

CHAPTER ONE

Ishboeth ben-Judah and his donkey made their way through the mass of people crowding around the Temple. Next to Ishboeth walked Jacob, his twelve-year-old son. It was the first time Jacob was allowed to come with his father to the valley of the Mount of Olives. The olives they would pluck there were intended for use in the temple: they would provide oil for the golden lampstand that was lit every day toward evening.

They made their way through a colorful crowd of people who were busy buying and selling. Every Monday and Thursday there was a market. Heavily laden donkeys, slow-moving camels, carts, women carrying large packs on their heads — all of these congested the narrow streets of Jerusalem. The tax-collectors were busy collecting duty on the merchandise being brought into the city from other lands. From the belt of each tax-collector hung a big pouch that got heavier and heavier. All the while they argued with the sellers who believed they were being swindled.

There were Pharisees walking calmly among the people, muttering their prayers. On their faces one could plainly see their contempt for the mob around them. The phylacteries bound to their foreheads and their left arms were visible from afar,¹ and as they walked they pulled their cloak tight around their bodies — afraid of physical contact with the people of the soil, the despised multitude of people who do not know the Law. A Pharisee who had contact with such people might well be defiled, made impure.

The peddlers stood on streetcorners and in houses, making a lot of noise as they advertised their wares — vegetables from the Valley of Sharon, fresh figs from the gardens outside Jerusalem, fish imported from the port of Joppa, wool and flax from the fields near Bethlehem, large, dew-laden grapes from Eshcol and the valleys of Jericho. Water-carriers held up their skins of water before the people and cried out: “All you who are thirsty, come and buy my living water!” Poor traders offered freshly caught sparrows for sale — two for a penny. There were tradesmen who repaired sandals and belts and sold chairs and foot-stools. Other peddlers offered oil-lamps, plates, dishes, jars, and pans for sale. And then there were merchants with turtle doves for people who were too poor to offer any other kind of sacrifice.² Around these booths crowded the poor — humbly dressed people who scarcely managed to cover their bodies with a shaggy cloak of camel’s hair or stringy goat’s hair.

But there were also shops with expensive ointments — scented spices and perfumes and oils imported from Arabia and Egypt. That was where the rich gathered — women in finely woven garments, veiled with tulle. They adorned themselves with golden armbands and silver rings and long, diamond-stud earrings. They were accompanied by their female slaves who carried their purchases for them.

At an open spot on the market square was a group of people listening to the words of a rabbi. The speaker made emphatic gestures, his frail arms cutting the air. His tanned brown face was very expressive, and his coal-black eyes had a living glow that fascinated his hearers. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead and dripped down into his black beard.

Ishboeth and Jacob paused briefly for this speaker, but soon they went their way again. There was work waiting for them. Moreover, they were quite used to this weekly scene.

When the busy center of the city was behind them, they went down some narrow streets. The donkey shook its head, for it was bothered by buzzing flies of a mother-of-pearl color. It flapped its ears constantly.

At the Sheep’s Gate a group of beggars was seated, most of them hideous in appearance. Some were blind, others lame. Among them was Eliakim, who had two stumps in place of hands. The beggars knew Ishboeth very well, for at this time of year he often journeyed to the Mount of Olives as he went about his work for the Temple. They also knew that he himself had no possessions to speak of and thus could give them nothing. Weren’t many of the Levites in the service of the Temple almost as poor as he was? They greeted him silently, and he said, “The Lord be with you!”

When the father and son had passed through the dark gate, it became yet stiller. They were on a sharp descent. The morning sun shone right in their faces, and Ishboeth wound his head covering even lower around his face to protect his eyes. Then he saw that his son was wiping the sweat from his brow with his mantel, and so he said, “Come, my son, let me put you on the donkey.” With a triumphant expression in his eyes, the boy looked around

1. See Matthew 23:5.

2. See Leviticus 5:7.

and let himself rock back and forth with the rhythm of the donkey as it advanced slowly.

The sun burned down on the unshaded path as they passed bare boulders and wove their way down. The deep ravine lay hidden in a mist of rising vapors — the last morning fog patches that disappeared slowly in the azure light.

When a troop of late market-goers passed them, grimy reddish-brown dust swirled up. Ishboeth turned his face away and held his breath for a moment so that the grime would not enter his lungs. Then, when they were about halfway to their destination, he turned right, following a small footpath which was hardly wide enough for him to walk next to the donkey. There were some trees here; the shade from the high, thin palm trees brought welcome refreshment. After half an hour they came to thicker growths as they approached the edge of the Mount of Olives, with its dark grove of olives.

Jacob jumped down from the donkey. The animal shook its grey body and reached for the sprouts of grass at its feet. “It’s wonderful here, Father,” said the boy.

“Yes, boy, where man does not spoil the creation, the Lord is generous in what He gives. Blessed be His name.” Ishboeth’s eyes passed inquiringly over the fruit trees, and then he said, “Look, my son, you may help me, but only on the condition that you do *exactly* as I say. You know that these olives are used to make oil for the holy lampstand. The olives used for this purpose must not be too ripe. It’s very exacting work.”

“Why may we not pluck the ripe olives, Father?”

“Because they tend to give off smoke, and that’s not allowed. The light must be clear and without any smoke. Look, these over here are good, but those are already too ripe. Do you understand?”

Jacob nodded. He plucked a few oval fruits and held them before his father. “Are these good, Father?” he asked.

Carefully Ishboeth inspected the light green fruits and pinched them between his finger and thumb. “This one is all right, my son,” he said, “but this other one is already too ripe and must be thrown away.”

Each one attached his bag to his belt and began to work silently. When the bag became too heavy, it was emptied into the bigger sack which would be tied to the donkey’s back when they left.

It was quiet in the garden — a holy stillness that was only occasionally disturbed by bees and other insects buzzing around. But when the sun burned down upon them from directly overhead and the trees afforded them almost no shade, Jacob said, “I’m thirsty, Father — and hungry.”

Ishboeth nodded, and after he looked at the sun’s position, he said, “We will eat and drink now, my son.” They both went to the spot where the donkey was tied up. The animal had filled its belly with grass and seemed to be dozing with a vacant expression, while using its tail and ears to shoo away pesky insects.

From his saddlebag Ishboeth took a piece of bread and a jar of water. The two sat down against the trunk of a tree where there was plenty of shade, and after Ishboeth had broken the bread and placed his hands over it in blessing, they ate. For dessert Ishboeth came up with a few figs.

Jacob looked around and suddenly jumped up. He came back with a handful of red berries and asked, “Can we eat these, Father?”

Ishboeth nodded and said, “They are pure bilberries, son. Go right ahead and eat them.” Soon there was rich, dark red juice to be seen on the boy’s lips. He also shared the berries with his father.

Then Jacob nodded and said, “Father, did you hear what the rabbi at the market was saying?”

Ishboeth had to think for a moment to figure out what his son was talking about. Then he shook his head. He was drowsy from the heat and hoped he would have a chance to doze off for a while. “What do you mean, my son?” he asked.

“The rabbi was talking about Corban. He said that if you make your goods into Corban, you don’t have to give anything of what you own to your poor father or mother. What did he mean by that, Father?”

Ishboeth thought about it very carefully. Did he have to tell his son about this matter now? Wasn’t the boy still too young to be able to deal with such questions? But then he thought about the olives they had just plucked. Hadn’t he told Jacob that the fruits that were not yet ripe were the ones that must be plucked because when their oil burned, it gave out a clear light without any smoke? And wasn’t it the same way with the boy? If so, wouldn’t it be best to begin answering his questions at a very early age?

“Corban,” he explained, “is the promise one makes when some gift or possession is dedicated to the Lord or the Temple. If a person does this, he doesn’t have to give anything to his parents. For the Temple comes before everything else, my son.”

Jacob was still. He had to think about his father’s answer. After a while he said, “But then it would be possible, Father, for a son to give nothing to his poor father and mother, but only to give to the Temple! Are his parents then

supposed to go hungry? Surely that cannot be the Lord's purpose, Father! I don't believe it. If that were true, then let the Temple be cursed!"

At once Ishboeth jumped up and shook the boy by his small shoulders. He looked at him angrily, and at first all he could say was: "How *dare* you . . . ?"

Jacob stamped his feet angrily. Tears welled up in his large, dark eyes, which were turned toward his father in a quest for help. At last Ishboeth let the boy go, and said, "Take back what you said, my son. Take back those terrible words. May the Lord be gracious to your soul. May He forgive you. Take it back, my son, take it back."

"Father, may a son let his parents go hungry because he dedicates his goods to the Temple? Surely that cannot be what the Lord wants, Father — it's impossible."

Then at once there was light in his youthful face, and he continued, "Father, doesn't the Law say, 'Honor your father and your mother so that it may go well with you and you may live long in the land I shall give you'? How can the same God then demand that a child should make Corban of his possessions and let his parents suffer want? This is an idea made up by the rabbis and the Pharisees, Father. It's a human idea — nothing more." The boy was so worked up from his little speech that he was panting.

Ishboeth looked at his son in amazement. But then he thought again of the horrible words the boy had spoken. Hadn't he committed a deadly sin? How could he be forgiven if he did not retract his words? "Take your words back, my son, take them back," said Ishboeth, virtually pleading with the boy. "And never let such words cross your lips again."

"Was it really so bad, Father, what I said?"

Ishboeth nodded and said, "Did you see Eliakim sitting at the gate with his pathetic little stumps?"

"Yes, but what about it?" responded Jacob.

"I'm going to tell you something, my son. Listen and find out how the Lord punishes those who mock the Temple or do something even worse — as you were doing just now. In his younger years Eliakim was a rich man. But then he spoke a word against the Temple and the High Priest — may the Lord bless him"

"Bless whom, Father? Eliakim?"

"Quiet, boy. I mean the High Priest, of course — may he be blessed. And do you know what happened then? They brought Eliakim before the Sanhedrin, and then the High Priest — blessed be his going out and his coming in — pronounced the verdict upon him. His right hand was to be cut off"

"That's horrible, Father! But why are *both* his hands missing?"

"Listen, Eliakim bribed the man who was to carry out the sentence. He paid him a great deal of money to cut off his left hand instead of his right hand. Naturally, the High Priest got to hear about this, and then he decreed: 'The law demands the right hand. That he has surrendered his left hand is his own business.' And so they also cut off his right hand. After that he lost all his possessions, and now he is a poor beggar lying at the gate every day. That's how the Lord punishes those who resist Him, my son."

"The Lord or the High Priest — which one do you mean, Father?"

Ishboeth trembled. Anxiously he looked in all directions, for his son had said it right out loud. Someone might have heard. He wiped the sweat from his face, and then he replied, "Take it back, my son, take it back. Do not let the Lord become angry." His eyes were pleading with his son.

"I take it back, Father, but"

"Quiet, boy, say nothing more about it. That's enough. When you are grown up and have become a priest yourself and are allowed to serve in the Temple, then you will understand what you have done."

"Am *I* to become a priest, Father?" Jacob asked, looking at his father in amazement.

"Naturally, boy, naturally. You are of the tribe and line of Levi. Many priests have come forth from this line. Your father, regrettably, could not become a priest: I am missing the big toe on my right foot. But there's no obstacle in your case; you have no physical defect. Just think, the holy oil your father is now gathering you will later burn in the lamps of the golden lampstand in the Holy Place. You will light the fire on the incense altar, and the people will kneel before you in prayer. Son, it is your father's desire to be in the midst of God's people in the Temple one day, bowing down when his son enters the order of the service in the Holy Place."

By this point Ishboeth had tears in his eyes. Feelings of great awe overcame him. What he had thought about so often and had once spoken of to his wife had now been expressed to his son for the first time.

But Jacob did not share his father's eagerness. He was not delighted; instead there was deep disappointment to be read on his face. "Father, I will never become a priest," he said.

"Not become a priest? Even if the Lord calls you? Think of Samuel, my son. If the Lord calls you, you have

to come and serve Him in His holy Temple.”

Jacob shook his head. “No, Father, I will become something else,” he said with determination.

“What do you wish to become, my son?”

“A shepherd, Father.”

“A shepherd?” Ishboeth looked at his son in amazement. Then his features came together in a frown of disapproval. With contempt in his voice, he asked, “A shepherd? Child, how did you get that idea into your head?”

“Why shouldn’t I become a shepherd, Father?”

“There is nothing lower than a shepherd. Shepherds just don’t count among our people. They are despised. They belong to the scum of the earth. Did you know that no shepherd can ever be accepted as a witness before a judge? No one attaches any value to what a shepherd says or does. No, my boy, that cannot be — *never!*”

Jacob became angry again. He stamped his foot on the ground and said, “I want to become a shepherd! I want to go into the fields and be with the sheep and goats. I like to be in the open places. I hate the city and everything that goes with the city”

“Quiet, my boy, don’t go any further. Don’t curse the holy city, as your” He did not continue with what he was about to say.

“Wasn’t father Jacob a shepherd, and King David? What’s so bad about being a shepherd? People may say that it’s bad, but the Lord cannot say that. I just don’t believe it, Father. I want to become a shepherd — only a shepherd, Father, nothing else.”

By this point the boy was in tears. The father looked at his son without saying anything. Suddenly a strange feeling came over him: he had to admit that the boy was right. Why should a shepherd be of less value? Hadn’t father Jacob and King David been shepherds?

The two went back to work. Jacob was quiet again. He no longer sang the happy song he had used to gladden his work that morning. And Ishboeth had trouble keeping his attention on the difficult work. The boy gave him a great deal to think about, and he kept asking himself: why does he come up with such strange ideas?

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They filled two big bags with the sea-green oval fruit. They loaded the bags onto the donkey and returned to the city along the same path.

The sun now stood far to the west and shone in their faces again. The heat was even more unbearable than it had been in the morning. The sun burned down on the city; the air above the city shimmered like the air above a pot of boiling water. The contours of the walls and the towers on the high Temple mount formed a sharp contrast with the opal light. The reflection of the bright light against the white marble of the temple and the gold of the pillars was hard on their eyes.

When they came to the big military road, there were thick clouds of dust hanging over the slopes of the valleys. The merchants were returning home from the market. There was shouting and screaming from men in a hurry as they urged their camels and donkeys ahead and passed the slower travelers. Some of the slower ones were even pushed to the side.

Ishboeth led his heavily-laden donkey to the edge of the big road. Jacob walked directly behind him to make sure he would not be separated from his father.

Closer to the city, the stream of travelers thinned out. Most of the people who had gone to the market that day were already heading home. When the two entered the Sheep’s Gate, Jacob looked with revulsion at Eliakim’s pathetic stumps. Now that he had heard Eliakim’s story from his father, he looked at this beggar differently.

The scene in the city had changed. The market area was empty. Children played in the open space. In their games they imitated the adults who had been there earlier in the day: they, too, bought and sold, played father and mother, and knelt before the dark gate of a dwelling just as they had seen people kneeling for morning or evening prayer before the Temple. They carried out weddings and burials and quarreled noisily when there were children among them who spoiled the fun or did not want to join in.

Ishboeth drove his donkey along past the noisy young people of Jerusalem. He and Jacob went through the valley to the Temple mount, and when they had made the difficult ascent, they went through the outer Court of the Gentiles and the outer Court of the Women, and then right through a door to a building where the oil was prepared for the temple service. This gate was the Water Gate, and the building bore the name Abtinez, after the man who in earlier days had been responsible for preparing the ointments and incense. This man had made himself and his

descendants hated because he made a secret of the recipe by which he prepared these materials: the recipe was his own invention, and he refused to pass it on to others who were not members of his family. There had even been some curses spoken over him, using the words of the poet of the book of Proverbs: “Cursed be the memory of the godless . . . !”

When Ishboseth entered the room, the heavy, sensual odor of the spices wafted toward him. It was here that the costly salves and incense were prepared in accordance with recipes reserved for the temple service. Any man or woman who undertook to use the same mixtures of spices for private enjoyment would be cursed.³ According to the Law, such a sinner would have to be rooted out from the people. The purest myrrh and aloes were stored here, along with cinnamon, calamus, cassia, and olive oil.

Ishboseth approached with the greatest reverence. He was acutely aware of the powerful ban pronounced in the Word of God, which decreed: “You are not to pour this ointment on any human flesh. Apart from Aaron and his sons, you are not to make any ointment like it! It is something holy, and it shall be holy to you.”⁴

A few Levites were busy in this room making new wicks to be used in the golden lampstand. The wicks were made of a worn-out priestly garment. A few priest’s skirts lay on the empty benches next to the workers.

“The Lord bless you,” said Ishboseth.

“The Lord bless you,” was their answer. Jacob repeated the greeting and bowed to the men who were squatting at the work tables.

“I have some fresh olives for you,” said Ishboseth.

“Bring them inside, Ben-Judah,” one of the men responded. Ishboseth carried out this command with the help of his son. Then a priest entered the room to inspect the olives. Standing in the entrance to the room, where the late western sun still came through, he looked at a few fruits very carefully. He pinched some of them between his thumb and index finger.

“If they are all like these, Ben-Judah, then you have done your work well,” he said. “Did your son help you?” Ishboseth nodded, and Jacob made a deep bow. The priest placed his hand on the boy’s head and said, “May the Lord bless you, my son, and make you an ornament in your father’s house, and a strong arrow in his quiver.”

The father and son then left the building and stood in the broad outer Court, with the holy Temple before them. Ishboseth stood reverently behind the high balustrade and watched the activities of the priests, who were busy getting the evening sacrifice ready at the altar of burnt offering.

Here, in this outer Court, by the great bronze altar, with the holy Temple in the background, was a place of supreme importance to the Jewish people. This spot was *holy ground*; it was the central meeting place to which every Jew wanted to come at least once in his lifetime, even if he lived at the very end of the earth. Here, in the shadow of these high, gray walls, the wealthy Jews from Greece, Egypt, Syria, and Rome wanted to be buried one day. Here they wanted to rest until — as they firmly believed — the Messiah came, appearing on the battlements of the Temple, which were special to the people, to deliver them.

This was also the place where blood flowed every day. It flowed down the altar and through a channel that led to the slopes of the mount and then to the brook Kidron. Yes, the blood flowed so abundantly that the slopes of this hill were drenched in it and thus became the most fruitful ground to be found anywhere around Jerusalem.

Every Jew had to set his unworthy foot on this piece of ground at least once in his life, for every Israelite who proposed to offer a special sacrifice (and what Israelite would *not* do so at least once in his life?) would have to bring it to the altar of burnt offering here in the outer Court. Every Jew who wished to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving or a sacrifice of praise, whether in the form of the firstlings of his cattle or the produce of his field, or who sought forgiveness from God by way of a sin offering or a guilt offering — every such Israelite would seek a restoration of his covenant relationship with the Lord. That relationship had been broken because of his own sin, but now, when he approached the outer Court with his sacrifice — provided there was no Levitical impurity in him that would keep him from being allowed to enter this place — he could have it restored. He would bow deep in the dust before the altar, that is, before the Holy and Just One, the Merciful and Gracious One, and he would then see how his sacrifice was consumed by the flames, and how the smoke went up as a pleasing aroma before God’s holy Countenance — provided he offered the sacrifice with his whole heart and kept the eye of his soul fixed upon the suffering servant of the LORD whose coming had been promised.

And so this place was visited every year by thousands and thousands of Jews. Everyone had to be there. There

3. See Exodus 30:38.

4. See vs. 30–33.

was no difference or distinction in rank or class here; the poor, the needy, and the forsaken were not set apart. Even if a poor man had no money and could only buy a pair of turtle doves for his sacrifice, or a handful of flour, he still *had* to offer a sacrifice.⁵

Ishboseph saw how the continual sacrifice, the evening sacrifice, was consumed by the fire, in accordance with the Law. The animal sacrificed had to be a one-year-old male sheep or goat.

The smoke went up and dispersed slowly in the hazy blue sky. The evening sun penetrated the smoky column with its flowing gold and gave it the appearance of a fiery glow. It was reminiscent of the column of smoke above the Tabernacle in the wilderness, which miraculously turned into a column of fire every evening.

Along with the many other Jews who were present, Ishboseph, filled with reverence, kneeled down and bowed his head to the ground. In his heart he repeated the prayer of the psalmist: “May my prayer be counted as incense before Thee; the lifting up of my hands as the evening offering.”⁶

Then the priests blew their silver trumpets. The sound traveled a long way and echoed against the slopes of the nearby hills; it was heard on the paths from the Temple mount to the city. The people in the outer Court stood up and received the priestly blessing given them by priests with hands stretched out wide. After that the crowd dispersed.

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As Ishboseph and his son were heading back down to the lower part of the city, they were stopped by a woman clothed in a dark garment. She approached them with a smile on her face. It was Anna, the prophetess, who was Ishboseph’s sister-in-law and Jacob’s aunt. Anna was a widow who lived in a room near the outer Court of the women.

“The Lord bless you both!” she said.

“Greetings, Anna,” answered Ishboseph. The donkey, which had been waiting patiently by the temple gate, had already been released by Ishboseph from the iron ring in the wall. Anna laid her hand on the boy’s head, looked into his eyes lovingly, and said, “Did Jacob join in the prayer at the evening sacrifice?”

Jacob blushed and remained silent. He had not joined in the prayer, but he did not dare confess this to his aunt, who was known all through Jerusalem as a pious prophetess in the Temple.

Then Ishboseph remembered his conversation with his son that morning. He was sad and shook his head compassionately. “I sometimes fear that the boy needs to be rebuked, Anna. He did not behave well today.”

“Let him come and visit me sometime, Ishboseph,” she said gently, and again she put her hand on the boy’s head. “Give Huldah my greetings, and may the peace of the Most High be your portion,” she added. Then she disappeared into her room.

Anna never missed a sacrifice prescribed by the Law. From early morning until it became dark, her continuing prayers accompanied the sacrifices offered by the priests on the altar of burnt offering. Her life consisted of praying and fasting — for herself, but in the first place for all of her people.

Years before, when her husband died and she left her home in the northwest of Canaan, which was the territory of the tribe of Asher, she had sought comfort and protection in being near the Temple and in doing penance for her sins. For she, along with her tribe, had departed from the Law. Her people in the area from Mount Carmel to the Phoenician border had grown pagan; they had broken with the kingdom of the two tribes and had bowed before the golden calf in worship. She had joined her people in breaking the unity of the covenant people; she had cut the bond with the Temple, where the Lord dwelt.

Then suddenly she had become a widow, after only a few years of marriage. Her new standing exposed her to the scorn of her people, for a widow without children is the object of the greatest contempt and is mistreated by those who eat up the houses of widows and trample on the rights of orphans. After first enduring her pain in silence for a while, she read the prophecies and found something to hold on to, for she discovered that the Lord helps the widows and wishes to be a Father to the orphans. Her Maker also wanted to be her Helper. Within her there arose an irresistible desire to serve Him in His Temple: she wanted to do penance for her sins and testify to the riches that come with serving Israel’s covenant God in faith.

For years now, she had been known as the prophetess who never departed from the Temple. She was known

5. See Leviticus 5:7–13.

6. See Psalm 141:2.

all over Jerusalem as the widow who sanctified the sacrifices through her prayer and fasting, and whose words went up to the Lord.

Through her deeds even more than her words, she became a daily witness in the Temple service. Her conduct acquainted people with the mighty fact that the breach between the tribes that made up the nation of Israel had been healed, in principle, through faith in the promises of God.

She also persuaded her sister Huldah to come from the land of Asher, which bordered on pagan territory. Once her sister took up residence in Jerusalem, she became acquainted with Ishboseth, a pious man descended from a line of priests who was barred from becoming a priest himself because of a small imperfection on his foot. Ishboseth became her husband.

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This Ishboseth now headed downhill with his son. They walked along the narrow streets of Jerusalem toward their home, which was in one of the poorer districts of the city. The darkness deepened. Between the gray walls of the houses one could still feel the musty, sticky heat of the day. Many people were out in the broad streets and squares seeking some relief from the heat that lingered in the small houses and narrow streets. They were leaning listlessly against walls and doorways.

Ishboseth was lost in thought as he responded to their greetings. He had been deeply affected by the conduct of his son — even more deeply than he admitted to himself. Why would the boy choose being a shepherd above the priesthood, the service which the Lord Himself in His grace had made so special? How could he choose the service of animals above the service of the Lord? Ishboseth just couldn't understand it, any more than he could fathom the reason for the boy's harsh words about the Temple.

When the two finally arrived at the outer neighborhood of the old city where their own little home stood, Jacob drove the donkey indoors from the back entry. Ishboseth entered through the front door, where his wife Huldah approached him.

It was dark in the house. There was an earthen lamp on a board in the corner of the little room. The little wick floating in oil hardly gave enough light for people to be able to recognize each other.

At the lower end of the room Jacob appeared with the donkey, which took its customary place between two goats. Then, with a jump, Jacob was on the elevated mud floor of the house, where he greeted his mother.

Judith, his older sister, was weaving. Her fingers moved quickly and automatically over the loom. As she continued working, she observed the two who had come in.

On a couch in the corner of the room lay an old man with a white beard. He could hardly be recognized in the dark shadows. The old man was Ishboseth's father, a priest, and he had been sick for some weeks. Ishboseth asked how he was feeling, and the old man answered in a gentle but hoarse voice, using broken sentences, "The Lord will make it right, my boy. His Name be praised. Were you at the evening sacrifice? Were many people there?" He raised his head a little, and the light of the oil lamp was reflected in the old man's black eyes in the form of small points of light.

Ishboseth talked about his journey, while mother Huldah prepared the evening meal — some barley cakes, cheese, goat's milk, and figs. When Ishboseth and Jacob had carefully cleaned their hands in an earthenware bowl, they sat down to their supper, over which the old priest had pronounced a blessing.

It was quiet while they ate. In the lower part of the room, where the animals stayed, the donkey had lain down, and the two goats were bleating softly. They were waiting for the leftover pieces of barley cake.

Ishboseth brought greetings from Anna, and the old priest said, "Blessed be her name among the children of our people, that she, in the length of her days, may abide in the shadows of the Lord's House. How my soul yearns for the courts of my God! How happy are His servants, who abide under the wings of His tent day and night" The old man turned to lie on his side, but it was hard for him. The last words had come from his mouth in a series of gasps.

Ishboseth looked at his son as if to say, "That's different language, my son." He then nodded in agreement and said, "Blessed are those who dwell in Thy House. They praise Thee continually."

The old man added, "A psalm for the children of Korah. Amen!"

The meal was over. Mother Huldah pulled the linen wick a little further out of the spout of the lamp. Then the light, which had all but died away, flickered and grew stronger.

Ishboseth was still troubled. He sought help from his gray-haired father and said to him, "Your grandson told

me today that he would rather be a shepherd than a priest in the Temple. What do you think about this, my father?"

The old man tried to straighten up somewhat. He looked at his grandson questioningly. Jacob said nothing. Seated on the floor, he rocked his young body back and forth in embarrassment as he watched the flying fingers of his sister Judith.

Mother Huldah said, "Our son is still so young. The age for making such choices has not yet come for him. And until it comes, we will be patient, won't we, Jacob?"

"I don't like the Temple," said Jacob, while turning his head toward the dark, back part of the room, where the animals were resting.

The old man now sat up and pointed at his grandson with a trembling hand. "My son, weigh the words you are speaking. Listen to the counsel of the writer of Proverbs: 'He who guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.'⁷ Never speak a single word against the Temple, for then you are speaking against the One who dwells there. Why would you not love the Temple — may the Lord be gracious to your soul — more than you love your own life?"

"Mordecai says that the ark is not even in the Holy of Holies, that it's only an empty space. Now, I . . ."

"Quiet, my son," said the old man, who sat straight up on his couch. His messy hair formed a crown around his pale face. His dark eyes glowed with indignation.

Mother Huldah wanted to calm him down, but he brushed her aside with a trembling hand. "Mordecai is a son of error. Bad conversations spoil good conduct. He is a fool, and you must think about what is written: 'A simple person will believe anything, but the prudent man considers his steps.'⁸ Even if the Ark of the Covenant has been taken away by the Lord because His people have broken the covenant, this does not mean that the Almighty has forsaken His Temple. Because of our horrible sins and apostasy we have lost the glory and presence of the Ark, but the Lord is the Faithful One. His Word abides in eternity, and His Temple will one day be filled with the glory of the Most High, when He comes to deliver His people in accordance with His promise. Oh, if only my eyes could still behold that salvation, and if I could serve in His Temple on the day He appears in all His majesty and glory to destroy His enemies through the breath of His mouth . . ."

The old man spoke these last words with great difficulty. He fell backward onto his cushion, panting rapidly, his chest heaving. There was complete silence in the room — a silence no one dared to break. It was as though these words, spoken with so much feeling, continued to echo against the white walls of the room.

Ishboseth gave Jacob a signal, and he kissed his mother good night. Then he stood hesitantly before the old man's couch, waiting, as he did every evening, for the old man to place his hand on his black curls in blessing.

It took a while before the old man could catch his breath and take note of his grandson. Then he laid his trembling hand on the boy's head and said, "May the Mighty One of Israel grant atonement for your thoughtless words and give you the grace to love His House above everything else there is to be loved in this world." The old man could not say more than that. His heart was not up to anything more, and his hand sank powerlessly to the edge of the couch.

Jacob went silently through the small door to the upper room his father had built for him against the north wall of the house. He spread his mat on the floor and rolled up part of it to serve as a pillow under his head. No light was needed: he could do all of this in complete darkness.

But sleep did not come that first hour, for there was great sorrow in his soul. He did not know the nature and cause and depth of his sorrow. But it was there, and it was very intense. He knew that he had caused his grandfather and his parents great pain and had spoken contrary to their holiest sentiments. Yet he had not intended to do so. How had all of this come about? And why was he now so anxious? Why was he so troubled, as though he feared some impending danger without knowing just what it was?

And then he thought about the God of whom both his father and grandfather spoke with such great reverence — so much so that they did not even dare take His Name on their lips. He knew that this God has a book of memory before His Countenance in which He notes all sins — sins one could never pay for, sins that will call for the most severe punishment. He thought of Eliakim, with his pathetic stumps, who had lost his hands because he spoke out against the Temple. He thought of what Mordecai had told him only a few days ago, how in times past a High Priest named Alexander Jannaeus had hosted a great festive meal for himself and his many wives at an open terrace in Jerusalem, and how he had ordered hundreds of Pharisees crucified there — the High Priest and his guests watching

7. Proverbs 3:13.

8. See Proverbs 14:15.

and consuming their meal while those Pharisees writhed about in their death throes!

Whenever Jacob thought of the Temple, he thought of blood, blood, and more blood — the blood of human beings and the blood of animals to be slaughtered, including cows, bulls, sheep, lambs, and doves. All of this blood was supposedly needed to make atonement with God, who was frightfully angry every day because of sin. In his keen imagination, Jacob saw before him Eliakim's bloody stumps and the two hands that had been cut off. He saw the crucifixion victims twisting vainly while attached to their post, with the High Priest and the chief priests sneering at them while offering a cup of water. He saw the little turtle doves being slaughtered, and also their own little goat, which was soon to be born. Because it would be the first-born, in his mind's eye he could already see his father taking it away to be sacrificed, with the animal crying aloud for its mother all the while. Jacob sobbed as he lay on his mat, giving expression to the deep and uncomprehending agony which had made his life so miserable and sorrowful.

Then his father knelt by him, laid his hand on his head, and said, "Go ahead and tell your father about it, my son. What is it that troubles your heart?"

How could Jacob tell his father what was going on inside him? He could not put his sorrow into words. He only knew that he was deeply troubled and distressed. What he did not know was that his grief and sorrow formed only one small part of a great, broad stream of pain which all believing Israelites through the ages had felt, in their awareness that the Lord is not a God who can take pleasure in sacrifices of flesh and food, whether steers or goats. Jacob did not yet know that his own sorrow was flowing into the one great sea of sorrow which, through the ages, came forth from the faithful people of the covenant as they cried out for the one Sacrifice which was to come and which would put an end to the stream of blood.

What was disturbing the soul of this humble boy was the burden of many ages. In his heart was the desire of the faithful Israelites over many, many centuries, a desire for redemption and for the comforting of Israel. These Israelites yearned for an end to the anger of the God who demanded blood, blood, and more blood — and after all that blood had flowed, this God still did not set aside His demand that satisfaction be made for sin.

But how could he say these things to his father? When his father continued to press him, he finally summed everything up in this one complaint: "Father, I am never going to bring our little goat to the priest. I don't want it to be sacrificed."⁹

"The goat?" asked Ishboeth, dismayed. He did not immediately understand what his son was getting at. But when he thought about it for a moment, he realized what was upsetting the boy. He laid his hand on the boy's head again. In his son he recognized the unhappiness he had felt during his own youth; he saw his own difficulties reflected. And yet there was also quiet joy and gratitude that it was not what he had feared at first, namely, that the boy was indifferent to the service of the Lord and wanted to seek his own paths apart from Israel's God. Like any other believing Israelite, Ishboeth could understand the storms that were liable to spring up in such a young heart.

"And now, my son, you must go to sleep. Later we will talk about these things. Your father understands you all right. I also had to bring a young goat as the first born to the altar of burnt offering to be sacrificed. You, too, my son, had to be redeemed through a goat because the Lord is entitled to you as my first-born. But go to sleep now. You are your father's big son. You helped me today as a big boy and a faithful servant. Tomorrow you may help me again, and all the days of the week, until the Sabbath comes."

Ishboeth left the room, and his son fell into a deep, healthy sleep. His young soul was now unburdened, for he knew that his father was aware of what he was feeling and understood him.

* * * * *

Night came over the holy city. The Levites kept their Temple watch, with their smoking torches casting fanciful shadows on the fortified walls of Zerubbabel's proud, old edifice.

That same night there was a great banquet in the royal palace of the High Priest Hyrcanus II. In the reception room with its high ceiling, the many lamps shed an effusive light between the Corinthian pillars and over the swaying palm trees in the inner garden. There were garlands wound around the pillars, and the play of light made the thin streams of water springing up from the fountain look like silver. Female slaves were busy greeting the guests, and male slaves bent their naked backs over the great bowls of water which they used to wash the feet of those who entered. The master of ceremonies assigned each of the guests a place to lie down. There were black

9. See Numbers 18:15–18.

slaves waving large palm branches to keep the people cool.

It was a mixed company that had gathered here. The High Priest Hyrcanus II belonged to the powerful party of the Sadducees, which represented the modern element among the Jews. The Sadducees liked taking on Greek airs and were only too happy to adopt the latest fashions from Athens when it came to manners and clothing. But there were also sophisticated Arabians, Syrian officers, and high-ranking Roman officials.

The language they all had in common was Greek, although Latin was the language which the Romans continued to speak. Yet Greek was the language of civilized people, and the Sadducees were proud to be able to quote lines of Greek poetry when they spoke. They even liked to change their Jewish names into Greek forms.

In those days, Hyrcanus II, a weak descendant of the mighty line of the Maccabees which had delivered the people of Israel from the tyranny of Antiochus Epiphanes, the cruel Syrian tyrant, had been forced to pay tribute to the ruler in Syria, who was named Cassius. It was only in appearance that the House of the Maccabees still ruled, and if Hyrcanus styled himself a Priest-King, it was not much more than show. Cassius had big plans. He wanted to make war on Rome, and so he needed a lot of money. The little land of Judah had already been forced to pay no less than seven hundred talents in tribute.

The man who actually held the reins of power in Jerusalem was Antipater the Edomite, who was a descendant of Esau. He was one of the counselors of Hyrcanus, who retained his services because he was afraid of him. Antipater came from the lowly ranks of the ordinary people in Ashkelon. Through his cunning he became rich; he was very shrewd when it came to the international political scene, in which his only real interest was personal gain. He had managed to obtain a governorship for his young son Herod in Galilee.

Hyrcanus was like putty in his hands. Antipater managed to convince him to appoint Malichus, an Arabian, who was one of the great dignitaries at the court, as the collector of tribute. Malichus often stood in the way of Antipater's own ambitions, and so the latter's cunning calculation was that if Malichus was charged with exacting tribute from the burdened and oppressed people, he would soon be hated by them. At the same time Malichus would be discredited in the eyes of the Romans, whereas Antipater himself would preserve a good name.

Yet Malichus understood this scheming perfectly well and already had some plans ready by way of revenge. Hyrcanus's chief butler knew all about it.

The banquet began in the great hall. Occupying the places of honor to the right and left of the High Priest Hyrcanus II were Antipater and Malichus. The slaves brought out the most exquisite food the land had to offer: the fish and fowl to be served had been caught at the harbor in Joppa by specially appointed fishermen and hunters. The wine was mixed by the chief butler, who had learned his trade at the Olympian feasts in Athens.

Hidden behind the heavy Babylonian curtains stood the musicians, who would play quiet, sweet music on harps, zithers, cymbals, and flutes. Their music gradually became louder and more uninhibited and passionate.

Then the dancers appeared, heavily perfumed with the finest scents, swinging their hips and making small, carefully measured dance steps to the beat of the music. Their daring outfits were designed to capture the attention of languid guests.

The High Priest's personal butler, meanwhile, kept refilling the golden cups of Malichus and Antipater. It was already very late at night when this butler once again handed the cup to Antipater, this time containing just a few drops of the most effective poison then known. Malichus toasted his partner in a friendly way: as he lifted up his own cup, he wished Antipater good health and also drank to the well-being of their host.

The face of cunning Antipater shone with fat, while his greedy eyes watched the movements of one of the Egyptian dancers. Smoke from the incense hung low in the air around the chandeliers. The clouds of smoke were so thick that even the efforts of the weary slaves waving palm branches produced no more than small spirals.

The conversations gradually died down, and the dancers became dull and heavy in their movements. The music became somewhat slurred and settled into a dreary rhythm.

Some of the guests rose from their places and were helped into their travel garments by the slaves. When Antipater tried to stand up too, he was overcome by a severe dizzy spell, and his slaves seized him under his armpits to get him to his feet. His heavy body hung in their strong arms like a sack of flour. With difficulty they managed to drag him to a side chamber, and even before a doctor could be summoned, the gray color of death began to steal across his trembling cheeks.

Hyrcanus II did not manifest much surprise at what had happened. He was more than tired of the Idumeans.

As for the guests who went home, accompanied by slaves who did their best to keep them from stumbling, they had little awareness of what had just happened.

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High up on the Temple mount, one could see the silhouettes of the somber battlements clearly in the night sky, for there was plenty of light from the stars. The small, smoke-producing flames coming from the torches of the Levites who kept watch cast glowing patches of light onto the fortified buildings containing the Holy Place.

The fire of the altar of burnt offering smoldered under the charcoal, and in the Holy Place the golden lampstand burned, fed by the pure olive oil called for by the Law.