

Chapter 1

The High Priest

April, 619 BC – the 20th year of King Josiah

My father sort of faded away.

I am reconciled to his death, but I can never really be satisfied with all the missed opportunities. From an early age, one looks up to one's parents, and a son should honour and admire his father. My father was admired by all and was a master at keeping the peace, particularly with idolaters and pagans. His voice could woo enemies and friends alike. To hear him read the scriptures – when I was young, before his eyesight began to fail – was pure pleasure.

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Two years ago, when I returned to Judah after the discovery of the Book of the Law in the temple, I had noticed a little shakiness, a little caution in his step, a few signs of old age. His fall that night on the road to Anathoth had been the start of a gradual decline. He had never been able to walk easily after that and had lived in the High Priest's house in Jerusalem from then until his death. His eyesight had continued to worsen so that he could no longer read or even see very well, and his voice had begun to fail too. Increasingly, he seemed to be sick with a cold, and he began to feel pain in his legs all the time. His pain was worse during the cold weather, and my mother was rightly worried about him this last winter. He spent most of the time in bed. Two weeks ago, shortly after the Passover, he again got a cold; then one day last week, as he was talking to my mother, he suddenly stopped, clutched at his chest and never spoke again. Before nightfall, he was dead, and the sad tidings were carried to the king and to my brother Azariah.

I heard the shocking news the next morning from the servant Azariah sent to convey the information. With my mother and father living in Jerusalem, I had been living alone in our house in Anathoth for most of the time when

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I was in Judah. Azariah and I walked to Jerusalem together that morning, and I think we were both in shock. For me, it had come as a big surprise and I felt a great sense of loss, despite the fact that my father and I had had many arguments over the seven years that had passed since that memorable night of my seventeenth birthday. For Azariah, though, there would be not only a sense of loss, but also a suddenly increased responsibility. The spiritual weight of a nation had fallen on his shoulders and he must bear it without any advice from his father.

We walked in silence for much of the way, and I wondered what the future would bring between us. The future had suddenly come much closer, and now my work as a prophet must involve interacting with a new High Priest to deliver a message of coming destruction which was now seven years closer than it had been when I had first experienced the voice of Yahweh. Azariah and I had never got on well – he viewed me as an upstart idealist with a blinkered view of life, while I considered him to be sadly detached from the God he worshipped, more interested in the mode and means of worship than in the God who inspired our worship. The

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confrontations of the past could now easily become more common – and more bitter.

The day was a typical spring morning in Anathoth, sunny and warming quickly. Flocks of travelling birds still flew uncaring overhead, and Anathoth, perched on its unremarkable hill, remained as testament to the fact that life goes on, though the protagonists change. Roads recently mended after a cold, wet winter still carried people into and out of this unimportant village inhabited mostly by priests and Levites. Yet one of its more important sons had left its streets never to return. Israel's leader of worship had finished his course. His work had been left to another, one of the next generation – a generation which would make its peace with God, or not, as it chose. My father's work was done, but his legacy would live on in the Book of the Law of God that he had uncovered in the temple. The copies made under his supervision could guide the worship of the nation through generations to come, but we who outlived him would choose how important it was. Azariah was to be the new hand guiding the worship of the people of God. It seemed like a big change – one of the biggest changes of my life – yet around me the world continued unaffected.

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A little more than two years had elapsed between the great Passover of King Josiah and the death of my father, and I had spent much of that time in other nations. I had seen the Nile River and delivered a message to Pharaoh, which had taken my very best efforts and the blessings of God to achieve. I had even crossed the Euphrates River and visited some smaller kingdoms in the north. Three times in each year, I had returned to Jerusalem to keep the feasts which God had commanded all Israelite men to attend in Jerusalem.

Throughout that time, King Josiah had kept his direction and maintained his enthusiasm for the God of his fathers, but the work of leading a nation had taken its toll on him. Urgent reformation is admirable and inspiring, but the ongoing task of reshaping attitude and driving constant religious renewal is far more trying. Josiah's faith still shone in everything he did, but his proselytising zeal had been overshadowed by the urgent but mundane matters of ruling a kingdom. Never again would he ride at the head of a column of men burning with the desire to purge Judah of her thanklessness and unfaithfulness. Already, the paroxysm of purity was

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exhausted and any remaining energy was directed towards trying to hold onto the advantage gained.

For the moment, the enemies of the worship of Yahweh had quietly withdrawn, hiding themselves under an appearance of godliness, concealing their true colours, continuing to attend feasts and display a habit of acceptable expression. But God was never the object of their love within either their homes or their minds.

Already, the best had passed. Looking back past the horror of the sickening downward spiral presided over by Josiah's sons, it is easy to delineate the bright summer of Josiah's reign, a season of inspirational leadership; but it is also easy to see where midsummer passed and the relentless descent into winter began.

Josiah had made a mighty effort – and he never gave up. His lifelong struggle against Manasseh's legacy was monumental, but it was a failure. He might just as well have tried to stop the incoming tide. Too many people find evil delightful and constraint unacceptable.



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Let me also provide what balance I can. Though Josiah's tireless work failed to save the nation, it did help individuals. Shobai, Miriam, Maacah and their friends from Bethel were all helped enormously by Josiah's visits to Israel and by the first Passover he commanded. They had already been determined in their faith, but Josiah had added the support of authority, which makes goodness easier. Josiah made it easier for his subjects to choose God, and some took the opportunity. Zaccai and Abigail, with whom Shobai and the others had stayed during that first Passover, were led to a closer worship of Yahweh by Josiah. In the lives of these individuals and others like them, Josiah won. A king must rule for his entire nation, but sometimes the real benefits of his work go to only a select few.

Josiah's true success was seen in the lives of those who chose to follow Yahweh and passed on their love of God to their children. Some of those children would later go into captivity and died in a foreign land, longing for the land of their fathers – but they would die in faith.

This diary is taking much longer to write than I ever expected it to. I began it in frustration on the evening after Johanan accused me of not speaking the words of God and not being sent by Yahweh. Thinking back over

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the years stirs up all sorts of memories, both good and bad. The ones that fill me with joy are the memories responses of individuals who saw God's offer of life and reached out for it. These were the wonderful long-term results of Josiah's work, and I hope to write more about some of them later – if I live long enough.



Azariah and I arrived in Jerusalem; two walking together, but each wrapped up in his own thoughts. For the next seven days, Azariah's time would be dedicated to his ordination as High Priest. As High Priest, he was not permitted to make himself unclean through contact with any dead body, not even that of his father¹. Personal wishes and opinions must be subjugated to his task of representing his nation before God. For the High Priest, holiness must come first. In some ways, my position as a prophet was similar: my freedom was limited by the commands of God, which made my life a living parable to those around me. Others were permitted to marry and welcome children as a heritage of Yahweh, but I

¹ Leviticus 21:10-12

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must not. Others could celebrate happy events and mourn sad ones, but I had not this freedom².

After entering the city through the Benjamin gate, we made our way to the house of the High Priest, now a house of mourning. Neither of us could enter, but each wished to leave a message of sympathy and condolence for our mother. A servant greeted us and we each wrote a brief note on a small piece of papyrus, requesting that they be delivered as soon as possible.

Our mother would not expect either of us to go into the house, as she knew both Azariah's position and the constraints that God had placed upon me. We had discussed these constraints shortly after Josiah's great Passover when she had asked me my intentions regarding Maacah, whom she had liked at first sight. She had noticed that I had largely withdrawn from any interaction with Maacah over the last couple of days of the feast and had wanted to know why. I had explained God's command against marriage, which had come as such a shock to me, and also the limitations on both mourning and celebrations. Disappointment had brought tears to her eyes as, once again, she had been

² Jeremiah 16:5, 8

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quicker than I to see the ramifications of these commands. She pointed out that our relatives, already unhappy with my work as a prophet, would be sure to respond with criticism and anger when I did not join them in mourning the next death in the family.

She had been right. Soon after the end of the Feast of Unleavened Bread in the eighteenth year of King Josiah, Gemariah's sickly young son, Hasshub, died. I had explained God's instructions to Gemariah, but though he had said that he accepted the situation, he still implied that I had let him down. Gemariah and Abigail had both been understandably upset about their loss, and my inability to share in their mourning had done nothing to assuage their grief.



After leaving our messages at the house, Azariah and I went directly to the temple and found messengers from the king and several priests waiting. Of course, they weren't waiting for me, but for once, Azariah seemed happy that I was there.

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Zechariah and Jehiel, the two most senior remaining priests, welcomed us.

“Azariah and Jeremiah, we have been terribly saddened by the death of your father, although it was not completely unexpected,” said Zechariah, gently.

I remember feeling surprised at his words – my father’s death had been completely unexpected to me.

“So now, Azariah,” continued Jehiel, “we must appoint a new High Priest, and, based on our advice, King Josiah has suggested that you are the right person for this responsibility.”

“Are you willing to be ordained for this task which your father carried out so faithfully before you?” asked Zechariah.

Azariah looked down, his face working as he struggled to control his emotions. Finally, he nodded, very slowly.

Zechariah put his hand on Azariah’s shoulder in sympathy and I struggled to stem my own tears.

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Achbor the son of Micaiah was the leader of the king's representatives, and Zechariah looked to him for confirmation, receiving a silent nod of assent. Zechariah turned and said to Azariah, "Israel cannot be without a High Priest. Your nation needs you now. Are you ready?"

Without speaking, my brother nodded again, and Zechariah repeated the instructions God had given to Moses before ever the tabernacle was made or the clothes of the priests tailored:

"The holy garments of Aaron shall be for his sons after him; they shall be anointed in them and ordained in them. The son who succeeds him as priest, who comes into the temple to minister in the Holy Place, shall wear them seven days."³

Then Zechariah led him towards a doorway where a few junior priests stood waiting. The door was opened and Zechariah ushered my brother through it into another room to prepare for the ceremony.

³ Exodus 29:29-30, slightly modified

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The is the end of this sample of
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