

Chapter 1

Leaving

“Off to Egypt today, Jeremiah,” said Baruch with a crooked smile as we met outside the inn.

It was just after dawn on a fine morning in early spring, less than a day since the remnants of Judah had rejected God’s command and decided to escape to Egypt.

We stood in the same place where I had confronted the crowd the day before and told them that God’s answer to their question – the answer they had promised to abide by – was that they should stay in Judah.

“Egypt! Egypt! Egypt!” had been the response, and Baruch and I were going along whether we liked it or not.

That evening, Johanan had made it clear that if we cooperated we could go along in relative freedom, but if we resisted we would suffer. To make sure that we understood, we were forced to collect our belongings and were taken to separate dormitories in the inn where his men could keep a watchful eye on us. In that crowded room, I began writing my prophet’s diary. Finally, after several hours, I was told to stop and lay down to sleep under the watchful eye of some of his men.

We were given no opportunity to escape.

I returned Baruch’s smile with a wry smile of my own and sighed. Neither of us knew quite what to expect. Once again, life was uncertain,

and we knew that some of our countrymen would be very happy to find any excuse to make us suffer.

“Yes, off to Egypt. The very journey God told our fathers we would never need to make again once he led them out of there.”

“Oh, you prophets,” said Johanan, who had come out of the inn in time to hear my words. “You keep harping on things. Just let it go. The decision is made.”

“We could still change our minds. Even now, we could have a time of prayer and thought. We could...”

“Shut up, you old fool!” said Johanan in an angry voice. For a moment, I thought he was about to strike me, but he took a deep breath and continued with a little more control, “Oh, I suppose that I shouldn’t speak to a prophet – a priest – like that, but you just won’t accept when you’re beaten. Everyone has agreed. We’re not talking about it any more. So, just leave it. Do you understand?”

“Yahweh is the one you are abusing, Johanan, I’m just a prophet. He has told you what to do, and...”

Johanan lifted up his hands and spread them out in front of me. “Stop!” he commanded. “Not another word from you, or you’ll be coming along with us tied up and with a bag over your head.”

I closed my mouth.



Almost everyone got up early that day, but that didn’t mean they were ready to leave!

Men and women hurried to and fro, shouting – often at each other. Children played with the goods already packed for transport, often carrying them away or leaving them mixed up with other stacks of goods. Noise was the overwhelming result, but there was also an underlying feeling of urgency. With the passing of winter, the survivors’ dread of Nebuchadnezzar and his army had returned in full force. What if the Chaldeans had heard about the assassination of Gedaliah and the soldiers? A detachment of soldiers might already be bearing down on them from the north, approaching from Jerusalem as the sun climbed above the horizon!

Leaving

Few oxen and even fewer asses were available to pull the limited number of carts that had survived the Chaldean invasion. Most of the refugees would have to walk all the way to Egypt, just as their relatives and friends had recently walked to Babylon.

I stood near the inn and listened to the words of the would-be refugees. Some spoke only of the things they needed to take with them to Egypt, while others reflected on the past or the future.

"It will be good to get away from this cursed place," said one man to his companion.

"Yes, a curse has been on it ever since our fathers came here."

"If only they had never left Egypt."

I couldn't help myself. "Are you serious?" I interrupted. "Our fathers were *slaves* in Egypt! We've had hundreds of years of freedom in this land, although it hasn't always been as good as it would've been if only we'd obeyed God's commands!"

They looked at me in that "here he goes again" way that 40 years of delivering God's messages has forced me to get used to.

I suppose it is desperation that makes people paint in such gloomy colours something they have decided to abandon. After all, Judah was the only country most had ever known, and now they were leaving it to walk into the unknown. And fear was driving them. God had warned that we would meet terror on every side, and now that terror was outweighing God's assurance of his care.

Without faith in God, only terror remained.

No soldiers came, however, and the sun was high in the cloudless sky before the trumpet sounded to start the ragtag caravan travelling south.



King Solomon ruled over a kingdom that extended from the Euphrates to the border of Egypt during a time of unparalleled prosperity for Israel.

But empires crumble, and this was no exception. The grandeur and extravagance of its peak were matched by the suddenness of its fall: within five years of Solomon's death, the kingdom he ruled had split in two and Egypt, that hovering vulture, had descended on its defenceless

Terror on Every Side!

victim. Riches beyond the wildest dreams of most nations had been carried back to Egypt and the divided seed of Jacob were left to count their losses.

Count their losses they did, but regretting the godlessness that had caused them was still beyond them. God had led them out of Egypt and told them to keep away from there. Solomon had flouted those rules, trading with Egypt in horses and chariots, and even taking the daughter of Pharaoh as his wife. Egypt had been well aware of the vast riches that sat so temptingly to their north!

Never again would two-tribe Judah, or even ten-tribe Israel to the north, be free of the influence of Egypt. God's commands had been discarded, and his care along with them. Egypt became the rod of God's judgement, bruising the backs of his people on many occasions in repeated, but vain, attempts to gain their repentant attention.

It would be unfair to dismiss the 350 years that followed as simply the prolonged death-throes of the nation Jacob had fathered: indeed, there were some shining lights among the kings of Judah, kings who did their best to guide the nation in the footsteps of David their forebear. Not only so, but there were hundreds, even thousands, of prophets who did their utmost to help, but it was all too little in the face of so much idolatry. Reforms were limited and short-lived, and the overall trajectory of the nation was downhill. The reforms were no more than temporary upward blips on a fatal, inevitable collision course with judgement that had ended with Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem.

Those of us who lived through that final siege and saw its aftermath were still numbed by the horrors we had witnessed. We had endured hunger and plague, the disorientation of starvation and the terror of uncertainty as the final hours passed slowly over the survivors of the siege.

By that time, many were almost too tired to care. The defenders too weak to defend, the mothers too hungry to do what mothers always do: care for their children.

Words cannot adequately describe what we all witnessed, and many still endure screaming terrors every night as they helplessly relive the deaths of their loved ones.

Eventually, Nebuchadnezzar and his army returned to Babylon, leaving Gedaliah the son of Ahikam to manage the few people left in the

land. Mostly this was the poor and the weak, the sick and the hopeless, but there were also those who fled the land when Nebuchadnezzar invaded and returned once the fighting was over and the victors had left. Guerrilla bands who had avoided excessive involvement in the war reappeared, and many foreigners grasped at an opportunity to take over an empty land.

There were few who could lead, and fewer still who would lead with Judah's best interests at heart. Gedaliah was one such, but he didn't last long. Just a few weeks after Nebuchadnezzar's army left, he was assassinated – along with the Chaldean soldiers left behind to support him.

Once Gedaliah was gone, all instincts suggested flight. When those weak but arrogant leaders decided to ask for guidance from God, I hoped it was a positive sign, but it wasn't. I have thought it over so many times now, and my conclusion never changes: don't ask God for guidance if you won't listen to his answer. They asked, but by the time God gave an answer, they had already decided what they were going to do – whatever the answer was. Of course, I explained all of this earlier in my diary, but I can't stop reliving it: it is so upsetting.

I was called a liar – well, I'm used to that. But they're also ignoring God's words and we are all going back to Egypt. Egypt! A place God said we would never have to go to again, and now we're going by our own choice!

Assyria did away with Israel, Babylon has done away with Judah, and now the tiny remnant of Judah is going to Egypt.



We went south from Bethlehem along the road to Hebron, seeing very few people along the way. Most of those we saw had already heard about the assassination of Gedaliah, and many joined our pitiful caravan from fear of Nebuchadnezzar's expected reprisals.

We passed the ruins of Hebron, staying the night nearby, and next day continued south. Beersheba was reached during the third day's march and then left behind as we went on through the Negev towards the boundaries of the land God had promised to Abraham.

The next morning was cloudy with a little rain. I don't know if God was sending us a message, but it was particularly dark in the south

and west, while the sky towards the north seemed cloudless and lovely. Was God giving us one last chance?

If he was, we ignored it and marched south towards Egypt.

Once we left the land of our fathers, Johanan and the other leaders decided that Baruch and I could be freed. It was good to be free of the ropes we had been bound with. Nevertheless, they made it clear that we must still come with them, and that any attempt to escape would be punished severely. I'm sure that some of them hoped we would give them an excuse to take their revenge on us: revenge for giving them God's answer.

That night, my mind was full of conflict. Should I do my best to escape and return to Judah? God had said that we should stay there, but our leaders would not listen. Should I?

Baruch and I could probably have found a way to escape. There were guards stationed near the tents, but I think we could have crept away to safety in the depths of the night.

But I was tired; morose; depressed. Escape didn't seem worthwhile.

God had told my fellow refugees not to leave Judah, but what about me? Should I be struggling to return to an empty land or was my next task opening up before me in Egypt?

Over the years I had spent long periods of time travelling through many different nations – including Egypt. I was, after all, a prophet to the nations. It was only in recent years that I had spent the majority of my time in Jerusalem – unwelcome and often locked up.

I had no clear direction from God. No message that gave me a confident direction or purpose. I didn't know what to do.

Energetic escape and a lonely journey north felt beyond me. I wondered if my work was just petering out, wandering to an uncertain end. I couldn't help remembering how my father had died – when he was a little younger than I was – just fading away. Would I follow his path? I desperately wanted to write my diary, but exhaustion had stolen my enthusiasm.

In the darkness of the desert night, keenly aware of being outside the Promised Land, I fell into a disturbed sleep.