

Jeremiah, is unexpectedly called by God to be one of his prophets, creating upheaval and tragedy not only to his personal life but to the world around him. It is a journey of discovering oneself through interaction (human as well as divine) and insight: A relationship to others and to God that defines who one is destined to become.

JEREMIAH

by ROBERT CAIN

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A Novel by

ROBERT
CAIN

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CHAPTER 3

“Weeping may endure for a night,
but joy comes in the morning.”

- Psalm 30:5

Jeremiah woke to a sunlit room. Though a bit stiff, the few hours of sleep had refreshed his exhausted body, his mind was clear and much of the tenseness gone. Jeremiah looked up at the ceiling, thinking how long it had been since he had slept in a bed, washed or put on clean garments. Looking over to one of the other beds he saw that Baruch was still fast asleep, snoring softly. Baruch, a name meaning ‘blessed,’ had grown into a fine man who was devoted to God and, with the support of Jeremiah’s father, was prepared to carry out the Lord’s will. He recalled how they had first met long ago at the community well in the desert—a youth lost in the world had been found, nurtured with faith and love, then returned to the prophet’s side. God called on Baruch to be Jeremiah’s disciple and scribe, recording the prophet’s words and then proclaiming them for all to hear. Jeremiah wondered what the future held for his companion. Is he to be like Elisha who picked up the mantle of the prophet Elijah who ascended in a fiery chariot? If the spirit of Jeremiah rested on Baruch, then Judah must endure in order for God’s will to be carried out.

Ebed’s cot, Jeremiah saw, was empty and he wondered where his friend could have gone. No worries, though, for he knew the young man can take care of himself; Ebed’s resourcefulness and

courage last night proved that. He thought of the story Ebed told of his placid life on the shores of Lake Tana and how it had been turned upside down. Jeremiah couldn't imagine the shock it must have been, to be suddenly thrust into a totally different world. Just then, the door swung wide and Ebed stepped into the room offering the prophet a basin of fresh cool water and a towel. Jeremiah raised himself up, saying, "Ebed, you're no longer a king's slave and surely not mine. You're a free man now, one who can choose his own destiny."

As he placed the bowl upon a small stand, Ebed replied, "I am trained to serve others and enjoy being in your company. Let me do what I enjoy."

That was that. Jeremiah thanked his friend and, as he refreshed himself, hoped that Ebed would one day set out in search of his homeland and be reunited with his people. In the meantime, these hours of horror and hardship had bonded the trio together, and Jeremiah needed Ebed's and Baruch's friendship and support more than ever. He likewise hoped they needed him as well.

Splashing cool water onto his face and running his fingers through his hair, Jeremiah felt the muscles in the back of his neck being soothed. The images of prison, the burning of Jerusalem and life and death struggles haunted him—a black cloud that may forever hang over him *and* Judah for a very long time. Depression, grief and despair were taking hold once again. He shook his head to try and snap out of it, water droplets flying. While drying off, he stepped over to the open window and inhaled deeply, noting how clean and fresh the air was. He listened to the birds chirping in a nearby olive tree, its green leaves a contrast to the browns of dirt and rock, the deep blue of the sky. He enjoyed the warm sunlight shining upon his face and, for a moment, thought that he was in heaven.

* * *

Jeremiah entered the central room of the house and saw Gedaliah talking with his wife Deligha, and their two young children, Jachin and Ruth, who were playing a game at their feet. Time drifted by as the three of them talked of times past and caught up on what has happened in their lives since. No one wanted to think about Jerusalem, the refugees searching for a safe haven, or the exiles suffering the tortuous trek to the metropolis of Babylon. A loud rapping at the door abruptly shook them from their reverie. Gedaliah opened the door to find Johanan, son of Kareah standing there, a trusted friend and advisor. He was one of Judah's military leaders who had fought the Babylonian invaders in virtually every engagement and barely escaped from Jerusalem with the remnant of his army. While the king and palace guards sneaked away like cowards, Johanan and his brave men fought on until they were nearly surrounded and compelled to flee.

Jeremiah knew of the general and Johanan had heard all about the prophet, yet this was the first time they'd met. If Jeremiah was asked to visualize in his mind an army general, Johanan fit the stereotype—tall, heavily built and radiating confidence. He had deep-set eyes and a square jaw that could have been sculpted out of marble. Immediately, the prophet saw that Johanan was clean shaven, which was unusual, for beards and moustaches symbolized manliness and virility. There was no mistaking the soldier's manhood though, Jeremiah saw, and he doubtless chose to shave to show off his handsome features.

After the initial introductions and small talk, Johanan said, "All we can expect to do is harass Nebuchadnezzar's forces with hit-and-run raids and await the help of a powerful ally."

“Egypt?” Gedaliah offered.

“Perhaps,” Johanan replied. “But the pharaoh’s armies have been weakened by past campaigns. I expect he’s more concerned in strengthening his own border defenses and overhauling his army than helping others. However, other Babylonian-occupied countries may be growing weary of bondage and seek to rise up. An alliance with Tyre, Sidon and Ammon might be likely once again.”

“Three or four small states can’t stand up to an empire,” Gedaliah replied.

“No,” Johanan agreed, “but if we carry on the fight and gain allies, then other occupied countries will follow.”

A hope brought about by desperation, Jeremiah knew, but hope nevertheless. Men, horses, and supplies will continually be in short supply for Johanan, but not faith, courage and, above all, hope. Jeremiah believed that as long as these qualities exist the striving for emancipation will continue to endure.

Johanan told Gedaliah that he wanted to address the townsfolk and urge them to go on cooperating with the Babylonian representatives when they show up to receive their tax money and annual tribute. He also touched on the possibility of leading his army northeast near the region of the Sea of Chinnereth to fight the invaders, thus sparing the people of Judah any reprisals. Gedaliah agreed to convene an assemblage of the elders; he judged it a good idea for them to meet a general officer who would reinforce what he had told them earlier; to remain neutral and be who they are—farmers, tradesmen, and shopkeepers.

As Jeremiah and Deligha listened, Gedaliah spoke about what was now taking place in Mizpah and the neighboring districts. “Hundreds of refugees will turn up,” Gedaliah said, “seeking food

and shelter. The sick and injured, widow and orphan, will need caring for.”

“Yes, my friend,” Johanan replied, “they are trickling in as we speak. My men are directing them to the town plaza where we’ve set up a receiving area with food, wine and medical care. Fortunately, there is plenty of fresh water.”

They spoke of the necessity of getting the whole town involved and assigning each citizen a specific task so nothing is wasted, not even time.

“The stores of food need watching over,” Johanan interjected, “since the harvest is complete. There has to be enough for the months ahead.”

This prompted Gedaliah to pause and reflect on the future. He looked over at Jeremiah and inquired, “Will we be here come winter? What is God asking of us now that Jerusalem is destroyed?”

The prophet cast his eyes to the floor and remained silent. Time appeared to stand still before he spoke, “I know God is guiding my footsteps, but he has not yet revealed what I am to do. If I may remain here with you, my friend, the Lord will eventually speak.”

“It is good you are here with us, Jeremiah,” Deligha said as she stood and placed her hands in his. “You bring comfort and tranquility to this house, and all of Mizpah.”

Johanan rose and announced, “I must see to my men. I’ll select two of my officers to take an inventory of the livestock, stores of grain and vegetables.” After a moment’s reflection, he added, “We need to reach out to other towns and settlements within, say, a thirty-mile radius to spread the refugees out more equitably and lessen the burden on Mizpah. The larger districts of Gibeon and

Samaria are better suited in dealing with the large numbers of people fleeing Jerusalem.”

“Perhaps,” Gedaliah replied, “but hundreds are coming through our town to get to those places. Our obligation is to care for them until they can move on.” Standing, he said to his friend Johanan, “Please stay and refresh yourself. You’re tired and need to rest.”

“Maybe later.” With that, Johanan left.

Gedaliah readied himself to gather the town elders and inform them that the army will be here for a time. He knew they could not close the city gates to anyone who asked for sanctuary, no matter how dire the supplies, for not to offer charity and benevolence would be a sin against the Lord. Could Johanan's soldiers scour the countryside for any livestock or grain left by fleeing farmers or herdsmen? We must put a strict rationing scheme into effect, but even with that food shortages are inevitable. He then glanced over at Jeremiah. God will have to provide, and Jeremiah is close to God.

* * *

Sitting atop the flat wall which encircled a beautiful shade tree in the courtyard's center, Jeremiah watched the children play. After witnessing the horrors of yesterday, it was invigorating to see the carefree innocence of youth. The prophet wished to smile and feel good inside as he gazed out at the laborers in the fields and women bearing water, the prescribed daily chores which needed to be done in the cold of winter or the heat of summer, whether it was a fine day like today or in the pouring rain. Life in these small hamlets centered on concerns about the weather, how the crops were doing, the quality of the olives and the amount of oil they produced. One's subsistence depended upon how much milk they drew from their goats, how

much wool from the sheep. People worried more over a donkey gone lame than soft beds or full bellies. Life here, as in his hometown of Anathoth, he reflected, hasn't changed in generations. He wondered when, or if, he would ever smile or feel good inside again. Hearing the front door of the house open, Jeremiah turned to see Deligha approaching.

"I'm overjoyed that you'll be staying, Jeremiah," she said, while setting down a tray with freshly baked bread and a vessel of wine. "You and your companions could stay here in Mizpah, teaching in the school, and encouraging us to follow God more intimately." She paused to see his reaction but when he didn't respond, Deligha continued. "Talk it over with Baruch and Ebed. I'm sure they'll be eager to settle down and find contentment."

Jeremiah breathed in the fabulous aroma of the bread which reminded him of home long ago, then said, "It is not up to me whether I go or stay; a prophet has no place to lay his head. My task, regarding Jerusalem and all of Judea, may or may not be finished. I do not know. The command of God has been fulfilled, and the people neglected to heed his word, and thus he has dealt us a heavy blow. But even so, the Lord will always care for us and *never* forsake his favored ones. So, the Lord might yet have a use for me."

He glanced over at Deligha and their eyes met. A jab of pain touched his heart, for she reminded him of Adah. Jeremiah wished the love of his life were here now. He wanted so badly to take Adah into his arms, to feel her warmth, to be safe and secure. He needed desperately Adah's comforting embrace. Tears welled up in his eyes, his heartache too much to bear. He looked away.

Deligha pleaded, "Remain here and enlighten us. Our people must reach out to God and be reconciled in order to prosper. That is your mission now."

"Bringing God to others has always been my mission, Deligha," he replied. "True, the joy of our hearts has ceased for a time, and our dancing has been turned to mourning; the crown has fallen from our head. But this will not continue on forever, for our Lord cannot abandon his people. *We* broke the covenant, not God."

The prophet again looked off into the distance, becoming silent. Deligha moved to sit beside him, her hands clasping his, saying, "Jeremiah, it's time to grieve and lament as a kingdom; God punishes only to cleanse us. You must bring Judea back to God's bosom."

He peered into her eyes, saying, "The rule of Babylon must ultimately pass away and God will deliver his people from exile. Then, a time of rejoicing, as a new covenant is established between heaven and earth and we will be transformed. It will be an *everlasting* covenant."

Deligha could not reply for she had felt an outpouring of energy emanate through the prophet's hand, a force that jolted her soul. She had just witnessed God communicating through Jeremiah. Letting go, she quietly got up and left.

Jeremiah didn't touch the bread and wine she had brought but sat there motionless while the children continued to play. Baruch and Ebed checked on him from time to time but dared not intrude upon him. Around midday he stood up and went out into the tranquil countryside to be alone and pray. He observed a group of people on the road, shoulders bowed, others being helped along or lying on makeshift stretchers. More refugees from Jerusalem, he reckoned. Jeremiah lowered his head in sadness. Walking through the furrowed

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fields and amongst the plains of grazing sheep, the prophet came across a secluded tract of lush green grass, bordered by colorful flowers, alongside a flowing brook. Surprised at discovering such a garden at this time of year he paused to admire its beauty. Abruptly, Jeremiah threw himself upon the bed of grass and cried uncontrollably, begging the Lord for a second chance to bring reconciliation and salvation to a now scattered people. The prophet believed it his duty, his obligation, to renew the appeal for contrition, and be a part of building a new Jerusalem—a new kingdom of God. He wanted his pain, the pain of Judah, to go away. He wanted to be free; he wanted Judah to be free.

CHAPTER 8

My sacrifice to God is a contrite spirit.

A humble, contrite heart, O God, you will not spurn.

- Psalm 51: 17

“Will this place help me find true happiness?” Jeremiah asked the ascetic who greeted him.

The frail man was stooped and, even though he wore a loose fitting, tattered old robe, Jeremiah could tell that he was quite thin. Gaddiel was his name and looked to be around seventy years of age, with short grey hair and a long scraggily beard. He walked with the aid of a crooked staff and it appeared he struggled to engage in conversation.

“Purely temporal happiness can be found here. It is a finite world, and true happiness comes entirely from God,” the ascetic answered. “The world in which we dwell only inspires us to prepare for that which is to come.”

As they walked, Jeremiah remembered hearing these words before, but yet could not fathom their depth. Perhaps he would discover their meaning here. After a time, the elderly man halted in front of a small rounded hut about five feet high, constructed from rock and clay. There were no windows, merely a narrow entrance. It hardly looked big enough for one person.

“This is your home now, Jeremiah.”

“Where are the others?” he inquired.

“They are scattered amongst the rocks and surrounding hills,” the ascetic replied, casting his arm over the expanse of desert.

“When do I get to meet them?” Jeremiah asked, uneasy at being left alone in the desert.

“This evening I will return and take you to our common area. There we share our meals, pray and sing the psalms. You will quickly come to know our routine; it’s kept quite simple. Now you must rest from your journey.”

With that, Gaddiel turned and ambled off.

Jeremiah stood there gazing out across the barren landscape, thinking of how desolate and lonely the setting was. Bending, he entered the small hut and rested on the earthen floor, allowing his eyes to get accustomed to the darkness. The one-room dwelling was as bleak as the outdoors—no bed or bench, no window or hearth; nothing but hard dirt and a roof. *My Lord and God*, he declared, *what has become of me?* He laid down and tucked his bundle of clothes under his head for a cushion. His mind was blank and his spirit numb. All he could do was to curl up into a ball and gradually drift off to sleep.

* * *

“Jeremiah,” came a voice from outside. “Jeremiah. Come out!”

Jeremiah woke, drowsy from sleep.

“I’m coming,” he hollered, struggling to get to his feet. Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain as his head smacked the ceiling.

“Come, Jeremiah, we’re late,” the old ascetic insisted.

Crawling out of the hut Jeremiah stood beside Gaddiel, rubbing his sore head. It was now sunset and the air much cooler.

“It is time to meet the others of our community and to break bread together. Come, follow me.”

The venerable ascetic shuffled off, leaning heavily on his staff. Jeremiah drew his cloak tightly around his breast and followed. Walking three-quarters of a mile or so, they reached an area free of rocks and brush. Surrounding a small fire, there were seated fifteen men, middle aged or elderly all with beards, attired in threadbare clothes, with no shoes on their feet. Walking staffs lay beside each person, their eyes, he noticed, were fixed upon him. One of the ascetics approached him. “*As-salama alaykum,*” he said in welcome, as they embraced.

“*Wa Alykum As-slam,*” Jeremiah replied.

The man escorted him to a vacant spot on the desert floor and declared, “Our community welcomes you.”

They all nodded in acknowledgment.

“As you can see, we are a small group devoting ourselves to prayer and supplication. As ascetics, we live simple and quiet lives, speaking only when essential, fasting the day before Sabbath, and praying at all times. We pray for you, Jeremiah, that you may commune with God here; to find peace, strength and insight.”

“You know why I am here?” Jeremiah asked. “It was not my will but that of the Council in Jerusalem which brought me to this place.”

“We know,” he replied, “Everyone is born for a purpose, to carry out a ministry or vocation of some kind in order to build up the kingdom of God.”

Jeremiah glanced at the faces reflected by the fire. There was an awkward pause until someone in the assembly started to sing the psalms:

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Come bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who stand by night in the house of the Lord! Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the Lord.

Jeremiah joined in and soon felt the warmth of companionship enveloping him like a blanket. Closing his eyes, he sang as his mind grew calm; his spirit soared.

Lift up your hands to the holy place.

He lifted his arms to heaven.

* * *

Jeremiah woke the next morning refreshed. He lay on the hard ground thinking about last night, how his anxiety, fear and loneliness dissolved into ecstasy and serenity. As he sat up, he realized that he hadn't experienced such a sense of freedom in a long time; not having to be guarded in his words or cautious around people who had previously been his friends and neighbors. He looked forward to getting to know the members of the community and discovering what the Lord had in store for him. Scanning the stark hut once again, he was reminded that it was an empty shell, not even a basin for water to wash his face. *My Lord and God*, he said to himself.

"Jeremiah. Are you awake?"

Recognizing Gaddiel's voice, Jeremiah rose and rushed through the small doorway.

"Ugh!" he exclaimed, the blinding pain like bolts of lightning from striking the top doorpost.

"Jeremiah," the old ascetic said as he moved to his side. "Let me take a look and see if you have broken the skin."

Lifting his hand away, Gaddiel examined Jeremiah's head. "No, it's not bleeding; but you'll have a nice bump for a while," he said with a grin. "I remember my first day here; I got *two* bumps!"

They both chuckled.

"I'm to show you around and explain the community's rules," the ascetic explained. "There are only a few and easy to grasp. We live quite simply here as you can see."

As they made their way through the rocks and hills Jeremiah said, "I prefer simplicity, but there isn't even a bowl for washing."

"There is a small oasis with a natural spring two miles in that direction," Gaddiel said, pointing to the east. "It is where we bathe and there is also a well. It is where we draw our water. That is one of the chores you will be asked to do."

"What about a bowl for washing?" Jeremiah inquired, being persistent.

"We all have a bowl, in some shape or form," Gaddiel replied. "Joshua's looks dreadful," he added chuckling, "and it is much too small."

"I was instructed not to bring any money, so I cannot buy one. Are there any extras?"

"Oh no. The community items are for preparing and serving meals. You must make your own."

Jeremiah was a little taken aback, but looking at how they lived, was not surprised. It reminded him of the women back home making pottery; bowls, plates, cups and jars.

"Will you show me how to do that?"

"Oh, you just take a bit of clay and water and then you bake it in the fire, and in time, you have a bowl," Gaddiel said, while his hands shaped a bowl out of air.

They came to a rocky cliff, and the aged ascetic started climbing a craggy, narrow path. Though easy going for the most part, there were edges which dropped off severely. Nearing their objective, the rocks formed a crude stairway ending at a dark opening of a cave. Gaddiel ducked inside with Jeremiah following, being sure to mind his head. He immediately sensed how dry and cool the air was. As his eyes got accustomed to the darkness, Jeremiah saw that the cavern was packed with clay jars.

“Within these jars,” the ascetic began, “are our scrolls and manuscripts. We place them here because they are protected from rot, bugs and bandits.” He continued in a tone of seriousness. “Bandits sometimes pass through these hills searching for food and plunder, or to escape those pursuing them. The only things we have of material value are these scrolls, for they contain Sacred Scripture. They must be cherished and protected.” Gaddiel then turned and calmly slipped back out into the brilliant sunlight, resuming the tour.

Along the way, they passed a few huts like Jeremiah’s, yet no one appeared to be about.

“Where is everybody?”

“In prayer,” came the response.

Such a brief and straightforward answer stunned Jeremiah. Where do they go? Do they pray in community or independently? Is that all they do? From what he observed there weren’t any fields to cultivate, nor cattle or sheep. Fetching water is the only task he knows of so far. Where do they get their food?

“When is the morning meal?” Jeremiah asked. “I haven’t washed up or eaten anything since last night.”

“Oh, we ate hours ago. You were late in getting up! We partake of a simple meal before dawn then, as the sun rises, we begin our

morning prayer; raising our voices to God the Most High!” Gaddiel looked up toward heaven. A little further on, he halted and sat down on a rock, appearing distressed.

“I am sorry for not being a proper host. I do not know how to express myself clearly. It has been a long time since I’ve talked this much. Too long, perhaps.” The aged ascetic cast his eyes downward.

Jeremiah put a hand on the man’s shoulder to reassure him. He liked Gaddiel and didn’t want him to feel bad on his account. “I expect there will be plenty of time to learn my way around and how to be an ascetic, Gaddiel.” he said, adding with a smile, “Remember, simplicity!”

They both chuckled and continued on, traveling along a steeper path.

“After morning prayer, we complete our assignments, such as fetching water from the well, cleaning any cooking utensils or tidying up the community area. Any scraps or waste must be burned or buried to prevent attracting animals and insects. That reminds me, always carry your staff at hand for there are venomous serpents in these hills, and wild dogs and jackals that travel in packs! Be on your guard and keep your eyes open. Anyway, the tasks that need doing are carried out at this time of day—including, making bowls,” he added with a giggle.

And walking staffs, Jeremiah wanted to add.

Gaddiel continued, “Then, there is individual prayer, where each brother goes off to their own place for silent prayer and reflection. Only a walking staff goes with us, no scroll or anything that may create distraction. It is a time for the human spirit to commune with God’s Spirit. At midday, we come together for a little bread and some water. No one speaks except for the one chosen to read from a

scroll of Sacred Scripture. As we eat, we listen to God's Word. Afterwards, we depart alone to meditate upon what was read. Finally, before the sun sets, we gather for our evening meal and prayer, like we did last night. There is no timekeeper. No one will wake you or announce when it is time to eat or to pray."

Laying a hand on Jeremiah's shoulder he said, "You'll learn when to rise and when to sleep, when to eat and when to fast. Those are simple things. Praying is the task that is hardest of all."

Once Gaddiel had departed, Jeremiah went for a stroll to relax and consider what had transpired so far. Standing high on the edge of a cliff, facing westward toward the holy city of Jerusalem, he began to feel weightless. Was it the euphoria of being at such an uplifting place? He didn't know.

In a flash, his spirit soared with the hawks, wheeling about, caught on the thermals, going ever higher into the clear blue sky. He looked down upon the earth, the hilltops and valleys getting smaller as he ascended. He was free of any hindrance as if a newborn babe, innocent and pure. But, just as abruptly, his spirit tumbled, hurtling toward a deep, black abyss. Jeremiah became conscious of tears rolling off his cheeks as his eyes flowed. Total emptiness, forlorn and without hope, his head swimming, making him dizzy, his body beginning to sway. Jostling his feet to steady himself, he displaced small rocks which tumbled over the edge to the valley below. Images of his parents passed through his mind, of Adah, then of Gedaliah. The face of Tubal, with those dark menacing eyes, whirled round and round almost causing him to fall. But, like the sun's golden rays penetrating through the darkness after a storm, he felt relief; his spirit now at rest, his breathing steady. Waves of delight now surged through him and Jeremiah heard God's voice.

* * *

“Are you at peace here Jeremiah?” Shimeon asked.

He had been the one who welcomed Jeremiah at the fire on that first night. Jeremiah had now been with the ascetics for two months, striving to fit in. The initial ‘newness’ of the place was wearing off, although he still had twinges of homesickness for family and friends. Getting to know the brothers took a while since conversation rarely occurred, but he discovered that two of the fellows were like him, only here to discern their calling then move on. The rest, however, were permanent residents; some had been here for thirty years or more. Shimeon seemed to be the master and spiritual guide of the community, offering insight and instruction about prayer, scheduling tasks, etc. He was very learned in Sacred Scripture and Jeremiah believed he must surely have been a priest or a scribe.

“Peace?” Jeremiah answered. “It’s so quiet here.” After reflecting for a minute, he said, “Even though I enjoy being here I’m not called to be an ascetic, but a prophet of God. My ministry is to *talk* with people, not keep silent.”

Shimeon recognized frustration in Jeremiah’s tone and smiled. “A young man shut away with a bunch of old codgers and no one to hear his voice.”

“Am I not supposed to communicate with people, Shimeon? Isn’t that what a prophet does?”

“Yes, Jeremiah,” was the reply. “But how can we communicate with others, understand others, if we can scarcely understand or communicate with ourselves? A prophet is no good if he cannot speak on God’s behalf. If you proclaim in the name of the Lord, you must be confident it is *his* words you speak and not your own.”

Shimeon sat beside Jeremiah and asked, “Does God talk to you Jeremiah?”

“I hear the Lord in my thoughts and in my words, when I’m awake and when I sleep.”

“That’s good.” Shimeon replied.

“Lately, though, I’ve been distracted in spirit. I miss my mother and father, my friend Gedaliah, and especially Adah, the girl I love.” Jeremiah choked back the tears he wanted to shed hoping that God’s peace would, one day, fill the void. “So quiet. Why?”

“It has taken only two months for you to begin the spiritual conflict, Jeremiah. God is with you,” Then, Shimeon said resolutely. “Remember the prophet Elijah on Mount Horeb. He did not hear God’s voice in the strong wind or when the earth quaked, or in a blazing fire; but in utter silence did the Lord’s voice touch his ears, like a whispering breeze. Dwelling on thoughts of family, friends or earthly things will overwhelm you. Instead, recognize them for what they are and allow them to pass by, as a cloud drifts on the horizon. You see it and know it’s there, but you do not focus upon it. Your heart must rise above the frivolous distractions that encompass you. Learn discipline to control them.” He studied Jeremiah for a time, then stood up and strolled away.

Perhaps too much was said, Shimeon thought, too upsetting for a seventeen-year-old. But God’s will must be done. He had brought up the prophet Elijah to Jeremiah because that had been the focus of his prayers lately. He saw in his dreams Elijah ascending body and soul into heaven in a fiery chariot; the living prophet that will one-day return heralding the coming of God’s kingdom. Sacred writings told of a Messiah, a descendant of our beloved king David, who would bring Israel back to God’s bosom, thus bringing about a new heaven

and a new earth. The King of kings' authority shall grow increasingly, Shimeon recalled from his studies, and there shall be perpetual peace. Whenever he contemplated such things, a sense of urgency overcame him. He knew something divine and holy was to purify the land of Judah and perhaps Jeremiah was the chosen one to announce that the time had come. Shimeon knelt in the middle of the path and lowered his head to the ground, praying, hoping, that the Promised One may quickly arrive.

Focus, Shimeon had instructed him; pray from the heart, not the mind; be free of thoughts and worries, for there's nothing to be distressed about in the desert. Jeremiah found that to be true, and the more he prayed the more he felt nearer to his Lord and God. The days, weeks and months passed and his spirit flourished. He started to call God his father and conversed with the Lord as if he was addressing his own father back in Anathoth. On occasion, God answered Jeremiah's entreaties with insight and reasoning, sometimes through dreams or visions. Every so often, there were explicit mandates of the tasks needing to be carried out, and tragic visions of what might take place if his people refused to reconcile themselves to the one true God. For Jeremiah, those dreams were nightmares that often caused him to scream in his sleep and sit up trembling, drenched in an icy sweat.

Once, Jeremiah was uncommonly quiet, causing Shimeon to inquire if anything was wrong.

"Why is it so difficult for people to walk side by side with God, their Creator?" Jeremiah asked.

Looking at Jeremiah with compassion Shimeon smiled. Here was a young man searching for the meaning to life's great questions. He

replied, “Recall the tale of Noah, the flood, and God’s command to build an ark.”

Jeremiah glanced at Shimeon quizzically, not being sure of where this was leading.

“Well, before Noah, all of creation—the animals, the waters, and fields—existed to serve humankind. After Noah, when the flood waters receded, humankind was *equal* to the animals, the waters, and the fields.”

Shimeon paused to ascertain if Jeremiah understood, then went on. “Only the Savior can raise humanity to where we formerly stood in the eyes of God before the flood. Pray, Jeremiah, for those cleansing waters to once again wash over us, lest the fires of hell purge us instead.”

Stillness filled the air as they both sat quietly, contemplating the divine mysteries. After a while, Jeremiah asked, “Savior?”

“The Messiah, the Anointed One. History is a journey through which God’s people pass until ultimately the kingdom of God is fully established. Whether our experiences are good or bad, they aid us in discovering the Messiah; they equip us for that perfect union.”

“That is why you and the others are here, in the desert? You’re preparing yourselves to greet the Messiah?” Jeremiah reasoned.

“Yes. Not only to prepare, but intercede for Judah. That is why the Council wanted you to come here for you have that same mission, to show Judah the highway to God.”

“I understand,” Jeremiah replied. In wonder he asked, “But is the kingdom of God only for the people of Judah?”

“All people are God’s people; all are created by him. The Anointed One will come from Judah. In Sacred Scripture, and in our history, it is revealed to us that the tribes of Judah have been assured

an eternal rule, established under king David. When the Messiah arrives, he will terminate the line of David and bring forth the reign of God upon the earth. I should say, the new earth, for it will be transformed. As the prophet Micah said, ‘And they shall live secure, for now God shall be glorious to the ends of the earth, and he shall be the one of peace.’”

Jeremiah listened closely, endeavoring to fathom what Shimeon was saying. Increasingly, he felt a greater respect for these recluse ascetics and the wisdom they possessed. It wasn’t long before he started calling them ‘brothers.’

* * *

The months and years flew by. Jeremiah's sandals had worn out long ago, and he was now barefoot. The only cloak he owned had been patched up so many times it looked as if it was an assemblage of rags. One day, after it had rained, he gazed at himself in a puddle of clear, still water. Not only had he grown spiritually but physically as well, no longer a ‘boy’ as Shalev deemed him. Bending down to have a better glimpse, he saw that his jet-black wavy hair was beyond his shoulders, and he sported a beard and moustache. Jeremiah figured that he must be nineteen, maybe twenty. “My Lord and God,” he said out loud to himself. How much longer will I be in the desert? When will I be ready?

Sitting at the same cliff edge when he first began his sojourn so long ago, Jeremiah looked out onto a bright summer's day, the air so clear he believed he could see forever. As was his custom, he began by praying for understanding and recalled the passage of Sacred Scripture read at last nights’ meal:

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Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil. It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.

Trust and wisdom. Human wisdom was challenging enough, but divine wisdom? Jeremiah knew from his father and scripture classes at school that everything bestowed upon us from the Lord are gifts; gifts of the Spirit. And God gives those gifts to whomever he desires. Therefore, I must beg for wisdom, Jeremiah thought, so I can help lead others to God. Trust. I trust in the Lord. I wouldn't be here, in the wilderness, if I didn't trust in the Lord. He resolved to dedicate this day to asking for the gift of divine wisdom and trust that God is leading him as a shepherd leads his flock.

Later that week, Jeremiah woke up just before dawn, proud of himself for adapting to the community routine so well. He even found the hard ground upon which he slept comfortable. It had been pretty rough at first—the loneliness often unbearable. But he had toughed it out. Now, he seized his handmade washbowl and walking stick and, to freshen up, strode over to where the water jars were kept. Soon, it will be time for the morning meal followed by prayers. The day was off to a great start. And so, when the community had finished singing the last psalm, Jeremiah volunteered to clean up, allowing the older ascetic to carry on with his contemplations. Taking one of the breakfast bowls, he gathered any scraps from the meal, then grabbed the makeshift shovel and set off on the narrow trail to the place where they buried refuse. While Jeremiah was tamping down the dirt, he heard a noise amongst the rocks.

Remaining still, he thought that maybe bandits were about. His heart pounded and the palms of his hands became sweaty. As his eyes darted this way and that, he caught sight of a hound slowly making its way around a massive boulder. It must have smelled the garbage, Jeremiah concluded. Raising the shovel in defense the dog then froze in its tracks even though it didn't appear to be afraid. It raised its snout to sniff the air. After a while, the hound looked straight at Jeremiah. Now, it was Jeremiah's turn to freeze, for the dog's piercing eyes, black as night, terrified him. A voice declared, "I'm watching you, prophet."

Strange, Jeremiah thought. It sounded as if they were coming from the dog, but the beast's mouth remained closed. He sensed an evil presence as a cold shiver traveled up his spine. Shaking himself out of the trance-like state, he lunged forward with the shovel held high, yelling, "Get behind me, Satan!"

The hound turned on its heels and fled.

Jeremiah was hunched down in one of the caves helping his brother make room for a new clay jar containing parchments. He considered it odd because in these past years he had never seen or known of anyone writing things down. He almost asked where these manuscripts came from, but caught himself, realizing that it would be small-talk and, therefore, not worthy of breaking silence. Jeremiah did notice, however, that the jars were adding up and another cave will soon need to be found. Just then, the ascetic spoke, saying, "You're right, Jeremiah. We must start looking for another cave."

The brother then turned, a grin on his face. Whether the smile was because he knew Jeremiah's thoughts, or because of the astounded expression on his face, he would never know.

* * *

Lost in profound contemplation, Jeremiah failed to notice as a strong gusting wind swept in from the north and that the heavens had abruptly grown dark. Only when a deafening clap of thunder caused him to jump did he come to his senses. The air had turned bitter as a torrent of bone-chilling rain began to pour down in sheets. Jeremiah rose to his feet, but in doing so dislodged a rock. Losing his balance, his hands clutched at nothing but empty space as he slid closer to the edge of the cliff. Panicking, he saw all of Israel spinning below him, with Jerusalem as its midpoint. Soon, one by one, each of the twelve tribes broke loose, being sucked down into the fires of Hades. Jeremiah fell to the ground, half of him on the precipice, the other in midair, his body sliding on the mud and loose rock, sending him over the side toward the cauldron of hell. Jeremiah's fingers clawed at the earth, skin and nails ripping against gravel and stone. He screamed out in terror!

Jeremiah awoke to a clear blue sky and a warm gentle breeze. Confused and disoriented he remained motionless on the cliff's edge overlooking the tranquil valley below. Rapid and shallow breathing, pulse racing, arms and legs quivering, he struggled to compose himself. Hearing footsteps behind him, he glanced back to see one of his brother ascetics bounding over the rocks having heard the horrifying scream. Still shaking, Jeremiah slowly got to his feet as the brother approached.

Out of breath from running, an expression of concern upon his face, the ascetic asked if everything was all right.

"Everything's fine," he said, with an unsteady voice.

Jeremiah then saw his brother looking him over, head to toe and only then realized that he was soaking wet as if he had been caught in

a storm. Not only that, his hands and fingers were ripped open and drops of blood fell onto the earth. A few uncomfortable minutes passed, thereupon the ascetic walked away. He looked out over the valley and the rough soil beneath his feet. Something has happened, he told himself. Something must have taken place in Judah, or something has *happened* to Judah, and it wasn't good, he reasoned. Jeremiah kicked a few pebbles over the side of the cliff speculating what this vision meant.

As they gathered for the midday meal one of his fellow ascetics came up and asked. "Did you hear the news?"

"What news, my brother?"

"Our king, Josiah, is dead—killed in battle against the Egyptians at Megiddo."

Jeremiah was shocked. How could the Lord permit this to happen? The sweeping reforms he established for the religious life of Judah, the benevolence to widows and orphans, and the grand feasts and sacrifices presented to our Lord and God. How could this be?

"What will happen to Judah now?" Jeremiah whispered, more to himself than anyone else.

"It is said all of Jerusalem and Judah is lamenting the loss of our king," the ascetic continued. "Prayers are ascending to God like incense as they cry out, 'The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing turned into mourning. The crown has fallen from our head.' The people are lost, Jeremiah!"

No longer hungry, he withdrew to his small hut, now knowing the significance of his dramatic vision. Yes, he acknowledged, the people are genuinely lost. With the death of our pious king the end of Judah is now inevitable.

* * *

That evening, Jeremiah returned to the community area for the evening meal and prayers. It had been a dreadful day, and he was downtrodden. Sitting at his place near the fire, staring into its flames, Shimeon came and sat beside him. “Why the distressed expression?”

“The news today grieves my heart.”

They quietly sat before the roaring fire. After a few minutes, Shimeon asked inquisitively, “Are you saddened by the king’s death, or for the people of Judah?”

“Both, I suppose.”

“Have you ever felt real pain in the heart, Jeremiah?”

The question jolted Jeremiah out of his thoughts, being taken aback by its bluntness.

“Everyone feels pain. It’s a part of life,” he responded. Shimeon pressed on. “That’s true. I concede that there are various levels of pain. We must endure pain and hardship in order to understand the pain and discomfort in others.”

Shimeon asked his initial question once again. “But, have you ever felt *real* pain; a pain which pierces the heart?” Shimeon hesitated and then said, “If you will forgive me, it seems your life has been pretty easy and comfortable.”

Jeremiah continued to stare at the fire which was not the expected reaction Shimeon wanted. Puzzled, he watched Jeremiah, waiting.

Little did he know, his remark had brought Adah into Jeremiah’s mind, his love for her still burning strong. He pictured her graceful appearance, bright smile, her dark hair shimmering in the noonday sun, those rich deep eyes. Then, he thought of never seeing her again, of never feeling her delicate touch, her warmth, her tender embrace.

“Yes,” he said with conviction, “I know real pain, and the misery it creates. It is still here,” tapping his chest, “in my heart.”

Shimeon remained silent, continuing to watch Jeremiah intently.

“King Josiah felt the pain of Judah. He realized how God suffered because of his unruly people,” Jeremiah concluded.

Shimeon, too, gazed at the fire, to look at the shifting intensities of individual flames. He exhaled deeply. It was true. Josiah and the Lord had been close, for they acted together to bring about reconciliation. The discovery of the lost scroll confirmed Josiah’s convictions that Judah must experience renewal and thus open the door to an awakening of spirit. Finally, he spoke. “Our king faced daily the torment of a struggling soul.”

Jeremiah nodded in agreement. The other ascetics had gathered, yet they remained distant from the fire’s light. He didn’t notice them, for he was transfixed upon the flames—some growing higher, some brighter, and some giving off a reddish orange color while others flickering white or blue.

“If the king cared for the nation of Judah and its people, whom God gave him charge over,” Jeremiah flatly asserted, “then why was he foolish enough to attack the Egyptian army? Even a silly child knows you do not strike a mightier opponent with a small and poorly disciplined army. Besides, is it not the Egyptians that have been looking after us these many years?”

It was true. The Egyptians protected Judah from the Assyrian invasion which swept over their brother countrymen of Israel to the north. Now, the Egyptians were on their way to combat the Babylonian army. What prompted Josiah to jeopardize Judah’s security?

“Judah has been free of Egypt for years. Perhaps Josiah feared occupation if the pharaoh took sides in the north and lost,” Shimeon speculated. “Are you a foolish child, Jeremiah?” Shimeon waited for an answer, but he received none. An obstinate young man, he told himself.

“To accept one’s place in human history,” he went on, “means to make a stand on its behalf, and to assume the burden for its sake. Many fail in their obligation to humanity, Jeremiah. Only a few are strong enough in their convictions to hold their ground. You see, confirmation in their proper calling proves that pain and suffering is not in vain, but virtuous. That their struggle has not been fruitless, for it is part of the evolving plan of God. In the virtuous is the spirit that begets the future.” Shimeon took his gaze off Jeremiah and looked back to the fire.

“What did humanity gain by king Josiah’s death?” Jeremiah asked, peering over at Shimeon. Their eyes met. “Though only a man, he was a man of God. When he was slain, the future of Judah died with him.”

“Kings come and go,” Shimeon answered. “Josiah had fulfilled his duty to God and Judah; one man cannot cleanse an entire nation in one lifetime. Only the Messiah can accomplish such a task. Judah will endure if merely a remnant.”

Jeremiah looked away, his gaze returning to the fiercely burning, all-consuming, fire. Did he have the conviction to carry out his calling? Or was he hoping, praying, that Josiah would have succeeded in his mission thus sparing him from being the Lord’s ambassador? Then, he could have returned home to a normal life, and to Adah. Was he being selfish? Afraid? Cowardly? Foolish?

“Your soul is not your own, Jeremiah,” Shimeon said, as if reading his thoughts. “From the moment of your conception within your mother’s womb your life was foreordained. If that were not so, then why are you here instead of in the arms of Adah?”

Jeremiah’s head shot to Shimeon presenting him with a bitter, piercing stare. How did he learn of Adah and my love for her?

Shimeon said, “You see, it’s a duty, an obligation; call it destiny if you wish. It is what unites us to God and his created world. It is not something you can refuse or dissociate yourself from because it has always been a part of you. If you endeavor to walk away from God’s voice it will follow you wherever you go, no matter what life you choose to live. There is no escape.” Shimeon studied Jeremiah’s appearance; a sad and forlorn face met his gaze.

“Did you flee into the desert to forget your past, Shimeon, to run away from the world and its obligations?” Jeremiah asked with a cynical tone, still bitter at Shimeon for mentioning Adah.

“I am sorry if I hurt you,” Simeon said gently, ignoring his question. “God will haunt those who attempt to ignore their destiny. But, why would you choose to? Unless you wish to turn away from God and seek your own direction; to take a bite of the apple, so to speak.” Shimeon again paused. After a while he said, “For, if one truly loves God, believes in him and cares for others, they will gladly listen to the voice of God and follow. It’ll be one’s deepest desire and greatest reward. Then, as we progress onward from this earthly existence, no matter what the circumstance, our life is fulfilled. I think king Josiah believed that and is presently resting in God’s bosom.”

Movement caused Jeremiah to glance around and saw his brothers were coming near, their faces and arms uplifted to heaven.

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Even in their silence he knew they were glorifying God with one voice. “But judgment shall return unto righteousness,” Shimeon stated, “and the upright in heart shall follow it,” he said, quoting the psalms.

Jeremiah and Shimeon looked at each other with affection and profound respect, and with a greater understanding.

* * *

On a pleasant spring morning, Jeremiah was lugging two large water jars, one on each shoulder, down the path leading to the well. Being the youngest, and most fit, this laborious task was regularly being relegated to him more and more. But he didn't mind, being aware of how aged and frail many of his fellow brothers were, plus the trail was easy and the scenery pleasurable. With the elevation dropping, lush green shrubs and trees sprang up in the more inviting soil, imparting color to the otherwise bland desert. Humming a favorite melody, he suddenly heard a noise up ahead. Stopping, and moving the jar away from his ear, Jeremiah made out what sounded like a child reciting a prayer, yet he couldn't be sure. He proceeded a little further on until he could make out the words, “Our Father in heaven... He gives bread to all flesh... May it be your will, O Lord our God, to pardon sins... Forever and ever.”

Though recited badly, he recognized the familiar invocation of his people. Confident this was no bandit, Jeremiah continued on until he caught sight of a young boy pacing back and forth near the well. He looked to be about twelve years old, his attire that of a nomad or perhaps a shepherd. Then, in the distance, Jeremiah spotted a herd of sheep grazing in a pasture. A shepherd boy, he surmised, apparently taking his sheep to the market in Jericho. He observed the shepherd

repeating the prayer over and over and had to grin at the mistakes the youngster made but was impressed by his dedication. He set off once again toward the well.

“*As-salam alaykum,*” he said.

Startled, the youth turned and replied, “*Wa Alykum As-slam.*”

As Jeremiah set the two jars down, the shepherd boy asked, “Is this well on your property, sir?”

“This is a community well, accessible to whoever needs fresh water,” Jeremiah answered. “I haven’t seen you here before, are you just passing through?”

“I have a flock of sheep grazing over there,” the shepherd replied, pointing to the north. “My father has passed through here for many years and drew a rough sketch of the country showing the meadows and wells.”

The boy retrieved the parchment and showed it to Jeremiah. While examining it, Jeremiah said, “As I was nearing, I heard you reciting a prayer.”

“I was, but poorly I’m afraid,” the boy replied, embarrassed.

Giving the map back to the youngster, Jeremiah asked, “Did your father teach it to you, or did you learn it in school?”

“I’ve never been to school. I can’t read or write.” Then proudly asserted, “But, I can count! I know how many sheep I have, and which ones tend to go astray or become lost. I call out their names and they come: I know my sheep and they know me. By the sound of my voice they know me.”

It was obvious to Jeremiah that the young shepherd liked talking about his flock, for the child was lonely and eagerly sought companionship. He spoke of how he had raised them from the day they were born, and the distinct markings on each one. Jeremiah

enjoyed chatting with the lad, disregarding the silence of being an ascetic. Suddenly, a dog rushed up to the young shepherd wanting attention as well. As he petted the dog, Jeremiah immediately thought of Chaver. “What’s your name my young shepherd?”

“Baruch, son of Neriah.”

“I’m Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah. Where are you from?”

“Near Beth-zur.”

“That’s pretty far south of here,” Jeremiah said. “Are you taking the sheep to the market in Jericho?”

“I’m taking them to my uncle who lives near the town of Senaah. My father became ill a couple of months ago and died last week. I’m going to live on my uncle Zimirah’s farm,” the boy answered, after which he sadly looked to the ground, adding, “even though he doesn’t want me.”

“Why doesn’t your uncle want you? I would think he’d love to have a strong fellow like yourself to tend the sheep and do other chores.”

“He and my father worked together for years, raising and selling sheep. They also had a trading company that did very well. But my father didn’t care for the way my uncle did business, sometimes taking advantage of people or even stealing from them. So, they broke up and my uncle came north. There’s been a family grudge ever since.” As Baruch related his story to Jeremiah, it became evident that he wasn’t looking forward to living with his uncle.

“I’m sorry about your father, Baruch, and I am sure it’s hard to leave your mother. A mother’s love is always with us.” Jeremiah felt a twinge of sadness in his breast when he mentioned this, for he still missed his mother and father, praying every day for their wellbeing. He and Baruch walked over and sat down on a log under the shade of

a tree, both quiet for several minutes as they reflected on the past. Then, to change the subject, Jeremiah asked: “The prayer you were reciting earlier, who taught it to you?”

“I was sitting on top of a boulder one evening watching my flock and playing the lute when this man came up the road. He stopped and asked what tune I was playing and I told him it had no name, for I’d made it up, as that was my way of praising God for his many blessings. He then asked me if I prayed to God. I said that I prayed through music since I couldn’t read. The man scolded me, saying I was being disrespectful to almighty God and that I should learn a proper prayer. So, he taught me this one. He seemed a wise and learned man.” Baruch again cast his eyes to the ground, unhappy. “Out of fear of offending God I haven’t played my lute since. I miss it very much.”

Jeremiah once assumed that the Lord only listened to the prayers learned at home or in worship; formal and respectful prayers that recognized the grandeur of heaven and the lowliness of earth. But the wilderness had taught him new ways of reaching out and embracing God’s Spirit that are more intimate and genuine.

“There are many ways to pray and honor our Lord, Baruch,” Jeremiah declared. “If your words, actions, or even music are directed to God, and they arise from the heart, the Lord will listen.”

Baruch looked at Jeremiah and said, “My music came from within. I believe in God and with all my heart I wish to honor and give thanks to him.”

Jeremiah smiled, asserting, “Then play your lute once again. Let your music ascend to heaven and allow the angelic host to play their lyres and sing gloriously to God with you.”

Baruch was delighted, a broad smile spreading across his face. “Bless you, Jeremiah. Somehow I can perceive that what you say is true.”

Though pleased to help the boy become nearer to the Lord, Jeremiah knew in his spirit that something further needed to be carried out. He stood, went to the well, and took up one of his water jars. As he was pulling on the rope to hoist up the bucket, he understood what that 'something' was.

“Baruch.”

“Yes, Jeremiah,” Baruch said, walking over to the well.

“Did your mother and uncle agree that you were to stay in Senaah?”

“My mother hasn’t spoken or written to my uncle since he left. I have two older brothers and a sister, and she cannot provide for us all, so she sent me and my brothers away to live with relatives.” Baruch looked over to his flock. “These sheep are a payment to my uncle for taking me in.”

Jeremiah spoke in a confident tone, “Take your sheep to your uncle in Senaah, then your duty is complete. Afterwards, go to the city of Anathoth and locate my father Hilkiah, he is the priest there. Tell my father I have sent you to him; that he is to prepare you to carry out the will of God.”

While Jeremiah was speaking, the youth took out his sketching. “I cannot find where Anathoth is.”

“Trust in my words, Baruch, son of Neriah. You will go to school, my father will instruct you, and my mother will love you.”

Jeremiah again felt a piercing pain in his chest. Looking into the shepherd boy’s eyes he added, “You’ll be the son she has always yearned for.”

“I’ll do as you say.” Baruch did not understand, but trusted Jeremiah’s words, for they had authority behind them that made him feel confident this was the right thing to do.

“Good,” Jeremiah said, smiling. “I must leave you now, my friend, but will see you again.”

Jeremiah returned to filling his water jars while Baruch gleefully ran back to his flock, the dog bounding alongside him. Taking out his lute, he commenced praising God with his music.

* * *

Jeremiah lay upon the rock atop the cliff looking up at a bright clear sky, allowing his spirit to be carried away by a warm and gentle breeze. This harmony between heaven and earth made him believe all was at peace. As early morning gave way to midday, the intense rays of sunlight striking his face, he wondered how much longer God wished him to remain in the desert, but he knew from experience that the Lord had his own agenda; all his people could do was to have trust and patient endurance. For Jeremiah, at this point in his life, that was sufficient. Drawing in a deep breath of fresh air, he reckoned that he must be twenty-four or maybe even twenty-five. The first couple of years had been long and slow, he recalled, but now they seemed to be flying by. Suddenly, a hawk screeched, shattering the tranquil silence. He wondered how Baruch was doing in Anathoth. He said a brief prayer for him and his parents seeking God’s graces and protection; followed by one for Adah and Gedaliah, his cherished ones that still brought warmth to his heart. Slowly drifting off to sleep in the tender embrace of family and friends, God now granted him a visit.

Standing on a pure white cloth atop the altar king David had built long ago, Jeremiah floated above the city of Jerusalem. The Lord stood before him, brilliantly illuminated, holding a golden chalice in his right hand, saying,

Jeremiah, take this cup of the wine of fury.

Reaching out, he took the chalice, but did not drink.

Jeremiah, my son, is not drink served first to him who sits in the most prominent position at a banquet? Who is that but Jerusalem among the world's capitals?

Jeremiah watched an arm stretch forth from the center of the city, seizing the cup from his hand. Jerusalem then drank from the chalice, all of it, till it was dry.

The world was again silent—the young prophet alone, isolated. This revelation had been another manifestation of Jerusalem's downfall, he understood, and God was going to send him to the holy city to avert this divine retribution by bringing Judah to repentance. Jeremiah shivered in the warm sunshine.

That evening, the community was assembled around the fire eating and listening to one of their fellow brothers reading a passage of Sacred Scripture:

The people quarreled with Moses, saying, 'Give us water to drink.' Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me. Why do you test the Lord?' But the people thirsted for water and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?' So Moses cried out to the Lord, 'What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.' The Lord said to Moses, 'Take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. I will be standing there in

front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.

After reciting the text, the brother passed the scroll among the members, each reverently kissing it, for it was God's holy Word. With the meal finished there was silence, except for the crackling fire, as the ascetics contemplated on what the reading meant.

After a while, the aged brother, Orel, spoke, "Judah is once again in the wilderness and does not believe God is with us. We hunger and thirst, but for what? Worldly satisfaction? Or to be filled with God's Word and salvation?"

Nods and grunts of agreement circled the glowing fire. Someone tossed a withered olive branch into the flames, sending a shower of sparks skyward and a bright flash as the dry wood was consumed.

Shimeon looked over at Jeremiah and said, "You are quiet tonight."

"I'm distracted." He wondered if he should say something about the vision before the entire community, hesitated, but was unable to restrain himself. "The Lord spoke to me on the cliff this morning." He thus recounted the vision and what had been said. All were astonished and shuddered at Jerusalem's condemnation.

"The cup of the wine of fury," Orel whispered while shaking his head in sadness.

Those about him remained speechless, gazing into the fire. After a while, Shimeon said, "When you see a generation ever dwindling, expect the Messiah."

Only Jeremiah did not nod in affirmation. Jeremiah, though having been with the community for several years, still did not have the insight to understand who or what the Messiah truly was. It

appeared not to be a part of his calling to preach of the coming Messiah; his mission on earth was more immediate. Or was it?

Shimeon continued. “When you see a generation overwhelmed by many troubles, expect the Messiah.” Shimeon paused again, Jeremiah looking at him keenly. “Deliverance will come,” Shimeon announced, “not all at once but little by little, for people could not endure such a tremendous upheaval. It will burst forth as the dawn illumines the sky. Why? Because there is no greater darkness on earth than in the hour nearest to dawn. The way to righteousness is like the dawning light; it starts off as a glimmer, then shines more brightly until it develops into a perfect day!”

Shimeon raised his hands to the sky, his face uplifted to the heavens and declared, “It is the light of the Messiah, of which it is said, ‘And God saw the light, and that it was good.’” Shimeon remained in that position, arms and head held high, for a long time. Jeremiah cast his eye around the fire and observed that many of his brothers were postured in an identical manner. Silence continued into the night.

* * *

Lying in his small hut, thinking of the day’s events, Jeremiah suddenly sat up. The cliff face burst into his consciousness, driving all other thoughts and images from his mind. He rose and departed.

Atop the precipice, visions of God appeared before him—the dazzling white robe and gold sash, the chalice in his right hand; his divine love for his people, his divine wrath. Raphael, sitting by the gently flowing stream. Words, and phrases of words, were tossed about growing large, small, bold, then fading away. Voices shouted out to him, echoing over and over in his spirit: Mind and body—too

many distractions—unburden the soul—purge the body—rise to heaven and commune with God—God’s people are like the stars of the sky—no cloak with which to wrap himself—jackals howling—loneliness and isolation. Jeremiah struggled to speak, but his voice would not come. Attempting to move, his strength abandoned him. He sat with legs crossed and arms hugging his chest for what little warmth they could offer. “I formed you in the womb... I consecrated you... I have put my words in your mouth... I appoint you over nations... heaven and earth are united... kingdom of God not above or below, but within.” This onslaught of thoughts, images and words was overpowering. Jeremiah cast his eyes skyward and stared at the twinkling stars until dawn’s light caused them to disappear.

Lying prostrate on the ground, Jeremiah awoke to a gentle breeze which swept aside the strands of hair that covered his eyes. Standing, the dust of the earth fell from his threadbare clothes. A wave of peace passed over him and he declared, “Lord, I do not resist you; it will be done according to your word. I will take the cup of life and call upon your name all of my days.”

Clouds, with golden light shimmering within, descended from the heavens and enveloped Jeremiah. There he remained a second night, communing with the Lord God. Silence cast its shadow over the earth; the wind did not blow, the animals of the night did not prowl, and his fellow ascetics fell into a deep slumber. Jeremiah was ready, his life up to this point merely preparation. Now, God ordained his prophet with the Holy Spirit. His hour had come.

Descending from the mount, several of his brothers caught sight of the prophet Jeremiah, noticing at once that his face glowed like that of Moses coming down from Sinai.

“He has communed with the Lord!” Orel exclaimed aloud.

Dumbstruck, they went to their knees, praising almighty God. As Jeremiah passed, they watched in awe; feeling blessed to be witnesses to what they hoped would be a spiritual reawakening of Judah—a rebirth or, perhaps, the coming of the promised Messiah.

Jeremiah was twenty-six years old and had spent ten years in the wilderness. He was no longer the timid and homesick boy that had trekked into the desert. For the prophet, this barren wasteland had become his home, the harshness of the summer sun and the biting cold nights of winter had become comforts on life's pilgrimage—an experience not simply of the spirit within, but one that included God's surrounding majestic environment from without. Jeremiah's life now embodied itself with everything the Lord's hand touched, just as the finger of God caused a ripple in the air to form, which caused a ripple upon still water, or ripples through the depths of space that ultimately reached another star or planet. All things created by God are influenced by God—this he knew in every nerve and cell of his body. The earth is a beautiful place, he realized, except for the stain of sin upon humankind that diminishes this beauty, sometimes even to the point of ugliness. Trusting deeply in God's Word and Spirit, Jeremiah had grown in self-confidence. His own spirit was now courageous, and his heart surged with love. Love could wash away that stain and now is the moment to bring that divine love to all the earth. 'Do not be afraid, trust in the Lord' were the words uttered by the angels night after night in his recent dreams. God's will, not my own, must be carried out.

* * *

“Good morning, Jeremiah.”

“It is a good morning, Shimeon. God's blessings be with you.”

“So, the time has come for you to leave,” Shimeon said, sadly. “We will no longer have you with us around the fire, and you will be missed. I pray that the Lord our God will guide your every step.”

“I have been praying for that as well.” Jeremiah said as they embraced. “Please say goodbye to the brothers for me.”

“I will.”

Then, the smile on Shimeon’s face vanished as his voice took on a more serious tone. “My son, the life of a prophet is fraught with peril; people seldom want to hear God’s Word. When did a prophet ever rise up to save the people and they not stone him to death? The prophets of old did *not* have long and happy lives,” he warned. “Please be careful.”

“My life is not my own,” the young prophet replied. Then, with assurance, added, “I will not be foolish, Shimeon. The longer I live, the longer I can proclaim God’s Word.”

Shimeon put a hand on Jeremiah’s shoulder, saying, “Always remember, that the divine struggle of truth and faith is not against flesh and blood, but against the darkness of evil.”

An icy shiver moved down Jeremiah’s spine as goose bumps bristled over his whole body. Simeon then said, “Be alert. When you proclaim God’s Word stand firm and put on his armor—the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and raise high the sword of the Spirit. Then they will recognize you are a prophet of God, perhaps then they will hear.”

Jeremiah nodded and replied, “God is the one who offers his heart to reveal himself. I love my people as does the Lord. You are right to say they are not the enemy, and I will be on my guard against the forces of evil that deceive and lie.”

They stood before each other for a few moments, nothing more needing to be said. Jeremiah continued along the path.

“Jeremiah,” someone yelled out. “Jeremiah.”

He was in his hut and had just finished collecting what few belongings he had, grinning at his misshapen wash bowl he had made with his own hands so long ago. He recognized the voice and went outside, speculating how long it had been since he stopped banging his head on the lintel.

“*Shalom*, Gaddiel,” Jeremiah said, as he embraced the aged ascetic.

“I am grieved by your leaving us but overjoyed you have found your calling. To be a true prophet of God must be a great blessing.”

“And God’s blessings be upon you, my friend!” Jeremiah said cheerfully.

“I will never see you again, Jeremiah, for I should have died years ago. But, for some reason the Lord keeps me here. As long as he does you will be in my prayers.”

“The Lord keeps you here because you do his work. Look how he had brought me to you. I was a lost child, and you gave me shelter, and made a man of God out of me.”

“It took the whole community to do that,” the old ascetic said chuckling. “I remember the first meal you prepared for us, it was awful,” he said, shaking his head. “But you are a man now, prepared to do a man’s work. God be with you now and forever.”

The ascetic turned and slowly shuffled away, his walking stick softly tapping against the hard ground. Jeremiah took up his staff and the small bag of possessions and walked away, leaving the wilderness behind him.

CHAPTER 10

“The righteous is more excellent than his neighbor;
but the way of the wicked seduces them.”

- Proverbs 12:26

It was late into the night when Jeremiah returned to Gedaliah’s house. Expecting everyone to be asleep, he was surprised to hear voices in the courtyard. As he drew near, he could make out a large crowd milling about and the dwelling lit up. He weaved through the people and upon entering the home heard shouting and arguing coming from the central room. Tension charged the air. Ebed and Baruch, seated at the eating table, rose to greet him, and while washing his feet Jeremiah asked what was happening.

“Johanan is here,” Baruch replied. “The people are anxious to find out what is transpiring in their country.”

Upon entering the central room, the prophet noticed that people were loosely clustered in groups of twos and threes whispering amongst themselves—sometimes passionately—waving their hands in the air and occasionally raising their voices. He witnessed Johanan take Gedaliah by the arm and whisper into his ear. Suddenly, Gedaliah shoved Johanan and spun away, refusing to listen to any further words. Just then, Gedaliah’s wife, Deligha, saw Jeremiah at the entryway and called out his name. Everyone grew silent, staring at the prophet, except for Gedaliah who had turned to face the wall, and Johanan who wanted to go on arguing. On everybody’s face there was a serious concern.

Jeremiah walked over to Gedaliah and inquired, “What is wrong?”

Gedaliah did not answer, so Jeremiah looked to the other.

“Johanah?”

Neither would speak. Deligha, with a stern expression, said, “Johanah, tell Jeremiah the news you have brought to this house.”

Drawing in a deep breath, Johanah began. “Earlier this evening I received information from one of my scouts that there is a plot to assassinate our governor, Gedaliah.”

It was difficult for Johanah to repeat the words even though he’d been trying to convince his friend that this *was* a serious threat.

“Rumors and lies!” Gedaliah shouted. “Ever since Nebuchadnezzar’s forces invaded our land, people have been in a panic, not knowing what will come to pass.”

“We are not speaking of the Babylonians coming here to kill you, Gedaliah,” Johanah retorted. “I’ve told you, it’s our very own people, zealots.”

Shocked by what was said, the prophet asked Johanah, “Who are these zealots that want to kill Gedaliah, and why?”

The general sought to explain. “Many of our soldiers fled from Jerusalem either before or soon after the city was taken. They’ve joined together to continue the struggle for freedom, many in guerilla bands and others in larger units. But there are those who have become bandits, roaming throughout the region and terrorizing travelers and small villages.”

“What has this to do with Gedaliah?” Jeremiah asked.

“Gedaliah, and all of us here in Mizpah,” Johanah said, waving his arm across the room, “opened our doors to the Babylonian army

and submitted to their rule. There are a few Judean soldiers who see Gedaliah as a traitor and have conspired to kill him.”

The prophet pressed the matter further, asking, “Who has threatened Gedaliah’s life?”

It was Gedaliah who answered. “Ishmael, son of Nethaniah. You remember, the captain of the palace guard who imprisoned you.”

How could Jeremiah forget? The man who took pleasure in beating him, the one who pushed him into the cistern leaving him to die.

Gedaliah continued. “Before the siege of Jerusalem began, the king gave Ishmael a commission to continue the fight against Nebuchadnezzar’s forces in any way and in any place should the city fall.”

“They will kill anyone who is against Judean independence,” Johanan interjected. “He is a strong leader, and it’s rumored that he even has a larger force than I.”

“Ishmael,” Jeremiah said under his breath.

Gedaliah added, “Before the siege of Jerusalem, Ishmael came to Mizpah with some of his soldiers. We welcomed them with food and drink and offered them shelter. Ishmael wanted the sons and fathers of the district to join his ranks and fight, but the elders and I persuaded most to remain, as they were needed to care for the crops and livestock. We likewise, we had already given our pledge to Nebuchadnezzar that we would abide by his laws and not rise up.”

Gedaliah lowered his head in shame when he uttered those last few words. To hand over the town was humiliating, but what else was there to do? Whole families could have been massacred, and the district reduced to ashes.

“I urged Ishmael to cooperate with Babylon,” Gedaliah continued. “I saw it then, *and see it now*, as the one and only means to safeguard our beliefs and culture. God will deliver Judah when this time of retribution is complete.”

“I’m not arguing that, Gedaliah.” Johanan replied. “We are all here because we agreed it was the proper thing to do. The issue, at hand, is that Ishmael and his soldiers are coming to kill you.”

“That I don’t believe!” Gedaliah insisted. “I’m sure he has more important things to do than travel to a small district town to murder one individual. Besides, Judeans do not murder fellow Judeans, it’s against the laws of God!”

With that, he disappeared amongst the crowd.

Disgusted by the obstinacy of his friend, Johanan turned to Jeremiah, stating, “In the morning I must leave Mizpah and return to my army. As the only Judean forces in the region, we need to call on the other communities as well.”

Then, turning to Deligha he added, “Convince your husband of the reality of this threat. Ishmael and his army *will* travel to Mizpah.” Johanan then kissed her on the cheek and bade the prophet farewell. Jeremiah could tell Deligha was frightened. He could not even try to console her for he, too, was overcome by a sense of despair. Would the destructive wrath of God ever cease? He thought of the stories of Noah and the interminable flood; of Moses and the long arduous exodus out of Egypt; the seven-year drought and famine which wiped out so many during the time of the prophet Elijah. But he likewise remembered these struggles came to an end, and their passing brought forth a re-awakening of faith, a bright new future and a new covenant with God that produced green pastures and a fruitfulness of spirit. He wondered how long this time of purification will last.

“Endurance,” the prophet whispered. “Endurance, faith and hope: For without these we are a fallen people.”

A voice jolted Jeremiah out of his ruminations. Deligha took hold of his arm and was speaking to him. “Do you think we should celebrate Rosh Hashanah this year, or allow it to pass? So very much is taking place and now, with these threats, it doesn’t seem possible to rejoice.”

“It is a high holiday, an occasion of remembering what is genuinely important in life,” Jeremiah replied. “We must celebrate.”

Not merely a remembrance, but an opportunity to call upon God’s forgiveness and mercy. A coincidence? No, not a coincidence that this holiday has appeared after Jerusalem’s downfall. He announced in a thundering voice, “We *will* celebrate Rosh Hashanah. We will think of what blessings God has given to us, acknowledge our sinfulness, and strive for his love. Though normally a solemn occasion, we will bring this new year in with celebration!”

The force of his words astounded all. Only after speaking did Jeremiah realize the power released from within. With a smile, he added, “God is among us, my people; God is within us. Blessed be the Lord our God!”

The crowd cheered with a resounding "Amen!"

Jeremiah recognized the significance of a solemn time of remembering the past through story and reflecting on the present through worship. This could, he speculated, be an opportunity to turn God’s heart away from punishing to forgiving, but only if the people’s hearts revealed God’s presence within themselves—within their lives. Only sincerity of love would appease the transcendent God and love equates to forgiveness, divine and human love forming a bond.

The prophet closed his eyes to better reflect on the storied past:

At midnight, at the end of the sixth day of creation, a ram was in the Garden of Eden grazing beneath the ‘Tree of Life’ and drank from the waters which passed beside it. An angel of the Lord took the ram and placed it upon Mount Moriah where it began to graze once again. Throughout the day, father Abraham saw the ram come and go amongst the green pastures until it got entangled in the branches of a tree. The Lord God said to Abraham: “So will your children be entangled in many kinds of sin and trapped within successive kingdoms—from Babylon to Media, from Media to Greece, from Greece to Edom.” Abraham asked, “Master of the universe, will it be forever?” The Lord replied, “In the end there will be redemption at the sound of the horns of this ram; as it is said: ‘The Lord shall blow the shofar when he goes forth in the whirlwinds at Edom.’”

Jeremiah knew that the Lord blew the ram’s left horn on Mount Sinai, and that God will blow the larger right horn to announce the coming of the Messiah.

* * *

From the hills and valleys, hundreds journeyed to Mizpah for the celebration of Rosh Hashanah—the first day of Tishrei, the seventh month of the year. It took days of preparation as the town's plaza was transformed with colorful banners representing the great Jewish patriarchs, and artistic renditions of fields of wheat and lush orchards. Bright autumn flowers decorated tables while carts and kiosks were filled to the brim with fruits and nuts. The markets and bazaars located along narrow streets overflowed with this year’s abundant harvest; chickens hung upon hooks and lambs roasted on skewers rotating over charcoal pits. But even though it appeared

extravagant, Gedaliah made certain this display of bounty did not exceed the food restrictions set in place by Johanan and the elders. In fact, the carts and kiosks had false bottoms revealing only half or indeed a quarter their potential capacity. The chickens butchered had ceased laying eggs, and the sheep were past their prime. Individuals donated what they could spare, knowing full well that winter was coming and there were many months before the next growing season.

In the town's center square, under the broad shade tree, standing beside the public well, Jeremiah conversed with both Gedaliah and the town elders. Ebed and Baruch stood behind looking on, thrilled to be taking part in such a wonderful day. As the moment drew near to kick off the festivities, families gathered 'round. Many sought to gaze upon the prophet of God they had only heard about. Some were disappointed, however, for Jeremiah appeared to be like any other man, not singular in any respect, unlike Moses or Elijah. The elders held up their hands and called out for quiet.

Gedaliah declared, "My people, today is holy to the Lord; we are holy to the Lord. Let us celebrate in communion with our God, appealing for peace and security."

With that, Jeremiah lifted his arms in supplication and prayed, "Almighty and everlasting God, we gather before you in love on this day of remembrance to thank you for nourishing our bodies with a fruitful harvest. We thank you for nourishing our spirits with fortitude to follow you, O Lord. Remember your people taken in captivity and give to us perseverance in looking forward to a New Jerusalem."

Jeremiah then lowered his arms and bowed his head. For several minutes he did not move and said nothing. The crowd became uneasy and began muttering, wondering if Jeremiah was communing with

the Lord. Perhaps he is having a vision? Certainly, he was in a kind of trance, others reasoned. Raising his head, Jeremiah spoke, “My people, God’s people, attend to my words. Our Lord reigns forever, his dominion endures through all generations. God has not abandoned us and will restore us as a nation. Judah has passed into exile and now lives among the world; the Temple is destroyed and we are in ruins.”

Jeremiah paused once again but did not lower his head, rather, he peered out over the crowd. He saw pain and suffering on their faces, the harshness of God’s wrath and judgment. He knew those standing here today had lost everything, torment choked the spirit. Maybe God *has* forgotten us. Has our Lord become an enemy of his people? No!

“My people,” the prophet proclaimed. “No one heard my voice crying out for repentance, and God’s judgment came with his wrath. The Lord has brought about what he had promised; he has carried out his threat. He has demolished without pity and enabled the enemy to rejoice over you. But the steadfast love of God never ceases, his mercies never come to an end. The Lord is upright to those who persevere and he will not reject us forever. A new Jerusalem rises out of the ashes, freedom will come once more. Today we must celebrate our love for God and beg for his mercy. We think of the day in which Adam was created, so let us be created anew in the Lord’s spirit. Therefore, my friends, blow the *shofar* and declare that redemption is at hand!”

People shouted and rejoiced throughout the plaza. After months of anguish and pent-up despair, they danced in the streets while musicians played familiar tunes. Children tore free of their mother’s grasp and ran off to play and laugh. The community elders gathered around Jeremiah thanking him for his message of strength; it was a

tonic for them to hear God's prophet. Through him, the Almighty was telling them to hold on in faith and all will be well.

While being embraced and thanked, Jeremiah saw that Gedaliah had slipped away, so he asked, "Where is my brother Gedaliah? He should be here to celebrate with his people."

One of the elders spoke up. "A messenger came for him. Do not worry; he will soon return."

A young woman with a child in her arms came up to Jeremiah and said, "Holy prophet of God, your words inspire us. This is truly the time to turn away from our sinfulness and welcome the Lord into our hearts, following his commandments forevermore."

Jeremiah smiled and blessed the young woman and her child. However, in his heart he felt uneasy and continued to search the crowd for his friend.

In an empty stable three blocks from the plaza, Ishmael, son of Nethaniah, and ten of his soldiers surrounded Gedaliah. With an expression of contempt on his face Ishmael stood before his captive, his eyes dark, black as coal. Over the years since they had last spoken, anger had turned to hate; a hate for Gedaliah and all he stood for, a hate greater than what he had toward the Babylonians.

"You celebrate and dance in the streets while Judah's exiles die in Babylon." Ishmael spat in Gedaliah's face. "You prefer living under foreign rule don't you Gedaliah? Eating and drinking while others do the fighting and dying."

"Ishmael," Gedaliah explained, "we celebrate Rosh Hashanah according to God's law. This is your day as well. You and your men are welcome to join us."

“My men and I do not wish to eat and drink with traitors and cowards who bow down to the Babylonian king.” Ishmael retorted. “They would prefer to kill everyone in town, take your grain, livestock and food, then burn what is left.” Ishmael again drew near to Gedaliah. “We fight! Never will we be slaves!”

Gedaliah clearly perceived the evil in Ishmael’s eyes and for the first time the coldness of fear shook him. He realized that fighting and surviving in the back country had made Ishmael and his troops more animal than human.

“Ishmael,” Gedaliah offered, “all the young men in the district have gone off to fight, killed over the years of war with Persians, Babylonians, Chaldeans. Open your eyes and see that only women, children and old men fill the streets of Mizpah. How can we fight Babylonian rule?”

“By resistance!” Ishmael shouted. “Do not pay the prescribed taxes to the Babylonian pigs or give them food for their army’s bellies.”

“How can we not give what they demand? They’ll take what money we have, go into the storage bins and warehouses, they’ll take everything!” Gedaliah shouted back.

“Then burn it!” Ishmael yelled into Gedaliah’s face. “Destroy what they need so their armies cannot survive in this land. How can we continue the struggle if you feed and clothe the bastards?”

Gedaliah knew he could not argue or use reason to a creature filled with such rage. Quietly he said, “Destroy the food and the people die, *your* people, Ishmael. The nation of Judah will die.” Out of exasperation, no longer caring, he said, “You’re speaking as a man possessed; hate blocks you from thinking with a clear head. You

didn't listen long ago when I told you to cooperate with the Babylonians and you're not listening to what I'm telling you now."

"You do not tell me what to think or do." Ishmael shouted, eyes blazing and veins bulging. "No one standing here listens to a traitor's tongue." He lifted his sword.

"Your trial was held last night, out there," he said gesturing toward the desert. "We know you have supported the Babylonian king more than you've helped your own people regain their freedom. This must stop."

"I have kept our people alive," Gedaliah said. "I've kept the Law and our nation's faith alive. You would destroy the world in order to destroy Babylon."

"Damn God for creating the human race," Ishmael shouted out in a torrent of rage, "a race inherently evil."

He paced the floor breathing laboriously, his face contorted as if a hideous monster was struggling to be released. Once again, his dark menacing eyes fixed upon Gedaliah, saying,

"Don't be a fool. You cannot absolve yourself with talk of God's forgiveness and love for one another. We are a cursed people, never again to be free of the wicked spell that has been cast against us."

Pacing once again, Ishmael mumbled to himself, absorbed in deep thought. Then, standing before his prisoner, he declared, "It is the judgment of a military commission that you are a traitor Gedaliah, governor of Mizpah. You aid the enemy to the detriment of the people and the land of Judah. You are a dead man as is Johanan and the elders of this district."

"Ishmael, my life is nothing, but spare everyone else," Gedaliah pleaded. "I'm responsible..."

Ishmael's double-edged blade silently penetrated Gedaliah's flesh. A last gasp of air escaped as the two men stared into each other's eyes—Gedaliah's expressing shock, Ishmael's a piercing hate.

As Gedaliah's body slumped to the floor, Jeremiah felt a sharp pain in his gut, like someone had punched or stabbed him. Ebed and Baruch rushed forward but Jeremiah quickly recovered though still disturbed. Where is Gedaliah? He wondered. Jeremiah was about to send Ebed to go and look for him, but loud screams suddenly filled the air. Glancing to his right, he saw townsfolk running into the town square in fright. Soon, a few men on horseback appeared. Then, more men, women and children running and more horses. The horror Jeremiah now witnessed could not be described. Soldiers wielding swords and spears cut families down in the streets. On this sublime and joyful day, the streets streamed with Judean blood. Jeremiah found himself alone, all others having fled for their lives. Even Baruch and Ebed were gone, caught up in the panic and mayhem. The screams slowly diminished, but the sobs of the maimed and dying filled the prophet's ears. Quickly, he took up a jar of water and seized any pieces of cloth within his grasp, endeavoring to care for the wounded as best he could. He saw the young woman who had spoken to him earlier and hurried to her side. Though bleeding from a deep wound in her side, she was still conscious. Jeremiah raised her to a sitting position and took notice of the dead child in her arms. The woman looked up, asking, "Why?"

Then she slumped into death. Sitting there in the street, lamenting the loss of so many, he raised his eyes toward heaven asking, "Why did I not die at birth, so as not to witness devastation such as this? Why was I not buried stillborn and cast down where the wicked

cease to be wicked and the weary are at rest? Why is the Light of truth revealed to me in the bosom of misery and pain?"

Jeremiah looked at the young woman and child. He brushed soft strands of hair from her face and wrapped the child tightly within her mother's cloak, as if to protect her from further violence.

"I long for death, but it does not come," the prophet states, tears forming pools in his eyes. "What are human beings that you make so much of them, yet test them at every moment? Look away from me, O Lord, that I might lament for my people in peace. Do not look upon me as your focus of retribution; I appeal for mercy."

Jeremiah took the mother and child in his arms and reverently carried their bodies to the tree where he had stood moments before praying for God's love and blessings. Gently placing them in the cool shade beside the trunk of the old cedar, he then raised himself up and took a deep breath.

"Yet, I am alive. I breathe the air, walk upon the earth and eat of its fruit. God is the creator; he created evil and chaos as easily as he created me. The Lord does all things, sees all, on earth and in heaven. Who am I to pass judgement on the Lord and his doing? I, a speck in the universe. Can I make the rains fall or the winds to blow? Is it I who brings forth the sun each morn, or knows each star in the heavens? No. The divine plan continues to unfold in time and space as the Lord decides. I despise myself for my weakness."

Hearing loud voices and laughter, Jeremiah woke from his reflections and saw a straggling column of soldiers coming back to the city square. They brazenly sat at the decorated tables and feasted upon the richest meats and choicest wines, their blood lust satiated for a time. They ate and drank long into the darkness of night.

A red sun rose in the east to embrace a hamlet still living a nightmare. Those who had not vanished into the surrounding hills began the horrendous task of lifting the blood-soaked dead into donkey carts to be buried. How many are dead? How many carts are needed? They go about their task in an animated way as if in a trance. Amongst the tables and benches, Ishmael and his soldiers rested in a drunken stupor. But directly, as the sunlight strikes their faces and warms their skin, they began to stir; some sought water to slake their thirst while others searched for more wine. The wretched devils had no remorse over the carnage committed, as if immune—their hearts hardened, their souls gone cold. The prophet doesn't know whether to pity or curse them.

Horses approaching from the north caused the wandering soldiers to halt and listen. Ishmael leapt up onto a table intently looking as if striving to peer through stone and mortar. Friend or foe? He expects a contingent of his cavalry this morning, but what if they had met Johanan and been wiped out? Could this be Johanan? Commands were bellowed, horses rounded up, and Ishmael rode out to face the coming riders.

Jeremiah's heart sank when he caught sight of Ishmael leading another party of his warriors into town. The hearty feasting began once again. Jeremiah, who tended to the wounded throughout the night, has had enough and now confronts this crazed commander, wishing to know what his plans are for the surviving population. He likewise wanted to inquire about his friend, Gedaliah.

"Gedaliah and the elders of Mizpah are dead," Ishmael proudly revealed. "Convicted of being traitors to Judah."

"And the women and children your soldiers slaughtered, they, too, were guilty?" Jeremiah asked.

“Yes!” Ishmael said harshly, still eating.

“What now for the township of Mizpah? Burning?” The prophet asked.

“Yes,” came the reply.

Jeremiah watched the soldiers eating and drinking. In disgust, he turned and walked away knowing he needed to find Deligha and the children. Nor had he seen Ebed or Baruch since the attack yesterday and prayed that they were well. He quickened his pace toward the governor’s house.

As he proceeded down the lanes, Jeremiah saw the results of yesterday's rampage, which had continued through the early hours of night. Loved ones wailed as they squatted beside lifeless bodies lying in the bloodstained dust; loud laments echoed throughout the avenues as if all the souls of Judah’s past, present and future were crying out in torment. Broken furniture and upturned carts littered the roadside and courtyards of plundered homes. Jeremiah’s pace turned into a sprint. Cannot God even defend his faithful remnant? He begged. These people did as the Lord commanded; why was this evil allowed to happen?

Jeremiah reached Gedaliah's house and saw no trace of disturbance. Silence. Entering the courtyard, he couldn't see any evidence of looting or death. His spirit rose. Perhaps no one is here, he thought, hoping they had gotten away. Maybe Deligha and the children are hiding in the adjacent hills with Baruch and Ebed. Jeremiah’s mind filled with possibilities. Suddenly, the front door flew open and a man, with a sword held high, charged toward him. Jeremiah fell back in shock, arms raised to protect himself from the blade, when surprise caused him to freeze in place.

“Ebed!” Jeremiah shouted in relief. “Thanks be to God you are here.”

Baruch and Ebed had tried to console Deligha and the children while prepared to protect them with their lives. But Ishmael’s marauders hadn’t gotten this far down the street, yet.

“I do not wish to flee, by day or in the dark of night,” Deligha said stubbornly. “I’m not frightened of death and will embrace it if only to be reunited with my husband.”

“Gedaliah did not fear death,” Jeremiah answered. “He only feared for his people and their welfare. You know as well as I that his intimacy with God saved many from hunger and thirst.”

Then, a faraway expression fell over the prophet as if he were in a trance. He declared, “Your husband’s death symbolizes Judah’s death, our people’s death. But as my father once told me, death can bring rebirth to a new life. Judah must die so it can be reborn.”

“Let me die, Jeremiah, for I am part of Judah’s past,” Deligha pleaded.

“If you were a part of Judah’s past you would not be sitting here.” He declared. “Your hour has not yet come.”

Deligha’s head dropped onto the Jeremiah’s breast as she wept with grief.

* * *

With the arrival of the detachment of soldiers were eighty pilgrims they had picked up along the road. They were corralled into the courtyard as an officer conducted their leader to Ishmael, saying, “We came across these men on the road ten miles north of here. As we approached, they seemed suspicious in their movements.”

Ishmael looked at their leader, asking, “Who are you, and where are you from?”

The leader answered, “I am Imrah, son of Osher, of the province Dan. We are pilgrims on our way to Jerusalem to present our Lord with offerings for the forgiveness of sin and to reaffirm our faith. Two days ago, your soldiers seized us, though I do not understand why.”

Ishmael paced slowly by the pilgrims, looking them over, judging if what their leader said was true. He observed that they had shaved their heads and had no facial hair, were clad in sackcloth, and wore nothing on their feet. He said, “I am Ishmael, son of Nethaniah, general of Judah’s forces. Welcome to Mizpah my friends.” Putting a hand on Imrah’s shoulder and gesturing to the tables, Ishmael offered, “Please, come and take refreshment.”

As they moved toward the tables, many of Ishmael’s men encircled the pilgrims. Imrah noticed this and expressed uneasiness, but Ishmael waved off the man’s concerns, stating, “Do not fear. They know that the men of Dan are renowned for their fighting qualities, praised even in the blessings of Moses.”

With a sigh of relief Imrah relaxed and replied, “We are not warriors, general, but practitioners of faith.”

As they sat, food was served, and Ishmael filled the pilgrim leader’s cup. He said, “I am distressed to say that your quest has come to an end, my friend. A foreign army stands between Mizpah and the ruins of Jerusalem. It is not safe to travel any further.”

“We were told that the Babylonian army left with the exiles.” Imrah stated. “We must go to the sacred stones which were once the house of God.”

“It is regrettable,” Ishmael reiterated, “but your journey is over.”

Imrah rent his garments declaring, “My soul is in anguish. I cannot find the words...”

The pilgrim rose from the table and fell to his knees, bowing his head to the ground, the other pilgrims doing so as well. While they were praying, Ishmael rose from the bench, drew his sword and severed Imrah’s head from his shoulders. The soldiers ringing the pilgrims then attacked, killing all but ten.

The remaining survivors pleaded with Ishmael. “Don’t kill us. We have wagons full of wheat, barley, oil and honey. Spare us! We also carry silver and some gold. Please!”

Ishmael walked toward the pilgrim who had spoken. Passing near one of the other survivors, he swiftly plunged his sword into that pilgrim’s breast. After pulling his sword free, Ishmael showed the bloody blade to the pleading pilgrim, saying, “My men saw no wagons when they captured you.”

Shaking with fear, the pilgrim replied, “Because of the war and foreign occupation, we hide the wagons as we progress through unfamiliar territory then, when we see that it is safe, a few of us go back and bring them forward. They are in a grove of trees not far from where your soldiers came upon us.”

Ishmael beckoned his second in command.

“Sheerah, take this sinful pig and a detachment of your men and bring the wagons here.” He then said to the pilgrim, “The welfare of these other worthless sinners is in your hands. It is the wagons or your companions’ lives.”

After they had set off to retrieve the wagons, Ishmael and his men slew the surviving eight pilgrims. He ordered that their bodies, and the towns people killed earlier, be thrown into a large cistern, the one dug long ago by king Asa.

Later that morning, Jeremiah approached Ishmael who was on horseback giving instructions to some of his men. Seeing the prophet approach, the general turned his horse to face him.

“What happens now, Ishmael?” Jeremiah asked. “The townspeople are frightened, believing their city is to be destroyed, and they killed.”

“Tell the people to say farewell to Mizpah,” Ishmael replied, with a wicked smirk.

“It is true then; we are to die.”

“I would never kill a prophet of God,” he said. “Your life is safe.”

Jeremiah’s face became red with fury, boldly declaring, “You sought to kill me once before, or have you forgotten? If you think I’ll just stand by and do nothing while you slaughter every man, woman and child in Mizpah...”

Ishmael cut him off. “Please spare me your false bravery. You stood by and watched the massacre of Mizpah, which is what it will be called, and did nothing.” Ishmael dismounted from his horse.

“Ishmael...” Jeremiah began, but received a slap across the face.

“Be quiet prophet.”

While Jeremiah wiped blood from his lip, Ishmael roared, “Tell the people to get ready to leave Mizpah. We will travel many days so no baggage, only what food and water they can carry.”

“Where are you taking us?”

Bored with speaking to Jeremiah, Ishmael did not answer, but turned and led his horse away.

There was a reason for urgency as Ishmael worried that Johanan would come back to Mizpah with his army, see what had been done, then seek battle. Poor Johanan, he thought. What a fool for trying to

protect a city of traitorous scum. How could he betray Judah? Ishmael recalled that Johanan had once been a devoted companion, the best of friends. But now he is a foe—a formidable foe which he could not possibly face today, for his troops needed many weeks of rest and refit. How long has Judah been at war? He mused. How many years, months, days? The dead were all around him. Ishmael was dead, inside.

By midday a courier rode into the city, reporting to Ishmael that the pilgrim had spoken the truth, and that Sheerah was returning with six wagons loaded with food and other sundries, including the silver and gold. He further added that they had executed the pilgrim after revealing their whereabouts. He was glad for the extra supplies because of the number of people traveling with him, about four hundred. But wagons, carts and civilians meant slow going. Ishmael was concerned.

* * *

A clear and cool morning presented itself, but all knew that with the rising of the sun it would soon grow hot. It was time to move out, and so Ishmael's soldiers gathered the traitorous Mizpah rabble outside of the city and stationed guards around them. Most carried what they could on their backs and walked, but many of the younger children and women with babes rode. One cart contained Gedaliah's wife, Deligha, and her children—just behind walked Jeremiah, Ebed and Baruch. The people, still weeping for their dead and not having slept a wink since that fateful day, were fatigued and weak. Confusion reigned from the very first step of a journey into the unknown, with no one wishing to leave their cherished homes.

Ishmael, in a hurry to flee Mizpah, forgot to give the order to torch the city. His soldiers did not remind him.

Ishmael revealed to his officers their destination, the kingdom of Ammon, due east. "Here, we will find sanctuary with sympathizers and plenty of tools to rebuild our weapons cache. But, the first stop is the town of Gibeon, to the south."

"Why Gibeon?" his lieutenant asked.

"With this rabble in tow we cannot move fast, but fast we must move." Ishmael declared. "This little trek will tell us how well we can maneuver cross-country, and Johanan's scouts will report our heading south. By the time they arrive, we will have turned east and be long gone. Also, there is plenty of fresh water and grain in Gibeon to replenish our containers."

"We are carrying sufficient water to reach the springs of Jericho. Directly east is the way to go," one officer remarked.

"I command, and we go to Gibeon!" Ishmael shouted. "Now send a messenger back to Sheerah to instruct him to meet us there." He thus turned his horse and trotted off to take the lead, his soldiers coaxing the people southward.

As expected, the journey of trudging through a merciless sand and stone wilderness was agonizingly slow. It didn't matter how much yelling, whipping and spurring the soldiers did, the nameless teeming throng of men, women and children crawled on inch by inch, step by laborious step. The first to drop out were the aged—frail and weak to begin with, what strength they had failed them. They were counted in death as in life by the angels, to emphasize their preciousness in the eyes of God and likened to the stars of heaven or the sands of the desert upon which they now lay. Grandfathers, grandmothers and widows were left abandoned

amongst the sand and rock, the soldiers preventing others to go to their aid. Thus they remained, faces upturned to the broiling sun. Yet, within these black and tortuous hours harkened the cry for redemption, of rescue—a last source of strength to hang on, a last source of hope. Will it be the God of our ancestors of long ago that comes to our aid? Will it be Baal or Molech? Where is our brother Johanan and his army? But as the minutes melted away so did their faith, replaced with increasing doubt. A merciful God might permit them to fall unconscious from hunger or thirst and die in peace, but everyone knew that the jackals would pick up their scent and swiftly descend.

Time was the sole element moving fast on this trek. Ishmael's impatience increased with every passing minute, his fortitude long since gone. By midday Sheerah and the six wagons of provisions caught up to the column, and the second-in-command quickly realized that blood would soon flow if things kept going on like this. He rode forward to Ishmael's side. "My general, we're not making good time and Gibeon won't be reached till tomorrow." He saw the redness deepen his commander's face, the veins in his neck protruded, and he feared that perhaps he should have remained silent. But he had begun and felt he must continue. "May I suggest that you and a squad of soldiers go on ahead to the town and make preparations? You should not burden yourself in traveling with this caravan of refugees. Allow me to kick these animals into Gibeon."

"You are a bold man, Sheerah, for coming near me when I am in such a mood," Ishmael said as he turned and smiled at his friend. Distastefully, he continued, "We are overseers of women and children. How did we get saddled with such a procession? There is a

lengthy trail of garbage and bodies for Johanan to follow, and we are proceeding at a snail's pace."

"Our scouts report that Johanan and his entire army is in Ashdod, far to the west."

"Have we ever relied solely on scout reports? Never. They are many hours old and always inaccurate. For all we know Johanan could be in Gibeon waiting for us."

Sheerah was surprised at Ishmael's uneasiness concerning Johanan, for he had never exhibited fear of anyone or in giving battle but, this journey started to appear to him as if they were hiding out in the wilderness.

"Should I go to Gibeon and find out what, or who, is there?" Sheerah asked.

"No. I will take your advice. I cannot endure this pace or the smell of these pigs any longer. Get a squad of men together and I will go forward tonight."

Sheerah turned his mount and rode down the column to give the necessary orders. He was proud of himself to have calmed Ishmael and get him away from this dreadful passage, for if Ishmael had remained another massacre would certainly take place.

Ishmael's scouts were correct, a portion of Johanan's army was billeted in Ashdod. However, the commander and most of his army were much nearer, in Beth-horon, due west of Mizpah. A few of those who escaped the slaughter were just now arriving there and accounts of the bloodshed spread through the streets. This, of course, gave rise to panic amongst the townsfolk, for if Ishmael came here the two armies might fight it out in their midst. Therefore, people scurried about buying stocks of food and supplies, burying it in pits or cellars, while others loaded up carts in preparation to take

flight. It wasn't long before soldiers reported this to Johanan, and he called for a few of the Mizpah survivors to be brought before him for questioning. "Tell me what you know," he said to the small selection of men and women.

They relived the horror of that day; how a splendid celebration turned to tragedy; how families were butchered in the streets. Johanan noticed their blood-stained clothing, the look of shock on their faces—the staring eyes, shaky voices and nervous twitches.

"No mercy was shown, your excellency," one survivor said. "They claimed we were traitors for submitting to Babylonian rule."

"Are you sure it was Ishmael's men?" the general pressed.

"Yes. Several of us here saw his face."

"Where is your governor, Gedaliah? Is he with Ishmael in Mizpah?" Johanan asked, with false optimism.

"We cannot answer for certain, for we didn't see it take place, but heard that Gedaliah is dead. Killed by Ishmael himself."

Johanan had no proof that his friend was dead, but knew it to be true, for if Ishmael carried out the attack, then Gedaliah would most undoubtedly have been one of the first to die. Thanking them for the information, he said, "Go now and get some food and rest."

"Is Ishmael on his way here?" One of them asked. "The people are in a panic!"

"No. Ishmael will not venture westward," the general replied, though he wished that were not true, for nothing would please him more.

Johanan's heart sank. He and his men had pledged their allegiance to Gedaliah when he was appointed as governor of the district and encourage him to collaborate fully with Nebuchadnezzar.

Johanah did so mainly because he needed time to build up his army, not disclosing to Gedaliah that he would strike the Babylonians anywhere or at any time once this had been accomplished. Johanah even considered siding with Ishmael if that meant more troops at his disposal. Time is what they needed most, but now time meant nothing, for Ishmael had gone too far. Such heinous atrocities against the laws of God could not be disregarded or forgiven, no matter if two of Judah's strongest armies must clash. Calling his officers together, he said, "Get the men ready to ride first thing in the morning. Give them a decent hot meal and fine wine tonight, for we have hard work ahead of us."

"Yes, sir," Abiel, his second in command, replied. "Should we inform the men of our mission?"

"No, not yet. I'm not sure of the mission myself," Johanah admitted.

Ishmael arrived in Gibeon and, to his relief, Johanah was not there waiting for him. In fact, the locals stated that no troops had been in the region for days, Judean or Babylonian. This information, and the freedom of riding with a small detachment of soldiers, made him much steadier in mind. The ride had reminded him of long ago, when he was just a squadron commander fighting against the Persians—the small-unit tactics, the speed of maneuver, the attack and, of course, the victory. The good days, he recalled, where bonds of friendship and loyalty were forged. But now, as a vanquished general of a desert force with no home, he struggled to etch out a dog-eat-dog existence. Bitter and disillusioned, he existed on a harsh way of life, with no comradeship, no allegiances. Freedom, speed, attack, Ishmael decided, was for the young and adventurous, not generals.

Gibeon, the towns' name meaning 'uncertain,' is just how Ishmael felt. Though refreshed and invigorated, he nevertheless wished he were in Ammon safe and sound. Tomorrow his soldiers and the Mizpah rabble would arrive, and so he started to get things ready for the drive east. Mounting his horse, Ishmael rode a half-mile up the road to the 'pool of Gibeon,' calling to mind the legendary battle that took place here between the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Abner, the servant of Saul, king of Israel, went out from Mahanaim while Joab, the servant of David, king of Judah, came and they met here at the 'pool of Gibeon'. Both armies assembled on opposite sides of the pool, with Abner saying to Joab, "Let the young men come forward and have a contest before us."

Joab replied, "Let them come forward."

Forward they came, each grasping the other by the head and thrusting their swords into their opposite's side, falling together in a heap.

Ishmael remembered that though the battle was fierce, the Lord had looked with favor upon the men of David and they triumphed. Judah triumphed! Now, here he was, sitting on his horse before that very pool of water. It gave Ishmael a sense of victory. God is with us, he told himself. God is with us.

It took three days for the rag-tag band of Mizpah refugees to arrive. The soldiers accompanying them were just as weary with fatigue at having to coax and whip the people every inch of the way. The refugees were in appalling condition, having trod through the rugged desert, some on bare feet, with scanty rations of food and water. Many had perished while others suffered from festering wounds and sores. Sheerah rode up to Ishmael's encampment and reported.

“Any sign of enemy troops?” Ishmael asked.

Sheerah didn’t know if he was inquiring about Babylonian soldiers or those of Johanan, so he said, “No one within a four-mile radius.”

“Excellent. My intention is to remain here only a brief time, two days at the most. We will go due east, making for the township of Migron. There we’ll replenish our water and head into the desert to Jericho. Then, we cross the Jordan River to Heshbon in Ammon. I want to be there in ten days from the moment we leave here.”

“Ten days!” Sheerah exclaimed. “With horses for everybody and plenty of carts and donkeys for the supplies maybe, but with this rabble...” He was astonished that Ishmael could expect such a journey to take only ten days; it would perhaps require twenty. “It’s not feasible with women and children walking on sore feet. It took three days to get from Mizpah to Gibeon and you can see the state of things; our soldiers are exhausted and some of the people are no longer capable of walking. I counted at least fifty who died along the way.”

“Let them die,” Ishmael replied, the redness in his face and the darkening mood returning. “We will be in Ammon in ten days! We cannot afford to linger in Judah with Babylonians *and* Johanan hunting us. Our troops need an extended rest and refit so we can return to Judah as an effective fighting force.”

Ishmael gazed out across the bivouac, then said, “Look at our army. Tell me who are soldiers and who are rabble. Our brothers are no longer soldiers. War and hard riding have beaten them down physically. Worry fills their minds, not knowing if loved ones are alive or dead.”

Ishmael was certain his family was dead because, having been a member of the royal household, no one would have survived. Those he fought beside were his family now, and he needed to get them to safety as rapidly as possible. He turned to his comrade. "You have the rest of today and all of tomorrow to prepare, then we set off for Ammon. Those who make it to Heshbon well and good, but those who do not will die in their tracks."

Sheerah did not respond but simply nodded his head in ascent and departed. With plenty to do there was no time for conflict, he needed to focus. Ishmael, however, had a conflicted mind. He considered abandoning his captives here in Gibeon, burning the carts and just using pack horses, giving him speed and maneuverability. He was convinced that if Johanan was tracking him, he would arrive at Gibeon and find the Mizpah rabble encamped beside the pool. Thus, Johanan, bound by duty, must escort them home before returning to the chase, a week or ten days of additional time for escape. More than enough time, Ishmael mused. Across the Jordan River he and his men would be out of peril. That was the goal, the prize, to get across the river. He looked pleased, deciding this is best way. He stepped out of his tent to give this very order when two of his scouts rounded a hill riding hard.

* * *

In late afternoon, Johanan and his army had reached Mizpah hot and weary. After a long day's ride, they trotted into the city's square to water their horses and seek refuge from the sweltering sun. It was evident that the municipality had been abandoned or, if anybody was there, they were in hiding. Acting on experience, the horsemen automatically fanned out through the municipality's streets searching

for friend or foe. Johanan noticed dark splotches in the dirt, along with fragments of clothing, smashed pots and baskets with their contents spilled about the ground. His forward reconnaissance, already in the plaza when he arrived, reported that what the people in Beth-horo said was true, a massacre had taken place. Blood stained the surfaces of buildings and rotting bodies were discovered in the nearby shops and homes. Also, there was the unbearable stench. Johanan never felt such rage. After what had transpired in Jerusalem how could we, fellow Judeans, do this to one another?

“Abiel,” he ordered, “coordinate a search for remains, especially the governors.”

To his servant, he said, “Take my horse. I need to walk for a while.”

“Where will you be?” Abiel asked.

“I’m going to Gedaliah’s house.”

Johanan did not want his men to see the expression of anger, sorrow and anxiety displayed upon his face. Alone on the streets he cast his eyes downward; in shame, perhaps, for he once again recalled what he had declared to the people of Mizpah when they submitted to Babylonian rule: “I will protect you...” So much for his pledges, he reflected. But I will avenge you.

Arriving at Gedaliah’s home the house looked exactly as he remembered it, a place of refuge and peace. He cherished the time spent in Mizpah, and in this house, for he considered Gedaliah a brother and the people of Mizpah his family. Johanan felt the coolness of the shady courtyard and wished he could stay here, going no further, as feelings of dread settled upon him. Nearing the door, a cold sweat made him shiver in trepidation of what he might discover inside, but as he wandered through each room, those fears faded; it

all seemed undisturbed. But what of Deligha and the children? He'd come to terms with the distinct probability of his friend's demise but hoped Gedaliah's family was safe. And what about Jeremiah and his friends, Ebed and Baruch? Just then the door opened and Abiel came in, a look of deep despair upon his face.

"Johanan, we've found those slain by Ishmael." He wanted to go on with the details, as a soldier would in reporting to his commander, but he couldn't.

"Where were the bodies?" Johanan asked warily.

Abiel steadied himself and said, "They were thrown into the city's cistern. There must be over two hundred. We identified one or two of the town elders but..." It was difficult for Abiel to continue, "but the bodies are bloated and dark; the faces hard to make out." His strength deserted him, and he turned away, rushing out into the courtyard for some fresh air.

Johanan followed, and once outside asked, "The governor's body?"

"Many bodies were dumped into the cistern," Abiel repeated, breathing heavily. Only short, brief sentences were all he could manage; the gagging sensation in his throat worsening.

"Gedaliah *must* be found," Johanan insisted. "Retrieve those bodies and bury them."

As the words left his mouth, he realized just how repugnant the task would be, for he had seen the carnage of the battlefield and buried his share of comrades. But he needed to see Gedaliah's body; he must know of his friend's fate.

"Sir," Abiel began in a serious and demanding tone, "leave the bodies in the cistern and fill it in with earth. The soldiers would gladly dig a new one rather than get amongst decaying flesh."

Johanah tried to think straight, but his senses were overwhelmed.

“But what about the governor’s body? It must be recovered,” he stated in a frustrated and unsteady voice. Was he a man with conflicted emotions, or a soldier of method and logic?

Abiel reached out and grasped Johanah’s shoulder. “My friend,” he said gently and with sympathy, “why does the governor’s body need to be recovered? If he is down there, then he died for his people; let him rest in peace with them as well.”

“Rest in peace? How can he rest in peace at the bottom of a cistern with the weight of his people upon him?”

Abiel did not quarrel with his commander, but suggested, “We can leave a detachment of men in Mizpah and resume our pursuit of Ishmael. He cannot be allowed to run free to commit this atrocity on other cities or villages. Ishmael is our immediate responsibility in safeguarding the people of Judah.”

Johanah knew that his second in command was right, his pledge, “I will protect you...” echoing in his head. Abiel hoped that the preservation of the living would be more essential than attending to the dead.

After a few minutes of silence, Johanah said, “Make camp upwind of the city and send out patrols to find Ishmael’s tracks.”

* * *

The two troopers, who rode hard into Ishmael’s camp, reported to Sheerah who, in turn, reported to his general, “Johanah’s scouts have been observed three miles away,” he said in an uneasy voice. “They have discovered our tracks and are following them here.”

Ishmael’s expression remained like stone as he mulled over the report. He should have killed everyone in Mizpah, he brooded, then

this predicament wouldn't exist. We could have gone straight to Ammon. His contempt for the rabble of Mizpah became even greater. *Not too late to carry out my plan*, he thought.

* * *

While Ishmael received the unfavorable news, and thinking through his next move, two other scouts reported to Johanan, "We found Ishmael's tracks and followed them for some time. When it became clear that they were heading for Gibeon we returned while the others continued on. It is an easy route to follow and by the debris and bodies discovered along the way we know there are civilians accompanying them, many of them on foot."

"How many horses?" Johanan asked.

"Can't be sure, but over a hundred. Perhaps fifty carts or more."

Johanan and Abiel looked at the map spread out upon the table.

"They are definitely traveling for Gibeon," Abiel said. "It'll take them three or four days with the townspeople in tow."

"Probably," Johanan replied, not really listening but attempting to guess Ishmael's overall plan.

"Why Gibeon to the south?" Johanan asked, more to himself than anyone else. "Why bring these people with him? He cannot make it to Egypt, and Babylonian troops are spread out along the coast."

"Perhaps he intends to sell the women and children as slaves to the Phoenicians or Chaldeans?" Abiel offered. "They would bring a good price and put money in Ishmael's pocket."

"True," Johanan admitted. "But if that's the case, why go south instead of north?"

"To mislead us, or he may have allies in Gibeon to aid him," Abiel injected.

“If he and his soldiers acted on their own and rode free, yes.” Johanan argued. “But he can’t afford the luxury of wandering through the country with so many people and carts holding him back.”

It didn’t matter, Johanan decided. Abiel was right, Ishmael could not be allowed to carry out such crimes again. We must capture Ishmael along with his army and as rapidly as possible.

“Abiel, after the men have eaten and the horses are rested, get them ready. We ride to Gibeon.”

* * *

Another day lost on the banks of the pool of Gibeon. Ishmael was beside himself. His soldiers were scattered all over the town, in brothels or getting drunk. The elders and merchants were still dragging their feet in provisioning his army, with many asking exorbitant prices or hiding what they had until the soldiers left. Maybe Gibeon needed to be taught a lesson, Ishmael seethed, like being burned to the ground, or killing the community’s elders. He talked openly of such schemes, largely out of boredom and frustration. But he was serious in giving Gibeon an ultimatum—provide what was required, or else. He issued orders to his officers not to put up with backtalk or disrespect of any sort and turned a blind eye to the stealing and destruction of private property. But rape or brutality he could not permit. Ishmael told the people of Gibeon, “We fight and die for Judah! My soldiers and I are here to protect you from Babylonian oppression; help us, support us, in our endeavors.”

In the twilight hours, Jeremiah approached the commander's fire. "I have been informed you are thinking of killing again, Ishmael."

"You shouldn't listen to soldier's gossip."

"I hope that it is idle gossip, but the whole camp is talking."

"Cursed soldiers," Ishmael murmured. He had alluded to the possibility of killing the Mizpah rabble, or the Gibeon elders, and now the rumors are ripe. Panic will undoubtedly come in the morning.

"Why bring these people to Gibeon just to kill them?" Ishmael asked. "Do you take me for a fool? Don't you think I know what I am doing?"

"Old men, women and children, Ishmael. How could you contemplate such a thing? They are not soldiers you can fight, nor are they are not traitors that take sides. They are innocents caught up in the turmoil of God's wrath. They cannot harm you," Jeremiah pleaded. "How many must die to fill the emptiness of your dark soul?"

"My soul died with my nation, prophet. If Judah had prepared for war as we generals demanded, there may yet be a nation, a people. But you, prophet, presented yourself to the king and talked of God's judgment, of capitulation, of defeat. Well, we have been defeated and are now on the run, dodging Babylonian dogs that dwell in our cities and towns; eating our food, violating our women and stealing our riches." Ishmael's anger and patience were at the breaking point. He unsheathed his sword and rested it on Jeremiah's shoulder, the honed blade just brushing the prophet's throat. "Do not talk of my soul being dark. You should be concerned about your own. Are you prepared to see God face to face?"

Just then, Sheerah approached and saw what was happening. “Sheath your sword, Ishmael,” he demanded.

The general couldn’t believe what his subordinate had just said. Sheath my sword? Was he giving me an order? It was all too much. With no more thought, he lowered his weapon and stormed into his tent.

* * *

Johanah and his column rode hard through the night and most of the following day. His patrols were right, Ishmael’s route was easy to follow, especially with the mangled and decaying bodies scattered amongst the rocks—scavenging birds and beasts still tearing at the naked flesh. After what they had witnessed in Mizpah, and now the trail of dead, he and his soldiers were resolved to capture this demon, for they perceived Ishmael and his followers as bloodlust devils from hell itself. As the sky darkened, the column slowed to a walk so as not to lose the trail. With Abiel by his side, Johanah discussed plans for the deployment of the troops, trying to remember in detail the geography of Gibeon and the surrounding territory.

Now, lying low in the foothills, Johanah waited for the dawn, reminiscing of days long ago when he and Ishmael had been the best of friends. They entered the army together and, side-by-side, had taken the oath as officers for the king—Johanah because of his military prowess, Ishmael by political appointment. By different paths, both proved themselves as leaders and brave fighters. When the Persians came, they took to the field as young officers, being bloodied for the first time, and wore their scars like badges. And when the Chaldeans raided the borderland, they both led regiments to victory. Years later, the Babylonians came and once again Johanah’s

and Ishmael's armies fought shoulder-to-shoulder. But the Babylonians did not retreat, and their forces overwhelmed small Judah. With the two-year siege of Jerusalem and a depleted army, talk of capitulation to Babylonian rule fractured the nation. People took sides and friendships were forgotten as all were victims of a long drawn out war.

Johanan traversed the hills checking on his men. He made certain there were no fires to light up the night sky and assured them it would be a rapid and easy action. In the hours of darkness, they honed their blades and prepared their souls for battle.

* * *

Jeremiah did not sleep that night but, instead, appealed to almighty God. He regarded the years of war and the destruction of Jerusalem as God's wrathful judgment upon a people that had broken the covenant relationship forged at the time of Moses. The Lord freed them from Egyptian slavery and took them on a seventy-year exodus through the purging desert, bringing forth a new generation of God's chosen people. As a gift, God gave his chosen the Promised Land of milk and honey; a fertile region in which to establish the nation Israel. But, as with Adam and Eve, his people chose to turn their backs on the Lord and willfully broke that covenant. Ultimately, fighting ensued within the twelve tribes, the outcome being the creation of two divided nations—Israel to the north and Judah to the south. Without that union between God and humankind, they no longer enjoyed the Lord's protection: Israel was the first to fall, as God delivered them to the Persians, and now Judah had been struck down by the Babylonians. Foreign states now occupy the land once promised. But Mizpah, however, was not the Lord's work, but that of

Satan—a blood thirsty evil let loose. On his knees, head bowed, the prophet earnestly prayed for this curse to leave them.

* * *

The suns' rays shone across the horizon to the east. Jeremiah was jolted out of intense prayer by the noise of disorder and shouting. *My God*, he thought, *it has begun, Ishmael has issued the order.* Fear swept over him as he bolted to his feet and made for camp.

Ishmael leaned heavily against a table while examining his map, trying to decide his next move. "I must get control of the situation," he whispered. Suddenly, he too became aware of the shouts of panic and emerged from his tent to see what was going on. A cold chill overtook him, for upon the ridges dominating the pool of Gibeon was a mighty army, some on horseback, many more on foot, their weapons, shields and armor glistening in the early morning sunlight. Ishmael knew his adversary, Johanan, was up there somewhere peering down upon him. Sheerah was soon by his commander's side looking just as shocked.

"How can this be?" Ishmael's second-in-command exclaimed. "Where are our scouts?" Glancing at his general, he asked, "What disposition do you want the men in?"

Ishmael said nothing, for he already knew the battle was lost. Astonishment eroded into consternation, knowing Johanan had not forced-marched his troops to seek a peaceful resolution. He must think quickly; he needed a diversion in order to escape. Ishmael commanded, "Get them in line of battle. You know what to do."

Sheerah hurried off.

The people of Mizpah, who had watched the slaying of family and friends, who had been driven from their homes and dragged

through the desert like cattle, now cheered with all their might. Their savior, Johanan, had emerged up out of the darkness and into the morning light. They lifted arms high in adulation. They had been rescued from this oppressive scourge.

Ishmael's army, though veteran warriors, were a spent force and had no stomach for fighting fellow Judean comrades. Many had grumbled in dissent at the slaughter in Mizpah, nor had they liked the way the people had been dealt with on the trek to Gibeon. Now, they stood gazing forlornly upon the slopes, standing motionless, as if made of stone. Stillness filled the calm morning air; no officer or sergeant attempted to psyche the army up for battle, and no one sang the traditional ballads or gave uplifting speeches. Galloping up and down the line Ishmael saw shock and dismay on the soldiers faces. He drew back on the reins and contemplated his once brave men, realizing that there was no fight left in them. Perhaps it's best, he said to himself.

A solitary horseman slowly descended the rocky slope, a cloud of dust marking his route. He was met by Sheerah, who led the boy of eighteen to his commander. As the young trooper rode by the foot soldiers, he couldn't help but notice the disheveled state of Ishmael's men and the dirty rags hanging on slouched, limp bodies. Weapons, once sharp, shiny and new, appeared dull, bent, and many, broken. What a contrast to the messenger with a bright clean uniform riding a fine, healthy mount.

With a quaking hand, the youth presented Ishmael with Johanan's note. As the general accepted the parchment, he said, "Relax boy. No harm will come to you."

The trooper straightened himself in the saddle and sought to appear fearless, yet his eyes kept darting left and right. After reading,

Ishmael looked to his second-in-command and declared, "Our fellow Judean wishes to do battle in the valley to the west, away from the city and civilians."

Then to the courier, he asked, "Are you prepared to die at the hands of your fellow countrymen, boy?"

"I saw what you did in Mizpah," the young soldier replied with a trembling voice.

Ishmael studied the lad's face for a moment and said, "We fight here, at the pool, as our ancestors did. Go and report to your master." With that, the general turned his horse and rode away. Sheerah escorted the messenger back to where they had first met and saw him off.

Ishmael rode over to his devoted 'resolute' contingent, a highly disciplined unit of three hundred men that he kept near him at all times. The general and unit commander talked of a strategy until Sheerah joined them. The order was given for the contingent to charge a specific part of Johanan's lines believed to be the thinnest. Once breached, the rest of the army would rush through the breakthrough and destroy Johanan's army piecemeal, therefore avoiding a broad headlong confrontation. The unit commander saluted his general then departed to get his men ready. Sheerah stood there, both staring each other down. No salute was presented as Sheerah turned and mounted his horse to join the contingent in battle. Ishmael, with a smirk, remounted and rode in the opposite direction.

Sheerah led the assault with the fierceness of a roaring lion, attacking, falling back, then attacking again until only a handful of his brothers remained. This was Ishmael's diversion. Sacrificing his most loyal of men, he slipped away. Ishmael, son of Nethaniah, with eight of his soldiers, rode off and were never again seen.

* * *

Jeremiah approached Johanan with open arms, proclaiming, "Thanks be to God, Johanan, for you rescued Judah's people."

"Only the remnant of *Mizpah* was saved, Jeremiah," the general replied, "the whole of Judah will have to wait for another day."

"Even so, this day is symbolic of that future which is to come. God has not forgotten his people. We are in a time of penance now; the time for forgiveness and redemption cannot be far away."

"When, Jeremiah? How long will our nation be under this curse? How many more Judeans must die needlessly in their towns and villages, in their beds, before God's anger relents?" Dropping his head, Johanan said, "Remember Gedaliah, a courageous and kind man, a man of God, who cared for God's people." He shook his head in disgust. "Judeans killing Judeans. Is this the precept of God? To fight invaders and preserve the land is one thing, but when our people turn against each other..." Johanan could not go on, his anger and frustration overcoming him. He was not a scholar or one of the learned classes; a soldier cannot be a philosopher to ponder such matters.

"You lose sight of the bigger picture," Jeremiah replied. "*We*, the people of God, have sinned and turned away; the Lord did not turn away from us. Our souls must be purged in fire, and in blood."

"Bold words for one who talks and does not have another man's blood on his hands." Johanan replied coldly. "You're good at talking, but I wonder if God is still talking to you. Is he, prophet?"

With that, the general went off to get command of the situation.

There was jubilation in the encampment, for the majority of Ishmael's troops swore allegiance to Johanan. This made him the most powerful man in Judah; apart from the Babylonian king,

Nebuchadnezzar. As he stood before his tent, sweeping his eyes over the camp, pride filled Johanan's mind, then his heart, then his soul. The soldiers could now relax from their arduous forced march and the people of Mizpah settled down for another night at the pool of Gibeon. It was a time to pause and to reflect.

Jeremiah could not rest, however, but thought about Johanan's words. Have I changed? He murmured to himself. Has Johanan changed since I saw him last? Has Judah changed? Jeremiah shook his head, endeavoring to free himself of disordered thoughts. I must pray from the heart, for that is where the answers exist. Kneeling on the rough ground he beseeched the Lord that solidarity would sustain the people of Mizpah and all of Judah. Healing must now take place in order to step back from the edge of extinction. God is still with us... God walks among us... our Lord is within us. Ebed and Baruch, having found Jeremiah, stood near and heard these words. Looking at each other, they turned and quietly left.

After a great celebratory banquet, hosted by the elders of Gibeon, Johanan gathered his lieutenants together to work out their next move. He said, "The Babylonian army will have found out about the massacre at Mizpah by now," Johanan began. "It might be dangerous to return there."

"It's only a matter of time before they show up here," one officer remarked. "This is the best watershed in the area and good for supplies, as we well know. We cannot carry on further south, we're too near to Jerusalem as it is."

"And," another chimed in, "we can't head westward toward the coast, that's where the occupation forces are the strongest."

"I need not be reminded of the obvious," Johanan replied.

“Do we send the people of Mizpah back to their homes?” An officer asked. “What will be their fate?”

“The Babylonians showed mercy to them once but now, after what happened there, I’m not sure,” Johanan replied.

One of the older more experienced commanders spoke up. “Let us not forget that it was the Babylonians who appointed Gedaliah governor of the Mizpah district. Some of their allies, like the Chaldeans, would love to stir up trouble and take our land. With the killing of their governor, *and* the massacre, they will claim that the Judeans are still in rebellion.”

“It’s true that the Chaldeans want our land,” Johanan said. “And as long as they are allies of the Babylonians, we cannot fight against them on our own, no matter how large our army. We, too, need allies.”

“That’s well and good for the future,” Abiel replied, “but what happens to us when the sun rises on the morrow?”

“We must hide like the refugees we now are,” the general conceded. “With the district of Mizpah gone we have no home.” He glanced at the map and decided. “We head south toward Hebron.”

“Hebron!” A junior officer blurted out. “A crossroads city for tradesmen and roughnecks? Surely there will be Babylonian troops permanently based there.”

“We run that risk wherever we go,” Johanan replied. “We will dispose of our military equipment along the way and enter Hebron as a caravan of pilgrims, merchants or whatever we can pass ourselves off as. In Hebron we will hide until an ultimate destination reveals itself.”

“But there are over six hundred of us,” Abiel said. “An army of pilgrims?”

“After these many years do you take me for a fool?” Johanan impatiently replied. “We enter the city in small groups, over a span of days. There is plenty of time to work out the details along the way.”

Johanan already recognized what they must do—go to Egypt. But his Judean heart yearned to remain in his homeland. To leave, he was convinced, meant total failure in his mission to preserve any semblance of Judean history, culture and faith. Sadly, he recalled that this, too, was Gedaliah’s mission. From a soldier’s viewpoint, hightailing it to Egypt meant defeat. But he had the responsibility to provide a haven for these people and an obligation to his men. No, he concluded, his main priority, was to protect the Judeans under his care from any further harm. Egypt was now the only place of refuge. And, the Egyptians will fight against further Babylonian expansion and will require more troops. They would be grateful—perhaps grateful enough to help free Judah. But how can I convince these people to follow me into Egypt? Johanan said to himself as he paced in his tent. He dwelled long and hard over various possibilities but decided that only Jeremiah could persuade them.

* * *

Thus, says the Lord God:

Then all the commanders of the forces, and Johanan, son of Kareah, approached the prophet Jeremiah and said, ‘Be good enough to listen to our plea, and pray to the Lord your God for us—for this remnant. For there are only a few of us left. Let the Lord our God show us where we should go and what we should do.’ The prophet Jeremiah said to them, ‘very well. I will pray to the Lord

our God as you request, and whatever the Lord answers I will tell you; I will keep nothing back from you.

They in turn said to Jeremiah, “Whether it is good or bad we will obey the voice of the Lord our God to whom we are sending you.”

Jeremiah retired to a quiet place in the neighboring hills and there he prayed ceaselessly to the Lord for seven days and nights. Johanan hoped that he would come back with Egypt as the Lord’s answer. As time passed, the tension grew. The general knew the Babylonian forces could show up at any moment and so kept his scouts on constant lookout. Feeding and provisioning so many was putting a considerable burden upon the community of Gibeon; gracious as they were, Johanan and his people were overstaying their welcome. Convinced that Egypt was the sole answer, Johanan sought to gain the support he needed to persuade everyone else. Surprisingly, many of the leading citizens felt as he did, that to remain in Judah meant death. As days passed, and the prospect of being attacked grew, the people became uneasy.

“Why should we linger in Gibeon like sheep waiting to be slaughtered?” some asked. “How many days has it been?” Others said, “Perhaps God has told Jeremiah to abandon us to our fate.”

“God wished us dead in Mizpah,” a few answered. “He tried again here at the pool of Gibeon. As long as we stay in Judah we are doomed.”

The waiting caused hysteria, replacing any faith or trust they had in God. More and more, people demanded that Johanan be their leader and take them away from here. On the morning of the eighth day a delegation stood outside Johanan’s tent.

“We desire that a decision be reached,” declared the people. “Tell us where we are to go for refuge and we will go. We cannot wait here any longer lest we die.”

“If you put your trust in my judgment, then hearken to what I say,” Johanan pronounced. “Egypt is our only prospect for safety and many of our people are already there now. We cannot find rest in our homeland as long as the Babylonian hoard occupies our homes. My officers and I have worked out a route that will afford shelter, food and water along the way. Others have safely traversed the desert and the Sinai and we shall do it as well. We set out tomorrow, for there is nothing to keep us here.”

The people cheered! To do something, anything, was better than remaining here waiting for the unknown to happen. Many of their relatives and friends had moved to Egypt when the Babylonians first threatened Judah years ago. Even more left when Jerusalem was besieged. For seven days they had waited for Jeremiah to inform them what to do, but no word had come. Like Johanan said, nothing was keeping them here now.

Jeremiah prayed in silence, with no food or water to refresh his body. To commune with the Lord is an intense experience and a personal enlightenment, which invariably left him drained and weak. However, he knew the people were waiting for a revelation from God, so he stood, stretched, and began the long walk back to camp. As he drew near, Ebed and Baruch met and walked with him, but said nothing. Nearing the encampment, Jeremiah saw that there was much activity, with people loading their carts as if to depart. People saw the prophet arrive but paid him scant notice. He turned to Baruch and said, “Tell me what is happening.”

Baruch lowered his head and said nothing.

Jeremiah looked to his left and asked, “Ebed?”

Responding in a subdued tone, Ebed said, “Johanan is now the leader of these people, Jeremiah. You must speak with him.”

When they arrived at the general’s tent Johanan gladly welcomed Jeremiah, confident that the prophet, and the Lord God, would confirm his plans. Jeremiah said, “The Lord has answered the prayers of his people. Gather everyone together and I will proclaim the will of God.”

Johanan gladly complied, and when all the people stood before him, Jeremiah repeated what God had said:

Thus, says the Lord to whom you sent me to present your plea: ‘If you will only stay in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you down; I will plant you and not pluck you up; for I am sorry for the disaster that I have brought upon you. Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon; do not be afraid of him, for I am with you.

The people were stunned by Jeremiah’s words and could only stand there in silence—confusion conflicting their minds and hearts. After several minutes, they began to grumble. Jeremiah heard their groaning and saw their stony faces, realizing that God’s direction had fallen on deaf ears. Raising his voice, the prophet proclaimed, “Our Lord and God assures us that the evil has passed! We must remain in the Promised Land to flourish and multiply once more. You have nothing to fear!”

But fear had a tight hold on them.

“We will not stay in this land. No! We go to Egypt!” They cried out. “We have had enough of war; our stores of food will soon be gone.”

Jeremiah answered, “You say you want to escape war and hunger, but the fact is, you refuse to obey the words of God.” The prophet then declared:

Thus, says the Lord God of hosts: ‘If you are determined to enter Egypt and settle there, the sword you fear shall overtake you; the famine you dread will follow close after you. There, in the land of Egypt, you shall die.

Incensed, the people shouted and raised their fists in anger. So much so that Ebed and Baruch became concerned for the prophet’s safety. But, in truth, their pent-up rage was not actually focused upon Jeremiah, or the Lord their God; it was the days, months and years of anguish, fear, suffering and death. They just couldn’t take any more and now, with contradictory declarations by Johanan and Jeremiah, their exasperation flooded out of them in torrents. Disorder reigned, with chaos soon to follow.

“Jeremiah,” someone bellowed, “You are a liar!”

A stillness settled over the crowd as Jeremiah searched for the voice. His eyes rested on Johanan, who spoke again.

“The Lord our God did not send you into our midst to have us stay here and be slaughtered.” Johanan stated. “Baruch, son of Neriah, has turned you against us. *He* convinced you that we should stay in Judah.”

All in the crowd knew Baruch to be Jeremiah’s faithful disciple and scribe. They likewise were aware that Baruch aspired of one day being a prophet of God but as yet had not been granted that gift. Leaving Judah would dash those hopes. For, how could he be a prophet of God in a foreign land? The land of prophecy is here, consequently, they must remain here.

Johanán stood resolutely before the people saying, “Tomorrow we depart for Egypt, for there is nothing for us here except death. Continue to carry out preparations and try to get a good night’s sleep.” He retired to his tent and the crowd dispersed leaving Jeremiah, Baruch and Ebed standing there alone and rejected.

Deligha walked up with tears running from her eyes, overcome with sorrow and shame.

“Jeremiah,” she said softly as she placed her arms around him, “I’m so sorry.”

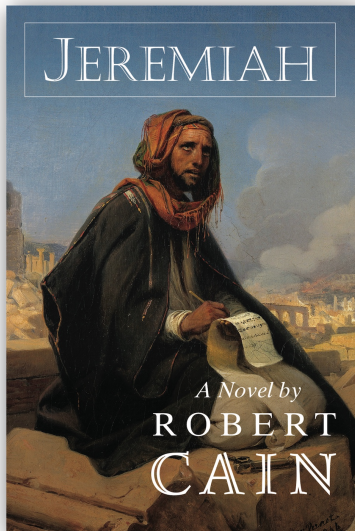
Jeremiah looked at her tenderly as he wiped a tear from her cheek. “Do not weep for me, Deligha, but weep for these people, and for Judah. They are a...” dropping his head Jeremiah choked on the words, “we are a cursed people, condemned to die in a foreign land.”

“We’re going with them?” Baruch asked.

“Yes,” was all Jeremiah said, being at the height of despair.

Walking off a short distance, Jeremiah wondered if God had forsaken him. No, Jeremiah decided. God is with me. God has always been with me since before I was born. I am the one who failed, not you, O Lord. I failed to persuade the king of Judah to submit to the Babylonians; I failed at Mizpah, and now at Gibeon. My commission in guiding the people back to the Lord has been a complete failure. God no longer has any need for this prophet, Jeremiah decided. He knew these people were not going into Egypt for security. By disobeying God’s will once again the Lord is sending them there in exile, to die outside the borders of the Promised Land. Why? He wondered. Why do people seek God’s guidance but do not hear, then grow anxious and lose patience? Their minds cannot trust, their hearts have no faith, thus they drift away from God’s truth and pursue their own way. The physical body yearns to feel secure; they

must be in charge, trusting only in themselves. They cannot see beyond their eyes; they cannot hear beyond their own words. The physical world surrounding them dominates while the spiritual interior grows dark and fades away.



Jeremiah, is unexpectedly called by God to be one of his prophets, creating upheaval and tragedy not only to his personal life but to the world around him. It is a journey of discovering oneself through interaction (human as well as divine) and insight: A relationship to others and to God that defines who one is destined to become.

JEREMIAH

by ROBERT CAIN

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