a fight to the death. Again, they didn't believe the ancient prophecies. Jeremiah, for example, had said against them:

"Behold, waters will come from the north, a torrent, overflowing the land of the Philistines. Every inhabitant will cry out, wailing because of the thunder of the stallions and the tumult of the chariots. For the day is coming when YHWH will cut off her allies in Tyre and Sidon, and then destroy the Philistines. Ashdod and Ashkelon have been ruined; baldness has come upon Gaza. For the Sword of YHWH has been loosed upon them and will not return to its sheath until the proud land has been humbled under the mighty hand of YHWH."

Here at Gaza Alexander faced the fiercest fighting of his entire career. Many of the Philistine warriors were giants, with arms like bronze beams and the strength of ten men. Alexander's first three assaults against the fortress of Gaza failed, and many were injured. Alexander brought siege engines against the city. He broke through but was injured, bleeding profusely in his shoulder. He ordered every man in the city slain, and every woman and child sold into slavery. In rage, he tied Batis by his ankles and dragged him behind his chariot through the breach in the walls, as conquering kings are apt to do to defeated foes.

But alas, it was all too much for Alexander. He almost fainted from loss of blood. Black Cleitus saw him wobble and sag, and came to his rescue. He brought him back to his tent, half conscious, and called for his chief physician, Philip. For days, his very survival was nip and tuck. This made twelve times Alexander had stared death in the face.

During his recovery, he had a visitor: Jaddua, a Judean high priest from the hills above Philistia. His miter bore the title: "Servant of YHWH." Alexander was intensely religious. He worshiped every god of Greece and many others besides. But he had not heard of YHWH, the Judean God. He invited Jaddua to his bedside. He eagerly listened as Jaddua told him the story of the Judeans and their demanding yet righteous but loving God, and showed him the book of Daniel and his place in it. (Daniel 8:21)

Alexander was intrigued. Jaddua looked just like the high priest in his dreams, who prophesied victory to him before each battle! He tried to find a place for Jaddua's God in the Greek pantheon, as he did for every other god, but YHWH didn't quite fit. "YHWH seems to be greater than my father, Zeus! How can any god be so perfect? Has he no faults, weaknesses, or moral issues like every other god?"

"Your father is not Zeus, my lord. Zeus is but a fiction, a construct of an immortal created in the minds of mortals, with all the weaknesses of those who created him. But YHWH is immortal throughout all eternity, the uncreated Creator of all things, the One who upholds all things by the Word of His Power, the righteous One from whom all law begins, the Holy One who has no fault or weakness. He is indeed perfect, in all the virtues. He has all knowledge and wisdom throughout time, and understands all mysteries. He has sent me to tell you that He loves you, my lord. He has brought you here. He has covered you, protected your life, and healed your body these twelve times when you approached death's door due to your own careless pride."

Alexander laughed. "You know, you sound just like my mother, Ada. She prays for me constantly, and worries about me. She used that exact phrase, 'my own careless pride' when she cautioned me to win Asia by caring about its people, rather than making myself a proud and hated tyrant. She would like you, Jaddua. I wonder if she knows your God? I do recall her talking about some great God above all gods, even above my father Zeus."

Jaddua bowed his head and for a while was silent. Then he softly declared, “Yes, Alexander, Ada loves YHWH, but she is not your mother, just as Zeus is not your father.”

Now Alexander got suspicious. How could this priest from a backwoods province like Judah possibly know his real father and mother? “A’right, Jaddua, I challenge you. If your God really understands all mysteries like you say, then tell me, who are my real father and mother?”

Jaddua was prepared, for Logos had revealed it. “Your mother is Olympias, princess of Epirus and queen of Macedon. She is filled with murderous hate and every kind of immorality, for she worships the serpent, the great dragon who is from of old. But as none but you, she, and her father are aware, her late husband, King Philip II of Macedon, was not your father. For she left him and was pregnant with you when her father sent her back to him.”

Alexander was stunned. This old priest was correct in every detail, even about his mother worshiping snakes. *Perhaps his God really does know all mysteries.* Now the question that had bugged him ever since King Philip’s death might finally be answered. “You’re right. So tell me, who is my real father? If you can answer that, I’ll believe.”

“Pharaoh Nectanebo II,” Jaddua replied simply.

“You’ve got to be kidding! That’s utter nuts! Why, it’s impossible! I don’t believe it. You’re just pulling that out the thin air. There’s no way you can prove that. It’s just... it’s preposterous! It’s insane! How in the world could...”

“Why don’t you just mosey on down to Egypt and ask him?” Jaddua interrupted with a good-natured grin.

Alexander paused in mid-rant, his mouth still open. He snapped it shut and nodded. “Okay. I will. If you are right, by all the gods, I will believe in this YHWH of yours.”

“YHWH is always right. He will confirm His Word. He loves you. And He wants to give you the kingdom.” Jaddua then told Alexander about King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, and his place in it as the belly of bronze, as in Daniel 2.

He concluded, “But you must do more than just believe in Him. You must accept Him as King of kings, God of gods, above all the other gods you have worshiped. He is the one true God, for only He can reveal mysteries and tell the future. Your life and breath are in His hands. If you hang on to all the other gods and demon spirits, though you may conquer the whole world you will still die like a dog, not in the glory of battle, but in the foolish shame and weakness of your own drunkenness and dissipation.”

“If I discover that Nectanebo II is my father, I swear that I will renounce all other gods to serve YHWH alone. Also, that I will never get drunk again!” Alexander vowed.

“Keep your vows, my lord. I will meet you again, in Jerusalem, after you’ve received your rightful place as the Pharaoh of Egypt in the royal line of your father.”

Egypt had fallen to Artaxerxes III in 343 BC. The last Egyptian Pharaoh, Nectanebo II, had fled to Nubia. King Artaxerxes had put Egypt under a reign of terror, reducing it to poverty and slavery. No ruler was ever more hated.

Alexander entered Egypt in fall, 332 BC. The Persian overlords fled in fear without raising a sword. The grateful Egyptians bowed to welcome Alexander, urging him on to the royal palace at Memphis. Alexander was hailed as their hero, their liberator from the hated Persians. Pharaoh Nectanebo II returned from Nubia, bowed to him, and put on his head the double crowns of lower and upper Egypt. He was proclaimed the incarnation of Ra and Osiris. All Egypt bowed to him, even as far out as the Oracle of Siwa. The priests of Amun declared him the son of Zeus-Amun. He was offered prime land north of Sais in the Nile Delta, upon which the grateful Egyptians began to build him a palace in his own new city, called Alexandria. It became one of the world’s most prosperous cities. Alexander was flattered. *What a great idea! I can bring in Greek culture without forcing it on anyone.* From then on he built many other such cities in his honor and for the honor of Greece.

Of course all this adulation went straight to his head. Too bad. He had a big enough ego before his lightning ascent to godhood in Egypt. But he had not forgotten his question. He got alone with old Nectanebo II and asked, “Tell me, father, were you ever in Macedonia or Epirus?”

“Why do you ask? And why do you call me father?”

“Just curious. Someone told me that you once loved a beautiful princess from Epirus.”

“Princess Olympias!” The startled words fell from his lips before he could check them. Now the truth came out. 25 years ago Nectanebo had indeed gone to Greece. It had come about like this. When a boy, his father had taken him to the Oracle of Siwa. The old oracle had gotten excited, saying that Nectanebo would become a great Pharaoh. She prophesied that he would deliver Egypt from the hated Persians – but only in union with Greece.

Ever since the death of Amyrtaeus II, Egypt’s Pharaohs had been weak and Persian rule had again grown strong. But the power struggle in Persia after Artaxerxes II died had left him an opportunity to find out what the oracle had meant. He had disguised himself as a magician and gone to Greece to discover his destiny. During his travels, he had encountered princess Olympias at Epirus, shortly after she’d left her husband Philip. Nectanebo, as the ‘Egyptian magician’, had convinced her that he was Zeus-Amun, and had seduced her under the sacred oak at the temple of Zeus. Then he had fled, not knowing that Olympias had conceived. Back in Egypt, he had fought against Persians all his life, in alliance with the Greeks as the oracle had promised, but without success. Until this very moment, it seemed like his whole life had been a failure.

“Not a failure!” Alexander assured him confidently. Old Jaddua’s words were now confirmed in his mind. “Just as the Oracle at Siwa promised you, it was your union with the Greek princess Olympias who has now defeated the Persians, for she is my mother. You are my father.”

Alexander knew the truth. Would he remember his vow to believe and serve only YHWH? Tension grew as the angels awaited his decision. But alas, being acknowledged as a god in Egypt is a powerful pull. Logos sadly bowed His head, shaking His great beard from side to side. “He has forgotten his vow. We must remind him. Notify Jaddua.”

In 331 BC, Alexander left Memphis and headed back north, to Judah. There he was welcomed, for old Jaddua had warned the Judeans to accept him as God’s choice for their next ruler. But he was rather sheepish when Jaddua chastised him for his failure to keep his vows. “I guess I let being Pharaoh go to my head,” he admitted. Then, “Wait! How did you know I haven’t kept my vows?”

“I told you. YHWH is the revealer of mysteries,” Jaddua responded. “Now, He will pardon you and bless you, and keep all His promises to protect you and make of you a great emperor, for He loves you. But from this day on you must keep your vows to renounce other gods, to worship Him alone, and to never get drunk again.”

“I accept His pardon. And I’ll do it! I’ll keep my vows. From this day on it is YHWH and Him only I will worship.”

The heavens rejoiced. Alexander had made the right decision, in the sincerity of his heart. Logos ordered the heavenly host to continue covering him. He continued up through Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo, then crossed the Euphrates to head east toward the Persian heartlands. Everywhere he went, they gladly bowed to his authority.

It had been two years since Persia’s disastrous defeat at Issus. All this time, King Darius III had been preparing to meet him again. This time he will not be squeezed between the mountains and the deep blue sea. He will fight on a wide open field north of Nineveh, where his numerical advantage will overwhelm the tiny army of Alexander. And numerical advantage it will be, for he had gathered over a million men from every part of his far-flung empire, including 40,000 cavalry, 200 war chariots, and fifteen battle-trained elephants. Alexander had 40,000 heavy infantry, and his cavalry had grown to 7000 due to a gift of 2000 horses and 800 archers from the Egyptians. That’s still less than a twentieth of King Darius’ million plus.

Alexander was unafraid. His soldiers were now well-trained and battle hardened. He knew that most of the men Darius had collected barely knew which end of the spear to point. Further, he knew that all he had to do was take out the king, and his army would crumble. Darius would be guarded by 10,000 Greek mercenaries and 10,000 elite Persian Immortals, Persia’s finest, but no better than his own 40,000. In his mind, he had the numerical advantage.

King Darius had prepared the field with meticulous precision. Every rock and bush was removed, so his horses would not stumble or his chariots tip. Every commander had his battle plan; every soldier knew his place. As King Alexander’s weary forces came to the huge battlefield after their long march, Darius lined up his armies, just for effect. It was a powerful effect. His forces stretched for several miles, clear across the open field. But it was dusk. Alexander immediately set up camp, barely glancing at the stunning army arrayed against him. He went to bed.

He was nearly asleep when his Generals Black Cleitus and Parmenion came to him. “Sir. Darius thinks we’re asleep. He has dismissed his soldiers for the night. We believe that you should awaken your men and attack now, while you still have an element of surprise. If you wait until tomorrow, when they expect you to attack, they could defeat us, due to their huge numerical advantage.”

“I know that is what ordinary generals would counsel,” Alexander responded sleepily. “But I am not an ordinary general,” he paused for a yawn, “and I will not act like one. Now go get some sleep, and don’t wake me until 9:00 AM.” He turned over and instantly fell asleep.

Darius knew it was a ruse. He had been outfoxed by Alexander before. Never again! He commanded that his men only pretend to sleep. They were to hide in their tents but alert, fully dressed, and prepared for the night attack that he knew was coming. *It never came.*

So, they will attack suddenly at dawn. Darius got his troops out to the battlefield just before dawn, all lined up and prepared before the sun peeked its sleepy face from behind the far mountains. Again, the attack failed to come. *It must be a trap! The wicked Macedonians are trying to lure him off his prepared field, to trap him down at their camp. They are hiding behind their tents, just awaiting his charge! Well, he won’t do it!* He held his ground. His battle plans centered around this field. He had the advantage here. *Alexander must come to him.*

About 9:00 AM the Macedonians awoke, and leisurely prepared their breakfast. By ten they had fed their horses and donned their battle gear, well rested, well fed, ready for another day’s work. All the while, poor King Darius worried himself into a frazzle. His men were falling asleep at their posts. It was nearly 11:00 AM when Alexander and his men strolled up to the battle lines, laughing and joking as if they were attending a church picnic. Even then, his line wasn’t solid. His left and right flanks were broken, tapering off as if his men didn’t feel like fighting. They only brought half their army. The others were lolling leisurely on a funny camel-hump shaped hill beside their camp. It looked like he was inviting an attack, and it was all Darius could do to hold his lines straight. *He will not be suckered into breaking his line to attack,* he assured himself. *His line is impregnable. He must let Alexander attack first; then he will overwhelm him and crush his little army into the dust.*

Now Alexander solidified his phalanx of heavy infantry in front of the Persian line. They looked like a little line of ants in front of the Persian hordes. Their pathetic cavalry was still trailing off on either side. *But what can you expect? They are probably terrified!* Still Alexander waited. Darius by now was about to have kittens. *Is Alexander sick? What is his plan? Why are those stragglers lounging around behind the battle lines? Is it a trap?* King Darius III had worked himself up into a frothing psychotic.

Finally Alexander saw that the time had come. He just raised one finger. His heavy infantry shouted a mighty Macedonian war cry, clashed their swords on their shields, and pretended to run by stomping their feet in place. It was enough to spook King Darius. He ordered his cavalry on both flanks to charge around the pitifully short Macedonian line and attack Alexander's cavalry trailing back in the rear. The Persian army moved into action in a circling maneuver from which there could be no escape.

Still King Alexander did not attack. His line, with the discipline that only battle-hardened troops can employ, stood firm awaiting their commander. Remembering the lesson his father had taught him at Charonea, Alexander studied the eyeballs of his foe. At first they were focused directly in front, expecting his attack. But when it did not come, they began to wander toward the action on each side. Now the enemy in front of him began thinning, while their brothers flowed out around either edge of his still motionless line. They were distracted.

His cavalry had retreated all the way back, drawing the Persians off their smoothly prepared ground. Now his 'stragglers' at camp formed a strong rear line to support his trailing cavalry, and the battle was being fought around his camel-hump hill rather than where Darius had planned. He was furious. He ordered thousands of his troops to go around both flanks to support his cavalry. He had troops to burn. Besides, he had his 200 war chariots and battle elephants right in front. *Since Alexander will not attack me, by all the gods in Hades I will send my armored elephants and scythed chariots directly into their front line to smash him!*

Alexander's men didn't flinch. Their line held until the attackers were upon them. Then suddenly Alexander's line opened a wide channel for each elephant and each scythed chariot, letting it pass straight through the line harmlessly. *Alexander didn't care if they got behind his line. He had bigger fish to fry. By the time they got themselves all turned around, they would be too late.* In less than a minute the Macedonian line had re-formed.

At that moment Alexander charged. His heavy infantry pierced a hole in the Persian line to let his Companion Cavalry through, with himself leading the charge. Again, his timing was perfect; his aim superb. He broke through the Greek mercenaries and the Persian Immortals, to find himself face to face with King Darius. His cavalry had formed a flying wedge, with Alexander himself at its apex.

As he got close, Alexander hurled his javelin at King Darius III, oblivious to the danger all around. But the king saw it coming. He ducked to the floor of his chariot, hiding himself as he soiled his pants. The javelin took out his charioteer, making the king's chariot appear to be empty! A cry rang out, "The king is down!" Pandemonium descended. The Persians turned to search for their king.

King Alexander, berating himself for missing, knew he would not get another chance. He must rescue his army, now, so they can live to fight another day. He turned and fought his way back through the lines to assist Generals Parmenion and Black Cleitus. They were barely holding out against the overwhelming Persian cavalry. But just as he had predicted, they were no match for his superbly disciplined troops. At Alexander's approach the Persians crumbled in disarray. Discovering that their king had fled, they also bolted in panic. The date was October 1, 331 BC.

Alexander chased Darius all the way to Arbela, but the king wouldn't even stop to clean his pants. Alexander needed to attend his own men. He had routed the million man army, killing about a third, enslaving another third, and seizing the chariots and elephants. Alexander's men got rich plundering the Persian camp. This famous battle is called the Battle of Gaugamela after that camel-hump shaped hill around which they had fought. It has been studied at military academies ever since. Only a military genius with the coolness of an iceberg, the courage of a lion, the eye of an eagle, the quickness of a panther, and the timing of a Swiss watch could have pulled it off.

Alexander led his victorious men south along the Tigris. The mighty Assyrian cities of Nineveh, Calah, and Assur were defenseless. Their armies had all teamed up with Darius. They capitulated. Alexander continued on south to claim Opis, Sippar, and mighty Babylon itself.

King Darius fled east to Ecbatana, vowing to raise yet a third army to defeat Alexander. His cousin General Bessus (the commander of his army's left wing) went with him. The Persians wintered there, struggling to recover from their appalling loss. Darius wanted to continue farther east, to Bactra, the capital of Bactria. Bessus was the satrap of Bactria. The king wanted his cousin to gather an army of Bactrians and Sogdianans and prepare for yet another big showdown with Alexander. But General Bessus realized that conquered King Darius III had become a liability. *Ever since his cowardly flight from Gaugamela, his men can't trust him and won't follow him into battle.* So Bessus took charge of the Persian army. He put Darius in chains, to use as a potential bargaining chip with the Greeks.

Alexander heard about the arrest of King Darius. He was planning to winter in Babylon, but now he made a quick change of plans. He must capture Darius before the Persian army escaped east to Bactra, where Bessus would quickly recover his strength. Alexander might not get another chance for vengeance upon the Persian king.

CHAPTER 48 – ALEXANDER'S DECADENCE

Though the winter of 331 BC was upon him, Alexander pressed on. He captured the great Persian capital city of Susa, then headed immediately toward Persepolis and Pasargadae. He wanted to get there before the Persian nobles had a chance to loot the king's treasury. He knew that Bessus was up north trying to gather an army. He wanted to catch him before his army was ready to fight. He would face no real resistance until meeting Bessus, he was quite confident.

So confident that he didn't send scouts ahead of him. Confident, but wrong! Ariobarzan, satrap of the province of Persis, had fought under King Darius at Gaugamela. But he had not gone with Darius to Ecbatana. He had taken his forces and gone home to Pasargadae, where he had prepared an ambush for Alexander. There is a narrow pass through the Zagros Mountains called the Persian Gates, on the royal road between Susa and Persepolis. Ariobarzan stationed his 700 soldiers high atop the cliffs above the pass. On January 20, 330 BC, as Alexander's men reached them, they rained down rocks upon their adversaries. It was a horrible rout; a terrible, humiliating defeat for Alexander. Whole platoons of his best soldiers were lost. It took him a month to find a way around the pass and overcome the ambush. Ariobarzan and his 700 were slain to a man. Alexander was then able to conquer the Persian capitals of Persepolis and Pasargadae.

Alexander was furious about his defeat and the loss of so many of his finest men. Ignoring the exhortations of his 'mother' Ada to always treat the Persians kindly, he let his men plunder Persepolis, while he explored the grand palace of Xerxes I. There he found the royal library, including the entire works of Zoroaster – hundreds of volumes, written on parchment with gold ink and leather covers. They had been written over many years after learning the truth about YHWH from Daniel. King Alexander was fascinated by the parallels between the Persian god Ahura Mazda, and what Jaddua had told him about the Hebrew God, YHWH. He decided that when he finished conquering the world, he would return here to spend the rest of his days delving into the mysteries of Zoroastrianism.

Logos once again was disappointed in Alexander. He had forgotten his vows and turned his heart toward another god. That night, during the drunken orgies in the palace that always follow the ransacking of a city, a big fire broke out. It overwhelmed the great palace of Xerxes, and the entire royal library burned to the ground. The fire spread, and much of the pillaged city burned as well. Alexander was heartbroken at the tragic loss of Zoroaster's life work. He saw the massive fallen statue of Xerxes I, and contemplated the fate of all great men. *How soon will he, too, lie crumbling in the dust?*

Alexander rushed his army north to Ecbatana. The great Median capital fell easily, for Bessus has already left, heading east toward Bactria. Eager to catch him and take vengeance against Darius, Alexander hurried east toward Hyrcania through the mountain pass called the Caspian Gates.

General Bessus heard that Alexander was marching from Ecbatana. He realized that his 'bargaining chip' was actually drawing the wrath of the Macedonian army against him. He was not ready! He chained King Darius to a baggage cart and took him back toward Ecbatana. At the Caspian Gates, he fatally stabbed him and left him and his dog on the pass where Alexander's scouts would find him.

They found Darius still alive, and quickly summoned Alexander. He came in time to give the pathetic king some water and hold his hand as he died. Darius was grateful. "You are a worthy successor to my empire. I grant it to you, asking only that you slay my traitorous cousin General Bessus to avenge my death. I am glad to die here with you, rather than alone, hated, abandoned by my own people."

Alexander was touched. He took the signet ring from the dead king's finger and wore it always. He gave Darius a magnificent funeral, and buried him with great honor next to his Achaemenid ancestors in Persepolis, the Persian capital. Alexander vowed to hunt down General Bessus and execute him as a usurper to the Persian throne.

With the death of King Darius III in July 330 BC, Bessus declared himself king of Persia, under the throne name, **Artaxerxes V**. He led what was left of the Persian army to Bactra to get ready for the inevitable showdown.

Once again, Alexander refused to behave like a normal general. He knew he had only two or three years until Bessus gathered a new army, and he knew Bessus was smarter than Darius and could become a formidable foe. But rather than march straight to Bactra, he circled around through other provinces of Persia, conquering everyone that might otherwise have been supplying Bessus with fresh troops. By the time he traveled up north to Bactra in 329 BC, he already had most of Persia in his back pocket.

Alexander had played his cards well. Bessus had been unable to get enough troops to form a credible defense, and his own commanders knew it. They arrested him and surrendered him to Alexander. To keep his vow to the dying King Darius, Alexander took Bessus back to the Caspian Gates and crucified him on the very spot where he had stabbed Darius. Thus Bessus / Artaxerxes V became the last king of the now dead Persian Empire.

General Spitamenes, the satrap of Sogdiana (just north of Bactria), was the next in line to the Persian throne after Bessus. He had ulterior motives for surrendering Bessus to Alexander. He knew the Persians weren't strong enough to resist, but he feigned submission, while gathering his forces and plotting secretly against the Macedonians.

Proud of his easy victory over Bessus, Alexander didn't realize what Spitamenes was doing. Blithely he moved on, through 'submitted' Sogdiana, to the Jaxartes River, where he decided to found another new city in his honor. It was called Alexandria Eschate, 'the farthest'. (Everywhere he went, he began new cities, all called Alexandria.)

So in 328 BC, while Alexander worked on his new city, he heard the shocking news that General Spitamenes had overcome the Macedonian garrison and retaken control of Maracanda, the capital of Sogdiana. Alexander was unconcerned. The Persians couldn't have much of an army; everyone knew they had been pretty well wiped out. He sent a small army back to take care of the distraction.

Logos was angry with Alexander. "How many times must I humble him? His colossal pride has caused him to forget his vows to Me, again! I do still love him, but how can I bless him when he continually turns against Me?"

Alexander's small army was annihilated. 2000 infantry and 300 cavalry lost their lives. It was a humiliating defeat. He mobilized his entire army and rushed to Maracanda, only to find that General Spitamenes had moved down to Bactra to attack the garrison he had left there. That was the last straw. Alexander would underestimate him no more. He sent his best troops and his most-trusted General Coenus (the son-in-law of General Parmenion) after the Persian rebels. He was victorious and the rebellion was ended. Oxyartes finally killed his own General Spitamenes and sent his bloody head over to General Coenus, suing for peace. Oxyartes later told Alexander that Spitamenes' rebellion had been a purely religious matter, which was partly true. He had been a devout Zoroastrian, and had nursed a grudge against Alexander for letting Zoroaster's irreplaceable life works burn up at Persepolis.

Alexander found a friend in Oxyartes. A Persian noble of Sogdiana, he turned out to be trustworthy and helpful. Alexander grilled him, realizing that he needed to learn more about Persian customs if he was to rule them well (as Ada had counseled him). He also found that Oxyartes had a wife and two lovely daughters, whom he had hidden away in the secret fortress called Sogdian Rock during Spitamenes' rebellion. Oxyartes led him to the fortress and called for its defenders to surrender, but they would not. High atop a vertical rock cliff, the renowned fortress was impregnable, and well-stocked for many years. Oxyartes pled for his own wife and daughters to come down. "That, we permit, but surrender we will not, unless you can find men with wings to fly to the tops of our walls!" they swore.

Alexander watched the ladies lowered down the rock cliff. He was instantly smitten by Roxana, one of Oxyartes' daughters. Suddenly he realized that he needed a queen. Alexander was now the undisputed emperor of all Persia. It was time for him to settle down and enjoy some of the rewards of his conquests.

In 327 BC, he married the lovely and talented princess Roxana. They settled in Bactra. With her help he perfected his knowledge of Persian language and customs. She truly loved him. She soon enabled him to win the support of the remnants of the Persian provinces. When he decided to move on, she gladly accompanied him as he went through the eastern-most provinces of Persia and on into India.

But first, King Alexander had one score to settle. He got volunteers from his army – 300 men who were skilled at rock-climbing. Using light flax ropes and tent pegs for pitons, they succeeded in climbing the vertical walls of Sogdian Rock at night. By dawn's early light they stood high atop the walls of the rock fortress. Oxyartes again pled with its defenders to surrender. Pointing up to his own men, Alexander reminded them of their promise to surrender if he sent men with wings to the tops of their walls. He promised them clemency if they did, in the name of his new father-in-law, Oxyartes. Their shock at seeing Alexander's soldiers atop their walls opened their eyes to their inevitable defeat. They surrendered. Alexander kept his promise, and treated them well. Oxyartes invited them all to a magnificent feast to honor the new Queen Roxana.

King Alexander was generous to the Persian Empire. Those satraps who submitted were allowed to keep their positions. Alexander introduced Greek customs too, but only within the new Greek cities he built. For the most part he permitted the Persians to retain their own language and culture and to rule themselves in their own cities.

However, the combination of the incredible wealth, the hero-worship of being called a god, and his near infinite power and glory as emperor of Persia went to Alexander's head. Even with his close calls, defeats, and brushes with death, King Alexander never overcame his huge ego. He never kept his vows to serve YHWH and stop his drinking. Now he began to behave more like an oriental despot.

It was easy for Alexander to justify his behavior. He was welding together an empire. As mighty as the old Persian Empire had been, his own empire was greater! There were parties to throw; dignitaries to entertain; alliances to forge. It's pretty heady stuff to be called ultimate sovereign of the civilized world. 'Invincible' Alexander filled with pride.

He gave a grand speech to his army. He declared the war of vengeance finished. 'Mission accomplished!' He paid off his soldiers from his fabulous riches. But before he sent them home he asked for all who were willing to re-enlist as mercenaries in his new all volunteer army. "The power of Persia is broken. We will have no more big battles. But some Persians still hate me. Some may rise up against me again. I'll always need good warriors beside me." After his speech many re-enlisted. The pay was large; the risk small.

Alexander wrote to his beloved 'mother' Ada, to tell her of his great victories. But she wasn't fooled. "Alexander my son," she wrote back. "I am glad to hear of your victories. I am even more glad when I hear that you are treating your conquered subjects well. God has given you great honor, but with great honor comes greater responsibility. Rule humbly. Give God glory. Remember kindness as well as justice. Keep your vows and your pledges, and be faithful to those who stood with you. I am praying for you always." Alexander had told Ada about his vow to Jaddua the priest. He knew exactly what she meant by, "Keep your vows!"

But again, he wasn't keeping them. He was back to drinking, heavily, at the lavish parties he threw. And he honored the gods of his nobles more than he honored YHWH. Logos was disappointed in him. How many more times must He humble this fine man?

King Alexander hosted a planning conference with his generals at Maracanda, capital of Sogdiana. First they feasted in splendor and drank themselves silly, as oriental despots often do. Then, in his drunken state, Alexander began the 'planning'. That was a big mistake. He ordered General Cleitus the Black to take 16,000 troops up to the northern steppes to subdue the barbarian Chorismians and Massagetae. A hush fell over the generals. They all knew the terrifying legends of the Massagetae and the death of King Cyrus the Great. They knew about the fabled peace treaty which King Darius I claimed to have achieved with the barbarians. But not a one of them was willing to go up there to find out which, if any, of the legends were true!

Black Cleitus, also drunk, refused. Harsh words were spoken on both sides: name-calling, racial slurs, earthy and lurid renditions of loved ones, allegations of illegitimate ancestry. Alexander threw an apple at his friend's head. Cleitus stood in rage and swore that Alexander was no greater than his father Philip and no more moral than his mother Olympias. That hit a raw nerve with Alexander, who screamed for his bodyguards to bring the dagger from his belt. They hid it instead, and hustled Cleitus out of the room. But after they left, Alexander managed to stagger over and pick up his spear. Soon, Cleitus returned to the meeting, still spouting insults. Before anyone could stop him, Alexander ran Black Cleitus through with his spear.

It was a great tragedy. When he sobered up, Alexander mourned his friend, who had saved his life several times over. Once again, he remembered his vow to Jaddua the priest to never get drunk. But it was too late for Cleitus.

The rest of the life of Alexander the Great, sadly, was mostly downhill. Logos did humble him, again and again, as he moved through eastern Persia and India. He suffered other defeats and confrontations with death. Historians boast that he was the greatest general who ever lived (which is true) and that he never lost a battle (which is a bald-faced lie), but they miss the point. Even if he did win every battle, eventually, he lost his soul in the process, for he became even more decadent than the Persian despots he replaced. Yes, he treated well those who submitted, but he ruthlessly massacred those who resisted, even leveling whole towns and slaying every soul in them. All Ada's prayers couldn't overcome his pride or his vile temper.

Though he allowed his Persian satraps to rule in their own palaces in their own capitals with their own culture, he also established new cities everywhere he went. These were Greek cities called Alexandria, with Greek language and customs. They became major world trade centers. Thus the 'Hellenes' gained influence throughout Persia.

In 326 BC, Alexander and his army came to a tributary of the Indus River called the Hydaspes. There, King Porus ruled the region of Punjab, India. With 20,000 infantry, 2,000 cavalry, 1000 chariots, and 200 war elephants, King Porus was determined to keep Alexander on the far side of the swift river. Wherever Alexander tried to ford the river, Porus was there to block him. Finally Alexander secretly led a quarter of his men seventeen miles upstream. King Porus discovered the ruse too late. He sent his son with an army to repulse him, but Alexander made it across and defeated them. King Porus' son was among the dead.

Now Alexander swept down into the Indian's camp. But the Indian elephants terrified his horses! That made his cavalry nearly useless. He ordered them to circle way around and attack the Indian infantry from behind, under trusted General Coenus. Meanwhile, his faithful General Craterus was attempting to cross the swift river to join the battle. He succeeded, though with many losses.

They managed to form a phalanx and charge the war elephants, but again, succeeded with great loss. Over 4000 of his finest heavy infantry died in the charge! 12,000 total from Alexander's army died that day. Alexander's own war horse, Bucephalus, died, as did hundreds of other great war horses from his crack Companion Cavalry. It became a war of attrition. The Indians refused to surrender. Both sides suffered heavy losses. Since Alexander had started with more than twice as many, in the end his were the last men standing. Again, he had won, but at what cost?

He halted the carnage and ordered King Porus to stand before him. "You fought bravely, defending your country well. You very nearly defeated me! For the first time since I entered Asia, I feared for my life! If you had started with a few more men, or a few more elephants, you might have won. I commend you. Now, what can I do for you?"

King Porus, though injured in his shoulder, stood tall, over 7 feet tall. "Nothing," he responded, his dark brown eyes piercing into Alexander's soul to see their kindred spirit. "I am content that you respect me – as a king."

"Yes. I will respect you as the king of Punjab when you acknowledge me as the emperor of the world."

For a time, Porus remained silent. His sons were dead, his army destroyed, his nobles captured, and his people and land devastated. "I accept your offer," he said finally, dropping his gaze and bowing the knee. "My emperor."

Alexander smiled. He liked this proud, brilliant, and ambitious man, for he was much like himself. "Rise, King Porus!" He put a hand on his shoulder. "Your kingdom is restored to you. I release your captives. Go now, care for your dead and wounded. As long as you are faithful, you need never bow before me again. We are allies. We shall work with you to restore your people and your land. I shall honor you as the mighty king who most nearly defeated me in my quest to conquer the world."

Alexander wanted to go farther into India. His real goal was to conquer the entire world. But King Porus cautioned him. "The Magadha Empire, on the Gangetic Plain just beyond the Hyphasis River, has 6,000 war elephants. My army nearly defeated you with only 200! You cannot hope to beat them. Besides, the monsoons are upon us."

"Monsoons? What are they?"

"Oh... just rain. You'll see." King Porus chuckled.

Alexander soon found out. The continuous heavy rains turned streams into torrents, the ground into swamps, roads into quagmires. Their boots leaked, their swords turned green, their armor rusted, their rations rotted. The steaming jungles bred hordes of biting insects; the swollen rivers drove snakes and scorpions into their tents. Still Alexander pled with his men to continue east. They refused. One stood up to declare that, "All truly successful men know when to stop!" Alexander's own favorite priest stood and insisted that for the first time, the gods had turned against him. Even his faithful General Coenus begged him to listen to the men, who had now been gone for eleven years, and longed to see their families.

Alexander finally yielded to the mutiny. He stayed with King Porus for six months. There he built an 'Alexandria on the Hyphasis', marking the easternmost extent of his empire. He also crossed the Hydaspes, where his battle with Porus had begun, to found another city. This one he called 'Alexandria Bucephalus', in honor of his great war horse who had died in the battle. Always looking for ways to improve history by rewriting it to his advantage, he instructed his historians to claim that Bucephalus had never been defeated in battle but had died of old age.

In the fall of 326 BC, Alexander announced to his men that they would begin the long trek home. He should have just returned to Bactra. But instead, he decided to explore other routes, perhaps to find other cultures to subdue.

He first tried to row upstream, to discover the mythical 'River that Encircles the World', for he believed himself near the end of the world. That turned into disaster. The overtaxed oars of his ship broke, the ship almost sank, and Alexander, who never did learn to swim, nearly drowned. So they gave up and went downstream toward the Indian Ocean. At last they were actually headed towards home.

But as before, proud Alexander had to conquer every tribe they passed and attack every stronghold that refused to fling open its doors. He attacked the Citadel of Malli at Multan, whose warriors were reputed to be the bravest and fiercest in the world. Alexander led the charge. But as he and two bodyguards entered the citadel, the ladder rungs broke and the rest of the soldiers on it fell. Three of them died. Alexander found himself inside the Malli fortress with only two guards. They fought like wild men, but a Malli Indian felled Alexander with an arrow in his chest, so close to his heart that they thought he was dead.

Alexander's men rushed to the rescue of their fallen hero, and dragged him from the battle, but no one believed he would live. They unleashed their fury on the Malli in the citadel, sparing neither man, woman, nor child.

Due to exceptional efforts by his surgeon, Alexander survived. But his men refused to go into battle with him anymore. It was clear that God was no longer protecting him. His 'invincible' days were past. So after founding 'Alexandria on the Indus', Alexander went down to Pattala and split up his men. General Craterus led a third on the northern route through Carmania. Admiral Nearchus took the fleet into the Indian Ocean to explore sea routes. The rest went with Alexander into the Gedrosian Desert.

Another mistake. The desert is a waterless waste of sand dunes and sand storms. Wagons sank to their axles in sand. Poisonous plants plagued them, causing blindness, or foaming at the mouth. Poisonous snakes and scorpions caused convulsions and death. Flash floods trapped them; one killed many women and children and destroyed much of their supplies. It took them two months to get through the desert. Of 85,000 who had entered, only 25,000 came out alive. *Indeed, God was no longer covering Alexander.*

Alexander reached Susa in 324 BC. A letter from Ada awaited him. She had read letters relating his successes, but she had also heard stories of his injuries, his angry massacres, his drinking parties. She had heard complaints of his men adopting the Persian customs and honoring their ancient gods. Again she warned him as only a loving mother can, "You won't survive as king if you do not keep your vows to honor the one true God of Jaddua the Priest and to stop your drinking! Until Bactra, I know God blessed and protected you. But now I believe God has turned against you, for you have turned against Him. I fear for you, lest He give up on you and leave you entirely."

But Alexander was too overjoyed at surviving the long campaign to heed Ada's warnings. He held a mass wedding ceremony at which all of his officers were given Persian princesses as prizes for their service. In spite of the love and faithfulness of his first wife, Roxana, King Alexander married Princess Stateira, daughter of Darius III. He gave her sister, Princess Drypetis, to Hephaestion (his best friend and commander of his Companion Cavalry) and proclaimed him Chiliarch, second ruler in the empire. General Seleucus married Princess Apama, daughter of Spitamenes. The wedding party became a drunken orgy.

"I am sorry that I have made him," Logos cried. "What more could I have done to draw him to Me? I blessed him above measure. I disciplined him nearly to death, but I also worked great miracles in sparing his life. A hundred times I reminded him of his vows to Me. I sent My people to teach and encourage him. Yet he will not cry out to Me in his defeats or glorify Me in his victories, nor will he cease his drunkenness! Yet I grant him one last warning. I will take his best friend. Perhaps then Alexander will turn to Me."

Alexander and his men returned to Ecbatana to collect the plunder they had left behind. There amid the parties and games, Hephaestion fell sick and died. Alexander was beside himself with grief. But rather than heed this final, stern warning of his own mortality and re-commit himself to keep his vows, he wasted the rest of his life mourning for Hephaestion and instructing his scribes to rewrite history to place his friend in the pantheon of heroic Greek gods.

Alexander returned to Babylon, where he died on June 11, 323 BC, following yet another drinking orgy. On his deathbed, he was asked about his successor. He was very weak, and replied with only a single word, 'Craterus', his favorite surviving general. Well, Craterus was not around at the time. Those who were, did not like that answer, so they agreed together to change the ending slightly to make his final bequest 'Krateroi', Greek for 'the stronger'.

Of course you know what happened next. Right. Big fight! In fact, many big fights, going on for over 40 years. I'd rather not even plow through it, but I must summarize it to provide historical continuity.

Roxana was now pregnant with Alexander's first child. Hoping for a son, she murdered Alexander's other widow Stateira and her sister Drypetis (widow of Hephaestion). She then conspired with General Perdiccas, who agreed to marry Alexander's sister Cleopatra, and to rule the empire as regent for her unborn heir.

But Alexander had a half-brother, Arrhidaeus, son of Philip II and his sixth wife, Philinna. Philip's fourth wife, Olympias, had tried to poison him to eliminate another rival to Alexander's throne, but she had only been partially successful, leaving him epileptic and mentally disabled. General Meleager did not want to wait to see if Roxana's child was a son. He insisted on appointing Arrhidaeus as the new emperor immediately. He himself would, ahem, magnanimously rule for him since he was disabled.

After a lot more squabbles, they reached a compromise. Arrhidaeus, as **Philip III**, would rule jointly with Roxana's child (if he was a boy) as **Alexander IV**. Since neither was able to actually rule, Perdiccas would be chief regent of the empire, with Meleager as his co-regent. The other generals would all rule under them as satraps. **Ptolemy** got Egypt. Neoptolemus got Armenia. Laomedon got Syria and the Levant. **Antigonus I** got southern Anatolia except Philotas got Cilicia. Lysimachus got Thrace. Asander got Caria. Menander got Lydia. Leonnatus got Phrygia. Peithon got Media. Craterus got joint rule of Greece with the king of Macedon, Antipater. Eumenes, Alexander's secretary, got Cappadocia and Paphlagonia. The eastern half of the empire remained as assigned by Alexander: Philip ruled in Bactria and Sogdiana; Oxyartes ruled in Gandara; Taxiles and Porus in India; Sibyrtius in Arachosia and Gedrosia; Stasanor in Ariana and Drangiana; Archon in Babylonia; Tlepolemus in Carmania; Phrataphernes in Parthia and Hyrcania; Arcesilaus in Assyria; and Peucestas in Persis.

You know how long that lasted! The scrapping Greeks were soon back at it again. Loosed from the strong hand of Alexander, they fought like tigers in an amphitheater. The jealousy and greed of the new kings was matched only by the treachery of their officers. Murders, shifting alliances, double crosses – the slain soon stacked up like cordwood. Alexander IV, Roxana, and Olympias were among the first victims, ending the royal line of Alexander the Great.

When the dust settled in 300 BC, all that was left was **Ptolemy** ruling Egypt, the southern Levant, and Cyprus; **Lysimachus** ruling Thrace and nearly all of Asia Minor; **Seleucus** ruling Babylon and Syria; and **Cassander** ruling Macedon and Greece. A bit later even Lysimachus and Cassander were slain. Finally, fifty years after Alexander's death, it boiled down to Ptolemy ruling Egypt, Cyrene, the Levant, Cyprus, and the Anatolian coastlands; **Antigonus II Gonatas** ruling Greece; and **Antiochus I** son of Seleucus ruling most of the rest of what had once been the Persian Empire. Gauls took Thrace and central Anatolia (Galatia).

But though their rule was brief, the impact the Greeks had upon the rest of the world was huge. Greek culture, language, and trade spread around the world. Greek became the common medium of communication from the Adriatic to the Indus. Greek legends, Greek gods, Greek sports, and Greek love for the arts, literature, and learning flooded the world. Alexander had founded or renamed more than 70 Greek cities, all called Alexandria, all over the empire. Many of them became wealthy powerhouses of commerce, as well as centers of learning. Some became (as Alexander intended) capital cities of their land, such as the Alexandria on the edge of the Nile Delta in Egypt. It remained Egypt's capital for nearly a thousand years, until Muslim conquest of Egypt in 641 AD. Its lighthouse was one of the Seven Wonders of the World; its library became the largest in the world; its philosophers and religious leaders became the most respected in the world. After the destruction of Tyre, Alexandria in Egypt became a center of trade in the Mediterranean. It soon was the largest city in the world. Though forever a stronghold of Hellenism, it cultivated a thriving Judean community as well. It was there that the Judean Hebrew Scriptures were translated into modern Greek by seventy scholars, thus named the 'Septuagint' (Greek for seventy).

Sadly, the Greeks lost something, too. Their free spirit, independence, patriotism, and adventurous bravery were replaced with a love of luxury and adulation – a lazy and selfish hedonism (as has happened in America today). Though they Hellenized the world, the Hellas themselves would never be great again. The old feuds and petty strifes of the scrappy Greeks continued until Alexander's empire was swallowed up in the worldwide dominion of Rome. Logos was sad. His intent in blessing King Alexander was always to bless the world by spreading the knowledge of the one true God. Instead, the idolatry and hedonism of Greek culture dragged the world toward paganism.

CHAPTER 49 – ROME AND CARTHAGE ARISE

Greece had been molded by the mystical philosophies and paganism of the East more than she realized. But at the same time, different forces molded the West, where two smaller cultures were growing into major civilizations based on riches, raw power, and glory. We must now turn our attention toward Rome and Carthage.

Remember Romulus and Remus, the Latins from Alba Longa? [Volume Three] Three years after ‘the Earthquake’ of 750 BC, they had conquered central Italy from the devastated Rasna (Etruscans) and founded Rome.

I have not yet told you where the Latins came from. That makes an interesting story, which turns out to become significant at this point in our time-line. Latinus, ‘father’ of the Latin peoples, became the father-in-law of Aeneas son of Anchises, cousin of King Priam of Troy. Aeneas was a hero in the Trojan wars. He was one of the few who survived the fall of Troy to the Greeks in 859 BC. Aeneas and his troop of warriors (the Aeneads) escaped and fled the fallen city. As everyone knows, they reached Latium in 847 BC, well before ‘the Earthquake’.

But few remember why Aeneas had taken nearly twelve years to reach Latium. He had moved his Trojan warriors several places, hoping to settle down, marry, and become peaceful citizens, but everywhere they went they were feared and rejected by the locals. We shall leave him to wander for six years while we direct our attention to Tyre.

Matten, the wicked and avaricious king of Tyre, ruled with his brother Acherbas, the fabulously wealthy high priest of Melqart. King Matten had two children, Prince Pygmalion, and the gentle and kind Princess Elissa (the only one in this story with any goodness in her character). Her father, wishing to divide the kingdom between his two children, forced Elissa to marry her rich uncle Acherbas. On his deathbed in 854 BC, he swore that his throne would be divided equally between Pygmalion and Elissa. This would let Acherbas retain his authority as religious ruler of the city. But Pygmalion was unsatisfied with his share. He wanted it all. He murdered Acherbas in his temple and made up a story to deceive Elissa, hoping to get her to tell him where her dead husband had kept his gold.

Elissa was no dummy. She could read the handwriting on the wall. When her brother sent eighty guards to bring her (and all her gold) back to the palace, she convinced the guards to switch sides. They loaded the gold and all their possessions onto ships and fled Tyre. Their first stop was Cyprus, where they picked up eighty prostitutes as wives for the guards; then on to the north shores of Africa, into a natural harbor which we now know as Carthage.

Being from a seaport herself, Elissa immediately saw the value of the natural harbor. The land was owned by primitive Libyan nomads (Berbers). Elissa bargained with them to buy ‘just a small piece of land by the water.’

They were entranced with her and her gold. She swore to take only as much land as she could circumscribe with oxhide. That seemed safe enough, as they had few oxen in that area. But Elissa fooled them by cutting all her oxhides into narrow strings, thus enclosing the entire harbor and a nearby hill (still called ‘Byrsa’ – oxhide).

The Phoenicians were struggling to defend their harbor from the Libyan natives (who rightly felt snookered) and build Carthage (meaning ‘new town’ in Phoenician), when whom should appear on the horizon but our wandering Trojans! Queen Elissa pled for help. The Trojan warriors were only too glad to oblige. Especially Aeneas, who promptly fell in love with the beautiful exiled queen. They married, vowing to each other to rule Carthage together. Carthage became a powerful, peaceful, and prosperous city, a center of trade in the Mediterranean.

More-recent myths and legends from Greece and Rome take rather dramatic flights of fancy at this point, for the truth is rather plain. Elissa made a good wife, and bore him several children. But most of his Trojan warriors did not have wives. The Tyrians had no girls old enough to marry. The Libyan natives hated them, and though they were not strong enough to defeat them (they tried) yet they would not give them any of their women for wives. Then Aeneas heard of a land to the north where a strong and wealthy tribe (the Rasna) had an abundance of beautiful women. Aeneas took his warriors to get them, swearing to return. *Now you know why he didn’t reach Latium until 847 BC.*

Aeneas first encountered Latinus, king of a Tyrrhenian tribe from Sardis, who gladly welcomed the Trojans and found wives for them. He gave them some land on which to settle down and build a city, and gave his own daughter, the lovely princess Lavina, to Aeneas. Finally, a place of their own! This is what they had wanted all along. Aeneas fell in love with Lavina, and broke all his vows to Elissa.

Latinus had an ulterior motive for wanting the Trojans to stay. The Rutuli, an aggressive neighboring Rasna tribe, was threatening war unless he let their vile King Turnus marry Lavina! Giving her to Aeneas instead took care of the problem. The Trojans subdued the Rutuli and killed King Turnus. Sadly, in the battle, Latinus was killed, too. Aeneas named his new city ‘Lavinium’ in honor of Lavina. Their combined tribe became ‘Latins’ in honor of Latinus.

Back in Carthage, Queen Elissa was heartbroken when she heard news from Italy what Aeneas had done. *How could he?! She had thought their love would last forever!* Legend says she killed herself, but that is not true. She told her sister Anna to build a funeral pyre. On it, she put all the personal possessions Aeneas and his men had left behind. As they burned, she swore that Aeneas was dead to her, and vowed a solemn curse before Melqart to forever pit her descendants against his. Her city was defenseless without the Trojan warriors, so Elissa began building up her own military for the day when her curse could be fulfilled.

So now you know where the Latins came from. Lavina bore Aeneas a son, Silvanus, who would become king of Lavinium. But Aeneas had an older son, Ascanius, by his first wife, Creusa. Creusa had been the daughter of King Priam, but had died trying to save baby Ascanius during their escape from the doomed Troy. As Silvanus grew up, Ascanius got jealous of his half-brother. So Ascanius left Lavinium in 817 BC, to found a city of his own. He put it on a long ridge in sight of Mount Alban, thus it was called Alba Longa. Romulus and Remus, who founded Rome in 747 BC (three years after the Earthquake), were direct descendants of Ascanius. The land where they all lived was known as Latium, after the Tyrrhenian King Latinus.

Now you shall see why I saved this story until 300 BC. By now Carthage had grown into the second largest and most stable empire in the world. Its Phoenician sea-traders controlled most of the western half of the Mediterranean, including the north coast of Africa past Cyrene, the islands of Corsica and Sardinia, most of Iberia, and half of Sicily. But they still bore that curse that Queen Elissa had cast against the Trojans. Their military was second to none. Though their infantry was small, they had a formidable cavalry with hundreds of North African Elephants trained for war. Their navy was now unequaled. They combined the use of their 400 warships for both trade and defense, thus even in peacetime they were always ready. Sailors from Carthage were known as the most skilled in the world, and their exploits were told like hero's tales. They even sailed out onto the Atlantic, to Britain and down the West African coast. Truly, the last 550 years had been good to Carthage and the 'Punics' (Latin for Phoenicians).

But the Latins had expanded too. They were now called Romans, with Rome as their capital. They controlled most of the Italian Peninsula up to the Po River. This included Magna Graeca, the area in the 'boot' which Greece had once controlled. Now the Romans were ready to flex their well-hardened muscles. So far they had been at peace with their Punic neighbors just across the Mediterranean. But with both powers growing, clashes were inevitable. The first big conflict came over Syracuse, in southeast Sicily. Syracuse, an independent Greek city-state, was troubled by lawless mercenaries. They appealed to both Carthage and Rome for help. Rome did not want war with Carthage – it was the most powerful empire in the world at the time. But the Punics already occupied most of Sicily and would soon have it all, if Rome dithered. After much deliberation, they agreed to ally with Syracuse and help defend them.

That was a difficult decision, and it was to have serious consequences. The Romans were battle-hardened from fighting Gauls and Samnites, and finally King Pyrrhus of Epirus, each of which had very nearly defeated them. But remember that the navy from Carthage was the best in the world. If the Romans wanted to defeat the Punics, they would need a navy. So when they found a stranded Punic warship, they manufactured 130 copies in only 60 days!

They had no skilled seamen; all their previous battles had been on land. So they fitted their new ships with drawbridges. Rather than battle with ships, they would simply cruise up to their enemy, lower their drawbridge, and decide the contest with hand-to-hand combat. Thus with great ingenuity and persistence, the Romans eventually won the first Punic War in 241 BC, after more than 20 years of fighting. It was not easy, and it cost both sides, heavily. The first few naval battles were disasters for the Romans, and their assault on Carthage was even worse. But then they began winning, and in the end, Carthage was forced to sign a peace treaty ceding total control of Sicily to Rome and paying for the cost of the war. Rome emerged as a major naval power. Then in 238 BC while Carthage was distracted with an internal rebellion of its mercenaries, the Romans took advantage of it to take Corsica and Sardinia as well. Carthage had gotten proud, thinking they owned the Mediterranean Sea. Now the Romans controlled it.

But wait! Let's get it straight. Who are the good guys and who are the bad guys here? Queen Elissa was a good person, who, though sorely treated, kept her promises and cared for her people. The Carthaginian Empire was mostly (except for their bickering with the Greeks over Sicily) built on honest trade rather than conquest. Phoenician traders brought prosperity wherever they went. Carthage was not trying to build an empire so much as to extend the benefits of free trade. So are the Punics the good guys? Are the Romans the bad guys for resisting their expansion?

Actually, no. Carthage may have looked innocent on the surface, but deep down they harbored that fierce resentment against Aeneas and his Trojans. Logos wanted to bless them. He appreciated the integrity with which they conducted their business. He had only one problem; they couldn't give up their grudge against the injustice Aeneas had done to Elissa. She had sworn a terrible oath by her god Melqart. That oath had been repeated by her son when he became king, and by his sons after him from that day until this. Every ruler of Carthage vowed eternal enmity against the Aeneads, and hence the Latins. Their steady expansion in the Mediterranean was merely biding time until they were strong enough to attack Rome.

Logos had sent many people to the Punics to warn them of their bitterness and its consequences, and to turn them to YHWH where they could find the grace to forgive. He had greatly blessed them, disciplined them, and even warned them through His prophets of what would happen to them if they continued to bear that awful grudge. His perfect plan was that they would eventually ally again with the Latins in fond remembrance of what Aeneas had done to help found Carthage at the beginning. Rome had a lot which Carthage needed to learn, just as Carthage had a lot which Rome needed to learn. Together, the two 'legs of iron' of Nebuchadnezzar's statue would have ruled the world in peace, justice and wisdom, to eventually even deliver Greece from its hedonism and idolatry.

So do the Romans deserve to be called the good guys here? Surprisingly, yes. To tell the story of Rome is to tell the story of western civilization itself. Though a monarchy at first, Rome was founded on principles of respect for each individual person and rewards for individual labor. They welcomed the downtrodden of the earth, gave them lands, and put them to work. We judge them by their later excesses but at the beginning they pleased God with their respect for human life and desire for righteousness and justice. Rome was built on the banks of the Tiber River, a crossroads of trade, and in honest trade they prospered. Yes, they took advantage of the weaknesses of the Rasna (Etruscans) and the Sabines, nations upon which God had pronounced judgment for their barbaric wickedness. But in the end, they gave their conquered enemies seats in the tribunal and lived in harmony with their neighbors.

Few realize that in subduing the surrounding Sabines and Rasna, the Romans had actually done them a favor. For the first time in history, lower Italy became civilized. Romulus was a strong ruler, but a wise one. From his laws, the Roman Republic had its roots. When Romulus died (he drowned in a storm, and his body was never found) they elevated him as a god, Quirinius, the Sabine god of war. But they did not crown his son as their new monarch. Nor did they have a big war over succession to the 'throne'.

No, they held a vote, and elected the wisest man among them to rule them. His name was **Numa Pompilius**. He had received training in Judaic law. He worked to further the wise and just laws of Romulus. Human life was respected. Every man had a vote. Every man had a right to a fair trial. Justice was meted out with a measure of mercy. Morality was lauded; immorality was punished; and the highest leaders had to conform to the same standard of righteousness as a common citizen. Integrity in business was demanded. Every man contributed equally from his labors for the common good. The thief, the lazy, and the murderer were similarly despised. Rome had no 'public welfare' for the lazy, so they learned to work or starved. Every man had his own little plot of land which he worked with his own hands. Freedom of individual choice was treasured. Even slaves had to be paid fairly so they could earn their freedom. And surprisingly, Numa insisted that, "God is Spirit, not a planet or idol or image of any physical thing. It is impious to represent the divine by that which is perishable." Thus Numa forbade physical images of God (idols), a law which was obeyed for Rome's first 120 years.

Of course such a system prospered greatly. And of course such wealth was noticed by other nations around them, who attacked them without mercy. Over the years, and over many vile attacks, the Roman Republic remained strong and conquered every foe, for God protected them. Logos intended that they should teach the Punics of His Law, even as the Punics taught them the benefit of world-wide maritime trade. They two were to become the 'legs of iron' to finally conquer corrupt Greece and rule the world.

But instead of joining in an alliance which would have enriched them and all peoples, they fought. As with every leader in Carthage, General Hamilcar swore at the altar of Melqart his eternal enmity against Rome. He took his son **Hannibal** with him, and though only nine at the time, he swore with his father the dread oath before they left. Hamilcar built up an empire in southern Iberia. There he trained an army for the main purpose of attacking Rome.

The Gauls and Celts who had invaded northern Italy in 390 BC had been driven back to the Po River Valley, but had never really been subdued. In their zeal to take revenge against Rome, Carthage saw an opportunity, and allied with them, providing money and arms in 225 BC to incite them to invade a second time. Once again, Rome was victorious, this time annexing the Po River Valley as a Roman province named Gallia Cisalpina, in 220 BC.

Now there were no other threats to the power of Rome in the entire Italian Peninsula. *They are the masters of the sea around them, and to the north, the only land route, they are completely protected by the Alps! Yeah. Right...*

At the age of 26 Hannibal became commander of the Punic forces in Iberia. They loved him, as in him they saw his heroic father Hamilcar restored to youth. He carefully trained his army. Now he would fulfill his vow to Melqart! He had 120,000 troops, with 12,000 cavalry and 36 war elephants. Before he left for Rome, he made a pilgrimage to the temple of Melqart at Gadir. [Greek – Gadeira; Latin – Gades; modern – Cadiz.] This is the most ancient city founded by the Phoenicians on the southern coast of the Iberian Peninsula, just outside the Strait of Gibraltar.

The imposing temple of Melqart there had two huge golden pillars in front, which came into Greek legend as the Pillars of Heracles. Hannibal spent several days in prayer and sacrifice at the altar of Melqart. On the eve of his departure toward Rome, he had an unusually vivid night vision, which affected Hannibal the rest of his life. A shining youth of divine beauty approached him, claiming to come from the 'supreme diety' (Melqart) sent to guide Hannibal into Italy. "Follow me," he said, "and see thou look not behind thee!" In his vision, Hannibal quickly rose to follow, but as he walked, he could not restrain his youthful curiosity as to what lay behind. He turned his head to see a mighty serpent crashing through the forest, destroying the land in a terrible and fearsome darkness. Torrential rain, thunder, and lightning fell all around it. Everywhere it went, it left desolation in its wake.

Hannibal asked the meaning of this vision. The shining youth answered, "What thou beholdest is the devastation of Italy, just as you have prayed. So follow thine own star. Inquire no further into the dark counsels of heaven." Thus in 218 BC Hannibal took the Punic army up the east coast of the Iberian Peninsula (known as Hispania) intending to cross the Pyrenees into Gaul (now known as France) and then – cross the Alps into the Po River Valley!

With an audacity fueled by dedication to his vow, he accomplished what no one thought possible. He fought his way through the fierce northern Hispanic and Celtic tribes to the Pyrenees. There he left a detachment of 11,000 troops to garrison the newly conquered region, and sent home another 11,000 who chose to return to southern Iberia. So he had 98,000 left when he entered Gaul. He conquered the hostile Gaelic barbarians, and made deals with the others, leaving more garrisons behind and reaching the Rhone River with only 46,000 troops remaining, including 8,000 cavalry. He forded the swift Rhone River, outmaneuvering the natives and eluding the Romans trying to stop him. He reached the Alps, and painstakingly cut new roads for his troops up the steep mountains. Hostile natives threw boulders from the rocky cliffs onto his workers. Avalanches crashed down upon them. Snow and ice made their way treacherous. Glaciers opened into crevasses to swallow them up. Food ran low. Deadly falls and the numbing winter cold took many lives. Many of his war elephants perished on the mountain trails. But to the world's amazement, Hannibal persevered in his perilous quest, driven by his fierce vow of eternal hatred for Rome, to reach the Po River Valley in the middle of winter with 34,000 soldiers. Most acknowledge this as one of the greatest military achievements of the ancient world.

The Romans, under General Scipio, had utterly underestimated Hannibal. They had gone by sea to the Iberian Peninsula, expecting to catch him before he crossed the Rhone River. After he eluded them, they bedded down for the winter, fully expecting Hannibal to do the same. No sane general would try to cross the Alps in winter! But the next they heard, Hannibal had allied with the Gauls in the Po River Valley. By the time they arrived, he was already terrorizing the Italian countryside. They clashed at the Ticinus River; there Scipio was soundly defeated and nearly killed. The Roman Senate was appalled, and quickly sent reinforcements under General Sempronius.

With that victory, Hannibal was able to convince the Gauls to supply him with more troops. Hannibal's forces now totalled over 40,000. When Sempronius arrived with 43,000 men, Hannibal and his brother Mago ambushed them at the Trebbia River; only 10,000 escaped the trap.

The terrified Romans elected Servilius to restore and then lead Scipio's forces, and Flaminius to command the remnants of Sempronius' army. However, the wily general Hannibal goaded Flaminius to attack before Servilius could join him. Hannibal camped on the north shore of Lake Trasimene, in full view of the attackers. That night, he lit campfires into the hills to the west, but secretly arranged all his soldiers in the hills to the east, above the shoreline along which Flaminius must march into battle the next morning. General Flaminius was snookered. He died, and his army was virtually annihilated. This is now known as the most successful ambush in history. The news of his defeat brought great panic in Rome.

For sixteen years Hannibal terrorized Italy, ravaging the countryside and trying to get the surrounding tribes to join him against Rome. That was his one driving goal – destroy Rome! He surrounded it, even heaved a javelin over its walls. He wiped out all the villas and farms around it. He besieged it and tried to starve them out. But alas. He could not break through the walls, for he had lost his siege engines in the Alps and the rest of his elephants in the flooded marshes of the Arno River. Worse yet, nearly all the conquered tribes of Italy remained loyal to Rome! (That ought to tell you something!) The Romans gathered another huge army, 100,000 strong. But again, Hannibal's military genius enveloped and crushed them. 70,000 were slain or captured at the Battle of Cannae.

This was the toughest time yet for the fledgling Roman Republic. It can be compared to the wars of independence faced by the thirteen original colonies in America in the late 1700s. Rome faced battles on many fronts. Hannibal's brother Hasdrubal was fighting Rome's allies in Hispania. Rome was trying to stop Carthage from sending supplies to Hannibal. Rome had to cope with their allies in Sicily, and on top of it off, had been forced to send an army to Macedonia against Philip V, who had promised Carthage he would send troops and supplies to Hannibal.

By 212 BC, the war had become a stalemate. Hannibal could not conquer Rome's walls without reinforcements, which the Romans had effectively blocked by loyalty to their allies and their patriotic defense of their homeland. But Rome could not defeat Hannibal's brilliant military strategies. Now Hannibal sent an urgent message to his younger brother Hasdrubal (who had been left behind with a small army in Iberia) to bring his siege engines across the Alps to meet him at the Po River Valley. From the beginning Hasdrubal had been trying to send supplies to Hannibal, but two Scipio brothers had prevented him. He finally overcame them at the Battle of the Upper Baetis in Iberia. He killed the Scipio brothers and destroyed most of their army, but it did delay his mission to aid Hannibal.

Rome sent another army, under another Scipio, which again delayed Hasdrubal. It was late in 209 BC before he could escape to follow his brother's footsteps through the Alps. But by waiting until summer and joining with the Gauls who had fought against his brother he was able in 207 BC to cross the Alps with his army, his war elephants, and the siege engines that Hannibal so desperately needed.

Hearing of his approach, Rome sent out two armies, Marcus Livius against Hasdrubal at the Metaurus River, and Claudius Nero to try to keep Hannibal in southern Italy. Though not strong enough to attack, they hoped to prevent their enemies from joining forces. They knew that if Hasdrubal with his reinforcements ever reached his brother Hannibal with his military genius, they were toast.

Satan had tired of years of inconclusive battles. He was eager to get the Punic forces joined and get it over with.

Logos called Satan into his presence. But before He could speak Satan was already gloating. "I have won! Your prophecy to Nebuchadnezzar has failed. The two legs of iron have split and are fighting each other. Now one or the other is sure to be destroyed, or both! And there is nothing You can do to prevent it! I am just as strong as You!"

"I concede that you have terribly harmed My plan. I loved the line of Queen Elissa, but all My discipline, all My entreaties, have failed to deliver her from the bitterness and rage with which you so successfully enslaved her. Yes, as always, sin ends in destruction. Yet you shall see that all your work was not a victory for you, but rather a defeat. Father will simply fulfill the prophecy in a different way."

This made Satan mad (which doesn't seem difficult). "Defeat? *I'll show You defeat!* When Hannibal gets his hands on those siege engines there is no power on earth that can keep him out of Rome! I'll squash Your precious ones like grapes of wrath! Their blood will run red like..."

"Satan!" Logos interrupted. "After all these years, are you still counting chickens before they hatch? As I said before, even the weakest among My precious ones shall defeat you. All your labor against the saints at Rome has only hardened them. They may become both legs of iron of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. You have not blocked Father's prophecy. You've only made its fulfillment more certain!"

Satan left in fierce wrath. *The land will be filled with the blood of the slain, and no 'weak saint' can stop it. Now that Hasdrubal has reached Italy with his supplies, all he has to do is join up with Hannibal. Together, they will be invincible!*

Claudius Nero was a great statesman and general. But he was also humble. He fought his battles first on his knees. He was thus engaged in earnest prayer when his bodyguard came in. "Sir, I hate to interrupt, but this could be important. Two citizens have something to report."

[Note that in the Roman Republic citizen soldiers made up the bulk of the fighting forces. They were volunteers, and rather independent, bound to the army only by their own patriotism.] "Sir! Thank you for seeing us so late at night. We were curious to see the great Hannibal and his elephants. So we snuck out of camp this afternoon to approach the enemy camp. But as we were hiding in the heavy brush trying to spot the elephants, we heard the sound of approaching scouts. We laid low, our swords at the ready, and caught the scouts coming down the path into their camp. We surprised them and slew them all. When we searched them, we found this!" He gave General Nero a still-sealed message.

Nero broke the seal and read the message. He whistled. "I commend you, good citizens! This message may be the salvation of Rome! For it reveals to me the battle plans of General Hasdrubal! He intends to attack General Livius at dawn in two days. Let us go quickly north and see if we can thwart his plans."

Claudius Nero immediately chose 6000 infantry and 1000 cavalry, his very best. They left the rest of his men to continue blocking Hannibal, and rushed north to join up with the army of Marcus Livius at the Metaurus River. By marching as if their lives depended on it, he arrived just hours before the attack. Nero immediately told Livius of the captured message. "Hasdrubal is attacking at dawn. He knows you're not strong enough to defeat him. He told Hannibal to advance to South Umbria, where he plans to meet him after he destroys your army. But I'm quite sure Hannibal never got the message, as it was still sealed when we captured it."

"What shall we do? Even with your additional 7,000, we are not strong enough to stop him. He has 48,000 men, 8,000 cavalry, and 15 elephants!"

"Sound the trumpet of my arrival!"

"What? Let them know that you're here?"

"They won't know that I don't have my full army here, but we can sure make them think we do!"

The plan worked. Hasdrubal heard the trumpet, and when he came out at dawn to sound the attack, he saw what looked like two armies already arrayed against him. Someone had betrayed his plans! He pulled his army back in retreat. That night, he turned tail and headed for the ford of the Metaurus River, planning to return to his Gaelic allies until he could safely join up with Hannibal.

"Shall we pursue them?" General Livius asked.

"I don't know. I need to pray." Again, he fell to his knees. "I hear no answers. So no, we wait," General Nero finally concluded. "Tell the men to refresh themselves and sleep. Tomorrow may be different." The next morning was different. General Nero was praying at dawn. Suddenly he knew. "Tell the men to have a good breakfast, for today we defeat the Punics! God has given us the victory!"

God had, indeed! Hasdrubal had wandered up and down the Metaurus River all night, trying to find the ford. His men were upset and cranky from lack of sleep. Many had given up and sacked out, but others, especially the mercenary Gauls, had taken to drinking heavily. When the Romans attacked, they were disorganized, half drunk, and most had not yet eaten breakfast. Thus Hasdrubal was annihilated. Every man in his army was slain. His camp was plundered. His head was chopped off and put in a bag.

Generals Claudius Nero and Marcus Livius took their combined forces back south to Nero's camp. They brought the bag and heaved it into Hannibal's camp that evening. When Hannibal saw the bloody head, he shouted out, "Alas! In my brother's eyes I can see the defeat of Carthage! Rome would now become the master of the world!" Thus Hannibal's hopes to fulfill the dread Carthaginian vow of eternal enmity against Rome were forever dashed. From that day forth, the mighty Hannibal was on the run.

Claudius Nero was a great hero in Rome. Every father wanted to name his son after him. He and Marcus Livius were elected to the Consulate, as co-rulers of Rome. This was the turning point of the Second Punic War. Hannibal remained in Italy for several more years, but he couldn't do anything without more supplies. The Romans turned their backs on him and went for the heart of the Punic Empire, Carthage itself. Hannibal fled Italy in an attempt to defend his own homeland. In 202 BC at Zama, Africa, he faced Roman General Scipio Africanus in a fair fight, and lost!

Hannibal had more men: (55,000 to Scipio's 43,000) and 80 war elephants. But Scipio had a better cavalry, plus a trick up his sleeve. He had read the history of Alexander's battle of Gaugamela, where he learned that elephants are slow in turning, and they can be directed by trumpets. He gave his troops trumpets, and organized them in blocks, with a wide corridor in front of each elephant. It worked, so most of Hannibal's elephants were ineffective. Scipio's men fought for their homeland, with all the discipline and zeal that only patriotic citizens can muster. It was close, but all Hannibal's brilliant strategy could not overcome the determination and dedication of the Roman citizens.

Carthage sued for peace. Rome imposed harsh terms to forever impoverish her. She was stripped of her foreign colonies, denied the right to have an army or navy, and required to pay a huge fine. Logos was sad for her. How wealthy and strong she could have remained if she had allied with the Romans instead of fighting them! Her own curse of eternal enmity against Rome had destroyed her.

The Romans too were profoundly harmed. They had lost many good men and had been tormented by vengeful Carthaginians for many years. Now they became bitter. Swearing vengeance, they pursued Hannibal to his death in 182 BC, and oppressed Carthage for fifty years. When she tried to free herself they burned her to the ground and sold her people into slavery. Rome was indeed master of the world, and a cruel master she would turn out to be. In the process, the Roman Republic itself was destroyed.

When the Punic Wars began, Italy was covered with small farms of a few acres each, where each citizen lived in his own villa with his family, working with his own hands. Most Romans were kind, frugal, honest, generous, and industrious. They voted for virtuous and wise heroes to represent them, and their leaders truly served the people.

But when Hannibal had swept the land destroying their comfortable villas, their heroes had become cruel, battle-hardened military men. The desperate people fled to the cities, where they fell prey to every lying demagogue who wanted their votes. The once-honest citizenry devolved into a democratic mob. The Republic died, and Rome descended into every kind of moral vice. Its bravest and best lay dead on a hundred battlefields, to be replaced by those with a slave or 'victim' mentality, whining like babies for their leaders to protect and provide for them.

The rise and fall of the Roman Empire is thoroughly documented, so this is only a summary. But first, I cannot resist a comparison with my own nation, America. We too had a republic, with honest, brave, hard-working citizens who elected their most virtuous to lead them. But as in Rome, lazy, self-consumed citizens of our republic now fill our cities in a democratic mob, voting for lying knaves promising free stuff. We cry for government to provide for all our desires, and defend our right to live off the labors of others. We kill the innocents but welcome the rebels and the lawless. Virtue is ridiculed while moral perversions are defended. We seem to think that the freedom won by the blood of our fathers permits us to toss out the God of our fathers and live as we please. Thus, like Rome, we've lost that inner integrity and goodness that once made us great.

The Roman Republic had been the 'good guys' in our story. In their conquest of Carthage, every hard-working, honest, and patriotic Roman citizen served in its defense. But now the wealth of her conquests began to pour in. Some heroes returned to their farms to rebuild their villas and resume their lives. But the vast majority, having tasted blood and riches, remained with the army, becoming wealthy with the plunder of nations, and sending slaves to live in their homes and till their fields. It's a pretty easy life, living off the backs of conquered nations. Rome had been content to rule themselves well. Now with the defeat of Carthage they wanted to rule the world. Forgetting the faith of their fathers, they became gods to themselves, as in America today. The Roman Republic degenerated into cabals of wealthy senators and tribunes, who bought their way into power and held it by bribery and back-room deals. The new nobility was all-powerful, since it was to them the wealth of the plundered cities flowed. But rather than distribute the money to their citizens, they bought votes with public works, grand buildings, costly games, roads, armies, and a little grain for the starving peasants.

Macedon under Philip V had assisted Carthage. She was brought under the iron heel of Rome in 168 BC, at the Battle of Pydna. King Perseus was taken in chains to Rome. There was a ruthless purge of all anti-Roman influence, in which 300,000 men were enslaved. Macedonia became another Roman province.

Vengeance against Epirus was next, for King Pyrrhus had nearly defeated the Romans in 280 – 275 BC. She fell under the iron heel of Rome in 167 BC.

Greece, particularly Corinth, had supported Hannibal in his campaign through the Greek cities of southern Italy. In revenge, the Romans destroyed and burned Corinth in 146 BC, putting all the men to the sword and selling the women and children into slavery. The rest of Greece then caved. They were granted some independence until 27 BC. Then Caesar Augustus reorganized lower Greece as the Roman province of Achaia.

Mighty Greece had fallen so easily it brought fear to the rest of the world. No one dared incur the wrath of Rome! Yet her vengeance was not satisfied.

Antiochus III the Great had governed the empire of the Seleucids, from Anatolia to Media and Persia. He, too, had supported Hannibal. He had moved his capital city from Persepolis to Antioch on the Orontes, which he had built up into one of the greatest cities in the world. There he had received Hannibal with honor after fleeing from Carthage, and had protected him from the wrath of the Romans. He had also come to the aid of the Greek 'Aetolian League' when it was under attack by the Romans. But they defeated Antiochus III at Thermopylae in 191 BC. The Romans chased him back to Asia. There they allied with Pergamum and defeated him again at the Battle of Magnesia in 190 BC. That forced him to make a crippling peace treaty with the Romans at Apamea in 188 BC, in which he lost all his European territories and Pergamum took his Anatolian states. (When King Attalus III died in Pergamum in 133 BC, he bequeathed it back to Rome.) During this time, the Parthians were busy conquering Persia and Media. Thus the mighty Seleucid Empire was reduced to... only Syria!

Hispania was next. They too had supported Hannibal. Though the Celt-Iberian city of Numantia held out long against the Roman legions, it fell in 133 BC. The Iberian Peninsula became just another Roman province.

Numidia, African neighbor of Carthage, was next, in 104 BC. King Jugurtha had maintained his power with bribes to the Roman senators. He declared that all of Rome could be bought with a bribe. His own corruption was his downfall. Numidia fell under the heel of Roman General Marius by the brilliant strategy of lieutenant Sulla.

Surprisingly, middle Europe was next. The Cimbri and Teutones had formed a Germanic / Celtic Alliance, headed toward Italy. **Marius** and his lieutenant **Sulla** were again the heroes, conquering most of Europe south of the Rhine and Danube by 101 BC. Marius and Sulla quickly rose in popularity and power, in part due to bribing those in high places. Sulla went to Anatolia and kicked Armenean King Tigranes the Great out of Cappadocia in 92 BC. By this time Roman legions went wherever and whenever they wished throughout the world. No one dared to disobey!

Then in 91 BC the 'chickens came home to roost' for the corrupt politicians at Rome. The allied tribes throughout Italy, who had stood loyally with Rome against Hannibal, were not getting their share of the plunder. They weren't even permitted to vote! First the Gracchi brothers, then Tribune Drusus proposed laws to correct the injustices. But they were murdered and their reforms scrapped. So some of these Italian allies (now little more than servile client states) revolted against Rome. Thus the veteran armies who had won the world faced each other in battle. It was a terrible civil war. 300,000 died. Private villas were destroyed, as in Hannibal's time. The land was laid waste.

Generals Marius and Sulla were brought home to fight their countrymen. Now Sulla outshone his compatriot. With incredible bravery, he successfully concluded that horrible civil war (called the 'Social Wars' because it was the 'Socii', Rome's abused Italian allies, who were fighting for their civil rights). Sulla was elected consul in 88 BC and given the highest military honors, the 'grass crown', woven of plants taken from the battlefield.

The vengeance of Rome was complete. Now they could settle back and enjoy their victories, right? No. As with all tyrannies, many hated them and longed for deliverance. Athens and other once-great Greek cities looked to Asia for help. By this time the states of Pontus and Bithynia, on Anatolia's north coast on the Black Sea, had gotten strong, while those 'Social Wars' had terribly weakened Rome. King Mithridates VI the Great of Pontus saw his chance. He declared that he would be the deliverer to throw off the cruel yoke of Rome. Sulla had forced his son Tigranes out of Cappadocia, so he wanted revenge! First he retook Cappadocia. Then in a vile act of genocide, he murdered every Roman living in Anatolia. 80,000 men, women, and children died on May Day, 88 BC. Rome was shocked!

Consul Sulla was granted the honor of leading Rome's armies into Asia to mete Roman justice upon Mithridates. But now a terrible squabble ensued between him and his jealous senior general, Marius. Marius tricked the senate into deposing Sulla and giving himself that honor instead. Sulla furiously entered Rome with his army and took over by force. He declared Marius an enemy of the Republic, banished him, and rewrote Roman law to justify his use of force to take control of Rome. The Roman Republic was effectively gone. General Sulla was now de-facto dictator of what would soon be known as the Roman Empire.

Of course as soon as Sulla left for Asia with his army, Marius returned from Africa with his army. Supported by Lucius Cinna, he banished Sulla, declared his reforms invalid, and massacred Sulla's supporters. Hundreds were slain, including everyone whose loyalties were suspect. Many fled to join Sulla in Greece. Thus Marius became the new dictator of Rome. But all his efforts were futile, for he died the next month, drunk with blood and wine.

General Sulla besieged Athens and its seaport, Piraeus. Sulla's wife and children joined him, along with the other refugees from Rome. He had no navy, so he couldn't block Archelaus (Mithridates' son-in-law) from fleeing Piraeus with his fleet. But he ruthlessly conquered and destroyed Athens and burned Piraeus to the ground. Sulla then took his army to Boetia, to drive Archelaus' army out of Greece.

Sulla won an amazing victory at Charonea, with 40,000 troops against 120,000. (Legend says he killed 110,000 of Mithridates' army, losing only 14 of his own soldiers in the battle. But that night, 2 more showed up, leaving Sulla's losses to total 12.) Archelaus sailed with his fleet and the surviving 10,000 to Thessaly to await reinforcements.

80,000 of Mithridates' best troops arrived the next year. Still, they were no match for the genius of General Sulla. Archelaus got whupped, even with a five to one numerical advantage. The swamps at Orchomenus in central Boetia ran red with their blood. He returned home, where he was accused of being a traitor. If there was any question before, it had now been answered. Rome will rule the world.

Sulla returned to Rome in 82 BC, battled himself back into power, and restored his own dictatorship. Again there was a murderous purge, this time of everyone who had been loyal to Marius and Cinna. 1500 nobles and 6,000 other supporters were slaughtered upon Sulla's return to Rome. He began a reign of terror in which anyone even suspected of disloyalty was condemned to death. Even sheltering an outlaw was punishable by death. Assassins were rewarded with the plunder of their victims. Wealth became the crime; their murder was gain. Sulla made the massacre of Marius seem like a Sunday School Picnic. In all, the civil wars of Maria and Sulla cost the Latins the lives of about 150,000 citizens. Sorry. This is what dictators do.

Sulla again rewrote the laws of Rome, justifying his abuses by claiming that the crisis demanded that he use dictatorial powers. He took power away from the people to give it to 'patricians', the wealthy aristocracy. "Never again," he swore, "Will Rome be ruled by the mob! We are not a democracy. We are a republic. The common people are too ignorant and foolish to be trusted with the vote. They vote only according to their selfish interests, not the good of Rome. Long live the Roman Republic!" Then, in a surprising move, the mad dictator resigned from power and moved away from Rome to his luxurious country villa in 80 BC. There he wrote out his autobiography, which he finished just before his death in 79 BC.

But as magnanimous as that sounds, Sulla had planted the seeds of the destruction of Rome. First, his abuse of military power had set a dangerous precedent. Second, his reforms were external, and did not change the hearts of men. Third, those wealthy patricians to whom he had bequeathed the power were no better than the citizens from whom he had taken it; indeed, many were far worse. And last but certainly not least, much against his better judgment, Sulla had allowed **Julius Caesar** to live.

Julius Caesar was a nephew of Marius' wife, and had married Cinna's daughter Cornelia. As such, he should have been killed in the purge. But he was a fine young man, and a descendant of the legendary King Aeneas himself! Through the intercession of some of Sulla's supporters, his life was spared. Sulla swore they would come to regret that decision, for "I see in Julius Caesar's eyes many a Marius!"

Satan gloated. He had them now! All the blood that had been shed was but a drop in comparison to what he had planned for Rome. But Logos grieved for the Roman Republic, and the Punics, and all the human suffering that had resulted from that one unforgiven grudge.

We've gotten so involved in telling the story of the rise of western civilization, that we've neglected the Levant. To pick it up, I must backtrack nearly 300 years. The famous prophecies given to Daniel included detailed descriptions of the many wars between the kings from the North (the Seleucids from Syria) and the kings from the South (the Ptolemies in Egypt). These prophecies are remarkably accurate, but the battles are so numerous and boring that I decided to skip them except where they affect the Levant.

Alexander the Great had treated Judea very well, for the high priest Jaddua's sake. More importantly, Alexander had passed on this love and respect for Judea to his trusted general and close boyhood friend, Ptolemy.

But when he died (323 BC), Syria and the Levant were bequeathed to Laomedon. Laomedon loved the power, but didn't care about the people. Ptolemy, who had been given control of Egypt, knew it. He offered him a huge sum to purchase control of the Levant, but Laomedon refused. Ptolemy did care about people! He consolidated his power in Egypt by executing Cleomenes, Alexander's previous satrap, for extorting money from the people, embezzling the soldier's pay, and stealing from Egyptian temples. He thus gained favor with the Egyptians, like the love they had shown Alexander himself. Ptolemy restored freedom of religion and Egyptian customs. He annexed Cyrenaica and the Siwa Oasis, and prepared to expand into the Levant, determined to return Egypt to her former glory.

Perdiccas feared Ptolemy's ambitions, especially when he intercepted the body of Alexander the Great on its way back to Macedon and brought it to Egypt for burial instead. (By custom, the ruler who buried his predecessor had a strong claim on the entire empire!) Ptolemy was but a satrap. Perdiccas was supposed to be the emperor! He invaded Egypt in 321 BC, but was soundly defeated. His own officers assassinated him. (One was Seleucus, soon to be founder of the Seleucid Empire!) Ptolemy crossed the Nile to bring the ravaged army food and medicines, and thanked the assassins. Thus he wisely gained power.

Ptolemy was offered the rule of the empire in place of Perdiccas, but again he was wise. His goal was to use his power in Egypt to protect the Levant. He would not risk it all to take the empire; that would just make him a target.

After defeating Perdiccas, Ptolemy brought his army to annex the Levant and southern Syria. He was successful, and triumphantly entered Jerusalem on the Sabbath as **Ptolemy I Soter** (the Deliverer). He granted the Judeans a great deal of freedom (as had Alexander) and promised them his protection. He welcomed free trade with Egypt and encouraged Judeans to settle in Alexandria.

Ambitious Antigonos I Monophthalmus did want all of Alexander's empire! He threatened the Levant. Ptolemy and Seleucus allied against him in 312 BC.

The following year, Seleucus defeated Antigonus and conquered Babylon. The resulting peace treaty tragically granted Syria and the Levant to Antigonus, while Seleucus got Babylon, Media, and Persia. It began the Antigonid and Seleucid Empires; **Seleucus** soon ruled the eastern half of Alexander's empire, while **Antigonus** ruled Greece and much of Anatolia as well as Syria and the Levant.

Furious over what his 'ally' had done, Ptolemy had to start over. Antigonus didn't care about the Levant either, except as a military choke-point and a strategic crossroads of trade. But now that he had it, he used Gaza as his staging grounds to threaten Egypt! Ptolemy fought Antigonus for years before retaking Syria and the Levant in 302 BC.

Seleucus, Cassander of Macedon, and Lysimachus of Thrace joined forces to stop the ambitions of Antigonus. They defeated him at Ipsus in 301 BC, and he was slain. Ptolemy waited for Seleucus in Syria. But the news somehow got confused. Ptolemy heard that Antigonus had been victorious and was headed south with his huge army, ready to retake Syria and the Levant, again! Regrettably, Ptolemy turned chicken and fled. Later, when he heard the correct story, that Antigonus was dead, he hurried back to reclaim Syria, but he was too late. His 'allies' had assumed his desertion meant he didn't want the Levant, and gave it to Seleucus! That was to become a sore spot between Seleucus and Ptolemy for many years. But Ptolemy kept his vow to Judea. He hung on like a bulldog for the rest of his life, occupying the Levant in spite of Seleucid claims.

His son **Ptolemy II** followed in his footsteps, fighting **Antiochus I** son of Seleucus several times to retain control of Syria and the Levant. He too was a strong and wise leader, bringing peace to the land. Under him the Judeans remained prosperous and happy. Many learned to love Greek ways. Trade, as well as wisdom, knowledge, and the arts, flourished. Ptolemy II improved the great library at Alexandria, established a zoo, and fostered scientific research. He ruled from 283 – 246 BC. During his reign, the great Egyptian historian Manetho began his works, and the momentous Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures was begun. When Antiochus I attacked the Levant, Ptolemy II successfully drove him back.

Antiochus died in 261 BC. His son **Antiochus II** began another war against Ptolemy II. It got messy, ending in 253 BC with Ptolemy suing for peace after losing a lot of lands in the Aegean. As part of the peace treaty, Antiochus took Ptolemy's daughter Berenice in marriage, as prophesied in Daniel 11:6. Antiochus vowed that Berenice's son would be his heir instead of the son of his first wife, Laodice.

However, when Antiochus II died, his promise flew out the window. Laodice swore that as he died, Antiochus had made her son his heir. Berenice cried foul, calling on the new king **Ptolemy III** to come urgently, and help put her son on the Seleucid throne. But when Ptolemy arrived, she and her son had already been assassinated.

As you can imagine, Ptolemy III declared war on the new king, **Seleucus II**, arriving with his army at Antioch on the Orontes in 246 BC. This is called the Laodicean War, after Queen Laodice. It was fought all over Syria, Anatolia, and as far off as Babylon. In every battle, Ptolemy tromped all over the Seleucids. He made a mess of their empire for five years, until they finally cried 'uncle'. The resulting peace treaty lasted for twenty years. The empire of Ptolemaic Egypt was now at the height of its power.

Once again the Levant was protected without having to do any fighting. It was amazing. The Romans were battling Carthage in the Punic Wars all throughout the West; the Ptolemies, Seleucids and Parthians were dukeing it out all over the East; yet little Judah was protected, blessed, and prosperous in the dead center of it all. Jaddua's obedience to speak YHWH's word to Alexander the Great had paid off, big time, for all Israel. Thus many Judeans came to love the Greeks, especially the Ptolemies. This 'Hellenization' of Israel became a sore point with patriotic and zealous Judeans, as many began to trade the God of their fathers and their love for His Law in exchange for the exciting new culture and gods of the Greeks.

Logos loved blessing them – if only they would remain true to Him! He determined to warn them. After the 'kings of the north' managed to recover and clean up the mess, **Antiochus III** took the throne. He still carried a grudge against the Ptolemies for 'taking Syria' from the Seleucids. In 219 BC, Antiochus launched a war to take it back.

He picked a good time. The Ptolemies had let their power and glory go to their heads. Corruption and self-indulgence had taken over the palace. Gross debauchery had weakened the court. The first three Ptolemies were strong and brave. But **Ptolemy IV** seized the throne by murdering his mother, and it all went downhill from there. He cared for nothing but his own perverted pleasures. His satraps ran the country to enrich themselves. They didn't care about the Levant. So Antiochus III took it.

That was a direct threat to Egypt. Sosibius, Ptolemy's prime minister, finally woke up and began to gather an army. If Antiochus had attacked Egypt in 219 BC, he would have won. Instead, he spent two years in the Levant, eliminating the longtime Ptolemaic influence to set up his own government. When he was finally prepared to attack Egypt at Raphia (near Gaza) in 217 BC, Sosibius was ready for him. He had two armies, one of Greek soldiers, and a new army made entirely of Egyptians eager to defend their nation. He still almost lost, but his new Egyptian soldiers turned it around into a great victory for Egypt. Thus the Judeans were granted another 20 years of peace.

Few know that this famous Battle of Raphia was nearly lost four days before it started. Theodotus, an apostate Judean, had joined the Seleucid army. Antiochus III had convinced him that the Ptolemies were too corrupt (which was true) and that their rule over the Levant should end.

So Theodotus volunteered to assassinate Ptolemy IV himself, knowing that if he were successful, the war would be over. He dressed as a Ptolemaic soldier, and snuck into the Egyptian camp at night. Finding the king's tent, he slew him and fled.

But YHWH is a God of mercy and forgiveness, blessing the children for the sake of their fathers for two or three generations of those who love him. Ptolemy IV, though himself utterly corrupt, was still covered by Logos for the sake of three generations of Ptolemies before him, who had loved His people and cared for the Levant. Logos counted that as love for Himself, and thus He protected Ptolemy IV. He sent a Judean prophet named Dositheus to warn the king of the assassination. Ptolemy IV heeded the warning and exchanged tents with one of his servants. Thus it was the servant who was slain, and not the king.

Ptolemy IV was grateful to Dositheus. After the battle he decided he wanted to visit these unusual people and learn about their amazing God who could prophesy the future. The Judeans welcomed him in Jerusalem with warm congratulations of his victory, glad to finally have a chance to express their thanks to him for the longstanding protection the Ptolemies had given Judea. This was the first time Ptolemy IV had been to Judea; indeed, he had hardly known of its existence before, so consumed was he with his selfish pleasures. But now, he accepted their glad acclamations and expressed his desire to visit their temple and learn about their God.

The Judeans were elated. Perhaps YHWH would cleanse Ptolemy IV's sinfulness and restore Egypt! Indeed, that was exactly what Logos wanted to do. **Simeon**, the old high priest, led him to the place of honor reserved for the kings of Judah, and gave him instruction all during the Sabbath services. Ptolemy was so impressed that he requested burnt offerings be made specially for him and for Egypt. When all was finished according to the Law, Logos and the heavenly host waited breathlessly to see if Ptolemy would receive in his heart the cleansing from sin which the blood sacrifices had bought for him.

Sadly, he did not. Though Simeon had tried (tactfully) to explain the nature of sinfulness and need for cleansing, Ptolemy missed it. His concept of sin was warped by his arrogance. *His people obviously needed cleansing, but their king was above all that. Indeed, so far above it, that he now wanted to enter the holy place, and the most holy place, and try his own hand at making atonement for his people!*

But when he ordered the high priest to lead him into the holy sanctuary, poor Simeon was appalled. His face white, he entreated the king, "Oh no, Your Majesty! No one may enter the holy place but the sanctified priests of YHWH. Even I, as God's anointed high priest, may not enter the most holy place except on the day of atonement. I urge you, O King, do not do this thing! If you try to enter the temple, you could be slain by the holy fire of YHWH!"

Pharaoh Ptolemy IV was adamant. Don't forget, he was used to being lauded as a god in Egypt. He put up his nose and insisted, "Even though normal men may be deprived of this honor, I shall not be. Have you forgotten who I am?"

When his insistence became known, there was great lamentation among all those gathered for the sacrifice. The Judeans knew what would happen to them if Ptolemy was slain in their temple! Their prayers reached the throne of God. Among them was this prayer of Simeon, who refused to violate the sanctity of the temple with Ptolemy. He just knelt beside the king's empty seat praying, his eyes and arms raised to the heavens, "Lord God, King of the heavens, Sovereign of Creation, Holiest among holy ones, the Almighty, hear us who suffer under this impious and profane man who is puffed up in the audacity of his power. Remember Your promise, for You love the house of Israel for the glory of Your honored name – Your promise that if we sin and tribulation overtakes us, You will listen to our cry when we come to this place, repent from our sins, seek Your face, and pray. We do now acknowledge our sins, and Your justice in setting this wicked king over us. Yet we beseech You, do not further punish us for his sin in defiling Your holy place and profaning Your holy Law, for we have done our best to prevent him. Stop him now by Your great power, we beg of You, for only You can prevent this terrible tragedy. Wipe away our sin and cover our iniquity, to reveal Your mercy in this hour. Put praises back in our mouths, and grant us Your peace."

Ptolemy strutted proudly to the door of the holy place. He stepped up to the threshold of the door and was about to enter, when he began to shake and jerk violently. He fell to the ground, writhing in convulsions. His bodyguards first drew back in alarm, then quickly reached out to drag him away from the door. But alas, when they got him back to the king's seat next to Simeon, he was paralyzed!

This was a tragedy of the first order, for the Pharaoh is a god to the Egyptians, and must therefore look physically perfect. But everyone had heard Simeon's public warning, and they all recognized this as the clear judgment of God. The bodyguards quickly returned their Pharaoh to the governor's palace and entreated Simeon to pray for him.

Inwardly Simeon rejoiced. Half of his prayer had been miraculously answered. Now he took faith for the rest of it. Hour after hour he cried out to YHWH on the king's behalf. Ptolemy was so severely paralyzed he could not even speak, but he could hear. He listened to Simeon's prayers, angry, but still amazed that anyone should care so much.

After three days, YHWH heeded Simeon's earnest prayer. Ptolemy recovered. A second time Logos and the heavenly host waited to see if he would repent and accept the cleansing offered him, after he had been so sorely humbled. But no. Again he clung tenaciously to his damaged pride. Now only feeling shamed at his collapse, he left Judah uttering curses and bitter threats.

Returning to Egypt, Ptolemy went back to his drinking parties and orgies. He felt ashamed that he had appeared less than godlike at the temple. As he related his story to his drinking buddies, they commiserated with him and urged him to take action against the Judeans. So he passed an edict, which he carved on stone: "Every Judean must register, pay a poll tax, and take on his body a brand-mark of Dionysus [Bacchus, the Greek god of spring, fertility, wine, and drunken orgiastic revelry]. Those who obey will be equal to any citizen of Alexandria. But any Judean who refuses will be hunted down and slain!"

There were few who accepted the king's edict. The vast majority rejected it and broke fellowship with those who had caved, as it was a direct violation of the Law of God. Ptolemy was furious. He ordered them all arrested, bound in chains, and brought to Alexandria for public execution.

At that, his own subjects protested! *The Judeans were too many! They were spread across the land! Why, the scribes registering them had even run out of paper!* But in drunken rage he threatened, accused them of being bribed by the Judeans, and demanded instant obedience.

Finally, many Judeans were caught. They were packed into the hippodrome, and bound tightly together. Ptolemy ordered Hermon, keeper of his 500 war elephants, to get his elephants drunk that night. When the king gave the word the next morning, the drunken elephants would be released into the hippodrome to trample all the Judeans. None would escape. No one believed that Judah would survive as a nation. That was the 9th of Av! The massacre was to be followed by a banquet for those obedient to the king. The Judeans spent the night crying out to YHWH.

Now, you can imagine how much wine it takes to get 500 elephants drunk. Herman did it, though it took all night. But the next morning at the appointed time, the king never showed up to give the signal. He overslept. In fact, he had such a deep and pleasant sleep that he didn't wake up until it was already past time for the banquet. So the king hurried directly to the party. He was already half drunk when he remembered his orders to Hermon. He summoned him, and demanded to know why the Judeans were not already all dead. Herman and his aides protested that they had obeyed the king in every detail, including waiting for the king's sign to start the massacre. Finally Ptolemy calmed down and rescheduled the massacre for the next morning. Then he returned to his orgy.

Again Herman got his 500 elephants drunk, and awaited the king's sign. Ptolemy was up bright and early this time, but never came to the hippodrome. So Herman went searching for him. The king had suffered a brain freeze and had completely forgotten his order. Herman reminded him, and bragged of his 500 drunk elephants. But Ptolemy was furious! "I would rather throw your own family to the savage beasts than harm the Judeans, who have always been loyal, and given no cause for complaint."

Herman was shocked, as were all the king's servants. They slunk away, wondering if their king had gone insane. But the king called them back, to party again as he had the day before. And, as before, in the middle of the carousing he called Herman on the carpet once again, demanding to know why the Judeans weren't already slain!

Now his nobles knew that he had fallen off his rocker. "O King, how long will you put us to the test as though we were idiots, ordering now a third time that the Judeans be destroyed and revoking it again? The city is in tumult awaiting your decision!"

In a violent rage, Ptolemy IV jumped up and screamed, "I vow by all the gods that tomorrow morning the Judeans will all be slain, trampled to death by my elephants! Then we shall march against Judea and level it to dust! We shall tear down their walls and plunder their cities! We shall destroy the temple they forbade me enter, grind to powder all the gods therein, and burn Jerusalem with fire!"

So for a third time Herman spent the night getting his 500 elephants drunk. Urged by the king, he drove them to madness with drugs and perfume. At dawn all was ready. The people of Alexandria, eager to witness the spectacle, were swarming to the hippodrome. Ptolemy was up bright and early, still filled with satanic rage against God's people.

The Judeans heard the tumult and saw the dust raised by the elephants and the army preparing for its march upon Judea. They figured their end had finally come. They said their last good-byes, amid loud lamentations and despair. But Dositheus the prophet shouted out to them, "Has not YHWH our God delivered us by His great power these last two days? Shall He thus deliver us on the 9th of Av, only to lose His power on the 11th? Do not despair! Rather fall on your faces before Him! Repent of your sins! Implore the Ruler over every power to show His great power on our behalf, that all the world will know that YHWH, and He alone, is the living God!"

The people heard, and obeyed, falling on their faces in prayers and supplications. Within minutes, the terrified mob had quieted. Now the zealous high priest Eleazar, the son of godly old Simon, shouted out a prayer, in a voice cracked with emotion. "Almighty God most high, King of greatest power, Creator and Sustainer of all, with mercy look now upon the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." He reminded God of all the times He had delivered His people. He concluded, "And now, You who hate the proud and insolent, merciful Protector of the humble, reveal Yourself quickly to Your people of Israel who are being treated so outrageously. If our own lives have been entangled by impiety, rescue us from the wicked and destroy us by Your own hand. Let not the vain-minded praise their vanities at the destruction of Your beloved, saying, 'Not even their own God could save them.' Bring honor and glory to Your holy name. Let the world see that you are the living God who saves Your people!"

The army had just flung open the gates of the huge, crowded arena to drive the maddened elephants inside. The people responded to Eleazar with a passionate shout, "Amen! YHWH is mighty! He is our Fortress and our Deliverer!" The thunderous shout reverberated off the walls around the arena. The maddened elephants reared up on their hind legs, turned about, and fled the arena. They were encouraged and redirected by a few angels, so not a one remained to harm God's people.

Now Pharaoh's army was being chased and trampled by the drunken elephants. They fled, filled with confusion and fear, leaving the king unprotected. He soiled his pants and fell to his knees in terror, crying out to his pagan gods to rescue him. The rampaging elephants were charging straight for him. One raised his foot to crush the king's head. But then he remembered what Simeon the high priest had taught him and cried out for YHWH to save him.

Instantly the enraged animal backed off. The elephants began to quiet down. The army recovered its composure. They led the elephants back to their pens and took care of their dead. Finally the king stood and ordered a servant to go get him a clean pair of pants. For the first time, he saw clearly what had almost been done to the Judeans.

He screamed at Herman, "What have you done? You are committing treason by attacking the Judeans! They have always been a friend of Egypt, guarding our roads to the north and manning our country's garrisons." He accused his nobles and army officers, "Which of you is it that so lawlessly arrested and so outrageously treated these, the finest of loyal citizens of my empire? From the beginning they differed from all other nations in their goodwill toward us. They have braved the worst dangers on our behalf! Loose them! Untie their unjust bonds! Send them home in peace, begging their pardon for your evil actions! For they are the children of the almighty God of heaven, YHWH the living God, who from the time of our ancestors until now has granted us amazing stability and prosperity all across our land!"

After he had changed his pants and had time to sit and think about it a bit, Ptolemy changed his mind. "Wait. Don't send the Judeans home yet. We have treated them horribly. If we just send them home, our last dishonor would be greater than the first. Order food and wine, and prepare a great banquet. They shall celebrate with us for seven days, while we give them gifts and restore all that was taken from them. Then we shall send them home rejoicing so they may bless their God on our behalf."

All this they did. When they were ready to return home he offered them transportation on his naval fleet, plied them with gifts, and gave them a letter of immunity from persecution. It further required that their enemies return the plunder they had confiscated when they had first arrested the Judeans to bring them to Alexandria. Any refusing to return their stolen possessions were to be slain.

The king's letter was long, but I'll summarize parts of it. "King Ptolemy Philopater to the generals in Egypt and all in authority, greetings! Good health to you! We ourselves are faring well, the great God guiding our affairs. Know that certain of our friends, urging us with malicious intent, persuaded us to gather all the Judeans of the kingdom and punish them as traitors, declaring that the kingdom would never be firmly established until this was accomplished. They claimed the Judeans harbored ill-will toward other nations, despising our customs, our foods, and our gods. They treated them savagely, like Scythian barbarians, and without any trial or examination sought to put them all to death. But in accord with the justice and clemency we have toward all peoples, we have spared their lives and have delivered them from their oppressors. We hereby declare them innocent of any crime, and acquitted of all charges. We also have ordered all peoples to allow the Judeans to return to their homes, with no one in any place doing them harm or reproaching them for the irrational things that have happened. For we have come to realize that the God of the Judeans surely defends His people. Know therefore that if any man devises any evil against the Judeans, plunders them, or causes them any grief at all, we have not merely a mortal man, but the immortal almighty Ruler over every power, the highest God, YHWH of the Judeans, inescapably to avenge such acts."

Thus the Judeans were blessed instead of slain. Their homes and possessions were restored, and the fear of God fell upon their enemies. And thus, for another 20 years, Syria and the Levant experienced the peace, prosperity, and protection of Egypt under the Ptolemies.

Ptolemy IV in his arrogance never understood his own wickedness, nor renounced his immorality. He blamed his irrational behavior on others. He died in 204 BC at the age of 41. His son and heir, **Ptolemy V**, was only five at the time. Fearing that Arsinoe, his mother, would declare herself regent and rule on her son's behalf, Sosibius had her murdered and declared himself the regent. The powerful Ptolemaic Empire slowly descended into anarchy. The brave Egyptian army which had won a victory against the Seleucids at Raphia in 217 BC, rebelled. They lynched some of the conspirators. Others fled. They couldn't agree who should be regent. Eventually they started a civil war, spreading turmoil throughout Egypt, which went on for 30 years. Many now hated the Greek Ptolemies, and hoped to drive them out of Egypt altogether. It got pretty ugly.

Once more, Antiochus III (now called 'the Great') saw his chance. He attacked Syria and the Levant again in 199 BC, and this time Sosibius could not stop him. By 198 BC, the Ptolemies had lost control of the Levant. But Ptolemy V grew up. In 192 BC he negotiated a peace treaty with Antiochus, who gave him his daughter Cleopatra Syra as his wife. But try as he might, he could not get the Levant back from the Seleucids. So now we leave the Ptolemies to their anarchy and civil war, and return to Antiochus III.

Antiochus III the Great spent the rest of his life in a futile effort against the rising power of Rome in the West. Remember, he had given the fugitive war hero Hannibal refuge in his capital at Antioch on the Orontes to protect him against the vengeful Romans. Antiochus attacked the Romans, in an attempt to take back Thrace, Greece, and parts of Asia Minor. But as we said before, he was defeated at Thermopylae and Magnesia, and finally lost all of Asia Minor, which he formally relinquished in 188 BC at the Treaty of Apamea. He died the year after, in a stupid attempt to rob a temple in Persia to pay off his war debts. His oldest son, **Seleucus IV**, ruled in his stead.

Up until now, the Seleucid kings had pretty much left the Levant alone. As I said, they didn't really care, they just wanted to control the trade along the royal highways there. But that huge debt imposed by Rome upon the Seleucids now fell upon Seleucus IV. He was no brighter than his father. Not wanting to hold a garage sale to unload his own riches, he decided to pay the debt with higher taxes on his subjects. He sent his minister **Heliodorus** to collect the taxes, as prophesied in Daniel 11:20.

Until now, the Judeans had had it pretty good. The Ptolemies had treated them very well, more like allies than subjects. The Seleucids had just maintained the status quo and mostly ignored them. Their taxes were low. They were given nearly total freedom to maintain their own culture, laws, and religion. Some had become Hellenized, but it was their own choice, not by force. Overall, the Greeks on both sides had been good to them. They had learned to appreciate Greek ways. All this was soon to change.

Ptolemy IV had been mad. Every succeeding Ptolemy showed signs of going bonkers in the head. Antiochus the Great had gone mad toward the end of his reign. His son Seleucus IV was worse. Even Sulla, the brilliant Roman general/dictator had gotten a bit crazy at the end. Philip V of Macedon had gone mad, killing his own son Demetrius the year before he died. Philip's oldest son Perseus had been mad when he took the throne. It was to get worse, as we shall see with Antiochus IV Epiphanes, whose brain elevator never made it much past the middle floor.

Why are all these great world leaders going mad? It's a valid question. It does demonstrate a principle that power corrupts. These were men of great power and wealth. It was pretty easy for Satan to bring them down in their own pride, consumed by selfish pleasures and feelings of self-importance. When one is worshiped as a god (as were the Ptolemies) it is hard to put up with mere fallible mortals. Expectations run high, and the anger and frustration that arises when miracles don't always fall into place can make a person mad. As with King Nebuchadnezzar when he became arrogant toward God and spent 7 years eating grass like an ox, the stress and temptations of ruling an empire can be too much for any man.

Another factor was involved in this madness as well. Bold Semiramis had forged a religious empire after the Tower of Babel catastrophe. But succeeding empires pretty much stayed with established traditions. Up through the Persian empire, most people had been farmers, herdsman, and traders, and such work was respected as much as the work of a soldier or builder. But the Greeks were different. They were patrons of the arts and sciences, sportsmen, innovators, philosophers, builders, and bold conquerors! They tended to despise the common tradesman or farmer. They demonstrate another ancient, inviolable principle: "*Professing themselves wise, they became fools.*" If they had sought for God's wisdom, He would have granted it. But no, they were the daring inventors of a new age. They were building a civilization to surpass all others in opulence and hedonistic ease. Not content with the simple foods of the farmer, they indulged in delicacies of meats and pastries.

It sounds like 21st century America, doesn't it. Having thrown out God and His wisdom, we live on drugs and chemicals, worship the aristocracy, ('scientists', 'experts', and lying politicians), and our leaders have all gone mad. So it was with the Ptolemies, Seleucids, Macedonians, and Romans from about the time of Hannibal on. For example, the Greeks invented (in about 250 BC) a 'better' way to get water to the palaces of kings and the villas of the ultra wealthy – lead pipes. They also extensively used mercury, arsenic, asbestos, black hellebore, and strychnine. Simple farmers and traders avoided most of these innovations and medicines. But the rich and powerful, the kings of the earth, used them and slowly went mad. We Americans think we're so much more advanced. Ha. Nearly everyone in America carries mercury in his teeth and drinks fluoride in his water! We cook the life out of our foods. And the drugs we consume! We're so proud of ourselves for finally, in 1977, removing all the lead from our paints and piping, but Romans at the time of Christ knew it was toxic.

Sorry. Bunny Trail. Back to Heliodorus. He reached Jerusalem in 176 BC. I am well aware that this story is told in lurid detail in the apocryphal book of 2nd Maccabees. I am sorry to disappoint my Catholic friends who hold this book to be infallible inspired Scripture. It is not. Many of the details told therein are hyperbole. I'll stick to the facts.

Heliodorus came to Jerusalem demanding taxes for their new emperor, Seleucus IV. His demands were an order of magnitude more than they had ever paid under the Ptolemies. They refused. In a rage, he went to raid the temple. He succeeded in getting all the money from the temple treasury and the poorbox (reserved for the widows and orphans). But when he tried to enter the holy place for more gold, the priests could take no more. They rushed on his guards, willing to die rather than allow their temple to be profaned. Now terrified for their lives, Heliodorus and his soldiers fled, leaving most of the money behind in their haste. What little he did manage to carry away ended up being stolen by bandits on his way home.

So when Heliodorus arrived penniless back at Antioch, he made up this incredible tale about how the Judeans' God had sent three mighty angels to beat him senseless and drive him out of the temple. Somehow that part made it into the legend told in 2nd Maccabees, but certainly not because Seleucus IV believed it! He was quite mad, but not gullible. Furious with his inept, lying minister, he ordered him slain. Heliodorus had figured that might happen, and was prepared. He managed to assassinate Seleucus IV first and seize the throne for himself.

As often happens in such times of transition, a bloody power struggle ensued. The son of Seleucus and true heir to the Seleucid throne, Demetrius, was being held hostage in Rome, in accord with the Treaty of Apamea. The next in line, another Antiochus, was just a baby. So Mithridates, a son of Antiochus III and younger brother to Seleucus IV, took charge, though he was not actually in the royal line. (Daniel 11:21) He executed Heliodorus, and pretended to be regent for baby Antiochus for a while. But once he had tasted the power of the Seleucid throne, it went to his head. He murdered the infant and declared himself to be the new king in 175 BC, under the name **Antiochus IV Epiphanes**, 'the Illustrious'. It wasn't long before he demanded to be worshiped as Theos Epiphanes, 'God Manifest'. But soon Antiochus IV earned the pejorative nickname, Epimanes, 'the Madman'. For he was indeed quiet mad.

The Ptolemies were having their own power struggle. Ptolemy V and Cleopatra I had three children, whom we know as Ptolemy VI and VIII and Cleopatra II. Ptolemy VI was only six when his father died in 180 BC, so **Cleopatra I Syra** ruled on his behalf, for five years. During that time she stopped the war over Syria that her husband had been planning against her brother Seleucus IV. For that she was poisoned by her advisors Eulaeus and Lenaeus, who took over in 176 BC as regents. **Ptolemy VI** married his sister **Cleopatra II**. The new regents proclaimed a co-regency between them and their little brother **Ptolemy VIII**. They spread the false rumor that Antiochus the Great had given Syria and the Levant to Cleopatra I (their mother) as a dowry. So the Levant rightfully belonged to Egypt. Thus they again declared war with the Seleucids to regain it.

Big mistake. Remember, these rich guys weren't very bright. Antiochus IV came into Egypt in 170 BC to settle it. He soundly defeated the Egyptians near Pelusium. Eulaeus and Lenaeus were slain. Ptolemy VI was captured and put on the throne at Memphis, with new regents. But at that the Alexandrians rebelled. They put Ptolemy VIII and his sister Cleopatra II on the throne at Alexandria, and appealed to Rome to force the Seleucids to back off. It was a big mess. Ptolemy VI was a reasonable fellow, but his brother was truly mad. The murderer of his own stepson, he became a cruel, fat, loathsome tyrant. Antiochus IV should have focused on Egypt until he had conquered the rebels in Alexandria and executed Ptolemy VIII. But he had created a problem in Judea – now he had to fix it.

We'll have to back up a bit to find out how his problem originated. On his way to Egypt in 171 BC Antiochus had passed through the Levant. He had to make sure that his subjects there would not stab him in the back while he was attacking Egypt. His brother's experience with the priests' fanatical attack on Heliodorus worried him.

But no. A friendly Judean named Jason, the brother of the ruling high priest **Onias**, had come to Antiochus with a wonderful compromise. Jason understood the situation. His brother Onias was a Zionist Zealot, who incited the Judeans to hate the Greeks, both Seleucids and Ptolemies. As a consequence, most of the Greek-loving Judeans had emigrated to Alexandria. *But, if Antiochus just deposes Onias and puts Jason in his place, everything will change!* Jason loved the Greeks and their ways. He had changed his name from Joshua to its Greek form, Jason. He promised to be a loyal servant of Antiochus. (With this promise came a rather large bribe to demonstrate his loyalty.) *He will require the Judeans to be more tolerant of Greek customs and Greek gods. He will build a gymnasium for Greek games [including nude wrestling], and a temple to the lewd Greek god Phallus. He even pledged to support the temple of Melqart in Tyre [called the temple of Tyrenian Heracles following Alexander's conquest of Tyre] with an annual offering of \$300 in silver! He will teach the Judeans to love their new masters! All Judea will become Hellenized like Alexandria!*

Antiochus had bought the line, accepted the bribe, deposed Onias, and granted **Jason** the high priesthood. Then he had gone to Egypt, confident that his subjects in the Levant were in good hands.

But then in 168 BC, while he was still trying to figure out how to subdue the Alexandrians, Menelaus showed up from Judea. He had been entrusted by Jason to bring the Judean's annual taxes to Antiochus. But instead, he lied, saying that Jason had been disloyal, abusing his powers and plotting against the king. Menelaus used the money Jason had given him for taxes as a down payment to bribe his way into power. Again, Antiochus naïvely accepted the bribe. He sent troops to Judea to drive out Jason and his friends (they fled to Ammon) and to install **Menelaus** as the new ruling high priest and governor of Judea.

Menelaus outlawed Judaism and looted the temple to pay the rest of his huge bribe. When godly Onias objected, he was murdered. Jerusalem rioted, falling into chaos.

Jason raised an army against Menelaus and attacked the city. And to make it worse, the zealous 'Orthodox Party' (Judean Covenanters who opposed Hellenization but still supported Ptolemy rule) weighed into the fight against both Jason and Menelaus! The civil war was terrible. Thousands were slain on all sides. Logos was deeply grieved. Those who remained true to the Law of YHWH, trusting neither in Seleucids nor Ptolemies to rule over them, fled to the mountains. None righteous remained in the Holy City to intercede. Logos withdrew His covering.

About that time, Antiochus had finally concluded that he must subdue Ptolemy VIII. But as he neared Alexandria with his army an old man stood in his way. By his dress, he was a Roman nobleman. Antiochus offered a hand in greeting. “What may I do for you, old man?”

The old man refused the outstretched hand. “I am Gaius Popillius Laenas, ambassador from the Senate at Rome. We received an appeal from the lawful government of Egypt declaring that you attacked them without cause. Withdraw your forces at once, from Egypt, Cyprus, and other Egyptian territories, or find yourself at war with the Roman Republic.” He stood tall and straight, fearless, and didn’t seem a bit interested in debating the matter.

Rome had just defeated Macedon! Antiochus was afraid! He nodded. “I will certainly do what is right, both for Egypt and Rome. But let me first discuss the matter with my counsel. Then I will decide.”

Popillius took his cane and quickly drew a line in the sand all around Antiochus. “Before you step outside of that circle, you will give me your answer.”

This was an order, an imperious, stern command, and non-negotiable. For a few minutes Antiochus stood there, considering. *He could easily slay this old man. Or he could just push him aside and continue on his way. But does he really want war with Rome? The fear of the Roman legions has circled the world.* Finally he again nodded to Popillius. “Yes. I will do whatever the Roman Senate thinks is right.”

Now Popillius extended his hand in greeting, and soon the two were talking like old friends and allies. Popillius explained the Senate’s position; that to the Ptolemies belonged Egypt, Cyrenaica, and Cyprus. The Seleucids owned Syria and the Levant. Rome claimed the right to enforce peace between them. Antiochus had no choice but to concur. What a bummer. He withdrew from Egypt and returned to the Levant, angry, defeated, and humiliated.

Antiochus reached Jerusalem in 167 BC in the middle of that civil war! *Judea was rebelling against his governor, Menelaus!* He rushed into the city in rage and ordered his army to slay everyone in the streets, men, women, and children. In three days 40,000 were slain, and even more sold into slavery. He seized control of Judea and plundered and desecrated the temple, acting like the madman he was.

He began a program of forced Hellenization. He burned all the Hebrew Scriptures he could find. He prohibited Sabbath-keeping and Israel’s Feasts. He prohibited Judean sacrifices, fasts, circumcision, even quoting the Hebrew Law. He made them eat swine’s flesh, and sacrificed a pig to his hideous idol of Zeus on the Judean altar in the temple. He built a permanent military fortress, the Acra, to enforce his edicts. This began the reign of persecution and terror for which Antiochus IV Epiphanes is infamous. Menelaus was restored as the governing high priest, but of what? Even he was appalled at the madman.

The unthinkable had happened, so suddenly the nation reeled with shock and disbelief. Israel had been so well protected by the Ptolemies for so long, they felt secure, immune to the wars that rocked the rest of the world. But they had forgotten YHWH their God, and had put their trust in the Greeks. Many had abandoned their faith, to pursue Greek customs, culture, games, immortalized heroes, and mythological gods. So God had allowed them to be defeated by their enemies as He had promised.

But with the horrible persecution, some renewed their faith and cried out to God. He heard, as He always does, and sent a deliverer. It began at the tiny town of Modein, seventeen miles northwest of Jerusalem. The Syrians were going from house-to-house around Jerusalem searching for reasons to kill the Judeans. But no one thought they would continue the slaughter clear up to Modein! Among those who fled Jerusalem was the family of **Mattathias**, great-grandson of Hasmon, descendant of Jehoiarib of the first division of priests. He was old, respected and zealous for YHWH. He had five sons: **John**, **Simon**, **Judas**, **Eleazar**, and **Jonathan**. He had trained them all to respect and obey YHWH’s Law. When a Syrian detachment arrived in town, built a pagan altar to Zeus, and assembled the people of Modein for the dedication sacrifice, they were shocked!

They were doubly shocked when the Syrian soldiers picked Mattathias and demanded that he sacrifice a pig on the altar in honor of Antiochus. Mattathias was an old man. Fully knowing he faced death, he stood tall with blazing eyes and refused the command, as everyone in town knew he would.

But one apostate priest in town loved the Greek ways. He was eager to take the place of old Mattathias. He rushed up and took hold of the pig, praising Antiochus by calling him Zeus, Jupiter, and Tyrenian Heracles, and bowing to the pagan idol as he prepared to make the sacrifice.

Mattathias couldn’t believe such blasphemous words could be coming out of the mouth of his own fellow priest. In a burst of righteous zeal he grabbed a sword from the hand of the startled Syrian officer, slashed him across the throat with it, and then ran it clear through the body of the apostate priest, right there on top of the pagan altar.

The Syrian commander was still standing, one hand on his throat trying to stop the blood gushing forth, the other waving wildly at his men in a futile and incoherent gesture for help. It confused his soldiers just long enough for the five sons of Mattathias to come to their father’s aid. Other townsfolk rushed in to help, as well. Within minutes the outnumbered Syrian soldiers were all dead.

Now old Mattathias realized what he had done. He had started a rebellion. The whole town was at risk. “We must flee to the hills or we’re all dead!” he shouted. “Go pack your things! Bring food and water! We leave at dawn!”

At first, the rebels merely hid in the many caves in the hills, in shock at the terrible crime they had committed. No one could comprehend the cruelty of their enemies; but now, had they become like them? They cried out to YHWH in repentance and fear.

Logos heard their heartfelt cries, and showed mercy. Madman Antiochus Epiphanes suddenly left the Levant. Mithridates I, the king of Parthia, had defeated his satrap Eucratides to take control of Bactria, and was attacking the regions of Margu and Ariana and the strategic crossroads city of Alexandria Areion. If victorious, it would give him control over the lucrative trade along both the Persian Royal Road and the Silk Road to India! The Parthians would soon be wealthy enough to take control of all of Media and Persia, the entire eastern half of the Seleucid Empire! So Antiochus left General Lysias behind with an army battalion to deal with the rebellion, and returned to Antioch to prepare his forces for a major campaign.

Lysias was an experienced general. He knew how to deal with rebels. He sent out spies, who followed some Judeans into the hills. Near the desert they discovered a group of about 1000 men who had fled from Jerusalem with their families, livestock, and all their possessions. Lysias sent his battalion against them on the Sabbath, ordering them to submit to the king's commands or die.

They refused to submit, saying, "We will not come out, nor will we obey the king's blasphemies. YHWH our God will protect us, for we are obeying Him and keeping the Sabbath day holy. We shall not even lift a hand against you, nor pick up a stick or a stone to defend ourselves. Thus you shall see the power of YHWH our God!"

At that, Lysias showed no mercy. Every last one of them was slain that day. When word of the cruel massacre reached the Hasmonians, they mourned for their slain brethren. Old Mattathias grew stern. "From now on," he swore, "We shall not just hide and pray, or we will all be likewise slain and Israel will perish from the earth. We must fight as well, even if they attack us on the Sabbath. For it is clear that YHWH our God will not protect us if we are unwilling to even lift a hand to protect ourselves!"

His oldest son, John, objected. "Father, we are priests! We must remain holy! We must be governed only by love and understanding! The Syrians are wicked, but if we go around killing them, we will become just like them!"

"Have you forgotten what God told our fathers when they first entered the Promised Land? He said to kill all the wicked inhabitants of the land, lest they become a snare to you! If you love holiness, then you must hate wickedness! Yes, have love and understanding – toward your brothers. Love them enough to slay all who are killing them!"

Thus Mattathias convinced them to go on the attack as an Army of God. He appointed his third son, Judas, who was quick in mind and body, as their captain.

They had taken the dead Syrians' weapons; now they used them in guerrilla warfare against Syrian detachments on their way to other towns. Always they left no survivors to inform Lysias. Always they collected the weapons and armor. Judas proved to be a brilliant captain. He was bold, courageous, and decisive, yet caring and considerate.

The news spread to the desperate Judeans like wildfire. *Someone has stood up against the hated Syrian oppressors!* Many other zealous brethren joined their swelling ranks. Now they had the numbers to attack small Syrian outposts and visit occupied towns, destroying the pagan idols and chastising apostate brethren. Mattathias had been very heroic. But in 166 BC he was fatally wounded. As he lay dying he wisely promoted his 2nd son Simon in his place as counselor and governor of the resistance. He gave his oldest, John (the pacifist), responsibility for defense of the growing community. But his 3rd son, Judas, remained in command of the armed forces. His lightning raids earned him the name the 'Maccabee' (the 'Hammer' – the Hebrew word is also an acronym for his personal title, "Who is like unto Thee among the mighty, O YHWH!").

Syrian General Apollonius was ordered to bring 2000 troops from Samaria to join with the Seleucid forces in Jerusalem. Along the way, he spotted a Judean scout and chased him back to the hideout. But when the Syrians rushed in and searched their cave, it was empty. John, though still a bit of a 'dove', had taken his responsibility seriously. His defense was simple, yet elegant: a back door! When the scout warned them of the furiously approaching troops, they all rushed out the back way, tromping the ground to leave an obvious trail down the Wadi Haramia. Knowing the Syrians would soon rush down the wadi in pursuit, the Judeans climbed to the top of a rocky divide, where they waited in ambush. Then at Judas' signal, they rained rocks down upon the hapless Syrians, winning a major victory – their first against such a large military unit.

The surviving Syrians fled like frightened fowl. When the Judeans came down to collect the spoils of war, Judas discovered that Apollonius himself lay among the many slain. Judas took his sword, to use in all his battles the rest of his life. Hundreds of other sets of swords and armor were collected as well. Now there were enough weapons for everyone who had joined the resistance so far. What a celebration they had that night! YHWH was with them! Even John had to admit that fighting against the Syrians had resulted in YHWH's blessing. Now he poured his energy into creating better defenses. He planned for two other hideouts, which they rotated at random intervals. He organized scouts to be on the lookout day and night. He developed methods to mislead the enemy as to their whereabouts. When John was accused of compromising the holiness of YHWH by such deliberate deception, he answered, "Our enemies have chosen to believe lies about YHWH, the God of Truth. So as long as they insist on lies, by God in heaven, I'll give them lies!"

Lysias realized he had better take these rebels seriously. He sent General Seron with a battalion, 4000 strong, to march through the hills and clean out the rat's nests. This time they would not escape!

John wanted to flee to the next hideout. Simon wanted the group to scatter to the hills. "We've been discovered. No matter where we hide, they'll hunt us down like dogs. We don't stand a chance!"

But Judas disagreed. "YHWH is not limited to save by many or by few. So they outnumber us 10 to one. We'll find a place where their numbers work to their disadvantage!"

"But we can't even fight now! We haven't had breakfast yet! We're faint from hunger!"

"Then we won't fight them. We'll play games with them until we're ready to fight." He quickly divided them up into three groups. While some were eating their breakfast, he directed others to show themselves at the tops of key hills, then scurry off as the enemy spotted them and moved toward them. That way, he slowly led the enemy army all the way to upper Beth-horon. By the time they got there, all his men had finished their breakfast. Two of his groups hid themselves in town, to stage an ambush. The third 'decoy' group met General Seron at the top of the steep road which leads down to lower Beth-horon.

Seron despised them. *This pitiful group is terrorizing the Syrian detachments? There can't be more than 100 of them.* He was angry with them for making him chase up one hill after another. But they were obviously exhausted now from all that running, and had decided to make one last stand. He was sure they would run again – it's all they had been doing all morning. *But by all the gods this time he has them! Their backs are to the cliffs, with only that one road to escape.* He ordered the attack.

As Seron figured, the chicken Judeans fled down the road as soon as they were approached. Seron laughed at them. "Let them go! They no doubt have prepared an ambush along the steep descent. We'll split up into four divisions. I'll keep one here to block their escape. Division two, circle around via the Emmaus Road to block them at the bottom. Divisions 3 and 4, go north and south a bit, then quietly sneak down the hills to come up behind their ambush. We'll have 'em from all sides!"

So General Seron waited there, rather smugly, while his divisions circled around down the hill. But suddenly the 'decoy' group of rebels charged back up the road right at him, screaming like banshees. *The fools! It's a suicide attack! They don't have a chance!* Seron ordered his battle line to stand firm against the charge. At that moment the rest of Judas' forces burst from hiding. They rushed out of the town to attack from the rear. It was a classic pincer, perfectly timed. Seron's forces crumbled. He was slain, along with 800 of his men. The Maccabees chased the other three divisions all the way into Philistia.

It was a glorious victory! Not a single Judean was slain, demonstrating the blessing of YHWH. But Simon knew there would be retaliation. Until now they had only been a renegade band of guerrillas fighting from the hills. Now he counseled Judas to forge a real army at Mizpah, using the weapons collected from their victories. They openly began recruiting and training for the inevitable showdown. They grew to 3,000, though only 2,000 had proper weapons.

Antiochus was furious. In 166 BC he sent half his army to Judea, with orders for Lysias to wipe Israel off the map, level Jerusalem, massacre or enslave the entire population, and resettle the land with aliens from other lands. He sent two more generals, 40,000 soldiers and 7,000 cavalry.

One of these generals, Gorgias, selected the best 5,000 infantry and 1000 cavalry. He knew that the Judeans were weak and lacked weapons. So he attacked Mizpah at night, knowing how easy it is to panic such green troops as these ragtag Judeans.

But righteous John had developed a sensitivity to the Spirit of YHWH in this critical defense of His people. He warned Judas, "I believe the enemy plans to attack tonight. Don't ask me how I know. Just trust me. We must move all our forces down to Emmaus."

This was hard for Judas. *Taking orders from John, the pacifist? What could he possibly know of battle plans? And Emmaus? It's indefensible! It's on a plain! The enemy host will overwhelm them! The sun is already set. His men are bedded down for the night. It's wrong to abuse them by getting them up now.* He wrestled with his thoughts. But finally at midnight, against all human logic, he awakened his little band of 3000. They fled the camp for Emmaus, with Judas agonizing if he had done the right thing.

Gorgias descended on the Maccabean camp just after midnight. *They should all be sound asleep by now; not a one will survive the night!* But no. Their bedding was still warm but the camp was empty. "They've run terrified! They've scattered to the hills! Chase 'em down! Annihilate them!"

All night they vainly searched the hills. Meanwhile, the Judeans discovered and plundered the empty Syrian camp, at Emmaus! They prepared for battle at dawn, as the big Syrian army returned to camp, exhausted and fainting from their wild goose chase.

Judas gave his men a good pep-talk. "Fear not their numbers or their cavalry. Remember, our God delivered us from their hands last night and will deliver us again this day, just as he delivered our fathers at the Red Sea. So cry out to YHWH, that He will forgive our sins. Remind Him of His covenant to our ancestors. Ask Him to crush this army before us today, that all the Gentiles will know that there is a mighty God in heaven who redeems and saves Israel!" Energized, they gave a great shout, stomped their feet, and blew their trumpets. This was YHWH's battle! They charged fearlessly into their foe.

It is amazing what fear, or lack thereof, can do. In hardly an instant, the Syrians' confidence turned to fear as the Judeans' fear turned to confidence in YHWH. General Gorgias and his officers fled, their men close behind. The Maccabees cut them down from the rear as they ran, all the way to the land of the Philistines. 3,000 were slain, and even more lost their weapons and armor in their haste. Now Judas had more than enough weapons for all his men! With the victory, more Judeans joined his army. Now he had 6,000 armed warriors, zealous for Zion!

Lysias' 2nd general was Nicanor. An evil man, he hoped to make a lot of money for himself by selling captured Judeans as slaves to the Phoenicians at the cut rate of one slave per two pounds of silver. He hated Judea and their intolerant God. He looked forward to leveling the whole place. He took 20,000 troops, ignored the pathetic little Judean army, and began capturing all the poor peasants to sell at Shechem. *If Judas wants to stop him, just let him try!*

Again Judas the Maccabee inspired his army with prayers and exhortations. He appointed his younger brother Eleazar to read from the Scriptures and bless them. Then he named his army, "The Help of God!" This time he divided it into four parts. One was led by Simon, one by Jonathan, one by Joseph his brother-in-law, the fourth by himself. In righteous zeal against the enslavement of their brothers, they came upon Nicanor's forces from four sides, right in the middle of the day, surrounding both his army and his slave market. With YHWH giving them courage, they were victorious. 9,000 of their enemy were slain; many more were wounded, and the rest fled with the Phoenician slave traders. The Syrian camp was plundered, the slaves were set free, and even their purchase price was gathered up. They all celebrated the Sabbath together, restoring the stolen property of the poor peasants and taking care of the widows and orphans. Logos was pleased. By winter, Judas had 10,000 men under arms.

But General Nicanor had escaped. He had stripped off his splendid uniform right down to his skivvies, and fled the country like a runaway slave. He finally made his way back to Antioch, penniless, having succeeded in nothing but the destruction of his own army. There he proclaimed that the Judeans have a strong Defender in heaven, and are therefore invulnerable as long as they keep His Law.

Lysias spent the winter increasing his forces. By the next spring he had 60,000 infantry and 5,000 cavalry. *This nonsense has gone on far too long.*

But just as before, Judas inspired his men with prayer and exhortations. They attacked the vastly more powerful army at Beth-Zur, routing them and winning another major victory. 5,000 Syrians fell in action. Lysias saw for the first time the boldness and courage of the Judeans, and how determined they were to either live or die nobly. He withdrew all his forces back to Antioch on the Orontes to recruit more men before attacking again in a few years.

With Lysias gone from Judea, Judas Maccabee quickly reconquered Jerusalem. The remainder of the Seleucids holed up in their fortress, the Acra, so Judas stationed a guard there to keep them penned in, and ignored them. His concern was the temple. The Maccabees entered it on the 25th of Tishri, 165 BC.

It was in sad shape, desolate, the altar profaned with the hideous Zeus idol, pig guts everywhere, the doors and gates burned, the courtyard full of weeds, and the priest's quarters in ruins. The Maccabees tore their clothes and fell on their faces in grief.

But intense grief inspires intense effort. Zealous priests were put in charge of cleansing the temple. It was a huge job, but with many willing helpers it was accomplished in two months. They built a new altar, restored the broken walls and gates, rebuilt the priest's quarters, repaired the utensils and furnishings, and purified everything according to the law. It was all complete on the 25th of Kislev, 2 years from the day Antiochus had defiled it, and 1150 days from the time Menelaus had looted it. [See page 183.]

They held a dedication ('Hanukkah') celebration, in which they offered sacrifices and incense, lit the holy lamps, set the Bread of the Presence on its table, and pledged eternal faithfulness to YHWH. They fell on their faces and implored Him that they might never again suffer such grievous tragedy. They pled that if they should again fall into sin, they might be disciplined by YHWH alone; not be handed over to blasphemers and pagans.

Sadly, they found only one vial of the sacred oil that must be used for the holy lamps. It would last but one day. Just the same, they determined to celebrate the full eight days, just as if it were the Feast of Sukkot (Tabernacles), the Festival of Lights, which they had missed for three years because of the Syrian occupation. It wouldn't seem quite the same, celebrating the Festival of Lights without the holy lamps burning, but it would take seven days to press and purify the fresh olive oil they must use. Then to everyone's astonishment, that single vial of oil lasted the entire eight days! *It was a miracle! God's favor on them!* They vowed to celebrate the dedication of the temple at that time each year forever, which they do to this day.

Antiochus Epiphanes won some victories against the attacking Parthians, driving them back toward Bactria. But now he needed more money to pay his soldiers. They were about to revolt. So he raided the temples at Persepolis. Big, stupid mistake. The people there rose up in anger, driving him out of the city. So he rushed up to Ecbatana to plunder the temples there. He had just reached the city when he heard the news of the terrible defeats of his three generals, Gorgias, Nicanor, and Lysias. 'The Madman' got insanely angry, spectacularly living up to his nickname. He threw a hissy fit and screamed out many unrepeatable things. He vowed before all the gods that he would make the entire city of Jerusalem a cemetery of Judeans.

So he ordered his army, which had not had a real rest since Persepolis, to march to Judea at double time without stopping. He rode at the head of the army, whipping his poor horses and cursing a blue streak behind him, while his foot-soldiers struggled to keep up. Logos wondered if there was any hope of repentance for this tortured man. While less than halfway to his goal, he was weakened by worms in his bowels, and fell from his chariot. At his own urging, it was moving pretty fast, and his fall was serious. They put his broken body in a litter and carried it toward Antioch. Thus was humbled the emperor who had called himself Theos Epiphanes, 'Manifest God', and who put his own likeness on the statues of Zeus, demanding worship. Now his body was covered with open and putrefying sores. His broken bones made him scream with pain at every jolt of the litter. The worms ate through his body, filling it with the stench of rotting flesh. His abused army felt nothing but utter revulsion at their once-mighty monarch stinking like a decaying corpse. His servants couldn't stand the stench and finally refused to carry his litter. The army ground to a halt near Babylon, awaiting his death.

At this point, 2nd Maccabees diverges from reality, claiming a deathbed repentance and promise to become a faithful worshiper of YHWH, proclaim the power of God, and restore the Judean's land to the rightful priests. Forget it. It didn't happen. As long as he had breath he continued cursing at the hell he had made for himself. Only one man stood beside him (upwind) at the end, his trusted General Philip. He buried the madman, then claimed that his last words (which nobody else could hear), were to appoint him as regent over his young son, **Antiochus V Eupator**, who was then nine years old.

This was a threat to Lysias, who had been guardian of the lad in his father's absence. He still had a grudge match to settle against the Judeans, and now his generals were threatening as well? The resultant power struggle crippled the Seleucid Empire during this critical phase of its wars against the Parthians. The Seleucids never recovered their former power or glory. Lysias had to put his grudge match on hold while trying to secure the kingdom for himself.

Judas Maccabee had gained control of most of the rest of the country, but that Seleucid fortress called the Acra still had 2000 troops, all working to destabilize his new government. When Judas heard that Lysias was fighting with Philip over the throne, he figured now was the time to besiege the Acra. In 163 BC he successfully broke into the fortress; most of the soldiers there were slain. Sadly, Syrian sympathizers among the Judeans helped the remnant escape. When they told Lysias what had happened, he was enraged. He rushed down from Antioch with an utterly invincible army (100,000 troops, 20,000 cavalry, and 32 war elephants), determined to wipe Judea off the map. The Maccabeans fought valiantly, but they were overwhelmed and defeated at Beth-Zur, and again at Beth-Zechariah. They retreated to Jerusalem for one last stand.

The Judeans were tempted to despair, but many great tales of valor encouraged them. This one is still celebrated by Israelites to this day. **Eleazar Maccabee** determined to show his brothers how to defeat those war elephants. When he saw the king's elephant, he showed incredible bravery. He valiantly fought his way through the phalanx of guards, killing soldiers right and left, until he reached the king's elephant. Though it had royal armor, he darted between its legs and stabbed it in the belly with his sword.

Sadly, the elephant plopped right down on Eleazar and crushed him, while the king remained unharmed. So in spite of such bravery, the overpowering strength of Lysias' army couldn't be denied. He determined to destroy the temple and totally level Jerusalem using his siege engines.

The Judeans did everything they could. They even built anti-siege engines. But now they were out of supplies. The refugees in the city had already eaten most of the food, as this was a Sabbath Year in which no crops were planted. Eleazar the high priest complained to YHWH in prayer, "O YHWH! We restored Your temple and kept Your Law, but now even Your Law has become a curse to us! You tell us on the seventh year to plant no crops, and You will provide. But now we are starving! Our enemy is near to breaking down our walls and destroying Your holy sanctuary! We plead with You to remember Your covenant with Your people. Vindicate Your Law, and protect Your temple!"

Lysias got an urgent message from Antioch. He called in his generals. "Philip, with the army of Antiochus IV, is already nearing Antioch. Our supplies are low, because everywhere we go in this accursed land they have planted no crops for our soldiers to confiscate. So we must withdraw from Jerusalem immediately. But I have decided to go with honor, rather than in defeat. We must come to terms with these people, and sign a peace treaty before we go. Let us agree to let them live by their own laws, as they did before, for all these things happened only because Menelaus tried to change their laws and customs." So in a miraculous answer to Eleazar's prayer, Lysias executed the evil high priest Menelaus and agreed to more freedom for the new governor, **Judas Maccabee**, on just one condition: that he tear down the walls of Jerusalem within the year. Then Lysias rushed his army back to Antioch.

Lysias did succeed in defeating Philip in 163 BC and made himself king. But he didn't last long. In 161 BC, **Demetrius I Soter**, the rightful monarch, escaped from Rome and sailed to Antioch. When the Seleucid army heard he was home, they slew both young Antiochus V and Lysias, and crowned Demetrius their new sovereign.

Demetrius appointed Bacchides as governor of Judea and Alcimus as high priest. But within a year they were back, expelled by Judas for their evil ways. So he appointed General Nicanor his new governor of Judea, with orders to slay Eleazar the high priest, Judas Maccabee, and all his rebels, and forceably install Alcimus as Judah's high priest.

Nicanor fervently hated the Judeans, especially since his humiliating defeat. He came with a large force to take Jerusalem. With the walls torn down it should be easy. But when he got there, he found that Judas had defied the terms of his treaty with Lysias, and had left the walls in place. (Lysias had left in a big hurry. Judas had figured, “Why make it easy on my enemy?”) *Hmm. Quick change of plans.* Being a sly dog, Nicanor decided on a subterfuge. *We will pretend friendship with Judas until we can kidnap him!* He went into Jerusalem under a flag of truce to arrange a parley with Judas. He swore he had come in peace; that Demetrius had only sent him to renew the peace treaty of Lysias.

Judas smelled a rat right off the bat. He knew he had not kept the treaty (by not tearing down the walls) and he did not expect Demetrius to keep it either – or why had he sent so many troops? “Okay, Nicanor. I will renew our treaty with you, but only on two conditions. First, send your army home; you won’t need it if we are at peace. Second, send that accursed priest Alcimus home. He hates our God and our country, and can never be our high priest!”

Nicanor nodded agreement, though his eye twitched uncontrollably. “Sounds fair enough. Come out to my pavilion. We’ll make the arrangements with my officers. I’ll have to leave 100 troops here to help protect you and keep the peace and to collect the taxes when they are due, but I think we can reach a satisfactory arrangement.”

“Right... I didn’t get to be governor here by being naïve, General! I’ll meet you at your pavilion with my officers, but only after your troops have gone and have taken that vile Alcimus back to Antioch with them!”

Nicanor was also no slouch at this game of bluff. “Good! I will send my army home tomorrow morning and will see you at my pavilion, up there at the top of that far hill, at noon sharp.” He smiled. “We shall call that hill Caphar-Salama, the Village of Peace!”

The next morning early, the army packed up the for the long march home. They were gone by 10 AM. Alcimus was with them. So at noon, Judas and his officers mounted their horses to ride out to Nicanor’s pavilion. They got close. Judas still smelled that rat, but couldn’t spot it. All was as it should be. Nicanor stood by his pavilion, bowing in welcome. Only the 100 troops Nicanor promised to ‘keep the peace and collect taxes’ remained beside him.

Judas got to within a hundred yards of Nicanor. In a flash of insight, he knew what was wrong. He had never prayed about this parley! He was startled that Nicanor had agreed to it, and had forgotten to check with the Almighty. He reigned his horse to a halt and bowed his head in prayer. Instantly God answered, “Would you sit down to make peace with the man hired to kill you? Do you trust the word of a heathen more than the Word of your God?”

“No, Lord!” he answered. “It’s a trap!” he yelled to his men. “Flee to Jerusalem!” But he was too late. Nicanor had noticed his hesitation and signaled his soldiers to attack. The ‘peacekeeping’ troops were suddenly mounted and riding furiously toward him. And now thousands of heads appeared over the far hills at Beth-horon where they were hiding in ambush. This was Judas’ first bad mistake.

It was a fatal error. Judas realized he was a dead man. Even as he rode frantically toward the safety of Jerusalem’s walls, he cried to God in repentance for his negligence. Judas realized that, as brilliant a general as he was, he was not invincible. He had allowed himself to become proud; now he would pay the price. Even if he reached the gates in time, they couldn’t hold them open for him, or his enemy would enter in behind him! They would hold the gates open for the rest of the Syrian army, and all would be lost!

But now, a miracle! A mighty shout sounded from the city, and out of the gates streamed his own army, ready to meet the foe. His captains had been less trusting than he, and had prepared for such a trap. Within minutes, the Battle of Caphar-Salama was joined. Judas and his officers were rescued. The 100 ‘peacekeeping’ troops were slain. Nicanor had gone back to lead his main force, which was not yet upon them, so the Judeans quickly gathered their dead and fled back to the safety of Jerusalem.

Nicanor reached the closed gates, furious that his prey had escaped. He rode around the city, shouting insults in his rage. When he saw some priests by the temple he hurled taunts, telling them, “If you do not hand Judas the Maccabee over to me, I will level this shrine of YHWH to the ground, tear down this altar (he pointed with his right hand), and build here a splendid temple to Dionysus!” Finally Nicanor left. He took down his pavilion and returned to Beth-horon to make a permanent camp. *So much for my cute subterfuge. What in heaven’s name was it that spooked Judas, anyhow?* Nicanor decided to use the brute force of his massive army.

Judas was truly repentant. He would never make that mistake again. He spent several days seeking the face of God, pleading for wisdom. Then one night he had a vision. In it, godly Onias, the high priest from the time of Ptolemy rule, prayed for the Judeans. As Judas watched, a noble-looking, white-haired man appeared beside Onias, who stood to introduce him. “This is one who loves the family of Israel, and prays much for God’s people and the Holy City. He is Jeremiah, the prophet of God!”

Jeremiah approached Judas, smiling, holding a golden sword. “Take this sword. It is the gift of God, whom you serve. With it, smite down your enemies tomorrow and be victorious!” It was a beautiful dream. Encouraged, Judas in turn encouraged his men the next morning. Eleazar the high priest told him about the insults against the temple. So Judas realized this was not about him. YHWH had chosen to defend His holy name against the blasphemers!

Judas took his troops out to camp in front of Mizpah, opposite Nicanor's camp at Beth-horon. Only about 3,000 actually turned out. The rest had fled in fear of Nicanor's humongous army, now 80,000 infantry, 12,000 cavalry, and 21 war elephants. It made their pitiful group look like an anthill. But Judas remembered his dream. He prayed, "O YHWH, when Sennacherib blasphemed Your holy name at the time of Hezekiah, You sent Your angel and struck down 185,000 Assyrians in one night. You can deliver by many or by few. So also crush this army before us this day, for Nicanor has blasphemed Your holy name. Judge him according to his wickedness, that the world may know that You are the almighty God of all the earth."

The two armies met on the 13th of Adar, the day before the Festival of Purim. Nicanor stretched his battle lines across the plain, to strike fear into the hearts of his enemy. His elephants were in front; his phalanxes behind; and his cavalry on the flanks. He was high atop the armored royal elephant, behind everything, to direct the battle. *He was truly invincible! This time, he could not possibly lose.*

Judas got up from his knees. "YHWH has given us the victory. I don't know how, but He has. I will attack. Just follow my lead, and see what YHWH will do!" Judas started to lope forward, directly toward the center of the opposing force. His sword that he got from Apollonius was in its sheath by his side, but he was still searching for that golden sword of Jeremiah that he had seen in his dream.

There it was! The glint of a golden sword, covered in dust at his feet. He nearly missed it. He stopped to pick it up, but alas, it was only a rusty old javelin someone had thrown and never retrieved. He almost tossed it back down, but rusty as it was, it seemed so well-balanced in his hand he figured he may as well throw it at the enemy instead. Inspired, he charged fearlessly forward at full speed, shouting, "The sword of Jeremiah and of YHWH!" He sprinted between the line of elephants and heaved it with all his might toward the royal elephant in the rear.

There was no chance that he could throw it that far, but this was YHWH's battle, not his. He now drew his sword and engaged the phalanx. His men were right behind. But the fight had barely begun when a cry went out, "The king is down!" Now the entire Syrian phalanx trembled, as 80,000 heads turn to see if it was true. Judas' little band fell upon them in their moment of distraction. 35,000 Syrians lost their lives that day; the rest fled in panic.

As they were gathering the weapons they found the broken body of Nicanor, still in full armor. But there was no rusty javelin piercing him – just a crushed corpse. Judas figured the javelin must have hit the elephant, which then reared up, tossed out Nicanor, and trampled him to death. Judas cut off his proud head and removed the blaspheming tongue and the right arm that had pointed threateningly at the temple. He hung them on the citadel facing the temple so everyone could see what happens to blasphemers.

Judas the Maccabee was a big hero. All the mothers in the land wanted to name their kids after him, just as with Claudius Nero after he defeated Hannibal. Judas remained officially the governor, but now became more like a king. He quickly sent ambassadors to Rome seeking an alliance. The Roman Senate, after hearing his ambassadors tell of all the horrible things the Seleucids had done to them, not only granted the alliance, but even sent a letter of censure to Demetrius, saying, "Why have you made your yoke heavy on our friends and allies the Judeans? If they appeal again for help against you, we will defend their rights and fight you on sea and on land!" Thus the people believed themselves to be finally free of Seleucid oppression, and they hailed Judas as their heaven-sent deliverer.

But Logos was not so happy with Judas, as he accepted the glory, even worship, of the people. He became proud. He began to trust in himself, in his strength and brilliant leadership, in his military exploits, and in his alliance with Rome, rather than humbly trusting in the God to whom he had prayed. And he disobeyed God's command for Levites like himself to rule only over the temple. The Maccabees were of the tribe of Levi. The ruler of Israel was supposed to come from the line of King David of the tribe of Judah, not the tribe of Levi. So Judas had set a bad precedent.

Demetrius, furious that Nicanor had been slain and his army decimated, was distracted. He had to go east to deal with those rebellious Parthians again. But as he hadn't yet received that letter from Rome, he sent General Bacchides with what remained of Nicanor's army to reconquer Judea in 130 BC. They rushed south, killing Judeans along the way, and surrounded Jerusalem, trapping Judas inside.

The Judeans were discouraged and fearful. They had thought they were done with war! They had an alliance with Rome! But once again the Seleucid army was setting up siege engines against them.

Judas tried to encourage them. "Our God is still with us! We will go out as before, and they shall flee seven ways before us!" But it was not true. Many of his men sensed that YHWH was not still with them. They began deserting his army, until Judas only had 800 men left. But still he attacked, at Elassa, which is in the hills between upper Beth-horon and Mizpah. Judas figured that the rough terrain might break up the Syrian phalanx and make it harder for their cavalry as well. He went directly for the cavalry, aiming for Bacchides hiding behind it.

A desperate battle ensued. Many died on both sides. But in the end, the huge Syrian force overwhelmed the valiant Judeans. Judas was slain, and the survivors fled. It was a terrible tragedy. Israel mourned their slain leader with the dirge, "How the mighty savior of Israel has fallen!" Despair now settled over the land. It was a sad time of distress, the worst since the exiles' return from Babylon. Bacchides hunted down the Judean army and the friends of Judas to exterminate them. He also slew Eleazar the high priest.

The brothers of Judas elected **Jonathan** as their new leader. They fled to the wilderness of Tekoa. Bacchides methodically stamped out any opposition. He established that vile priest Alcimus over the temple. He constructed fortresses all across the land for his many troops. It looked hopeless. A famine spread over Israel, as all their food was devoured by the occupying army. To top it off, a hostile tribe of the sons of Jambri took advantage of the Judeans' weakness. In an ambush, they stole their supplies and killed John the pacifist. It was a dark time for Israel.

Jonathan attacked the tribe of Jambri. He avenged his brother's death and got most of their supplies back. But Bacchides heard about their battle and sent his army to slay the rebels! Jonathan's forces were defeated and barely escaped with their lives by swimming across the Jordan.

With the oppression came humility, repentance, and recognition of their need for God. Jonathan and his men had nowhere to look but up. They began to cry out to YHWH for help. He heard and answered.

Alcimus was renovating the holy temple to make room for his idols and his Greek friends. He ordered the priests to tear down the wall of the inner court which divided the Israelites from the court of the Gentiles. He commanded that an imposing idol of Zeus be erected to stand where the wall had been. Some of the priests obediently went to work, but others balked, accusing him apostasy and of mixing the holy with the profane. Alcimus swore at them, and screamed, "I am a son of Aaron the same as you! I have the full authority of the Seleucid Empire behind me as well. By all the gods we will renovate this temple to serve both Judeans and Hellenes or I shall die trying!"

Zadok, the one who should have been high priest after Eleazar, pointed his finger at the raging Alcimus to say, "Out of your own mouth you have condemned yourself. May YHWH hear from heaven, and grant your request."

Alcimus instantly froze, his body still showing his rage. The priests bringing in the idol of Zeus froze as well. The stone idol toppled from their arms and smashed all over the pavement at the feet of Alcimus. The apostate priests tearing down the wall froze in fear at what they had done.

Bacchides himself was quickly called. He entered the temple in fury, his bodyguards close behind, ready to slay the rebels who had dared to challenge the authority of his appointed high priest. But as he swept arrogantly into the court, the presence of The Holy assailed him. He fell to his knees, then to his face in terror, unable to say a word.

Zadok finally broke the silence. "All you who serve YHWH, God of Israel, bless His holy name! He has set us free this day! Gather these pathetic sons of Satan and carry them to the palace. They shall trouble us no more. Then clean up this hideous idol and restore the wall as it was before. YHWH has returned to us, and has reclaimed His holy temple! Bless His holy name forever and ever."

They anointed **Zadok** as the new high priest. He served humbly, teaching the Law and restoring the people to righteousness. Vile Alcimus never overcame his paralysis. He died within a few weeks. King Bacchides, the ruthless conqueror of Judea, never quite recovered from his brief encounter with The Holy. He became a timid basket case, terrified of his own shadow, jumping in fright at the approach of his own ministers. Finally, realizing that he needed a vacation, he took his army back to Antioch.

For two years Judea had rest from war. Jonathan rebuilt his army and fortified a hideout in the wilderness of Tekoa at Beth-Basi. Zadok repaired and cleansed the temple.

But the Hellenizing party in Judea wouldn't give up. They loved Greek culture, delighted in Greek games, and wore Greek clothes. Now they were the persecuted class! So they turned traitor. They went to Antioch to convince Bacchides to return with his army and restore Greek rule, promising to support him.

General Bacchides, furious at his 'illness' and ashamed of himself for acting so fearfully, agreed. He returned to Judea in 157 BC to attack Jonathan's fortress at Beth-Basi. Jonathan and his brother Simon split up. Jonathan took his men outside to pester the besiegers from the rear. Every time they went after him, Simon sallied out of the fortress to burn the Syrian siege engines. Poor harassed Bacchides became so infuriated that he fell into an incoherent rage. He executed those who had talked him into coming.

Jonathan realized that Bacchides was a broken man. God had humbled him. He would be a threat no longer. So Jonathan sent an envoy to arrange a parley. Bacchides gladly agreed, as he was so frustrated and eager to return to Antioch. "O mighty General Bacchides, live forever!" Jonathan bowed respectfully. "You are most glorious and honored, in your own great land among your own people and your own gods. There your power is unassailable, and your wisdom unquestioned..." He went on like that for a while, until he saw the frightened general begin to relax and smile a bit. Then he nailed the clincher. "But here in tiny, backwater Judea, least among the far-flung provinces of your mighty empire, God has not granted you authority, just as He has not granted us any authority in your land. But we wish you no harm. We beg of you, merely release the captives you have taken and return to your own land in peace. We swear we will never try to harm you as long as we live, and we only ask the same of you."

Jonathan's kind words ministered peace to Bacchides' tormented soul. He agreed. They signed a peace treaty. Bacchides released the Judean captives and took his army back to Antioch, never to trouble Israel again. With their leaders gone, the Syrians manning the Seleucid garrisons and fortresses also returned to Antioch. The Hellenizing Party was driven underground. Jonathan cleansed the land of pagan influences. He made his home in Michmash, where he officiated as judge (though not ruler) of Israel.

A fellow by the name of Alexander Balas, native of Smyrna, pretended to be a son of Antiochus IV Epiphanes and Laodice IV, thus heir to the Seleucid throne. He went to Rome, where his claims were recognized after a few key bribes. Then he traveled to Egypt and won acceptance by Pharaoh Ptolemy VI Philometor. There he lived for some years, raising an army to claim 'his' throne at Antioch.

When he heard, Demetrius feared this pretender and his ambitions. He began preparing to invade Egypt and deal with this impostor. Thus he wrote a letter to Jonathan, reaffirming his alliance as signed by General Bacchides, and requesting that Jonathan recruit troops to join him.

Alexander Balas soon realized the danger to his plans. Those Judeans had already proven to be a formidable foe, or a valuable ally, and they lay directly between him and his goal. He quickly fired off a letter, some gifts, and a large bribe. His letter officially appointed Jonathan as the new high priest of Judea; his gifts included a gold crown, a royal purple robe, and the sacred vestments of the priesthood. Jonathan was pleased with the offer. After all, he was of the priestly line! He deposed Zadok and donned the royal robes, crown, and priestly vestments. He officiated as the high priest for the first time at the Feast of Tabernacles in 153 BC. Once again, Logos was angry that His deliverer had combined the offices of priest and secular ruler.

Demetrius was distressed. He wrote Jonathan another letter, upping the ante. He asked only for 30,000 Judeans to supplement his own forces. They could be stationed in the fortresses built by Bacchides. In return, he granted complete autonomy to Judea and permanent freedom from taxes or tribute. He vowed to set free all captive Judeans anywhere in his empire. He even gave the land of Samaria to be annexed to Judea under Jonathan. To cinch the deal he promised to pay for the temple upkeep and some building projects. It was a very fine offer indeed.

But you know, after all the tyrants he had sent to oppress Israel, King Demetrius' fine promises were not believable. Judea decided to support Alexander Balas and Egypt instead. For two years the battle raged between the two superpowers, until finally, in 150 BC, Demetrius I Soter was slain and his army soundly defeated. The usurper **Alexander (Balas) Epiphanes**, supported by both the Ptolemies and the Judeans under Jonathan, took the Seleucid throne.

After solidifying his power, he invited everyone down to Alexandria for a grand victory celebration. Ptolemy VI and Cleopatra II gave their daughter, the lovely princess Cleopatra Thea ('Goddess'), to the new King Alexander in marriage. Jonathan was also granted many rich gifts, for in truth, the victory could not have been achieved without his support. Jonathan was honored by both Seleucids and Ptolemies as the sovereign ruler of Judea, their esteemed ally and friend. Peace returned to the land of Israel. King Alexander returned to 'his' throne in Antioch.

Sadly, the usurper Alexander Balas turned out to be a corrupt and decadent tyrant. Ptolemy regretted backing him and giving his daughter to wed this evil man. Then in 147 BC, Demetrius II, the son of Demetrius I and true heir to the throne, showed up. It seems he had escaped to Crete when his father was slain. Now that he had become a man (barely) he had gained the support of Crete to return to the Seleucid throne. He came to Egypt, showing proof of his identity and pleading for the Pharaoh's support as well.

Well, Pharaoh Ptolemy VI was furious to discover that Alexander Balas was an impostor. No wonder he was so depraved! Ptolemy agreed to help Demetrius II. He sailed to Antioch, pretending to come in peace as Alexander's father-in-law. It sure fooled the guards, who let him enter the palace. But it was just a ruse to take over. Ptolemy made his daughter Cleopatra Thea divorce Alexander Balas and marry sixteen-year-old **Demetrius II** instead, setting him on the throne of the Seleucid Empire. When Alexander Balas came back from Cilicia, he found Ptolemy in control!

Alexander attacked, but failed, for his own subjects supported Ptolemy! Alexander fled to the Nabataeans, but they too wanted to stay on good terms with Egypt. They cut off his head and returned it, postage paid. But Ptolemy had been injured in Alexander's attack. He died three days later. Young Demetrius II took his throne in 145 BC.

From here on it got pretty messy. Demetrius was even more corrupt and cruel than his predecessor. Jonathan at first supported him. But Demetrius acted like a spoiled child, capriciously making promises he had no intention of keeping. Soon everyone hated him. Diodotus Tryphon, his general, plotted to put Alexander and Cleopatra's baby son, **Antiochus VI Dionysus**, on the throne instead. So now Jonathan supported him, instead. Demetrius II was forced to flee for his life. He set up a throne in Damascus, where he attempted to rule the empire without Antioch.

After a couple years, Demetrius had prepared an army to get Antioch back. Tryphon enlisted the aid of Jonathan and the Judeans to protect him; again they saved the day. Tryphon was victorious. In thanks, he gave Jonathan rich rewards. Thus Jonathan's fame spread. Syria, Phoenicia, Philistia, all the surrounding nations were either allied with him or subdued. He sent ambassadors to Rome and Sparta to renew the alliances that Judas had forged. Everywhere he went, he prospered. Demetrius II tried several times to defeat him, but failed. With each victory Jonathan gained more territory for Israel and more glory for himself.

But with all these blessings, Jonathan began to trust more in his alliances and his own political and military skill than in God. Tryphon, his friend, whom he had defended several times, began to fear him! Judea had become too powerful! So Tryphon pretended to give him a city in Egypt, but it was a lie. He captured Jonathan and slew him and all his bodyguards. His brother **Simon** sadly buried him at Modein, and took over command of Israel.

Diodotus Tryphon killed his young charge, Antiochus VI, by pretending he had gotten sick and needed surgery. He then took the Seleucid throne at Antioch for himself. He raged against the Judeans, but Simon managed to defend them. Remember that Demetrius II still ruled at Damascus. So when Tryphon made himself so odious to the Judeans by killing Jonathan, it again opened the door for Demetrius. Once more, he wrote a very generous letter, pleading for pardon for his many past faults and offering autonomy and freedom from taxes if only Israel would make peace with him and support his claim to the throne.

Simon accepted. The land of Israel became a sovereign state. In 141 BC, the people elected **Simon** as both their ruling high priest and secular ruler, ‘the prince of Judea’. Thus the Hasmonean line now became a ruling dynasty. At that time the last remnants of Seleucid authority, 2000 of Tryphon’s soldiers holed up in the Acra, surrendered and were expelled. This was the first time Israel had been truly free since before the exile. Even Rome recognized Israel’s independence and honored ‘Prince Simon’ in 139 BC. He appointed his son John as commander of Israel’s army. This was a golden period of cultural development, population growth, and border expansion for Israel. Simon, like his brothers Jonathan and Judas before him, was a godly ruler. Though he still combined the offices of king and priest, overall his reign was peaceful and blessed.

The alliance between Simon and Demetrius II, pledging peace and mutual military support, didn’t help either one very much. Demetrius left his wife **Cleopatra Thea** in charge of the empire while he traveled east to rustle up Parthian support for his takeover attempt. Instead, he got himself captured in 140 BC. His brother **Antiochus VII Sidetes** was crowned in his place at Damascus.

Antiochus VII confirmed his brother’s alliance with Simon granting Israel autonomy and freedom from taxes. Then he asked for help in the fight against Tryphon. In accord with their treaty, Simon sent military equipment, money, and troops to Antiochus. With their help, Antiochus defeated Tryphon in 138 BC at Dor (on the coast in northern Philistia) to take the Seleucid throne. One of his first official acts was to marry his brother’s wife, Queen Cleopatra Thea. Diodotus Tryphon escaped, but couldn’t take the shame of defeat. He committed suicide.

The years passed. The valiant Maccabees had led Israel from an impoverished, oppressed little province to a mighty and wealthy nation. Simon, the last surviving son of Mattathias and the last of the godly Maccabee brothers, was old. He had lived a good life and achieved much, but he was tired. He appointed his sons to fight his battles.

Like Tryphon, Antiochus VII was a bit mad and quite paranoid. He feared that Israel had grown too powerful. He wrongly accused Simon of abusing the terms of their treaty by stealing Seleucid cities and lands. In 136 BC Antiochus double-crossed Simon and sent his army against Israel.

The three sons of Simon, Mattathias, Judas, and John, were victorious over the Seleucid attackers. Antiochus realized that these Maccabees were undefeatable in battle. Their God is too strong! So he devised a plot. If he couldn’t beat them in battle, he would cause them to fall into sin. He had some daughters. He offered them to Simon as wives for his three sons. He apologized for his attacks, and swore he really wanted a marriage alliance with Simon.

Well, that was a bust! Simon made it very clear that his sons would never marry outside the families of Israel; something his God had warned him against.

But every man has his price. Antiochus sent his spies around the land to find someone willing to barter his soul. He found Ptolemy Abubus. Simon trusted him, as he had married Simon’s daughter Arianah and Simon had made him the governor over Jericho. Secretly, Antiochus sent ambassadors to Ptolemy Abubus with promises of instant grandeur – and a huge bribe. They slathered on the butter. *He is so wise, noble, and strong! He is worthy to rule the land! He shall be second in the empire next to Antiochus! All he has to do is invite Simon and his sons to a banquet, get ‘em drunk, and kill ‘em all. Easy, since Simon is his father-in-law!*

In February of 135 BC, the invitation was sent. Sadly, old Simon fell for it. He was too trusting. He got drunk and was slain, along with his first two sons, Mattathias and Judas. But John, Simon’s third son, wasn’t there! As the commander of the armed forces, he had refused to go to the drinking party. “Someone must stay behind to guard the country while you are gone,” he swore.

Ptolemy used his huge bribe to gather troops, which he sent to kill John, the last surviving son of a Maccabee. He quickly sent word of his victory to Antiochus, requesting more troops, which would be needed to take Jerusalem. He sent letters to the governors of the provinces and cities of Israel, also promising them big bribes to join his revolt.

But in his haste to consolidate ‘his’ kingdom, Ptolemy Abubus neglected one minor item: his wife, Arianah. She was, of course, appalled at her husband’s treachery against her father and brothers. She disguised herself as a servant girl, took an old donkey used for going to market, and rode hard to warn her last living brother.

Arianah was in time. As any good general would be, John was suspicious anyway. He was ready. He rushed his forces down to Jericho just as Ptolemy’s men were coming out after him. They were unprepared. John killed a lot of them, although Ptolemy Abubus managed to escape.

Antiochus was furious. His plot had failed. He brought his army and laid siege to Jerusalem. Legend claims that John took 3000 talents of gold from King David’s tomb to bribe Antiochus to spare the city. That is simply not true. David’s tomb never had any gold in it; that was an Egyptian custom. But John did go to David’s tomb, as well as to the holy temple, praying and asking God for wisdom.

CHAPTER 55 – THE HASMONEAN'S DECLINE

Once more, God had mercy. In 134 BC after an entire year of the siege, when the Judeans in Jerusalem were near starvation, Antiochus received word that the Parthians had moved into Media and Babylon, gained control over Mesopotamia, and were now in the process of conquering Assyria! His kingdom was threatened, with no army there to resist them. Trying not to appear frantic, he arranged a parley with John. “We have defeated you, but we wish to show mercy. We will not burn your city or slay any of your people. Rather we will forgive your offenses this once, and renew the peace treaty that we had with you before. Only you must pay a fine, level Jerusalem’s walls as your uncle Judas agreed with Lysias long ago, and supply me with troops and arms for my eastern campaign. If you accept my terms we will leave today. If you refuse, we will burn your city and all who now suffer within.”

The terms were generous. John wisely accepted. The city was saved without bloodshed. As soon as the Seleucids left, John ‘forgot’ to level the walls, but he did send troops with Antiochus VII. They helped him recover (briefly) Assyria, Babylonia, and Media. But then he was ambushed in 129 BC by Phraates II, son of Mithridates I of Parthia. Antiochus was slain. Thus ended the Seleucid rule east of the Euphrates. Phraates didn’t get to enjoy his empire very long, though. In 127 BC the Scythian Tochari barbarians, who had already overrun the Greeks in Sogdiana and Bactria, defeated the Parthians and killed Phraates.

Remember Demetrius II? He had been captured by the Parthians, and kept prisoner in the palace all these years. When Antiochus attacked, Phraates released Demetrius, hoping that he and his brother would fight over the throne and kill each other off. Instead, Demetrius made it home and took over the empire after his brother’s death.

If you can call it an empire. All he had left was Syria, and he had a hard time ruling even that. After more squabbles with the Ptolemies, his own troops, and another usurper (Alexander Zabinas), his wife Cleopatra Thea turned against him and had him slain. Their first son Seleucus V Philometor took the throne, but was angry at his mom for killing his dad. So she killed him, too, and took the throne for herself in 125 BC. She pretended to rule as regent for her son, Antiochus VIII Grypus, to make it appear legal.

By 121 BC Grypus had grown old enough to be a threat. Sweet Cleopatra Thea needed to assassinate him as well. She offered him a cup of wine when he returned one day from a hunt. But he knew his evil and self-serving mother only too well; offering him a glass of cool wine was out of character. He made her drink her own wine, which killed her. It was not long before his half-brother Antiochus IX Cyzicenus contested the throne and the Syrian civil wars began again. But I digress. As I said, from about 190 BC on, both the Seleucids and the Ptolemies had degenerated into bickering madmen, paving the way for the Roman Empire.

John ruled relatively well. He was energetic, brave, and a brilliant military general. Yet he remained humble, and zealous for God’s glory. He did take a Greek name at his coronation, ‘Hyrceanus’, in the hopes that conservatives would mellow out a bit on their rejection of the Hellenists. He reigned over Israel from the time his father was slain in 135 BC to his own death in 104 BC. He further expanded Israel’s domain in all directions, and worked to convert everyone in his realm to Judaism. He tried to resolve the religious dispute between the Judeans and the Samaritans by leveling the pagan temple at Mount Gerizim and insisting everyone come to YHWH’s temple at Jerusalem. Nice try, but in the long run, it didn’t work out very well. Most Samaritans just went on worshiping at the ruins of their temple, and only hated the Judeans more than ever.

Nabonidus had decimated the Edomites in 539 BC, allowing Nabataean Arabs (from Ishmael’s son Nebayot) to take over Edom and southern Moab. The remnants of the Edomites fled west into the Negev, later called Idumea. Judas Maccabee had conquered these Edomites in 163 BC. John subdued them again in 125 BC, annexing Idumea as a province of Israel. He forced the Idumeans to adopt the religious customs of his people, including circumcision. His son later tried to do the same with all the Nabataeans.

Always before, adoption into the families of Israel had been voluntary. This is the first time it was done by force. That was to cause problems for Israel in later years, for as they were absorbed into Israel, the belligerent Nabataeans / Idumeans changed Judea as much as the Judeans changed them. (The infamous Herodian Dynasty was later founded by a half-breed Idumean named Antipater, born during the reign of John Hyrcanus. I’ll tell Antipater’s story later.)

The forced conversion and absorption of the Idumeans and Samaritans into Israel caused other problems as well. Rather than unite the religious leaders and teachers of the law, it further divided them. The Chassidim, zealous ‘Covenanters’ and protectors of the faith of their fathers, had already been divided into the Orthodox and Hellenist Parties. But now even the Orthodox Party was divided. Some, called Essenes, were bitterly opposed to any mixing of their culture and religious heritage with anyone, Greek, Syrian, Samaritan, Idumean, or Nabataean. They began leaving society altogether, to form their own ultra-pure communities. Others, the Sadducees, gladly supported John’s forced conversions. They were wealthy religious leaders. They loved to impose the law when it suited them, but denied the traditions and the spirit behind it, and thus became tolerant of the modern ways. A third group was the Pharisees. They preached against the Maccabees for combining the offices of king and priest. They really came unglued at John for forcing pagans to become Israelites. They loudly criticized the corruption and abuse of power of their Hasmonean king/priests. This lack of unity in the Orthodox Party, the main governing body in Judah, began to severely weaken the Hasmonean kingdom.

Israel had reached its maximum extent of glory and influence since the exile. But the high water mark of the Hasmonean kingdom flowed by. Toward the end of John's reign, he lost the religious zeal of his fathers. It became more about power and control, devoid of spirit or piety. John died of old age in 104 BC. On his deathbed he passed the kingdom to his lovely and kind wife, Queen Sharon. Due to his many verbal battles with the Pharisees, John entrusted the high priesthood to Judas Aristobulus, his oldest son, thus separating the offices of king and priest.

But it didn't work. Aristobulus wanted power and glory like his father. He conspired with his brother Antigonus. They threw Queen Sharon and their three other brothers in prison and **Aristobulus I** declared himself the 'king of the Jews'. This was the first time that title had been used – Hasmonean rulers had been called governors, or 'princes', or 'ruling high priests'. Aristobulus worked to expand his kingdom, conquering Galilee and forcing circumcision and Judaism upon them, just like his father had done to the Edomites/Nabataeans in Idumea. He railed against the Pharisees for opposing this mix with surrounding pagans.

He also let his mother starve to death in prison. God gave up on him. Everyone had loved Queen Sharon. After she died, they were secretly glad when Aristobulus was laid low with worms in his bowels. His wife, Queen Salome Alexandra, didn't want his evil brother to reign after him, so she plotted the assassination of Antigonus in 103 BC.

Days later, Aristobulus died in excruciating pain. He had ruled for a little more than one year. Salome released his surviving two brothers from prison and helped the oldest, **Alexander Jannaeus**, take control.

Alexander married Salome Alexandra. She was one of the few good things in his miserable life. She held the country together with her wise diplomacy, while he behaved like a wicked tyrant. Why the good Lord allowed him to rule 27 years I'll never know. He fought the Pharisees even harder than his father had. The Judeans hated him, so he enlisted foreign mercenaries to oppress the Pharisees and any others who dared to oppose him. He tried to conquer and convert the rest of the Nabataeans. He fought brutal wars to enlarge Israel's borders, but most of them he lost, as his own people refused to support him. Queen Salome regretted ever releasing him from prison.

Alexander hatched a plot to get rid of the Pharisees. He knew their zeal for Judaism's religious traditions (unlike the Sadducees, who preferred Hellenistic traditions). So when Alexander was officiating as high priest at Sukkot, right during the climax of the water-drawing ceremony, he deliberately poured the holy water out onto the ground in full view of the people. That was sacrilege to the pious Pharisees, who pelted him with citron fruits from their lulav branches, starting a riot. That was just the excuse he had hoped for. He ordered his waiting mercenary soldiers to attack the rioters and slaughter them without mercy.

When it was over, 6,000 Pharisees lay dead all over the temple courtyard and a horn of the holy altar was broken off. Though this was a tragedy, King Alexander didn't care. He wouldn't even apologize for his brutality. Finally the Pharisees went to Seleucid King **Demetrius III** (who ruled from Damascus as successor to Antiochus VIII Grypus). He came down from Syria in 88 BC to oust King Alexander, and succeeded in driving him into exile. However, his own kingdom was in deep yogurt. It toppled the next year, allowing Alexander Jannaeus to return.

So in 86 BC Alexander regained control of Judea with even greater brutality than before. He killed his youngest brother, who had tried to take his throne while he was gone. A civil war began, in which about 50,000 perished. He ordered the instigators of the rebellion slain in the Roman way; over 800 faithful Pharisees were crucified. It was an unmitigated nightmare straight from hell.

Logos was furious. Alexander also contracted worms in his bowels. He lived in increasing pain for the last three years of his reign. As he was besieging Ragaba, a Galilean fortress, he died in 76 BC, with not one soul to regret his passing. His wife, **Queen Salome Alexandra**, took over.

We must relate a little-known conversation she had with her dying husband. He was in screaming pain – the morphine no longer had much effect. His drugged brain had been hallucinating for days. So it wasn't surprising when his servants came to the queen, again, to tell her, "Your husband keeps calling for you."

She went. Who knows, perhaps his mind had cleared. When she arrived, he was laying back on his cot, his face white, sweaty, looking very old, but quiet. "You called for me, my lord?" she asked.

When his eyes slowly opened, the pain she saw therein was complete. A more pathetic soul never lived. His raspy voice came out in a low growl. "Remind me – what good have I done for Judea? Have I not protected her? Have I not made her glorious and powerful? Have I not provided well for her stable and prosperous future by befriending both Greeks and Romans? And by dealing sternly with those damnably intolerant Pharisees?" His voice was rising.

He didn't give her time to answer. "Have I not been a wise king? Stern but noble? Faithful to my ideals? Why then am I tormented so? I've been a good Sadducee! We do not believe in heaven or hell, but only the good we do in this life. Why then do I see before me a lake filled with fire and torment of wicked souls from my past?" By this time he was screaming. "I don't belong there! He cannot send me there! I've been a good king! Tell Him I'm a good king!"

This was no time for pussy-footing around the truth. "No, my lord. You've been cruel and hateful. A good king loves his people and they love him in return. I cannot think of one good thing you have done for your people in your entire reign. That is why they all hate you, every last one."

“No!” he screamed. “It’s not true! I have been a good Sadducee! They’ve come to take me! What can I do?”

“You could start by repenting...” she suggested.

He jumped on it. “Yes! I will repent! I do repent! Tell the Pharisees I’m sorry. Beg their forgiveness!” He tried to continue, but only became incoherent in his screaming. His servants tried to help, but there was really nothing they could do. They no longer understood his words, but they could see the flames in his eyes as he passed from this realm directly into the hell in which he did not believe. When he finally fell silent, there was not a one in the palace who retained the slightest doubt about the existence of a terrible place of torment for the wicked in the life to come.

Queen Salome Alexandra ruled wisely and well. Her first official act as the regnant queen was to issue an official apology to the Pharisees, sent by the hand of her brother, Simeon ben Shetach. As a leader of the Pharisaic Party, they knew and trusted him, and slowly began to come out of hiding. She gave a decent burial to her dead husband, so as not to offend the Sadducees. She appointed her oldest son, **Hyrchanus II**, as high priest, thus separating the king and priest classes and further appeasing the Pharisees.

They loved Hyrchanus II; he turned out to be a Pharisee after their own heart. He reorganized the Sanhedrin into a ‘Supreme Court’ for the administration of the law in all religious matters. Thus much of the power of governing the land was returned to the hands of the Pharisees.

Queen Alexandra executed Diogenes of Judea for his part in urging the crucifixion of 800 Pharisees. Then, to complete her husband’s ‘repentance’, she removed the Sadducees from Jerusalem, assigning them fortified towns around the border. She immediately increased the size of Israel’s military forces (which had been decimated by desertions during the hated reign of Alexander Jannaeus). She placed them in fortified cities around the border, to discourage enemy attacks. Thus she was able to keep the peace through most of her reign.

However, her youngest son, Aristobulus II, was not like his older brother. He, just like his father, sided with the Sadducees. Queen Alexandra could see the ambition in his eyes. But her ‘mother’s love’ induced her to make the one stupid decision of her reign. She made him her general of the northern army, in charge of the fortified cities where she had sent the Sadducees, with orders to protect them.

Thus (except for one military excursion into Damascus by Aristobulus II), Israel lived at peace and prospered during the reign of Queen Alexandra. On her deathbed in 67 BC, she named her oldest son **Hyrchanus II** to become her successor. Now Aristobulus saw his chance. Within three months, he brought his army to attack his brother. Hyrchanus didn’t have much of an army. He lost at Jericho; at Jerusalem, and again at the temple. He was finally forced to surrender and give the kingdom to **Aristobulus II**.

CHAPTER 56 – THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Hyrchanus II took refuge with Aretas III, ruler of the Kingdom of Nabataea. Antipater the Idumean now saw his opportunity. He had been appointed by King Alexander Jannaeus as the general of the military in southern Judea. With a few bribes and pledges, he got the Nabataeans to agree to help put Hyrchanus ‘back on the throne’, knowing he himself would then control all of Judea through the weak king. They attacked Aristobulus with 50,000 troops, besieging Jerusalem for several months. So Aristobulus II appealed to Rome to send their legions to defend him.

But at the same time, Hyrchanus II appealed to Rome for help in regaining his rightful throne! To tell this story, we will have to back up a bit. Remember General Sulla, the mad dictator, who retired to his country villa in 80 BC? The Roman Republic had bred some great statesmen and generals to replace him. Among them were Julius Caesar, Marcus Crassus, and **Gnaeus Pompey**, as well as the famous orator Cicero, and Cato the Stoic. We’ll talk about the others later; right now we need to know more about Pompey. His father had been slain in the civil wars between Marius and Sulla, and Pompey had inherited a vast family fortune. His career was aided by a lucky choice to side with Sulla rather than Marius. He showed excellent military sense in defeating the generals of Marius who opposed him, and early won the title Magnus (‘the Great’) from Sulla. He became a talented and ambitious general, one of Sulla’s most successful. He won famous victories in Italy, Sicily, and Africa. It was after his victory in Sicily that he uttered his famous line, “Stop citing laws to us who have swords on our sides!” He had an unbroken string of victories under his belt when Sulla retired in 80 BC.

This continued in the 70s, when he finally defeated Marius’ general Sertorius in Hispania. There he showed his true genius, by reorganizing the conquered province with fair and generous terms, which brought the Iberian Peninsula back under the Roman umbrella. Then on his way home, he came across 5,000 escaping refugees from a rebel slave army of Spartacus that Marcus Crassus had defeated. He slaughtered them all, ending the rebellion.

When he got to Rome he tried to take all the credit for it, asserting, “Crassus may have defeated them, but I cut out the rebellion by its roots!” Infuriated, Crassus pointed to Pompey’s talent for showing up late in a campaign then trying to grab the glory. But the people loved him, electing Pompey to Consul in 71 BC at only 35 years of age.

In 67 BC, Pompey was given command of a naval force to clear out the Mediterranean Sea of pirates, along with unprecedented powers over every other military leader outside of Italy. He completed the almost impossible task by the next summer, again showing incredible abilities as a military man, and as an organizer and administrator. He was hailed as the ‘First Among Equals’. His was the empire for the taking. Some in the Senate began to fear him.

Now Pompey was assigned the task of taking charge of the Mithridatic Wars in the East. He concluded the war with King Mithridates VI of Pontus, making Pontus a Roman province. He renewed Roman control over the rest of the Anatolian Peninsula. In 64 BC he advanced into Syria, deposing weak King **Antiochus XIII** at Damascus, making Syria a Roman province and ending the Seleucid Empire. Finally Pompey sent his general Marcus Scaurus down into the Levant – *precisely at the time the brothers Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II were fighting over Judea*.

Both brothers gave bribes to General Scaurus. He decided in favor of the larger bribe – the \$30,000 from Aristobulus. Thus he ordered King Aretas III to withdraw his troops. This was a crushing defeat for the Nabataeans. Hyrcanus decided to appeal to a higher authority. He and a group of Scribes and Pharisees went to General Pompey to explain the situation. But other Judean leaders also came to Pompey, begging him to just slay both brothers and end their bickering. Pompey finally came to Jerusalem to see for himself. At first Aristobulus gave him another bribe to take his side. Then he got suspicious and fled, barricading himself in Jerusalem. Finally realizing how stupid that was, Aristobulus attempted to surrender. But now his own followers refused to open Jerusalem's gates. So Pompey besieged and captured the city by force, badly damaging it and killing 12,000 Judeans who had resisted him.

Pompey had always wanted to see for himself if the Judeans really had no idols or images in their temple. It was inconceivable to worship a God without seeing His image! He demanded to enter the most holy place. Of course some of the priests forbade him, but he callously slew them on the altar and went in anyway.

Nobody knows what he saw in there, except it was not the idol he expected. He was forever changed. He backed out in reverence. He took nothing from the temple, and even apologized to the priests for what he had done. The next day he ordered the priests to cleanse the temple, and he himself paid for the sacrifices required. With all that, he barely made it out of there alive. I'm not sure the Judeans ever forgave the Romans for that sacrilege.

Pompey made the land of Judah a Roman province. Antipater the Idumean became 'Secretary of State'. He held the actual reins of power. Pompey was a good judge of character. He saw the ambition and pride in Aristobulus II and sent him to Rome in chains. He recognized the kinder, more loyal nature of Hyrcanus II and restored him as the ruling high priest, but not as a king. Thus the Hasmonean kingdom and Judean independence ended in 63 BC. Pompey reorganized it into five districts: Galilee, Samaria, Judea, Idumaea, and Peraea [note the Roman spellings].

In a series of escapes, Aristobulus continued to try to restore the Hasmonean kingdom. He was assassinated in 49 BC. His son Antigonus II Mattathias was killed by King Herod in 37 BC, ending the line of the ruling Maccabees.

Pompey returned to Rome in well-deserved triumph. He was hailed as the Conqueror of Asia. The three most powerful Roman leaders, Crassus, Pompey, and Caesar, formed a league, known as the Triumvirate. Cicero was also invited, but refused because he feared the league would undermine the Republic. (He was right.) Cato, one of the few truly honest and selfless men left in the Roman Senate, actively opposed the many abuses of power by the Triumvirate. They commissioned him to govern Cyprus just to get him out of their hair. But later, Cato, unwilling to go on living in a world led by Caesar, committed suicide. Eventually, Cicero was banished, with all his oratory.

The Roman Triumvirate was at its formation the most powerful force in the world, with the invincible Roman legions at its command. In truth the Roman Republic had been struck a death blow, though it was some years before its fall. Cicero and Cato were right; it is too dangerous for so much power to be consolidated into the hands of so few.

Marcus Crassus had won some famous battles, but he was primarily known for being one of the richest men in history. He was covetous and greedy. You can be sure not all of his wealth was gained legally. He also was proud, and eager for fame and glory, which eventually cost him his life. He gained power in part because he supported Sulla against Marius; in part because of his victory against the slave revolt led by Spartacus; and in part because wealth buys power. But his chief significance in our story was his financial and political support of an impoverished young man named Julius Caesar. Crassus died in 53 BC while on a military campaign against the Parthians. He had come to win even more glory and gold for himself. The Parthian king in derision cut off his head and ordered it filled with molten gold – his great wealth had 'gone to his head'.

Julius Caesar is arguably the most famous man of Ancient Rome. Thousands of books have been written about him, and I do not intend to duplicate their work. But I must summarize a few of his achievements to set the stage for the return of the Messiah. As I said, of all the people that Sulla had purged, Julius Caesar should have been at the top of his list. He had now proven to be a brilliant military leader, statesman, and orator, though he was rather lavish with Crassus' money. He was also ruthless, calculating, and ambitious; his fervent lament was that Alexander the Great had conquered the world by the age of 33, while at that age he had achieved but his first few steps in Roman politics. In my mind, history seems to treat Julius Caesar overly kindly. He achieved power through intimidation, threats, bribes, back-stabbing, name-calling, and twisting of the laws for his own benefit. Sulla had set the precedent by making himself dictator. Julius Caesar took that much further. He was both a fascist and a socialist. In programs calculated to curry favor with the people, he spent lavishly on public entertainment. He even tried forced property redistribution 'for the poor', though as with today's liberal progressives, he actually cared nothing for the poor.

Again as with most liberals today, Caesar only used other people's money for his generosity, and considered laws but tools to use against any who opposed him. But he needed military fame as well as political success. So he led four Roman legions into Gaul and conquered the German barbarians there, driving them east of the Rhine. With this remarkable display of military genius, he won the public acclaim he desired. Pompey, once his ally in his quest for power, now began to fear him. With the death of Crassus in 53 BC, the Triumvirate also died. Pompey declared an emergency and got himself elected 'sole consul' – a polite term for dictator. He then joined forces with the senate conservatives to 'preserve the Republic', first by limiting Caesar's power. Finally he ordered Caesar to disband his army and return to Rome to stand trial for insubordination and treason. (Both accusations were inarguably true.)

Roman law prohibited any Roman from bringing an army into Italy. The northern boundary for this law was the Rubicon River, just south of the Po River Valley. But on January 10, 49 BC, Caesar brought his army across the Rubicon, saying, "The dice are cast." Thus he deliberately provoked civil war. Pompey, who went to confront him, had more troops, but was out-foxed and forced to flee. Within 60 days Caesar made himself sole consul (dictator) and tribune for life, ending the Republic. Caesar pursued Pompey to Thessaly and defeated his army at Pharsalus. Again Pompey fled, this time to Alexandria, Egypt.

There young Ptolemy XIII was advised to try to win Caesar's favor by assassinating Pompey. He did, but it did not win Caesar's favor! He was outraged! He wept at his former friend's fate. He overcame Ptolemy XIII, deposed him, executed his regent/advisor, and elevated his sister Queen Cleopatra VII to the throne of Egypt. She married her younger brother Ptolemy XIV just to legitimize her reign, but Caesar was her true lover. Cleopatra and Caesar had a son, Ptolemy XV Caesarion. He was the last Ptolemy to hold the Egyptian throne before Egypt also fell under the heel of the Roman Empire.

Caesar consolidated his empire over the next few years. He defeated King Pharnaces II of Pontus so quickly he mocked Pompey's earlier victories over such easy foes, reporting only to the Senate, "I came, I saw, I conquered." Pompey's supporters gathered against him in Africa, but Caesar defeated them in 46 BC at Thapsus. (It was after this battle that Cato committed suicide.) Caesar had one last battle at Munda in Hispania in 45 BC, where he defeated the two sons of Pompey. He was now effectively the emperor of the world, but still, he refused to be called a king. "I am not king, but Caesar!" he would vow. In time, 'Caesar' came to mean 'god' to many. Conservatives in the Senate assassinated Caesar in 44 BC on the 'Ides of March' in a desperate attempt to restore the Roman Republic. But it was too late. His popularity with the masses forced the assassins to flee. **Gaius Octavius** (his heir) and **Mark Antony** (his best friend) capitalized on that to take power.

After fighting each other awhile, they realized they needed to unite to seize power. In 43 BC they joined with Lepidus in a 2nd Triumvirate. Sadly, it became even more corrupt and brutal than the first. Caesar's assassins Brutus and Cassius brought an army to resist them, but were defeated at Philippi, and in despair committed suicide. Cicero supported Caesar's designated heir, Octavius, but denounced the brash ambitions of Mark Antony in fiery orations. Cicero was killed, as were most conservatives who wanted a return of the Republic. It was a bloodbath.

The three tyrants of the 2nd Triumvirate now divided the empire among them. Mark Antony took the Middle East, Asia Minor, and Egypt. Octavius controlled Latium, Hispania, and Gaul. Lepidus got only Africa, though he tried to get Hispania as well. When he failed at that, he tried for Sicily in 38 BC, stealing some of the soldiers of Octavius. That gave Octavius the excuse he needed to remove him from power entirely and take over Africa.

Gaius Octavius changed names a lot. I'll cover a few here to avoid confusion. He was renamed Gaius Julius Caesar Octavian when his great uncle Julius Caesar (who had no legitimate heir) adopted him. So for a long time he was known as Octavian, though he never liked that name. He preferred Caesar, to which he later added Augustus.

In 42 BC, Mark Antony went to Tarsus. While there, he summoned Cleopatra VII to answer for her support of Brutus and Cassius against him. Knowing which side her political bread was buttered on, she poured on the charm and managed to seduce him. He went to Alexandria with her and spent the winter in a wildly extravagant affair which scandalized Rome. She bore him two children. Mark Antony planned to make Egypt a power base for his empire. It tickled him no end to have the mistress of his closest friend (Julius Caesar) as his own lover. He swore he could see Caesar in her son and co-regent, Caesarion.

Antipater the Idumean, along with Hyrcanus II, had supported Julius Caesar against Ptolemy XIII. In return Caesar had appointed Antipater as procurator of Judea. Antipater made his sons Phasael and Herod the governors of Jerusalem and Galilee in 47 BC, to start the Herodian Dynasty. But Antipater foolishly sided with Brutus and Cassius against Mark Antony, so he got poisoned in 43 BC.

Herod married a Hasmonean princess and grew strong in Galilee. When Aristobulus' son Antigonus II invaded in 44 BC, Herod, with the support of the Roman occupying forces, defeated him. Antigonus hated the Romans almost as much as his ancestor, Mattathias, had hated the Greeks. He worked hard to garner enough support to overthrow the Romans and restore Judean independence and the Hasmonean kingdom. The Parthians had also supported Brutus and Cassius in the civil war against the dictators. They occupied Syria and parts of Asia Minor in defiance of Rome. So Antigonus got them on his side. They supported his invasion of Judea in 40 BC. This time he was successful.

He seized Jerusalem and sent Hyrcanus II (his uncle) to Babylon in chains (after biting off his ears to render him ineligible for the office of high priest.) He took the name **Antigonus II Mattathias** when he was anointed king of the 'Jews' (the Roman name for Judeans), and proclaimed himself their savior and messiah. He ruled Judea for three years, the last of the Hasmonean line. But Logos was not happy with him. His evil rule was based on power and pride, reflecting the decadence now widespread in Judea.

Herod fled Judea to seek help from Mark Antony. Antony finally woke up from his torrid love affair to see his responsibilities for the rest of his empire, which except for Egypt was falling down around his ears. He returned to Rome in 40 BC, ostensibly to visit his sick wife Fulvia, but she had already died. Antony pled Herod's case before the Roman senate. They agreed. They declared Antigonus II a usurper and **Herod** the legitimate 'king of the Jews'.

In support of Antony, Fulvia and her brother Lucius had fought against Octavian, but he had exiled them and slain all their allies. When Antony returned to Rome, he tried to attack Octavian for his earlier aggression, but their centurions wisely agreed not to fight each other. So in the end, they allied. Antony married Octavian's sister, Octavia Minor, to seal the deal. They agreed that Antony would send ships for Octavian's fight over Corsica and Sardinia against Sextus Pompeius; then Octavian would provide troops for Antony's upcoming fight against the Parthians. Antony went to Greece with his new wife for a rather extravagant honeymoon (he claimed to be the Greek god Dionysus). Octavian finally beat Sextus, but then double-crossed Antony by first refusing to send any troops, and then sending too few. Antony had to return to his mistress Cleopatra in Alexandria to get troops to beat the Parthians.

So it was 37 BC before Antony was able to install Herod as puppet king of Judea. Herod ruthlessly squelched the freedoms that Antigonus II Mattathias had fought so hard to win. Then, in an amazing precedent, King Herod had Antigonus, 'king of the Jews', their savior, their messiah, scourged and crucified on a Roman cross, a punishment no other king had suffered at the hands of the Romans.

As I'm sure you can imagine, Marc Antony earned the Jews' undying hatred for himself, the Romans, and Herod. Antony returned to Alexandria to marry Cleopatra (even though he was still married to Octavia Minor). His forces were mostly victorious over the Parthians, conquering much of Armenia, Syria, Phoenicia, and Libya.

Cleopatra got visions of grandeur. She was crowned 'Queen of Kings'. She planned to use the east to conquer Rome. Her burning desire was to become 'Empress of the world at Rome', and to inaugurate a new 'universal world kingdom'. She and Antony crowned their sons kings under them. Antony declared Caesarion as a legitimate son and true heir of Julius Caesar, proclaiming him 'King of Kings', destined to rule the world with Cleopatra.

This was a fatal breach of the 2nd Triumvirate and a direct threat to Octavian, since he was only an adopted son of Caesar. Octavian accused Antony before the Roman Senate of neglecting his legal wife Octavia Minor in favor of his 'oriental paramour'. Antony (while still in Egypt) divorced Octavia, then accused Octavian of being a social clod, usurping power, and forging his adoption papers! These accusations flew back and forth for several years, before Octavian pulled out his trump card. He managed by force to obtain Antony's will. It granted Roman conquered territories to his own sons by Cleopatra, and ordered that his tomb be built in Alexandria next to Cleopatra. That sounded enough like treason for the Roman Senate revoke Antony's powers as consul and declare war against Egypt.

The navies of Antony and Cleopatra met Octavian's navy on the Ionian Sea, just outside the bay of the Roman colony of Actium, Greece. It was September 2, 31 BC when Antony took 230 heavy warships out of the harbor to meet Octavian's 400 faster and more-maneuverable vessels. He should not have gone, for his cause was lost from the start. Too many of his men had fallen sick or deserted, so he had not enough to man the oars, which would be essential for his heavy ships to ram their opponents. Worse, one of his generals had deserted and given Octavian his battle plan. Antony didn't stand a chance. Cleopatra realized it. She deserted him and fled with her navy back to Egypt. So Antony abandoned his doomed fleet to pursue her.

Octavian next invaded Egypt. Many of Antony's men deserted him! He cried out that Cleopatra must have betrayed and deserted him a second time. She, fearing his wrath, locked herself in her fortress with two maidens and sent word that she had committed suicide. When Antony heard that, he couldn't bear it. He fell on his sword and lay down to die. When Cleopatra heard the news, she asked that he be brought to the fortress with her, where he died in her arms. She then committed suicide by poking at a poisonous Egyptian cobra until it bit her twice on the arm. Very romantic and dramatic, but rather sad, just the same.

Octavian captured Alexandria, and annexed Egypt into the Roman Empire on August 1, 30 BC.

Seventeen-year-old Ptolemy XV Caesarion, 'King of Kings', had been sent to Port Berenice for safety. Octavian brought him back and promptly executed him, saying, "Two Caesars is one too many!" Thus the Ptolemaic line ended and Octavian took absolute control of Egypt.

Now Octavian showed his true political genius. Rather than just take over the empire he now in fact controlled, he returned power to the Roman Senate and relinquished control of the Roman provinces and their armies, offering himself a 'humble servant of the Senate'. Thus assured that they were still in charge, they gave him back his powers. He repeated this farce every ten years, pretending to lay down his rank in order to keep the Senate's trust, while in fact exercising absolute power over the 'Republic'.

But it was a republic no more. Octavian was granted the title of Augustus in January, 27 BC. He used it from then on. This was not just a simple name change. The name 'Octavian' was inseparably linked with the reign of terror he had used in coming to power. That had to go. 'Augustus' was more of a religious title, meaning 'revered one', or 'illustrious one' implying near godhood, like the name 'Caesar'. So to call him '**Caesar Augustus**' was to worship his divine power – a cut above us mere mortals.

Augustus quickly consolidated his empire, north to Germany, west through Gaul and Hispania, south all along the African coast, and east through Greece and Asia to Assyria. His adoring public was, however, disappointed when he (wisely) decided not to invade Parthia. There his expansion ended. He was a rare exception to the rule, 'A rich man is never quite rich enough; a famous man is never adored enough; and a ruler's empire is always too small.' He had enough! Now, if only he could rule it well.

Though he only reigned from 27 BC to 14 AD, Caesar Augustus began what we know as the 'Pax Romana' (Roman Peace), which lasted for 200 years up to 180 AD. They did have rebellions and border skirmishes, but for the most part Rome ceased its aggressive expansion and concentrated on bringing stability, peace, and prosperity to its many far-flung provinces. Augustus was a political and military genius; now he proved himself a genius at running an empire, as well. He lived modestly, at home rather than in a palace. His toga was woven by his own wife. He walked humbly before his fellow senators. He revived the worship of the ancient Roman gods. His friends were men of learning. He built roads and great public works. He beautified Rome so much it was said, "He found it a city of brick, and left it a city of marble."

He organized Rome's first police force and fire brigade. He kept the people entertained and well-fed from the grain of Egypt. There were no more civil wars, pirates, hostile fleets, or attacking armies. He brought trade, civilization, education, and stable government all over the empire. Roman citizenship was highly esteemed. Unlike foolish multiculturalists of our day, he ensured communication throughout a unified empire by enforcing one common language. He installed a mail courier system with guarded relay stations. He virtually eliminated bandits along the king's highways. He protected his empire by negotiating peace treaties with the 'client states' all around his borders and by stationing 'rapid response' military garrisons in strategic places, with orders to instantly quash hints of rebellion. Villains were punished instantly and harshly. Peace was enforced. Taxes were consistent and generally fair. Though technically in bondage to Rome, in practice those who remained submitted were free to pursue the arts, science, religion, and literature, as well as travel and free trade. Indeed, even freedom of speech was tolerated, unless one spoke out against the Caesar! So tell me, is a wise, noble, kind, and generous tyrant still a tyrant?

CHAPTER 57 – IS IT TIME FOR MESSIAH?

King Herod, now sole ruler in Judea, owed his throne to Mark Antony. He renamed the Acra in Jerusalem 'the Tower of Antonia'. While consolidating his throne, Herod murdered venerable Hyrcanus II, as well as many others, including three of his own children. The Hasmonean Dynasty had ended; the Herodian Dynasty had begun.

Herod ruled Judea for 36 years. After Antony's death, he quickly won the favor of Caesar Augustus. Herod was politically astute, as well as militarily smart. He reigned in splendor. He expanded his boundaries both north and south. His building projects were unrivaled. He erected a series of massive fortresses; rebuilt and magnificently adorned cities such as Samaria, Jerusalem, and Jericho; renamed Strato's Tower Caesarea in honor of Augustus; built theaters and stadia; sponsored plays and sporting contests; and his greatest work of all (begun in 20 BC), he re-constructed and enlarged the temple at Jerusalem.

But as with most rulers of his day, he was utterly mad and unspeakably cruel to boot. He married ten wives and had lots of kids, but the majority of them he eventually murdered. His entire palace lived on edge, with nearly continual intrigues and scandals. Everywhere, he honored Caesar with inscriptions, trophies, statues, and idols so his loyalty would not be questioned, yet he was still paranoid that he would somehow be deposed. He was always afraid of plots within his own family; he revised his will to change his heir and successor six times! He became a gloomy tyrant, suspecting a conspiracy behind the tiniest incident. He set up an elaborate spy system, and later even began to prohibit public meetings. Roman soldiers could pop up any time, anywhere, watching, listening, poking around – a word spoken against himself or against Caesar Augustus was punishable by death. Herod's evil and sadistic rule made the Jews long for a return of the good old days of 'oppression' under the Hasmonean kings.

So now we have one more influential group in Judea: the **Herodians**. They truly believed that the best thing that they could do for their country is to cooperate with Herod and the Roman occupation! Some of the **Hellenist** party became Herodians. But most of the **Chasidim** did not. Indeed, Herodians were few; the vast majority of the Jews hated the Romans with a purple passion. Their 100 years of freedom in the Hasmonean kingdom had spoiled them. Their oppression under King Herod was even worse than under the worst of the Seleucid kings.

Remember, **Pharisees** are the pious teachers of the law at the Synagogues, the party of the people. **Scribes** are lawyers who support them. **Sadducees** are chief priests who enforce the temple rituals, the party of the rich. **Essenes** are religious separatists, ultra-right conservatives dedicated to preserving the old ways. Now all of these **Chasidim** parties groaned under the oppression, and cried out for Messiah to return as Daniel had prophesied.

Logos heard their cries. He agonized with them; felt every pain; wept at every teardrop; mourned each death. He dropped out of the Dance. He left his glorious throne with all its joy and laughter to walk the dark streets of the Holy City. His body shook in sorrow. He longed to hug his precious Bride, to cover her, save her, set her free.

But there in Jerusalem stood Satan, god of this evil world, present by invitation from the Judeans.

Satan was surprisingly understanding. “You really do love them, don’t You? I must admit, I cannot comprehend such love. It just seems silly for You to put Yourself out for these worthless ones. You’ve already lost them, You know. As many times as You’ve revealed Yourself and Your Law to them, so many times they have quickly returned to me, whom they really love. Your so-called Bride will always be a spoiled baby, crying to You for milk when she’s hungry, but running away to selfish pleasures when she’s satisfied. I think my point is pretty self-evident by now! Why don’t You just forget her? If You’re really the Creator, why should You suffer like this? Why should You feel her pain? I’ll take care of her – give her what she really deserves. You just go back to Your Father and start over. Maybe You’ll have better luck next time.”

Logos looked at Satan in silence. Satan smiled back, uncharacteristically patient and peaceful, and for once in his life not running off at the mouth. The temptation was strong. But Logos shook His head. “Have you forgotten what I told you, Satan? That I am willing to die to redeem My beloved? Have you forgotten your own promise, that when you see it, you will believe in Me?” [Vol 2, page 152]

“Of course I remember, but I thought You were just kidding. If You die, I win! Sure, like I said before, I’ll believe when I see You die. But it’s just too bad You won’t be around to enjoy my victory celebration!”

“I don’t kid. Remember your vow. And thank you for working with Me on this; I really could not do it alone.”

“You... You thank me for killing You? I have always suspected You were a bit crazy, but this takes the cake. However, I always knew I’d win. When can I begin?”

“I don’t know. That is in the Father’s hands. Of course I’ll have to become human, first. But I sense it will be soon. My beloved has no other hope!”

“Y’know, for once I really agree with You, Logos. They really do have no other hope. And I’ve always loved human sacrifice. I’m looking forward to Yours. I’ll cooperate with that entirely, with great delight! You’re welcome.”

The esteemed Rabban Gamaliel III was recognized by the Romans as the head of the Jewish Sanhedrin. He was a grandson of the honored Gamaliel the Elder, founder of the rabbinic academy at Jabneh. Rabban Gamaliel was a Pharisee of the Pharisees, a teacher and interpreter of the law, a stickler for details, and intolerant of opposing views.

But Rabban Gamaliel knew the law better than anyone in Judea; that no one could deny! He knew all the sacred writings, the prophets, and the Mishnah (oral traditions of Judaism). So when he spoke, everyone listened, whether Sadducee, Pharisee, Scribe, even Essenes and Herodians! Now he arranged a big meeting of all the leaders of Judea. “I’ve been studying the prophecies of Daniel,” he began. “Especially Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the statue. We know that He was the head of gold. The Medo-Persian Empire was the silver chest and its arms were its expansion east and west. Alexander was the belly of bronze, with the Ptolemies and Seleucids as the two bronze thighs. I now believe that the Roman Empire, which has conquered both the Ptolemies and Seleucids, is the legs of iron!”

“Doesn’t fit,” said a Sadducee. (They love nothing more than to argue with Pharisees.) “I too thought that at first, with Octavian in the north and west and Antony in the south and east. But Octavian now rules the entire empire. The symbolism fails. There must be two legs of iron!”

“How dare you tell the Almighty how to fulfill His prophecies?” Gamaliel glared at him. “There are a million other ways He can make the analogy fit. Maybe Herod is one leg here, while Caesar is the other in Rome. Maybe the legs are Roman roads, and how rapidly they can march their soldiers anywhere in the...”

“Herod can’t be a leg. If anything, he’s a foot of clay!” a lawyer shouted. From that point the group descended into chaos for a while, as such meetings are apt to do whenever you get Pharisees or their scribes in the same room with Sadducees. Finally Gamaliel banged his sandal on the table for silence. “Shut up! Let me finish. Then you can squabble all you want.”

They all shut up, a bit ashamed of themselves. But a zealous young man who had studied under Gamaliel was still standing there with his hand up. As his own student, Gamaliel couldn’t just ignore him. “Sir? I think the Roman empire is just the western leg. The Romans stopped going east after subduing Syria. The Parthians have conquered the entire eastern half of the Seleucid Empire. They’re pretty cruel, too. I think the Parthians are the eastern leg.”

It was a novel suggestion. Nobody could deny it. So they settled down. Gamaliel nodded. “Thank you, son. As I said, there are many ways YHWH could fulfill His Word. The point is, from the legs of iron come the feet of iron mixed with clay. Look at Herod. Just like you said, he already looks like a foot of clay! Corruption and violence has already run rampant through the empire. With their idolatry and wickedness, it won’t be long before the statue comes crashing down. Then what was next in Daniel’s dream? The stone cut out of the mountain without hands! Messiah! *‘In the time of those kings, YHWH will set up a Kingdom which shall never be destroyed! It will crush and destroy all the kingdoms of men, but it will endure forever!’* I believe – I hope and pray – that the time is near!”

A holy hush settled over the group. Suddenly no longer bickering factions, they were one. “Come, Messiah!!” someone breathed, answered by, “Amen and amen!” from several voices. Tears began to trickle down many cheeks, as a Messianic fervor swept the room. Rabban Gamaliel III squared his chin to calm his trembling jaw, wiped a tear from his own eye, and bravely continued. “I’ve done some calculations from Daniel’s prophecy of the seventy sevens of years. It’s hard to know where it begins, as there were several decrees to restore Jerusalem. But we know the demon prince already ‘put a stop to the regular sacrifice’ and committed ‘the ultimate abomination in the most holy place’. So I think it is just about time for Messiah to destroy this damnable Roman Empire and its feet of clay, and set up His everlasting Kingdom of righteousness!”

The entire group erupted in hallelujah’s and amen’s. Surprisingly, even the dour Herodians joined in. Fervent prayers came from every heart, as their deep longing for Messiah awakened within. It was incredible. Never had such unified prayers ascended in sweet-smelling incense from such a large and diverse group of Jewish leaders. The Father in eternity hears. He smiles.

Logos stared at Satan, appalled and revolted that the glorious being He had created as Lucifer had sunk so low as to love human sacrifice and to look forward to killing his Creator. He desperately wanted to say something; to show him the depth of depravity to which he had fallen; to tell him of the power of love over death; to communicate how the blood sacrifice can break the shackles and set a person free from the power of sin and death. He wanted to reach out and give Satan a much-needed hug, then set him on His knee and tell him how much he loved him. But He could not. He knew beyond a shadow of doubt it could not be received. Satan could be reached by nothing short of the fiery torments in the pit of hell. Logos dropped His gaze.

Satan saw that moment of indecision and began to laugh. But Logos did not hear, for the Father was calling by His Holy Spirit, and Logos’ total focus had turned inward. “Come!” Spirit called. “Come Home!”

Instantly, Logos vanished from Jerusalem in a sudden blaze of glory which caused Satan to fling himself back shrieking and cover his eyes. Logos flashed through the space-time-spirit universe at the speed of thought (which is the fastest speed possible in the created realm, and would appear to us as infinite.) Thus the Light of the World passed completely out of His time bubble in only a moment, to enter eternity. No words are used in eternity; no need of words, for all is known. But I must put words to it, for until this instant all was not known for Logos, who from the beginning of time had lived within created time. “I’m Home, Father! You called?”

“Yes, My Son. I called. But not because Your work is done. Tell Me again. Are You disappointed? Is Your Bride worth saving? Do you still love her?”

Logos laughs, joining with the music that fills eternity. “Ha! You heard Satan’s temptation. You’re concerned that I will change with time, as does everything else within My space-time realm. But no! My love for her cannot change. She is just as much worth saving as when I first sacrificed the lamb for Adam and Eve. Nothing can disappoint Me, for I trust in Your perfect Plan of the Ages. I am still of the same essence as You, who cannot change.”

“Cannot change? I am asking You to become a man; to take on all the frailties of human flesh.”

“Yes, I know. That is what We agreed. But My soul will not change. Our Spirit who guides Me will not change. How could I fail to give Myself for her?”

“My Son! Spirit will flee when You take upon Yourself the world’s sin. Your soul will go blind, with no anchor to eternity. Cast adrift, You will feel every temptation in full force. I cannot be there to pull You through! I won’t make you do it. Satan’s taunt was valid. Your Bride has indeed rejected You. Shall We pull the plug and start over?”

“I am the Plug! I am the Light of the World! Besides, how could I ever admit to Lucifer and his host that Satan’s ways have won the victory and Mine have failed? The Great Controversy is at stake, here, You know.”

“Lucifer and the angels are created beings. They won’t know. They will all vanish if We pull the plug.”

“We will know!” Logos chuckles. “No, Father. I have put My trust in Your Plan of the Ages, for I know You have matured My Bride to perfection in the end. I will not change. No temptation, no power in the universe could ever cause Your Plan to fail!”

“And that is why I called You Home. For the first time, You are mistaken, My Son. When You become human You will change. So far You’ve known only infallible divinity; You have no idea the weakness of fallible humanity. You will start as a helpless baby, to learn, grow, and mature as humans do. Even after you discover My Spirit, You will still have times when You must struggle to hear Me and prayer seems an impossible burden, or times when Satan’s temptations seem stronger than the pull of Our love. When You take upon Yourself all the sins of the world, when Spirit flees Your sinful flesh, You will have nothing left to secure Your soul to Me. I cannot be with You then, You know. There is indeed a very real chance that You will fall, My Plan of the Ages will fail, the universe will cease to exist, and You, My beloved Son, will be forever lost.”

Logos is no longer laughing. “The risk then is not Mine, for I gladly give up My life, My soul, My spirit, all that I am, if there is even one chance in all eternity that I can rescue My beloved. No, the risk is Yours, that You might lose Me! Will You please take that risk for the sake of My Bride?”

The Father of Eternity smiles. “Yes, I will! Go, My beloved Son. Your choice is My choice. It is time.”

THE END OF VOLUME FOUR

This volume is preceded by *Volume One – The Feasts of Israel, God’s Plan of the Ages*, which presents the theological and historical background necessary to understand the story of God’s Plan of the Ages.

This volume is also preceded by *Volume Two – The Beginning of Time through Moses*.

This volume is also preceded by *Volume Three – Joshua through King Jotham*.

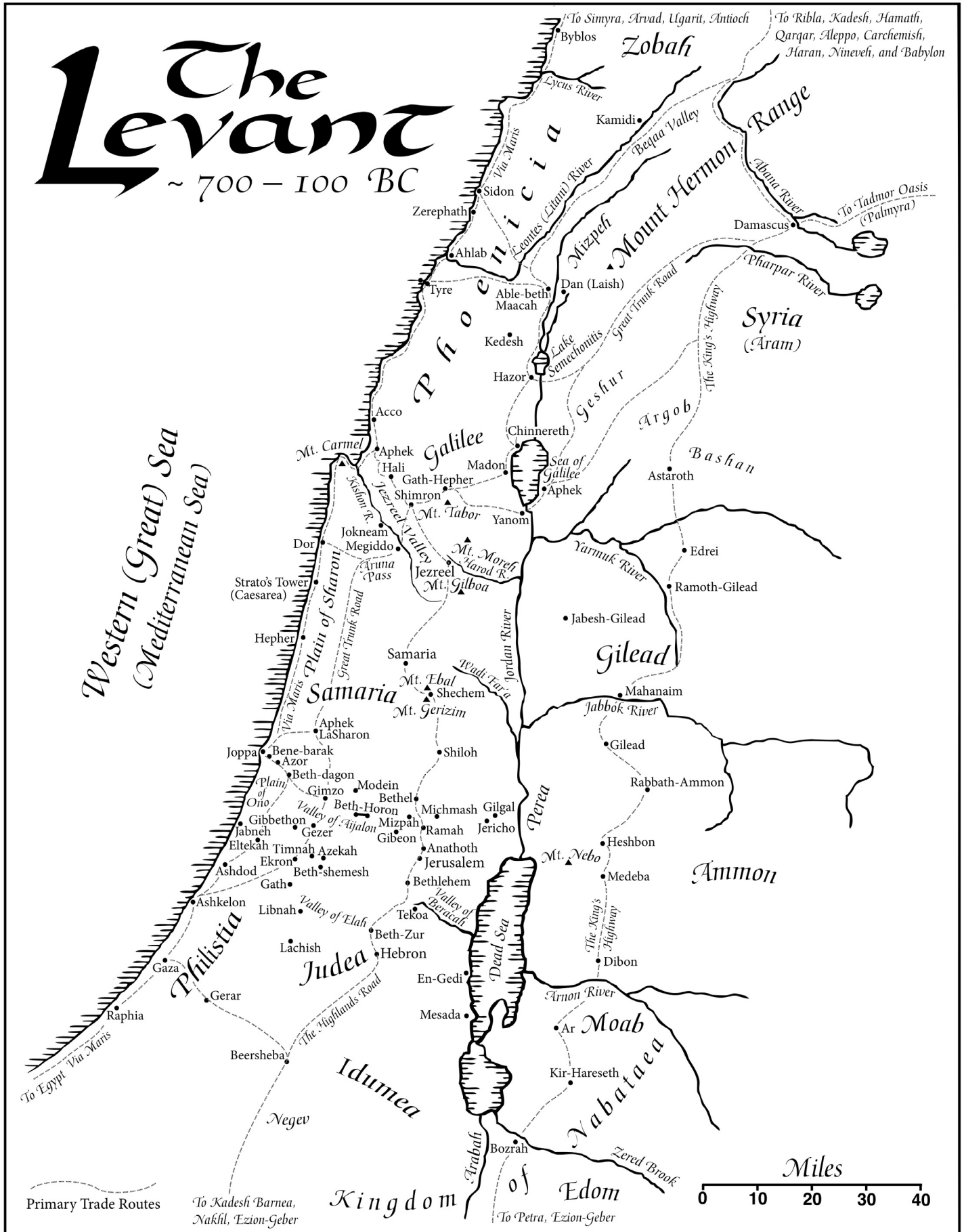
The historical fiction story is concluded in *Volume Five – Messiah through the End of Time*.

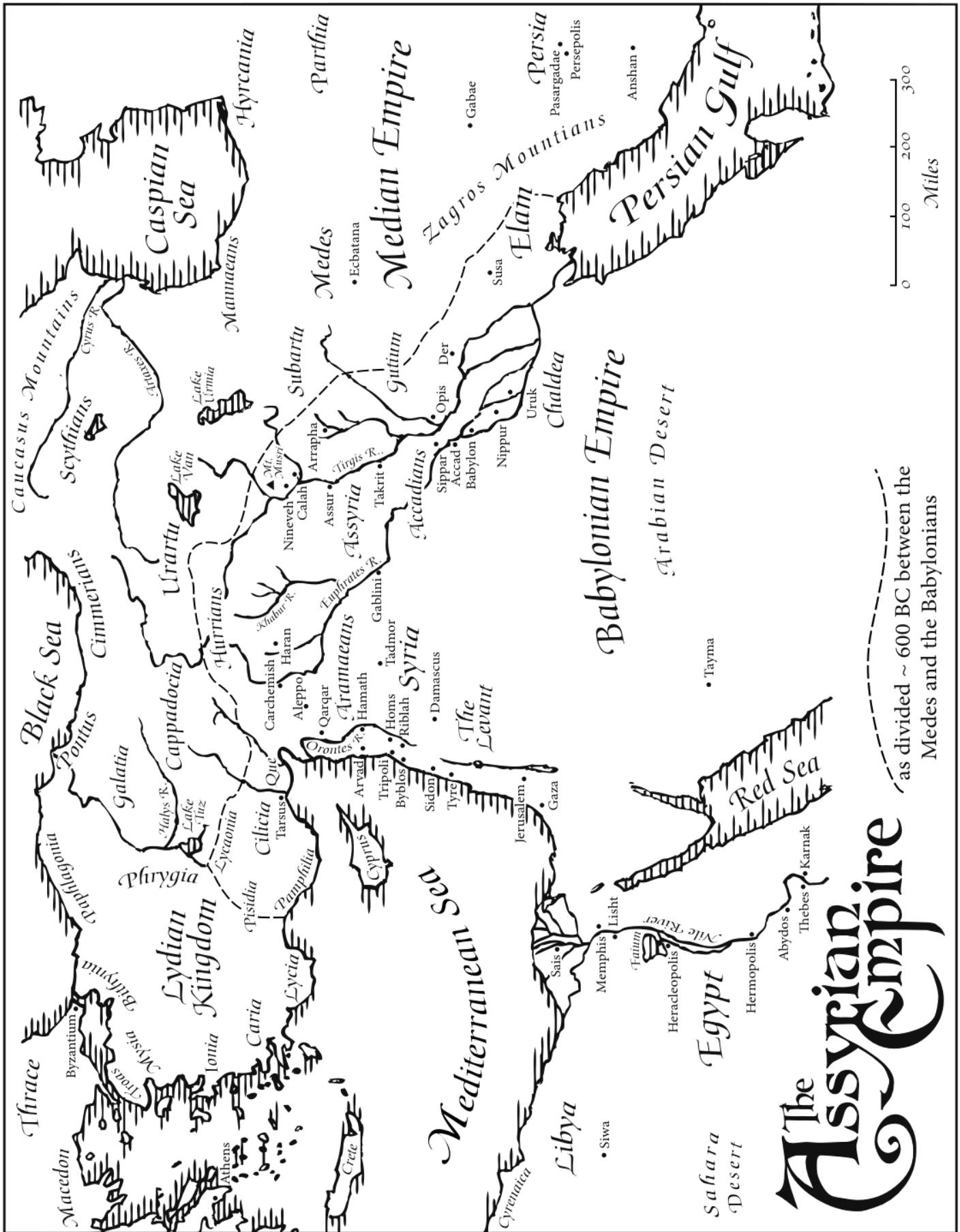
Date BC	Timeline for Volume 4
738	Jotham reigns in Judah. 2nd yr of Pekah of Israel
737	Rezin and Pekah conquer Elath from Judah
736	Hezekiah born of Ahaz. Civil war in Egypt ends
735	Ahaz co-regent w/Jotham. Rezin and Pekah attack
734	Rezin and Pekah kill Jotham's sons; capture Ahaz Zichri son of Tabeel rules in Jerusalem 2 yrs
732	Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria subdues the Levant releases Ahaz, kills Rezin; Hoshea reigns in Israel Zichri is slain. Jotham restores the throne of David Pekah returns, takes throne, banishes foolish Hoshea
730	Ahaz age 25 again crowned co-regent with Jotham
729	Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria conquers Babylon
723	Jotham retires. Ahaz reigns in Judah
722	Merodach-baladan usurps the throne of Babylon
720	Mars flyby is early; out of resonance. No cataclysm
719	Hoshea kills Pekah and Jotham; reigns again in Israel
718	Hoshea allies with Shoshenk IV against Assyria
716	Ahaz dies. His son Hezekiah reigns In Judah
712	Shalmaneser V, Sargon II of Assyria besiege Samaria Sargon II attacks Merodach-baladan in Babylon again
710	Sargon II conquers Israel; deports the 'ten lost tribes'
708	Manasseh born of Hezekiah in Judah
704	Sargon II dies. Sennacherib king of Assyria /Babylon
702	October Mars flyby is a month early, totally benign
701	March Mars flyby is early. Crosses Venus' orbit and passes on wrong side of Earth. System unravels Sennacherib attacks Jerusalem; his army is wiped out Merodach-baladan allies w/Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:12)
696	Manasseh age 12 co-regency with Hezekiah
694	The Elamites capture Babylon from the Assyrians
693	Sennacherib conquers Babylon again
690	Taharqa (Nubian Dynasty 25) rules Egypt 27 yrs
689	Babylon revolts. Sennacherib/Assyria levels it
687	Hezekiah dies, Manasseh rules Judah
683	Isaiah age 97 prophesies against Manasseh
681	Sennacherib slain; Esarhaddon rules Assyria Esarhaddon begins rebuilding Babylon
680	Isaiah sawn in two by Manasseh; great persecution
676	Amon born of Manasseh age 32
675-4	Esarhaddon subdues Levant including Manasseh
671	Esarhaddon captures Memphis; Taharqa escapes
670	Esarhaddon leaves; Taharqa recaptures Memphis.
669	Esarhaddon tries again; dies. Army goes home
667	Ashurbanipal conquers upper Egypt. Taharqa flees
664	Taharqa dies. Tanutamun retakes upper Egypt Ashurbanipal retakes Memphis, sacks Thebes, and ends Nubian control of Egypt. Pharaoh Psamtik I
654	Ashurbanipal sends Manasseh prisoner to Babylon Amon age 22 rules in Judah in Manasseh's place
652	Manasseh is released; returns to Judah, rules again
648	Josiah born of Amon, Jeremiah born of Hilkiah
641	Manasseh dies. Amon reigns in Judah
640	Amon dies. Josiah age 8 reigns in Judah for 31 yrs
634	Josiah's first son by Zebidah, Johanan, dies
633	Eliakim (Jehoiakim) born of Josiah age 15
632	Josiah marries Hamutal. He begins to seek YHWH
631	Shallum (Joahaz) born of Josiah age 17 and Hamutal
628	12th yr of Josiah - he begins to purge the idolatry
627	Jeremiah begins to prophesy (13th yr of Josiah)
626	Babylon King Nabopolassar declares independence

622	Josiah, age 26, discovers the scroll, initiates reform
621	Nahum prophesies the destruction of Nineveh
618	Mattaniah (Zedekiah) born of Josiah and Hamutal
615	Jeconiah (Coniah) born of Eliakim age 18 Zephaniah prophesies destruction of Nineveh
612	Nabopolassar (w/Medes and Sythians) ends Assyrian Empire. Princess Amytis marries Nebuchadnezzar
611	Pharaoh Psamtik defends Assyria at Haran; he dies
610	Babylon attacks again; Assyrians flee to Carchemish
609	Pharaoh Necho II goes to aid Assyrians, via Israel Josiah dies at Megiddo, trying to stop Pharaoh Necho
608	Joahaz reigns in Judah 3 months. Necho deposes him, makes Jehoiakim king in Judah. Reigns 11 yrs
607	Coniah (Jeconiah) age 8 co-regent with Jehoiakim
605	Necho defeated by Nebuchadnezzar at Carchemish Nebuchadnezzar takes Levant, besieges Jerusalem, takes hostages from the nobility, including Daniel
604	Jeremiah writes to Jehoiakim via Baruch
603	Nebuchadnezzar's dream; he is head of gold (Dan 2)
602	Daniel age 17 finishes training, becomes chief of the Magi
601	Nebuchadnezzar subdues Jehoiakim again
600	Jehoiakim again rebels against Nebuchadnezzar
599	Nebuchadnezzar conquers Judea, besieges Jerusalem
598	Nebuchadnezzar's siege interrupted by Egyptians
597	Jerusalem surrenders 9th of Av. Jehoiakim dies Jeconiah reigns 3 mo. Nebuchadnezzar replaces him w/ Zedekiah ; takes 3023 captives to Babylon
594	Zedekiah goes to Babylon w/Seraiah (Jer. 51:59)
593	Ezekiel's ministry begins; his grand vision, Ezek 1
591	Zedekiah unites the Levant; rebels against Babylon
589	Nebuchadnezzar subdues the Levant except Tyre He begins 18 month siege against Jerusalem
587	Pharaoh Wahibre tries to help; defeated at Lachish Zedekiah bound, taken to Babylon where he dies Jerusalem destroyed, temple burned. Exile begins Gedaliah son of Ahikam governor over remnant Gedaliah slain. Judeans flee to Egypt w/Jeremiah
583	Nebuchadnezzar gets proud; golden statue (Dan 3)
582	Nebuchadnezzar's dream; great tree cut down (Dan 4)
581	Nebuzeradan disciplines Judah, and Egypt
580	Nebuchadnezzar goes insane for seven years
573	Nebuchadnezzar restored. Writes Daniel chapt. 4
570	Nebuzeradan plunders Egypt, kills Hebrews there
565	Zerubbabel born of Pedaiah and Shealti-el's widow
562	Nebuchadnezzar dies. Amel-Marduk king Babylon
561	Amel-Marduk release Jeconiah from prison (Jer 52:31)
560	Amel-Marduk slain. Neriglissar king of Babylon
559	Cyrus is king of Anshan in Persia. Cyrus the Great
557	Neriglissar's son Labashi-Marduk reigns 9 months
556	Nabonidus kills Labashi-Marduk. King of Babylon
553	Belshazzar co-regent at Babylon. Nabonidus goes to Tayma. Daniel's vision of the 4 beasts (Dan 7)
552	Ezekiel marries; his vision of dry bones. He is 71
551	Daniel age 68 vision of the two goats (Dan 8) Median King Astyages invades Persis. Cambyses I and his son Cyrus try to stop him. Cambyses dies
550	Cyrus and Harapagus win the battle for Persepolis
549	Cyrus takes Ecbatana, conquers Median Empire
548	Cyrus allies w/Egypt, marries Nititis. Cambyses II
546	Cyrus conquers King Croesus; subdues Lydia
539	Nabonidus returns from Tayma, deposes Belshazzar

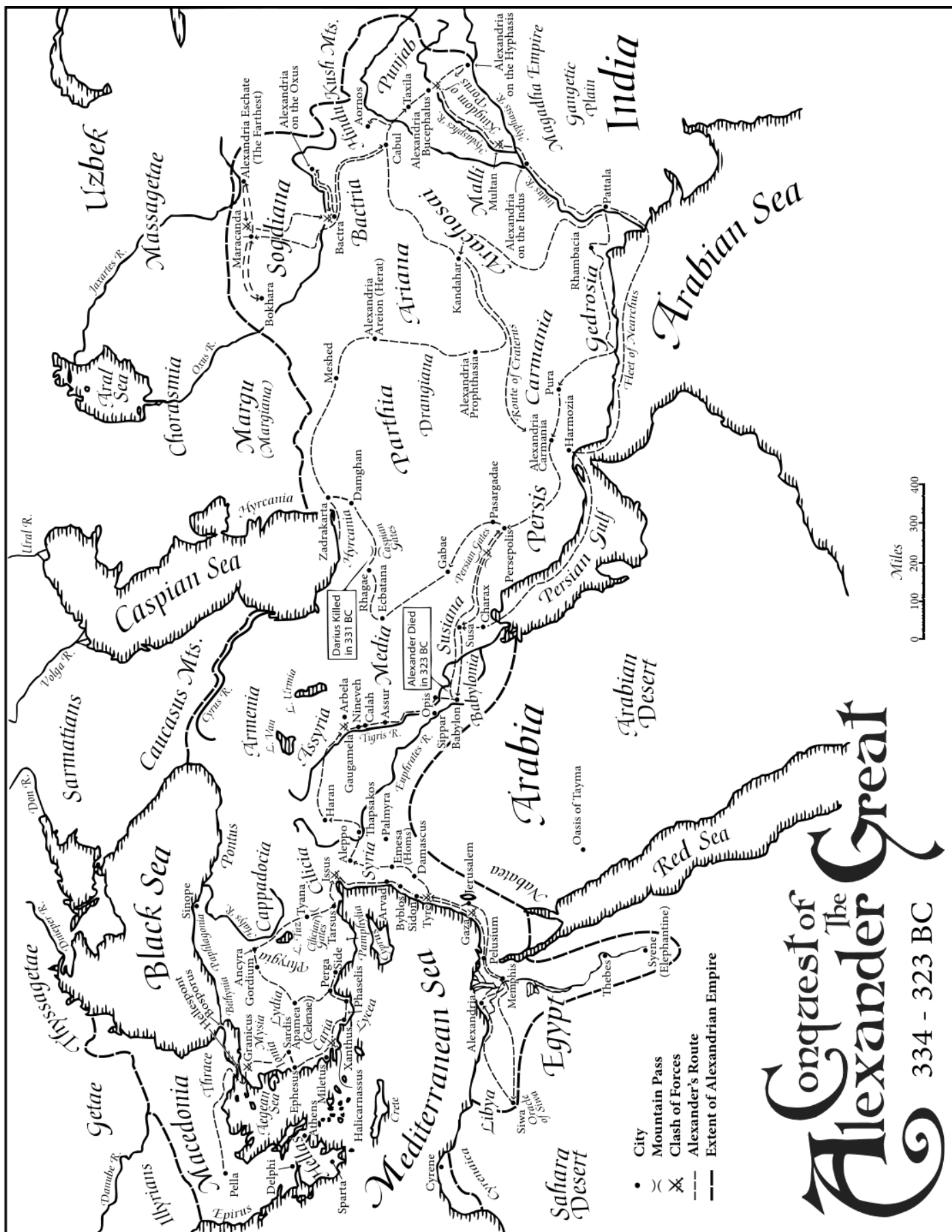
538	Daniel is 81. He interprets writing on wall (Dan 5)
	Fall of Babylon to Persia under Cyrus the Great
537	Daniel in Lion's Den (Dan 6). Cyrus permits Temple
	Exiles return from Babylon under Zerubbabel
535	Ezekiel dies. Vision of Daniel, chapt. 10-12. He is 84
	Work on the Temple in Jerusalem begins in 2nd yr
530	Cyrus slain. Cambyses II king of Persia.
525	Cambyses conquers, rules Egypt - 1st Persian Period
523/2	Insurrection led by Gaumata. Cambyses is slain
522	Darius the Great kills Gaumata; king of Persia 36 yrs
520	Darius contributes toward rebuilding the Temple
	Haggai, Zechariah prophesy. Zerubbabel governor
515	Completion of the Temple under Zerubbabel
490	Persians invade Greece. Darius defeated at Marathon
487/6	Egypt revolts against Persian rule. Darius dies
485	Xerxes I rules Persia; also rules Egypt 21 yrs
483	Xerxes' banquet; Queen Vashti deposed
481/0	Persians invade Greece again, take Macedonia and
	Thessaly, but lose at Thermopylae and Artemisium
480	Xerxes defeated at Salamis, Corinth, and Plataea
479	Persia finally defeated at Mycale. Xerxes goes home
478	Esther queen of Persia, The Greek Delian League
474	Haman is promoted. Mordecai refuses to bow
473/2	Haman's plot to kill the Judeans; the lots. (Est 3:7)
465	Artaxerxes I king of Persia. Nehemiah cupbearer
458	Ezra returns to Jerusalem with 1754. (Ezra 7 and 8)
448	Peace of Callias between Athens, Argos, and Persia
446	Artaxerxes decrees to rebuild Jerusalem on Nisan 1
	Nehemiah governor, returns to Jerusalem. (Neh 2:5)
	He builds the wall in amazing 52 days. (Neh 6:15)
433	Nehemiah returns to govern Judah; ejects Tobiah
431	Beginning of Peloponnesian Wars; last until 404 BC
423	Xerxes II, Sogdianus , then Darius II Nothus 18 yrs
404	Artaxerxes II Mnemon king of Persia 46 yrs
	Amyrtaeus II declares Egypt independence (Dyn. 28)
401	Cyrus the Younger attacks Persia at Cunaxa; dies
396	Agasilaus II liberates Asia Minor from Persia
395	The Corinthian Wars - 8 years
390	Gauls and Celts invade Italy; driven back to Po River
388	Artaxerxes II grants right-of-return to all Israelis
387	The Peace of Antalcidas ends the Corinthian Wars
380	Nectanebo I founds Egypt Dynasty 30; rules 18 yrs
360	Nectanebo II rules 17 yrs; last Egyptian Pharaoh
359	Philip II rules Macedon; builds military strength
358	Artaxerxes III Ochus King of Persia
350	Artaxerxes III tries to conquer Egypt; fails first time
343	He succeeds. Nectanebo II flees. 2nd Persian Period
339	Artaxerxes III dies. Artaxerxes IV under Bagoas
338	Philip of Macedon unifies Greece; League of Corinth
337	Darius III Codomanus king of Persia
336	Philip dies. Alexander the Great king of Macedon
335	Alexander unifies Greece with lightning conquests
334	He crosses Hellespont, defeats Persia at Granicus
333	He crosses Cilician Gates; defeats Darius III at Issus
332	Liberates Egypt. Persians flee. Nectanebo II returns
331	Persian Empire falls to Alexander at Gaugamela
	Darius flees to Ecbatana; Alexander takes Babylon
330	General Bessus kills Darius; becomes Artaxerxes V
329	Alexander defeats Bessus' army at Bactra, kills Bessus
328	General Spitamenes rebels at Maracanda and Bactra
327	Alexander conquers Sogdian Rock; marries Roxana

326	Alexander battles Porus at the Hydaspes River
324	Alexander marries Stateira II, daughter of Darius II
323	Alexander dies. Empire divided between his generals
320	Alexander's generals (Diadochi) fight for supremacy
	The Treaty of Triparadisus divides up the Empire
312	Seleucus founds Seleucid Empire from Babylon
306	Antigonos I Monophthalmus; Antigonid Dynasty
305	Ptolemy I Soter Pharaoh; begins Ptolemaic Dynasty
302	Ptolemy takes control of Syria and the Levant
301	Battle of Ipsus. Seleucus defeats Antigonos
264	Punic Wars begin. Rome defeats Seleucid, Macedon
246	Laodicean War begins, lasts 5 years. Ptolemy wins
219	Antiochus III takes the Levant from Ptolemy IV
218	Second Punic War 218 - 201 BC; Rome vs Carthage
	Hannibal crosses Alps; terrorizes Italy 16 yrs
217	Egypt under Sosibius recovers the Levant at Raphia
214	First Macedonian War 214 - 205 BC with Romans
207	Hannibal's brother Hasdrubal crosses Alps; is slain
202	Hannibal tries to defend Carthage, loses to Scipio
198	Antiochus III takes Levant away from the Ptolemies
192	Ptolemy V negotiates peace treaty with Antiochus
191	Antiochus III defeated by Romans at Thermopylae
190	Antiochus III defeated by Romans at Magnesia
188	Antiochus looses Asia Minor, Apamea peace treaty
171	Jason gains favor of Antiochus IV; rules Judea
170	Antiochus IV defeats the Ptolemies near Pelusium
168	Menelaus takes control in Judea; starts a civil war
	Antiochus Epiphanes : Abomination of Desolation
	Rome defeats Perseus of Macedon; Battle of Pydna
167	Hasmonean revolution began by the Maccabees
166	Mattathias dies. Judas Maccabee leads the revolt
165	The Maccabees retake Jerusalem, cleanse the Temple
163	Judas lays siege against the Acra. Lysias relents
161	Nicanor governor of Judea; dies at Battle of Adasa
160	Judas Maccabee killed at the battle of Elasa
153	Feast of Tabernacles; Jonathan usurps Hi-Priesthood
150	Alexander (Balas) Epiphanes takes Seleucid throne
146	Rome burns Corinth. The Grecian Empire is dead
142	Jonathan slain by Tryphon. Simon Maccabee rules
139	Roman Senate recognizes Jewish autonomy
135	John Hyrcanus reigns in Jerusalem 135 - 103 BC
133	The Iberian Peninsula falls to Rome
130	The Hasmonean kingdom throws off Syrian rule
129	Antiochus VII is killed; Seleucid Empire collapses
104	John Hyrcanus dies. Aristobulus rules about 1 year
	Jugurtha of Numidia falls to Roman Gen. Marius
103	Alexander Jannaeus rules 27 yrs w/Salome Alexandra
101	Marius and Sulla conquer most of Europe S of Rhine
88	Sulla ends Social Wars, is elected consul in Rome
87	Marius declares himself dictator of Rome. Purges it
82	Sulla returns as dictator. Purges Marius' backers
76	Alexander Jannaeus dies. Salome Alexandra rules 9 yrs
67	Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II duke it out 4 yrs
63	Roman general Pompey subjugates Judea to Rome
49	Julius Caesar takes control of Roman Republic
47	Antipater the Idumean procurator of Judea
44	Julius Caesar assassinated. Octavian and Mark Antony
37	Herod made Roman king of Judea by Mark Antony
31	Octavian defeats Marc Antony. Herod switches sides
30	Octavian captures Egypt, ends Ptolemaic Dynasty
27	Caesar Augustus makes lower Greece into Achaea









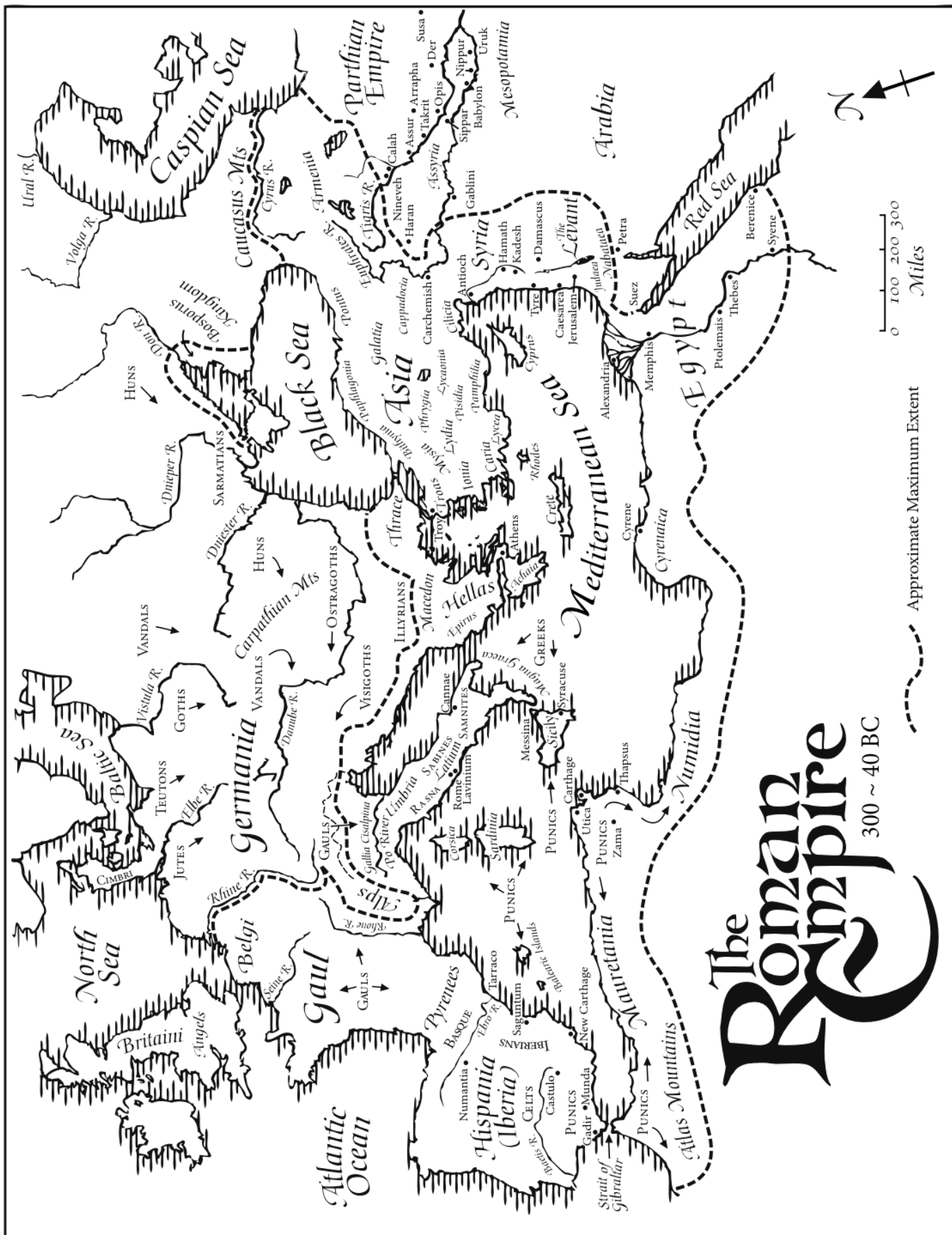


Latium

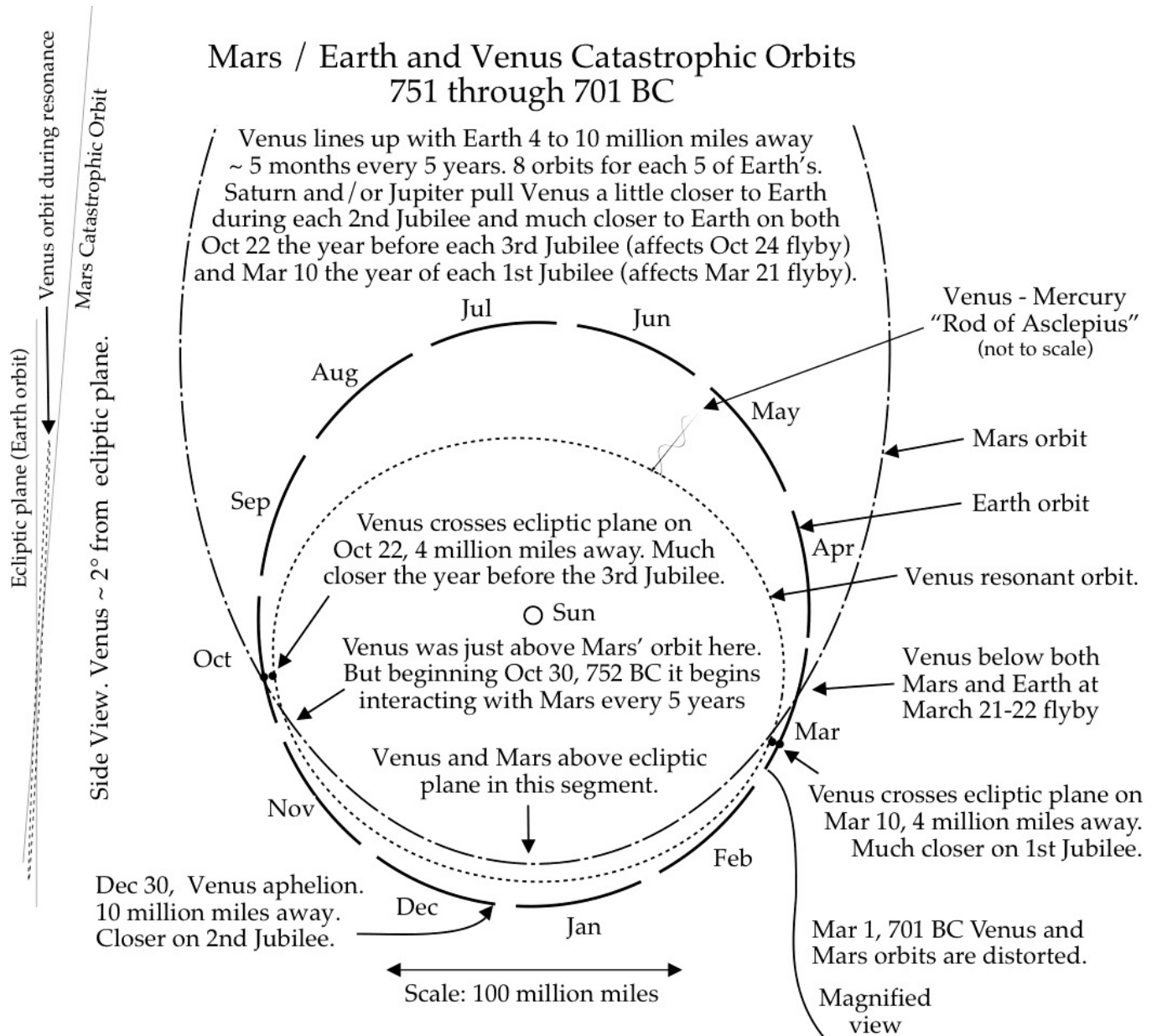
~200 BC

(Italy)

- City or Town
- ✕ Major Battle
- Hannibal's Invasion
- Hasdrubal's Reinforcements
- - - - Hannibal & Hasdrubal Same Route



Mars / Earth and Venus Catastrophic Orbits 751 through 701 BC

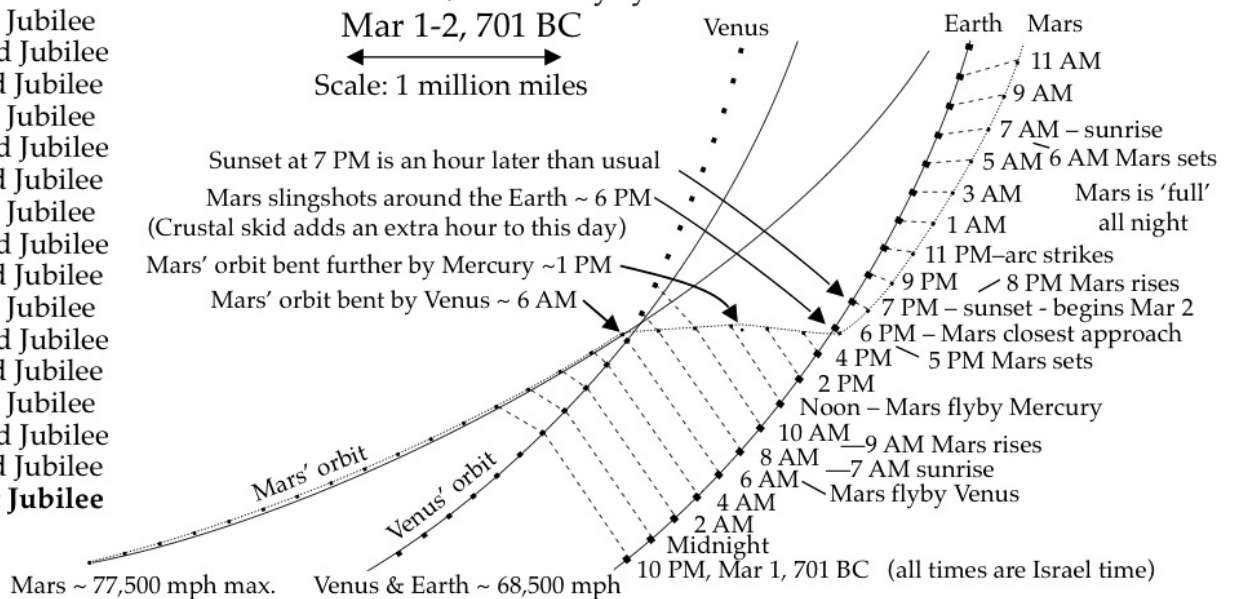


Jubilee Years

1451 BC	1st Jubilee
1401 BC	2nd Jubilee
1351 BC	3rd Jubilee
1300 BC	1st Jubilee
1251 BC	2nd Jubilee
1201 BC	3rd Jubilee
1151 BC	1st Jubilee
1101 BC	2nd Jubilee
1051 BC	3rd Jubilee
1001 BC	1st Jubilee
951 BC	2nd Jubilee
901 BC	3rd Jubilee
851 BC	1st Jubilee
801 BC	2nd Jubilee
751 BC	3rd Jubilee
701 BC	1st Jubilee

Final Mars / Earth Flyby Mar 1-2, 701 BC

Scale: 1 million miles



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