

DAY·OF·
ATONEMENT

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A Novel of the Maccabean Revolt



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Day of Atonement: A Novel of the Maccabean Revolt

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*To Donna Jean,
in honor of our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary*

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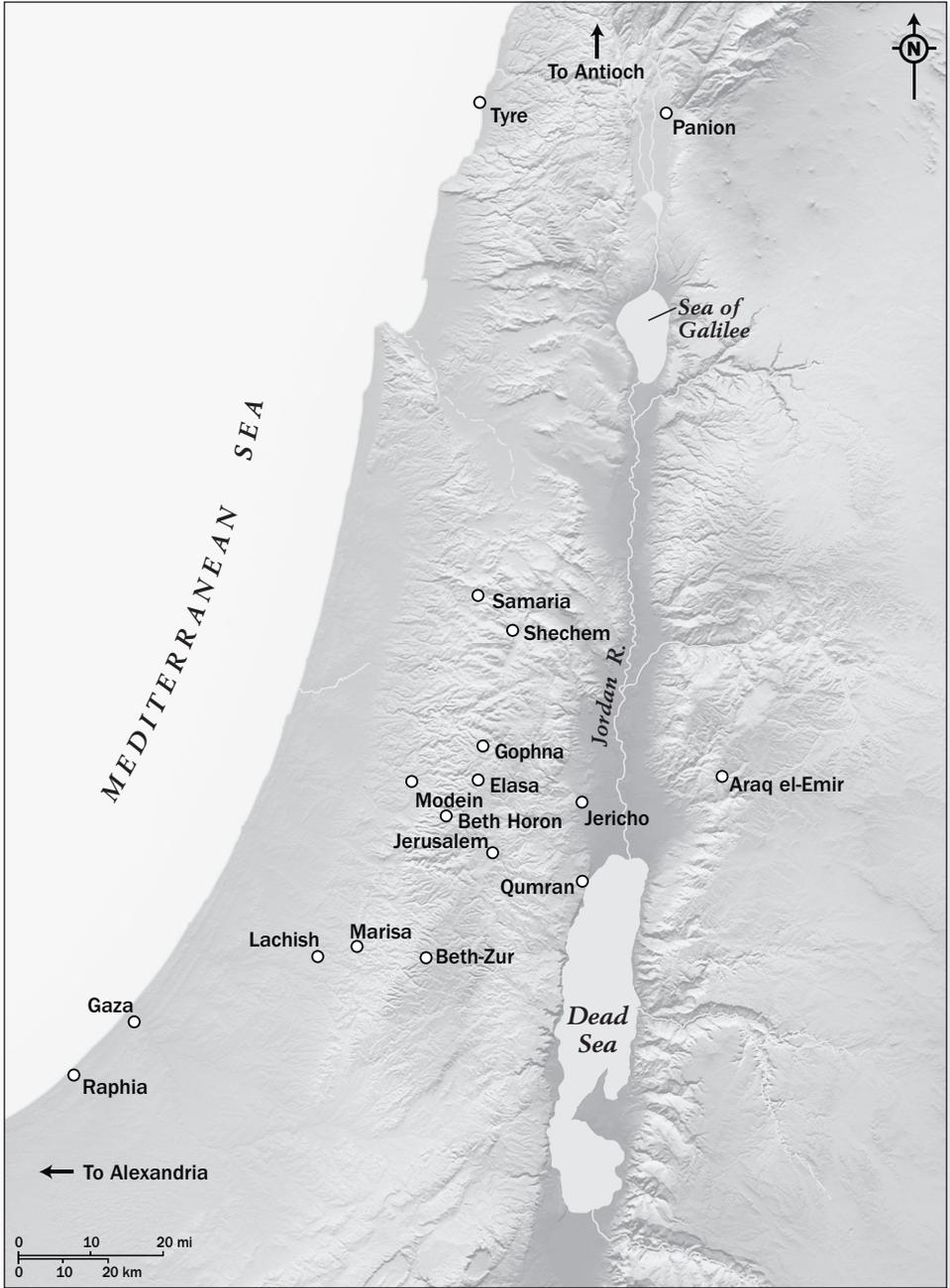
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Judah had lived under foreign domination since Nebuchadnezzar's initial conquest in 597 BCE, made more real for Judah's inhabitants by the king's return in 587 to destroy Jerusalem and its Temple. Throughout this period of domination, first by Babylon and then by Persia, Jews lived in tension. On the one hand, assimilation to their overlords' way of life promised greater acceptance, security, and even prosperity within their new political realities. On the other hand, commitment to remain true to their ancestral way of life promised the preservation of their identity as the people of Israel's God and the enjoyment of that relationship.

That tension was never greater than after Alexander the Great conquered the Persian empire in 331 BCE, uniting the people as far west as Macedonia, as far south as Egypt, and as far east as the edge of India under his rule. Alexander was unlike previous conquerors and emperors, actively seeking to blend local elites into the Greek and Macedonian ruling class, inviting the conquered to become partners with the conquerors. After his death in 323 BCE, his empire was divided among his generals, Ptolemy taking control of Egypt and Palestine, Seleucus eventually taking Syria and Babylonia, others seizing Greece, Macedonia, and Asia Minor. While each regularly sought to expand his territory at the other's expense, they nevertheless continued Alexander's policies of extending not only Greek domination, but also Greek language, Greek learning, Greek culture, and

Greek citizenship. The dominated elites often welcomed the chance to raise their status by becoming partners with the dominators.

Thus “some renegades went out even from Israel and led many astray, saying, ‘Let us make a covenant with the Gentiles around us, for since we set ourselves apart from them many evils have overtaken us’” (1 Macc 1:11) . . .

BOOK · 1



The High Priest

In the 137th year of the kingdom of the Greeks (175 BCE) . . .

The first glow of dawn appeared over the horizon. In an hour it would be beautiful, an ocean of fire setting the thin veils of clouds ablaze. But for now, it was still that pale green that appeared almost sickly, especially to the man who had already been staring at the sky for most of an hour. Jason slouched in a large alabaster chair upon the terrace outside his bedchamber. A cushion below him took off the chill of the stone seat. A wool blanket made of the finest weave shielded him from the bite of the morning air. He had seen far too many sunrises of late. How long had it been since the sun last woke him up rather than the reverse?

Jason pulled the blanket up closer around his neck. If he could not have the enjoyment of sleep, the gift of God that made the poor and the rich equal, he took some measure of satisfaction in that he could enjoy awake what few indeed in all of Judea would ever experience. He glanced briefly at the slender marble pillars and the decorative work that made up the railing before him, luminescent in the light of the moon that was still strong above him. Beyond, the Kidron Valley that separated him from the Holy City was dark, like a black sea, on the far shore of which he could see the outline of the city walls and, above them, the Temple Mount itself. No one else in Jerusalem awakened to such a view, the darkness still hovering over the city like a curtain about to rise upon a play that was performed for him, and him alone.

The poor laborers sleep soundly upon their beds, but the rich lie awake anxious for their riches. Jason recalled the face of his old teacher who had first recited to him the sayings of the wise. But it was not anxiety for his wealth that drove

Jason from his bed for his nightly vigil. Money had never been a cause for worry among his family. Other anxieties, other aspirations, other—endless—details to be worked out seized him, exiling him from his bed at that point in the night when most were simply turning over to go back to sleep.

Jason breathed in, closed his eyes, and let himself feel what it was to be the brother of the high priest, the second son of Simon the Just, the most sought-after associate in all Jerusalem. Indeed, his political clout far outstripped that of his brother. Honiah enjoyed the authority of the high priesthood, and all important decisions needed his approval. But it was Jason who was shaping the future of Jerusalem and, with it, all Judea. He breathed in again, imagining that he could feel the wave of destiny impelling him forward toward his vision as he exhaled.

Was this not better than sleep?

Dark crimson fires began to light the sky behind him. The edges of the clouds over the city began to glow orange like scraps of papyrus ignited in the hearth. Any lingering resentment Jason entertained against Morpheus for eluding him began to burn away as well. For his refreshment, his energy for the day ahead, came from this part of the dawn. It was the reflection in nature of what he was striving to bring about in the civil realm. He drank it in, storing its energy for the sake of releasing it into Jerusalem, continuing to drive his city forward out of night into a new day.

The sky grew brighter as crimson heated to orange and spread farther across the city beneath, pushing back the dusky grays. Jason lowered his blanket in anticipation of the warming day, revealing a sleeved tunic sewn in the Greek fashion, its squared neckline enhanced with scarlet embroidery. He had done what he could to remake his own image after the noble Greeks that he frequently encountered, keeping his tight-curved hair cut short and his face clean-shaven, but his pure Semitic features still sat uncomfortably within that stylish Greek frame.

He turned his eyes back toward the city, fixing his eyes upon the Temple Mount, now ablaze with orange-yellow light. Jason smiled with pride and satisfaction at the sight. Many residents of Jerusalem would do the same, but he had his own private reasons. His father had dedicated himself to the expansion and fortification of the Temple during his long term as high priest. Jason had himself inherited Simon's zeal and—even Honiah would have to admit—gift for architecture, and had continued to direct the public building projects in and around the Temple. But unlike Simon or Honiah, Jason invested in the Temple as a means and not an end. He looked to the spaces just west of the southern part of the Temple enclosure, a site that had been at the center of his vision for four years now.

After endless examination of the landscape of the city from every vantage point—from his villa’s terrace, the upper floors of the high priest’s palace, the walkways atop the fortified walls surrounding the city, and the Temple porticoes themselves—Jason had settled on that location some time ago. It was the most prominent location that would also require the least displacement of existing public works and private citizens. In his mind’s eye, he saw the space cleared of its existing structures and, rising in their place, the central organs of the new Jerusalem. He saw the *lyceum*, the center for learning, and the *gymnasium*, with its sprawling courtyard for athletic events, standing proudly alongside the elevated path leading up to the Temple from the west. In the shadow of the Temple would sit the renovated *bouleuterion*, the council chamber where all those educated in the finer arts of rhetoric and civics would deliberate about the future of the reborn city. The new forum would be made complete with the erection of a theater, built in the Greek way, through which the rivers of Greek literary and musical culture would pour into the mainstream of Jerusalem’s civic life. The magnificent Temple, renowned in its own right, would become the Acropolis above Jason’s own incarnation of Athens. He tried each morning to imagine anew how they would look juxtaposed, hoping they would sit together more comfortably than his own features.

The rustling of the draperies that separated the bedroom from the terrace and the elements interrupted his reverie. He felt the warm touch of his wife’s hand upon his shoulder. Looking over his right shoulder to greet her, he saw only the disk of the sun, now cleared of the horizon, the only source of morning warmth since his wife had died giving birth to his stillborn son two seasons ago. *How the early morning hours, how the sleepless nights play tricks on the senses!* But he was married now to his vision and about to give birth to a new Jerusalem, gaining a memory for himself that would outlast generations of sons.

The sun’s separation from the horizon was the appointed time for his servants to begin their daily attendance upon him. A young woman entered with a serving tray bearing a round loaf of wheat bread, several kinds of fruit, and a flask of wine. She set the tray on the table beside Jason and unfolded a linen cloth that she draped over the front of his tunic. After pouring the wine, she took his blanket and went back inside the bedroom to lay out his clothes while a male servant entered with a basin of water.

“Nothing too ornate today, Niobe. I’m going to see my brother.” *Honiah doesn’t understand how to be rich and unashamed of the fact.* Steam escaped from the bread as Jason broke off a piece and began to eat. *No need to antagonize him. Not today, at least.* He alternately took a mouthful of fruit and a drink of wine—new

wine, from his own vineyards, still sweet and barely fermented, just enough to be interesting. Jason had spent the third and fourth watches of the night turning around in his mind all the possible permutations of his conversation with Honiah, down to the details of what not to wear. The bulk of that time, however, was given over to the more difficult question: what he would do if—perhaps he should just admit *when*—his brother refused to play along.

Niobe came out to the terrace again. “*Adoni*, my master’s friend Agathon is in the atrium.”

“Escort him here,” Jason instructed her in their native Aramaic. “And bring a second cup.”

A moment later, Agathon’s voice greeted him in perfectly inflected, if not perfectly pronounced, Greek. “Good morning, Jason. How was your sleep?”

“Do not mock me, old friend,” Jason retorted, casting a dark glare before breaking into a warm smile. A middle-aged man in a simple tunic set a chair behind Agathon just in time to anticipate the latter’s descent, then retired into the house to resume setting out Jason’s toiletries. “You got my message, then?” Jason inquired in somewhat better Greek.

“Yes, I did,” Agathon said as Niobe placed a cup of new wine in his waiting hand. “Philostratos arrives with his party today, rather than three days hence as we anticipated. Your messenger arrived late last night.”

“An hour or so after he informed me, then.” *Whence this night’s insomnia.*

“That’s good news, isn’t it, Jason? Less time to wait and worry?”

“Timing is everything, Agathon. Have you forgotten what day this is and what the delegation will be expecting?”

Agathon looked puzzled for a moment, then drew a deep breath and raised his eyebrows, signaling his comprehension.

“The delegates will be in need of refreshment tonight, not in the mood for formal business, so this part doesn’t concern me.” *Though Honiah’s absence would be conspicuous.* “But they will be impatient to meet with the official representative of the Judean people tomorrow, especially if he is not present tonight. Honiah’s lack of enthusiasm for the project would have been evident enough even without putting them off an extra day.” Jason shook his head slowly. “Just one day later, and all kinds of issues could have been avoided, as if they weren’t issues for anyone at all.” *Timing is indeed everything.*

“Honiah might surprise us, Jason. He’s not oblivious to political necessities.”

“I appreciate your efforts to cheer me up, but Honiah has never surprised me. Perfect piety has made him perfectly predictable.” Jason stood up, subtly signaling that the conversation was over. He forced himself to smile as he dismissed

Agathon. “Perhaps if you have leisure today, I could ask you to arrange for the entertainment at tonight’s banquet and to make sure our guests are properly welcomed upon their arrival in the city?”

The recipient of so many of Jason’s favors, Agathon would never refuse, whatever his plans had been. “Whatever I can do to ease your burdens today. *Chaire, phile.*”

Alone again, Jason walked forward and placed his hands firmly on the cool marble railing of his terrace, taking its strength and the strength of the vision before him into himself. He would need it to persuade Honiah. Feeling sufficiently braced, he turned and entered his house. He approached the basin of water like a priest performing some rite of preparation, his garments like a general being armed for a decisive battle that would be well fought, but impossible to win.



Eleazar rapped gently on the heavy wooden door with the head of his walking stick. The door swung open on its iron hinges to reveal a servant, still holding the flask of oil that he had been using to refill the lamps throughout the main floor of the house.

“Peace be to you, Master Eleazar,” the servant said, bowing his head slightly.

“And peace to you,” the priest replied. Though nearly sixty, Eleazar had lost none of his stature and very little of his strength. His gray hair flowed out from beneath a round, white linen cap, down over his broad shoulders. His beard, fanning out over his woolen tunic, bore silent witness to his age and dignity.

“Welcome once more to my master’s home.” The servant took a step back from the door and gestured toward the interior of the house. “May I pour water over your feet?” he asked as he knelt to untie the priest’s sandals.

Eleazar smiled. “Thank you, but the fifty paces from my home have not wearied me.” The aged priest stepped inside, and the servant shut the door behind him, leaving the room suddenly dark. Even without the light from the single open window beside the door, however, Eleazar could have found his way, so often had he been to this house. In fifteen steps, he successfully navigated the oak furnishings of the living room and dining room and found the small staircase that led to the upper floor and the private spaces of the house. The chatter of people, the clatter of sandals and carts upon the pavement, the occasional objections of animals being led to the Temple, none of these sounds of life rising from the street below betrayed any awareness of the quiet approach of death in the upper room.

Eleazar paused at a bedroom doorway to consider the old man who lay sleeping upon the wooden-framed bed. Layers of woolen blankets beneath him cushioned his bones. Layers above him kept his body as warm as possible, compensating for the now inadequate pumping of blood. Three pillows propped up his head and shoulders, allowing him to take water or thin broth, or to look at his guests when he was permitted periods of consciousness. Eleazar smiled to see Binyamin once again at Yehoshua ben Sira's bedside. *How unlike those who wait beside the beds of the rich, hoping for a last-minute inheritance.*

Binyamin was keeping vigil seated on a low wooden stool. His body had all the firmness of a young man still approaching his prime, but his countenance bore a gravity sufficient for a man twice his age. A year short of twenty, he had already carried the responsibilities of husband, parent, and guardian of the household for the five seasons since his father had been gathered to his fathers, leaving him with the support and care of his mother and brothers. Binyamin was absorbed in reciting psalms that he had committed to memory. He uttered the sacred songs unhurriedly, prayerfully, softly, to ease the old man's mind if he heard them, or at least to sanctify his rest if he did not.

Eleazar waited for the young man to complete the psalm before greeting him.

"Shalom, Binyamin. Has anyone been to see Rabban Yehoshua this morning?"

"Peace to you, Rabbi Eleazar. Elam ben Jacob has been here."

"A good man, a fine scribe who learned his craft from Rabban Yehoshua three decades ago. There will be others in the afternoon, after they have concluded their morning business."

"Somehow, I expected more. How many men in Jerusalem have not been indebted to his wisdom?"

"Few indeed." Though only ten years his junior, Eleazar had always been something of a student of ben Sira throughout the four decades of their acquaintance. How many times had he sought the older man's guidance in the course of his own career as a priest and a scribe? How many hours of how many days did they spend together doing the very thing that the *Shema* enjoined—talking about God's commandments when reclining and rising, when at home or walking beside the road? "Many more people are willing to pay their respects after death than as a man lay dying." *Besides, quite a few of his former students wouldn't dare face their teacher now.*

Eleazar walked past the bed to the small window and let in the morning light. For a moment he looked out at the houses that lined the opposite side

of the street, with their second-story bedrooms and their rooftop porches, and then up to the Temple platform, clearly visible over the housetops across the street. Craftsmen, merchants, people from all walks of life making their way to the Temple passed by on the street below, but only the elite lived in such homes in the shadow of the Temple. *But how many still lived under its aegis?* Eleazar wondered. Many members of these households had studied under ben Sira but had since abandoned the principles of their old teacher, walking around like drunken men intoxicated by the new spirit of the Greeks.

The priest abandoned his musings and remembered Binyamin, both because he was in the room and, more importantly, because he was not a cause for such regret. “This room is a place suspended between this world and the next. A strange place to keep finding one so young, who has so much of this world left before him.”

“If you find a discerning man, visit him early; let your foot wear out his doorstep.’ Isn’t that what Rabban Yehoshua advised?”

“And do not forsake him when he is old,” Eleazar finished. Behind the proverb, Eleazar knew another reason for Binyamin’s faithfulness. He had brought Binyamin to ben Sira at a vulnerable time in the young man’s life, after the initial pangs of grief for his father had given way to an awareness that the loss was even deeper than those first pains intimated. Ben Sira had given Binyamin the guidance, the wisdom, the formation that Zerah, had he lived, would have given. Binyamin understood this need. He understood ben Sira’s role in filling that need. And now he returned the favor at a second bedside of a second dying father with filial devotion.

“You’ve been a good friend to him, too, Binyamin.” Eleazar looked at the young man with piercing but kind blue eyes—the color most common among the priestly families. “For years, many of his former students have been sending their own children elsewhere for their training, to the schools established by Jason. Rabban Yehoshua has watched his own influence driven back like a mist before the Greek sun god. Those who have shown interest in his wisdom have been a joy to him.”

“A remnant. A faithful remnant,” the old man whispered.

“Ah, you’re awake, old friend, and listening in on us,” Eleazar chided wryly. “And how are you today, Rabban?”

“Keep yourself in good health, Eleazar. Eternal sleep would be better than this endless sickness.”

“Rabban Yehoshua,” Binyamin offered, “most of my friends feel as I do about the ways of our ancestors. Most of the families who frequent our shop or who

live in the streets around us walk in line with the wisdom of Torah. What you have taught me has often been the subject of our conversation.”

“How different your estimation of my teachings from the estimation of many priests, many scribes, many even that sit on the council.” Ben Sira smiled weakly as he looked at Eleazar. “Perhaps if I had shaved my beard and wrapped myself in a Greek tunic and lectured on Homer instead of the sayings of the wise?”

“What a fine sight that would have made,” Eleazar said, his eyes rolling upward in a mock appeal to heaven. “An old rough-hewn Jew trying to recite Greek hexameter. I’m glad to have been spared.”

Binyamin cast his eyes down to the floor, suddenly aware of the kind of person ben Sira had been accustomed to teaching. “I fear I’ve been an imposition, that I’ve spent your time unwisely. I’m just a craftsman, not a future scribe or sage or statesman.”

Yehoshua ben Sira realized his error at once. “God forgive a vain, old man. People will honor the great, the famous, the powerful,” he said faintly. He raised his head slightly to look Binyamin squarely in the eyes before finishing his pronouncement: “But none of them is greater than the person who fears the Lord. I have spent much of my time poorly, but not the time I spent with you.” Ben Sira thought of the many sons of the elite priestly and lay families that he had taught and how fruitless so much of that labor had become. He thought about his own ambitions—or if he must admit it, his own vanity—that kept him seeking to attract students exclusively from among the rich and powerful families, mistaking the richest soil for the most fertile. “You may not serve among great men or appear before rulers, but you walk in honor before God.” Ben Sira allowed his head to rest again on the pillow. “Now go. Get on with your day. You’ve spent enough time by the bed of an old man.”

Binyamin rose, bowed slightly to the dying man, and wished him peace. Stepping away from the bed, he turned to acknowledge Eleazar with the same gesture of respect. He was arrested on his way to the door with ben Sira’s voice speaking once again, this time with a hint of urgency.

“Don’t ever be ashamed of the Torah, my son; don’t ever crave what the ungodly enjoy. Torah is our wisdom. It is our deliverance.”

“Yes, Rabban,” said Binyamin, looking slightly puzzled by the warning. With a final nod, he quit the room and went down the stairs.

“I think I will not see that young man again, Eleazar,” ben Sira said softly, looking off into the vacant doorway. “Keep watch over him. Help him if you can.”

“Of course I will, Yehoshua. Zerah was my friend, and until my death I’ll be a friend to his family, so I can greet him as a friend again in the world to come.”

“Be like a father to orphans; be a guardian to their mother,” ben Sira recited, half to himself. “It’s not easy, Eleazar, lying here at life’s close, seeing how little an impact one has had, how futile were one’s efforts to stem the tide. I might as well have spent my life shouting at the seasons to stop changing, or the sun to stop rising and falling.”

“And your shouting might well have stopped it,” Abigail said as she entered the bedroom. She smiled warmly at her father. “It always stopped us in our tracks.”

Ben Sira smiled, no doubt remembering the sight of his two daughters and two sons tearing about the house, a sight now forty years behind him. Abigail set a tray down upon a table next to the bed. She put her arm behind the pillows supporting her father and lifted gently. Taking a pillow from beside the bed, she inserted it behind the others. “Let’s see if this helps you drink more comfortably.”

“My daughter has become my nurse and my mother,” Yehoshua said to Eleazar. “And a good one at that.”

“So perhaps the birth of a daughter is not a complete loss after all,” Abigail said, smirking playfully at Eleazar. The aged priest could not help chuckling to hear the master’s words thrown back at him. *The birth of a daughter is a loss.*

“Will you never let that pass, Abigail? You never brought any of a father’s many fears to pass. If every daughter were like you, the birth of a daughter would be a great gain.” Ben Sira’s voice trailed off as a wave of sorrow washed over his face. “But not every daughter is like you.”

No one spoke for half a minute, as if observing a brief silence for the dead, until Abigail’s voice rescued the moment from undue discomfort. “Here, Father. I brought you some breakfast.” She put a cup to his mouth, and he took a few sips, swallowing with difficulty.

“Do you remember Simon the Just, Eleazar?” There was a new energy in ben Sira’s voice as he turned to look at his friend, the energy that comes to old men as they remember earlier, better times. “What a marvel it was to see him officiate in the Temple! How the beauty of holiness adorned all he did during his priesthood!”

“Yes, Yehoshua. I think of him often.”

“Those were glorious days, Eleazar.” Ben Sira’s gaze turned back to the ceiling, the canvas on which his mind painted its memories. “When all Jerusalem, it seemed, cared about the service of God, the keeping of the covenant, the reverence due God’s house. When the Temple was rebuilt after the exile, it is said that

the elders who remembered Solomon's Temple wept at the sorry replacement. Would they have wept after Simon's renovations? Would they not have had to acknowledge that it was good?" Ben Sira was smiling broadly now, as his chest filled with pride. "And under Simon people cared about wisdom. They sent their children. They sent their young men."

The pride drained from his face as he returned to the present. "Where is that all now?" he asked, as he seemed to sink more deeply into his bed. Abigail took the opportunity to give him another drink and to feed him a spoonful of thin wheat porridge. "Arrogance begins when a man turns away from obeying God to serve himself. The arrogant run through Judea like a pack of dogs, men who increase their wealth by stealing the land from underneath their brothers and the bread from the mouths of their children."

"Yehoshua, it is not as bad as all that," Eleazar said, not quite convinced himself. But he quickly fixed on the one ray of hope he could, wishing to restore ben Sira's mood. "Simon's spirit lives on in his son."

"Blessed be Honiah ben Simon for loving the Lord with all his heart and all his strength! Simon's spirit lives on in his son, but not his sharp and politic eye. I fear for him. He would steer the ship of this city straight, but lacks the charisma to lead the mutinous crew behind him."

Ben Sira turned to look Eleazar directly in the eyes, showing the earnestness—almost the desperation—in his own. "Do not leave your post in this struggle, Eleazar. You are revered as a priest, and as an interpreter of the law, your word carries authority."

"Hardly, Yehoshua. My influence in the council has diminished at the same rate as attendance at your house of instruction."

"You must keep your voice strong, all the more when the priest is weak or disposed to lead the land away from the covenant."

Eleazar began to voice his objection, which ben Sira immediately anticipated with a wave of his hand. "O, not Honiah, to be sure, as well they know—hence their attempts to remove him from his office and install their own puppet. But one day their attempts may succeed, and then, Eleazar, who will speak for God? Who will speak for the covenant?"

Abigail looked beseechingly at Eleazar, who understood at once her meaning.

"I had best take my leave, Yehoshua. You have exerted yourself enough for one day, and it is not even the fourth hour." Eleazar looked upon his old friend and mentor with deep kindness in his eyes. "Peace be with you, Rabban."

As Eleazar passed ben Sira, the old man reached up from his bed and grabbed Eleazar's forearm. He pulled himself up slightly from his pillow and said, "The

hope of the people is not with Judah's rulers, but with her faithful ones. Keep feeding them. Keep nurturing faithfulness among them."

Eleazar placed his free hand on his mentor's, trying to give what strength and assurance he had to him. "I will, Yehoshua. I will do all I can."

Ben Sira relaxed his grasp and allowed his head to fall back onto his pillow. Eleazar gently placed his friend's hand back on his bed. "Rest now, Yehoshua. Rest in God." He turned to Abigail and raised his hands slightly in a gesture of blessing. "May God remember the many kindnesses you have shown your father. I shall come after the morrow."

Abigail wished him peace and turned back to her father. As he descended the stairs, Eleazar glanced back to see her tuck Yehoshua's arms beneath the blankets and remove the extra pillow to afford him better rest. He knew his friend was in good hands, and it would have been easy for him to leave save for the conviction he felt that they would not speak again.



Jason stood in the main hall in the west wing of the high priest's palace. He had arrived moments before and had been courteously received and announced to his brother by the steward of the house, as always. In a sense, it was his house as well, and he was welcomed here as such—but as the *junior* son of Simon the Just.

A servant girl appeared with a tray bearing a glass flask filled with a lightly colored liquid, an alabaster cup, and a bunch of large, round grapes. She bent slightly to set it down on a table braced against the inner wall.

Jason walked over to the table and sampled the drink. Water, flavored with the juice from a mango and another fruit he did not immediately recognize. He looked out the large window upon the inner courtyard and was transported back thirty years, chasing playmates around the covered walkway that ran the perimeter of the courtyard, playing with wooden boats as he sat at the rim of the shallow pool at its center, being called in for lessons or for the evening meal. Though his own villa was far more spacious and boasted fine gardens that would be unthinkable in the crowded city, he missed this home from time to time.

"My lord Jason?" The steward's voice recalled him to the present. "My lord Honiah will see you now."

Jason turned around in time to see the oaken doors at the far end of the reception hall swing open. Jason walked toward them to find his brother seated in a wooden chair behind a table with a fine marble inlay. Several scrolls sat in

one corner, while official documents and requests from individual petitioners covered the greater part of the desk's periphery. These awaited the high priest's attention, more in his role as premier and official representative of the province than as high priest of the Temple. Behind and slightly above him was a window, the shutters opened so as to allow the morning light to illumine his work. Two cedar cabinets were set against the wall on either side of the window. A series of drawers containing official records and copies of correspondence occupied the middle third of each cabinet. These drawers were flanked by shelves and compartments of various sizes, each pigeonhole containing scrolls, a veritable library of the literature of the Jewish people.

"Peace be with you, Brother," Jason said in Aramaic.

Honiah rose from his chair to greet his brother. His face was as Jason's might be in another decade, but there the fraternal resemblance ended. Honiah kept his hair and beard, the reddish-brown losing the battle for dominance against the gray, neatly trimmed but quite long. He was dressed in a finely woven but simple white tunic bound at the waist with an undecorated linen cord, an austerity of attire that Jason's best efforts to appear understated could never match.

"Peace be with you, Yeshua," Honiah said in Aramaic. "Did you come into town to officiate with me in the afternoon sacrifice?" It was difficult to tell whether it was genuine hope or sarcasm that inflected Honiah's voice.

"Why is it so difficult for you to call me *Jason*?" He regretted the question as soon as it left his mouth, both because he did not want to get into an argument with his brother—at least, not today—and because Honiah usually had a long and somewhat patronizing answer for such questions.

"*Yeshua* was the name our father gave you. It means 'God delivers' and recalls the splendid deeds of the son of Nun who first led our people into the land of promise and dispatched the Gentiles and their idols that had polluted that land too long. *Jason* means God-knows-what and recalls a Greek opportunist who seduced a witch, stole a national treasure, prostituted himself to the princess of Corinth, and ended up an exile running for his life." Honiah paused in an air of triumph. "Can you tell me again why I should call you *Jason*?"

No, thought Jason, *there will be no surprises from Honiah today.*

Honiah had already turned his gaze to the papyri piled up on the right side of his table before he finished speaking, as if he were already calculating the next bit of business to attend to after Jason left. Jason was not particularly offended, for Honiah was always in haste on this day of the week, as he tried to conclude the week's business and foresee the needs of tomorrow.

Jason sat down in one of the two olive-wood chairs in front of Honiah's desk. *A brief change of subject, then, and on to the matter at hand.* "Are things well between you and the new administrator of the market?"

"Merari is a generally agreeable civil servant, but he seems to be infected with the growing tendency to evaluate matters based on the wisdom of the market rather than the wisdom of Torah." Honiah looked sadly at the scrolls to his left, which Jason knew to be the five books of Moses, the only reference works his brother kept on his table at all times. "Just now we were discussing a petition that has come once again from several noble families to allow the meats of unclean animals to be sold in the market place and to allow tanners and craftsmen to work with the hides of such animals within the city walls. They allege that our traditional practice impedes showing proper hospitality toward our Syrian and Greek residents, for whom such restrictions are a mere nuisance rather than an expression of piety." Honiah cocked his head slightly and looked at Jason. "I suspect they would not find you as unsympathetic."

On another day, Jason might have taken that bait. "I have tried not to involve myself in such debates, Honiah. My efforts to improve our youth's educational opportunities have left me with little time to entertain partisan economics."

Jason could see Honiah's defenses relax slightly, and so he decided to pursue more directly the opening that his segue afforded him.

"In fact, that is what brings me here. You may remember that I have been in conversation with Philostratos, the gymnasiarch and director of the lyceum in Antioch, for some time and that we expected him to visit our city early in the new week."

Honiah nodded to signal his recollection.

"Due to a last-minute decision to travel down the coast by sea rather than make the entire trip from Antioch by land, Philostratos is expected to arrive later today." At this, Jason paused, waiting for Honiah to grasp the significance of the statement.

Honiah widened his eyes and tilted his head back slightly, indicating that, if any inferences were to be drawn, Jason would need to be the one to do so explicitly.

"They will be anxious to meet with you," Jason continued.

"I will be most interested to meet with them as well," Honiah said in a tone conveying more suspicion than genuine interest. "I have reservations enough about the private schools you've already established in the shadow of the Temple—schools where our youth read about the exploits of the demons of the Greeks rather than concentrating on the acts of God, and where they are

taught to measure the commandments of Torah against the ethics of Aristotle and Zeno.”

“It has always been the custom of the sages to study the philosophy, religion, and ethics of other cultures,” Jason interjected in self-defense. “Even Rabban Yehoshua spent considerable time abroad studying both Egyptian and Greek authors before establishing his school here. This is what our people need in order to succeed in a Greek world. As our own teacher said, ‘A wise magistrate will educate his people.’”

“In the fear of the Lord,’ Yeshua! And you know perfectly well that *that* is what he meant,” Honiah retorted.

“Nothing I have done has jeopardized commitment to the fear of the Lord, Honiah. But we have to come to terms as well with the fact that the world around us has changed and that our survival depends on making the Greeks and Syrians feel as ‘at home’ as possible here. Their caravan routes are quite happy to pass far to the north and south of us, and their merchants are content to raise their families in the Greek coastal cities and the Decapolis. But if we put a few basic institutions in place, we can both equip our own youth for success in the larger world and capture the attention of enterprising Greeks and their wealth. We are threatened with becoming an irrelevant pocket of *barbaroi* if we do not adapt.”

“Adapt? They ought to be emulous of us, Yeshua, not we of them! It is written that ‘ten men from among the Gentiles will cling to each Jew, holding him by the cloak and saying, “let us follow you, for it is reported that God is with you!”’ That is the vision I serve!”

“And that is the future that I strive for as well, but how will they seek us out if our sages don’t speak their language?” Jason stopped to take in a breath, hoping the pause would alleviate the tension in the room as well as in his own heart. “I do not wish to bicker with you, Honiah. We have our differences, which someday you may come to respect when you understand that we both want the same thing for our nation.”

“Do we?” Honiah sounded positively peevish. “This gymnasium you want to build—how will it make the nations desire to know the one God? I’ve looked at your proposal at length, and I know something of what goes on in Greek cities and their gymnasia. Will you teach the Greek children that it is impossible for them to exercise in the nude in the city of God’s holy dwelling? Will you teach the Syrians to abandon their idols rather than bring them in to defile the Holy City? Will your gymnasium close during every Sabbath, festival, and daily offering so that the law may be observed and the many youths from the priestly families may be in their proper place—in attendance at the Temple?”

“Honiah, I swear to you that I will satisfy your every concern about the lyceum and gymnasium, and contrary to what any slanderer may have told you, nothing is being taught presently in the schools that leads our people astray from what is essential to our ancestral ways. If anything, it gives them the tools to reinterpret the ancestral faith and keep it living and vibrant in our changing world.” Jason could see Honiah’s resistance abate slightly. “As for the foreigner, we will need to think carefully how the holiness of the city will be maintained together with the requirements of hospitality. Many on the council are concerned that they be made to feel welcome here.”

“Yes, but on God’s terms; if that’s not good enough, then on the terms of the law of this land,” Honiah declared. “Even the stranger within your gates shall keep my Sabbath.”

“But Moses also speaks to us this warning: ‘You are not to oppress a stranger.’” Jason had been ready for this objection since two hours before dawn. “Is it not oppression to force them to conform to our ways without first converting their hearts to the love of God?”

Honiah’s expression softened considerably, and Jason congratulated himself for meeting his brother on the common ground of Torah—if only to disagree.

“Every step shall proceed under your supervision, Honiah.” Jason felt a twinge of guilt at having to keep his brother in the dark about how many steps were already in place to follow the present one, which Honiah was finding difficult enough. “But right now I need to ask a favor of you.”

Even though he knew very well what Jason would ask, Honiah remained silent. With elbows resting on the arms of his chair, his fingertips touching, Honiah opened his hands slightly toward Jason, inviting him to finish the rest of the request aloud.

“Would you be willing to grant them a brief interview tomorrow?”

“Ha!” Honiah exclaimed in mock surprise, pulling back his forearms as if his fingertips had been singed by the words Jason spouted in their direction. “You’re asking me to engage in business on the Sabbath! Or have you simply forgotten what day it is?”

“Honiah, I’m only asking you to meet some guests,” Jason protested. “I’m not asking you to give them a tour, to carry their luggage, or to cook for them, for heaven’s sake. Just to spend half an hour receiving them graciously.”

“Are you even listening to yourself? You’re asking the high priest to do work on the Sabbath.” Before Jason’s open lips could vocalize the objection, Honiah pressed on: “Yes, work, Yeshua. These are not my guests; they are not guests in my house who would be keeping the Sabbath with me. They are your business

associates. The meeting for which you ask is in an official capacity, and thus associating with them is work.”

“I am asking you, please, to see them tomorrow. I can put them off for today. They expect you to be busy with your priestly duties. But they will not appreciate being put off for a day on which you will be doing nothing.”

Jason instantly realized his misstep.

“Doing nothing? I will be honoring the God who created the heavens and the earth by mirroring his rhythms of work and of rest, and honoring the God who redeemed us from slavery by observing the rest that was once forbidden to us in Egypt. Is that now nothing to you?”

“Not to me, Brother,” Jason said with an earnestness that was not entirely manufactured. “I understand our laws. Perhaps I could even make Philostratos understand. But others in his party won’t be quite so broad-minded. Several wealthy men from Antioch—some from the Jewish community there, to be sure, but some Greeks, as well—are traveling with him. They have taken an interest in our endeavors and are considering helping to finance these public works.”

“You will have to make them understand,” Honiah countered. “And if they will not, I want nothing to do with them. Our law is divine, our calling to keep what is holy to the Lord inviolable. They must yield to God’s demands, not the reverse.”

“This is not about yielding,” Jason pleaded. “It is about opportunity—one that I have taken great pains to orchestrate. You are the premier, and your support is essential for all public undertakings. These patrons must see that you stand behind me.” Jason’s tone modulated to that of gentle but forceful reminder. “I stood by your side when Simon ben Iddo, the former chief financial officer of the Temple, challenged your commitment to regulate the market according to our law. I put my voice and the support of my clients behind you when he came to you to demand the office of administrator of the market with considerable support from the nobles.” He paused to allow the recollection to sink in and, with any luck, Honiah’s sense of indebtedness to rise. “Can you not also give a little when so much is at stake?”

Honiah’s eyes dropped momentarily down and to the left, which Jason took to mean that he was actually thinking about it. He pressed his advantage.

“If you do not see them tomorrow, you will cause me no small embarrassment and put at risk all I have been working for. You will show that the administration is less enthusiastic for these educational reforms than I have represented, and will offer an insult to people who wish to expend great sums to benefit our nation.”

But Honiah weighed matters from a different vantage point. “Should I rather insult the God upon whose favor our nation has depended from its beginnings?” He drew a deep breath that made his chest and shoulders inflate with an air of indignation. “If you weren’t my brother, I might begin to hear you as a false teacher trying to lead the people and their high priest astray from God—trying to lead me into violating one of our most sacred laws.”

The threat was stronger than Honiah intended, so he modulated to explanation. “And I *am* less enthusiastic about your lyceum than you represented. Honestly, I don’t understand why you should be so enamored of the arcane knowledge of the Greeks.” Honiah softened his tone further, which only made him sound more condescending to Jason’s ears. “Reflect upon what has been assigned to you, your portion from the Lord. I mean the Torah, the wisdom that God has made to live among us and no other people! Build a school where that is at the center again, and you will have my complete support.”

Jason wished he had been born first.

“As for your faction and your guests, remember the words of the psalmist: ‘Favored is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seats of the scornful, but his delight is in the law of the Lord.’ I would advise you to keep better company than the sinners who have your ear and seek to use you to their advantage.”

Honiah rose, signaling that their conversation was at an end. Jason stood, never breaking eye contact with his brother, seething at having to listen to ethical lessons from a man who would never read Plato or Aristotle. *You probably couldn’t even handle that level of Greek.*

As he turned to leave, Honiah’s voice stopped him at the door. “Yeshua, you were right to get behind me in my dispute with Simon. As my brother, that is where you belong in every matter. Honor our father, and be content to follow my lead.”

Jason remained still a few seconds longer, feeling Honiah’s gaze upon his back. Then he drew in a breath, raised his head, and walked out of the high priest’s office into the great hall. He was surprised at how angry he was, especially since he knew from the start that the outcome would not be any different.



Binyamin walked down the crowded street toward his house as if in a dream. The clamor of artisans at their work, the din of voices negotiating trades or exchanging gossip, even the jostling of people brushing past him registered more

as something remembered than experienced. He returned his neighbors' greetings half a beat late, requiring the extra second to process what would have normally been instantaneous. Though he had walked almost a half-mile to get to the market (his mother had been quite explicit: "Go to the *agora*, not the little vegetable stands at the head of our street where everything has been sitting in the sun for two days") and another to make his way back here, part of him was still sitting in the little room with ben Sira. He was reluctant to turn his thoughts away from him, afraid that if he let the old man out of his mind, he would let go of the lifeline that anchored ben Sira to this world.

He walked through the open door of his father's house, his meditations ended abruptly by his brother's greeting.

"Ah, *Adoni*, could you spare a few moments to sit beside a poor working man?" Meir's tone was half accusation and all sarcasm. Binyamin's younger brother, a strong lad of fifteen years, was sitting on a reed mat and bending over a perfectly smooth stone block on which lay some thin strips of silver. A leather apron covered his bare chest, the heat of the day and his frequent trips to the forge having made him abandon his tunic.

"I know, Meir," Binyamin said, his tone warm with unexpected sympathy. "It's not fair. You feel like you're carrying the load for two men." Binyamin looked earnestly into his brother's eyes. "Now you know what it feels like to be me every day of the week!"

The expression on Meir's face showed that he was completely taken off guard, and Binyamin smiled wryly with a slight snort as he walked away. But he did not make his escape before he felt the sting of a small ingot of silver Meir had tossed at his backside.

"Seriously, Binyamin, we're up against a deadline here. A messenger came this morning to ask if we could have the set ready by this afternoon. Something about a change in plans. I still have the ornamentation on three cups left to do."

"All right, all right. I'll be right back to give you a hand."

Binyamin was still smiling as he left the front room of the house that had been used as the workshop since before he was born, passed through the small family living area, and entered the women's spaces in the back of the house. To the left was a loom set facing the back door, where Miryam had spent many hours working while she watched her children playing in the narrow alleyway between the two rows of adjoining houses, a kind of poor person's courtyard shared by all the families on the street. To the right was the kitchen, Binyamin's destination.

"Peace to you, Mother." He set down the burlap sack he had been carrying

and began to empty its contents. “Six tilapia, brought in this morning by the smell of them.” Binyamin made a show of holding the fish up to his nose. “Ah, such freshness as only the *agora* can provide.”

“That’s enough, young man. I know where to find quality,” Miryam retorted in mock severity. She was sitting on a thick mat woven from cloth remnants, working meal into dough for the bread she would bake for both that evening and the next day. In front of her stood a large stone block on which most of the food preparation—including the kneading of bread—was done. Behind her were two clay ovens over low charcoal fires, ready to transform the lumps into fresh loaves. Later she would use the ovens to broil the fish, after she had marinated it in the vinegar and herbs she had already prepared, anticipating Binyamin’s return. Beside the ovens was another hearth with a metal grill above the fire, on which she was stewing some lentils and barley.

She paused her kneading long enough to see what Binyamin had brought home—and to make sure that he had not forgotten anything. He was highly attentive to the details of his own craft, but his mother often accused him of not being as particular about hers. She kept her kitchen well stocked with grains, dried fruits, nuts, olive oil, wine, date honey, lentils, garlic, spices, and whatever else would keep in the covered earthenware jugs and the tightly woven baskets that lined the inside wall of the kitchen. But it was impossible to keep a garden of any decent size in the city, so she relied on almost daily trips to the market for vegetables, fruits, and anything special.

Binyamin continued to empty out the sack and sound out the inventory. “Pomegranates, grapes, and *fresh* figs.” He closed the sack and began to turn away.

“Binyamin?” she said with a hint of apprehension in her voice.

He smiled broadly as he turned back to the sack and produced a final item. “And of course, I didn’t forget the cucumbers.”

She looked at him with amused exasperation as she went back to kneading the dough with renewed energy. “Honestly, Binyamin, you’ll do anything to provoke me.”

“A small reward for walking over half of Jerusalem to gather only the freshest produce and fish in the city.” Binyamin started to leave, when it dawned on him that his mother was working alone. “Where is Ruth?”

“I sent her home to be of use to her own family on the eve of the Sabbath.”

“Mother, I pay her to be of use to *you*.”

“I am quite capable of cooking a few meals, Binyamin ben Zerah,” Miryam scolded before breaking out into a smile at her son’s solicitousness. “Besides,

should we not be generous to a servant before the Sabbath rest, remembering that we were slaves in Egypt?”

Binyamin could not resist such an argument head-on, so he took a lateral step. “Well at least let me get Ari in here to help you. It’s about time he did more around the house anyway.” He stepped out the back door into the narrow alley and shouted. “Ari?” No answer as he walked on a few paces. “Ari? Ariyeh ben Zerah!” A head peeked out midway of the third door beyond an intersecting alley.

“What do you want, Binyamin?”

“There you are!” Binyamin waved Ari closer. “Mama could use your help in the kitchen this afternoon. She’s alone and has a lot of work to do before sun-down.” Binyamin leaned over slightly and brought his face nearer to Ari’s, both to get his full attention and to lend a modest air of menace that would impress his next words upon his brother’s ten-year-old memory. “Do whatever she asks, and don’t complain about it. And if she doesn’t have anything for you to do, wait with her till she does.”

Ari began to shuffle reluctantly toward their house until a playful kick adeptly placed on his buttocks convinced him to scamper well ahead of his brother.

Binyamin passed through the kitchen with a last admonitory glance at Ari—who quickly found a place at the stone table and began to cut up the cucumbers—and went back into the front workshop. He took off his cloak and hung it on a peg driven into the wall, then removed a leather apron from a neighboring peg and sat down beside Meir. He looked for a moment at the embellishment his brother was making to decorate the bottom of the decanter and cups. At the moment he was working silver wire into vine motifs, splitting off little pieces from the wire to press into leaves.

“Very nice work, Meir. You always had the eye for detail.” He watched as Meir struggled to keep his pleasure at the compliment from showing. “I’ll stamp some more lilacs and pomegranates, then I’ll start soldering all this on while you finish those vines.” Binyamin moved over to another work bench, selected the die with a small inverse lilac on the bottom, and began to strike it into a thin sheet of silver.

They worked quietly together, save for the sound of the mallet against the die within, and the bustle of their neighbors without. Not half an hour passed before their work was interrupted by a rap on the open door. The brothers looked up to see a Syrian mercenary—probably the bodyguard of some aristocrat, Binyamin guessed—standing in their doorway.

“Peace to you,” Binyamin said, rising to meet him. “How may we be of service?”

“I understand that you are metalworkers. Locals say you’re about the best for fine work,” the mercenary said in rough Aramaic.

“We are honored to have our neighbors’ confidence,” Binyamin replied matter-of-factly, neither sounding arrogant nor denying the compliment.

The Syrian produced a gold chain and two gold coins. “I got this chain from a merchant, and I’d like to make a present of it to a special woman. Can you make a charm of Astarte to hang on it as a pendant? I’ve got more gold if it’s needed for the work.”

Meir leaned forward, clenching his jaws so as not to speak out of turn.

“We have a surplus of work here,” Binyamin said evenly, hiding his disgust. “I don’t think we could take this on.”

Meir could not hold back. “Perhaps if you would be content with a different pendant, I could work it in between jobs. I could make a floret, or a cluster of grapes. I’ve even learned the Egyptian way of making names in cartouche. Truly an exotic gift for your special lady, and not so complicated as an Astarte.” Meir was not lying entirely. While the cartouche would actually be far more complicated from an artistic point of view—especially if the soldier’s mistress had some impossible name like Philartemisias—it would be far less complicated from the point of view of living with Binyamin.

“No, I want to give her a charm that will protect her while I’m away on business. She’s devoted to Astarte.”

“My younger brother hates to disappoint a customer,” Binyamin said, casting a sideways glare at Meir, “but we really can’t help you. I’m sorry.”

Binyamin returned to his work bench as the Syrian, his face a blend of confusion and annoyance, retreated to the street and started off in search of another shop.

Meir’s eyes followed his brother and continued to bore into him as Binyamin resumed his work.

“Are you going to finish that cup with your eyes on me and your hands idle?” Binyamin said after he had endured enough.

Meir struggled to keep the frustration out of his voice. “We’re busy today, Binyamin, but you know that we don’t have much work lined up for after the Sabbath. Are we so rich that we can afford not to have work?”

“Are we so poor that we have to steal?”

“Steal! What are you talking about, steal? The man offered us work!”

“Well, you said we needed the money. Are you ready to steal from others to

get more money? Do you want to leave this customer's order for later and go out into the market and cut a few purse strings?" Binyamin continued, as if he were making perfect sense.

"Of course I'm not going to steal, but we're talking about—"

"Breaking the commandments. If you're ready to make graven images of false gods, you should also be ready to steal, kill, and dishonor our parents." Binyamin spoke with unyielding conviction. "We do not make idols, Meir."

"I'm not talking about worshiping idols, Binyamin. I'm talking about doing business with people who do. If we don't take the jobs that the *goyim* offer us just because they happen to involve some image of some god of theirs, they'll find someone else—to whom they will happily ever after take all their other metal work as well."

Binyamin turned back to his task.

"How many Jews came in last week with gold to work? Last month?" Meier asked. "Why, in the past year I think we've had two jobs involving gold. The scraps from those coins plus our fee would have kept us in food for a month." Binyamin kept his attention fully on soldering the lilacs at even intervals onto the cups. Meir shifted his appeal more directly to Binyamin's heart. "And we could have purchased new clothing for Ari, rather than make Mother spend all her evenings at the loom making a larger outfit for him."

Binyamin looked pointedly into Meir's eyes. "How many times do you remember seeing our father casting some idol for a Gentile customer? Hm? How many times did he accept a commission to repair some piece that had graven images on it?"

Meir sighed out the answer, "Never."

Before Meir could object to this line of reasoning, Binyamin continued, "That's right. And I can remember several occasions when he politely but firmly refused such business." Binyamin kept Meir silent with his gaze. "Was our father wrong?"

Meir searched for some way to answer this without dishonoring their father or reneging on his own position but saw no way forward. Binyamin pressed on. "Did our father make bad choices?"

"No, Binyamin. He did what he thought was right."

"Yes, he did. And we will do as he taught us."