

BARUCH'S
— TAILIE —

*The Story of the Prophet Jeremiah
Told by His Scribe*

JOHN GIBBON



STONE TOWER PRESS

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“Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, to you, O Baruch: You said, ‘Woe is me! For the LORD has added sorrow to my pain. I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest.’ Behold, what I have built I am breaking down, and what I have planted I am plucking up – that is, the whole land. And do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not, for behold, I am bringing disaster upon all flesh, declares the LORD. But I will give you your life as a prize of war in all places to which you may go.”

Jeremiah 45:2-5

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in 587 BCE,¹ resulting in the destruction of the city and Solomon's Temple, was a cataclysm that seared the history of Israel with burns whose scars show even today. The subsequent Babylonian Exile left permanent indentations on the contours of the history of the Middle East. The prophet Jeremiah stands out as the supreme figure in the events surrounding this tragedy of tragedies, yet even among those who are biblically well-read, the book that bears his name has a reputation for being one that is happily skipped over for something more palatable. Its uncompromising tone and lack of chronological order means that readers, educated in the modern media era, usually prefer the grand tragic-comedic opera played out by Daniel and King Nebuchadnezzar on the parallel but wider stage of the city of Babylon.

However, two other characters, central to the events in Jerusalem, appear as mere shadows on the fringe of the biblical account. The first was Jeremiah's secretary, Baruch the scribe, to whom he dictated his prophecies. The second was Nebuzaradan, captain of the Babylonian Royal Guard, who was in charge of the destruction of the Temple, the city walls and the subsequent deportation of the remnant of the population. The story begins one night in a room in a Babylonian palace where Baruch and Nebuzaradan, as very old men, recount their story

1 Of the two conventions generally in use (BC/AD or BCE/CE) I have opted for the latter.

to the elders of the community of exiles from the Kingdom of Judah.² There they tell of the events leading up to the Great Siege, its tragic consequences, and unfold their experiences afterwards. Even though he briefly appears as a biblical character, Nebuzaradan's history is my own invention, as are the boyhood histories of Jeremiah and Baruch. The boy Boaz, with whom we travel through the later part of the story, is an entirely fictional character. There is much that is not understood about Exilic and pre-Exilic practices so I hope rigorous biblical scholars will forgive my poetic licence in the way I have re-imagined certain scenes and events.

Together with its sister book of Lamentations, the book of Jeremiah tells the tragic story of a nation that had rejected its own history and had lost its way. It is also the personal story of a man of tender conscience and emotions who had been given the painful task of calling that nation back to its roots. The national crisis that unfolded over a generation ultimately ended in a destructive confrontation with a predatory foreign empire ruled by a dangerously unstable king who eradicated Jerusalem from the map and drove the surviving remnant of the population of Judah into captivity.

On a more personal level, why would an elderly British Gentile wish to write a historical novel of this type? A forty-seven-year fascination with the book of Jeremiah is one answer. In addition to this, the story of the Exile has lessons to teach anyone with an ear to listen, despite the fact that its message runs counter to the prevailing 21st-century secular cultural wind with its fashionable obsessions and ultra-sensitivities. It is regrettable that this wind carries with it a whiff of the anti-semitism which has again begun to flourish on both wings of the western political spectrum where age-old tropes and conspiracy theories have become the standard currency of social media. In a world where truth and lies mingle in a bewildering hall of mirrors, historical events can easily and deliberately be twisted out

2 In the text the people of Judah are called Judahites, just as the people of Israel were called Israelites. The name Judaea (Judea) did not come into use until later times.

of shape to suit hostile political agendas.³ At the back of the story of the Exile looms the exceedingly strange and dangerous figure of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon whose gross folly at trying to supplant the God of Heaven brought forth the stinging rebuke from the prophet Daniel:

... that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men. (Dan 4:17)

Modern Nebuchadnezzar-like political activists and techno-visionaries who aim to 'change the world' should take note.

It would be extremely difficult to tell this story through the ancient Babylonian or Hebrew cultural mind, so I have tried to avoid a detailed immersion in the minutiae of dates, times, differences in calendars, customs and practices which would entangle the reader in awkward explanations without adding to the story. Instead, I have tried to tell it naturally in a way a modern reader would understand, using ideas and allusions familiar to this generation. Nevertheless, I have tried to pin various parts of it to a modern translation of the Bible (ESV) by the use of references. It is reasonable to assume that Baruch the scribe was raised in the old oral tradition of Scriptural memorization and would therefore have recalled all the words that Jeremiah dictated to him. Interweaving selected passages of the Books of Jeremiah, Lamentations and others into the story is deliberate. Even in an English translation, the lovely cadences of the variation and repetition of Hebrew poetry can often mask the tragedy described in the content. This novel is my way of re-telling Jeremiah's story without violating the scriptural narrative. The divinely inspired words of Scripture have a power and an elegance that mere secondary explanation does not. They do not just belong to that time alone but

3 The events of the Babylonian Exile are easily conflated with those belonging to 70 CE when Jerusalem and the Second Temple were besieged and destroyed by the Roman army, and an even later military campaign exiled Israel into her Diaspora after the Bar Kokhba Revolt of 135 CE.

speak to every generation and culture, so I believe it is best to let them tell their own story.

Inevitably, no project such as this can proceed without the generous help of others. My wife, Sheila, displayed great patience during the many iterations needed to turn this into a finished book, while she bolstered my flagging spirits and checked my text. Our close friend, the late, great Dr Anne Hinsley of Kingston-upon-Thames (Surrey), constructively commented on a very early version, while Rich Robinson of San Francisco and John Fenton of Bowdon Vale (Manchester) made some very helpful comments on a later version. However, my greatest thanks must go to Laurence Durston-Smith of Keswick (Cumbria) and Timothy Demy of Stone Tower Press, whose detailed and eagle-eyed critical reading produced a long list of invaluable constructive suggestions and corrections. To all of them I owe great thanks. Of course, all errors, both factual and typographical, are my own.

John Gibbon
London 2020

HISTORICAL TIME-LINE

Date BCE	Historical Time-Line
1010-970	Reign of David, first as King of Judah and then as King of all Israel.
970-930	Reign of Solomon, King of all Israel.
722	After defeat by Assyria, the northern Kingdom of Israel, based on Samaria, ceased to be an entity.
715-687	Reign of Hezekiah King of Judah who shut the gates of Jerusalem and defied Sennacherib King of Assyria.
687-642	Reign of Manasseh King of Judah.
642-640	Reign of Amon King of Judah.
640	Jeremiah, son of Hilkiyah the priest, was born in Anathoth, a village just north east of Jerusalem. Josiah ascended the throne of Judah.
626	The call of Jeremiah and the death of Ashurbanipal King of Assyria. Nabopolassar, Governor of Babylon (626-605), rebelled against Assyria and became Babylon's King.

621	Religious Reformation in Judah began under Josiah (2 Kgs. 23:3). The book of the Law was found. Huldah the prophetess was consulted by Josiah (2 Kgs. 22:14). Jeremiah was commanded to reveal the contents of this covenant publicly (Jer. 11:1-8).
614	An alliance of Babylonians and Medes reduced Ashur and other strong-points in the Assyrian Empire. This alliance finally defeated the Assyrian Empire and destroyed the city of Nineveh in 612.
609	Josiah was killed in battle at Megiddo confronting Pharaoh Necho who was advancing to the aid of the Assyrians. Jehoahaz (4th son of Josiah) ascended the throne of Judah but Necho deposed him after 3 months in favour of his brother, the 2nd son Jehoiakim (Eliakim). Necho fined Judah a talent of gold and 100 talents of silver (2 Kgs. 23:31). Jehoiakim vacillated between Egypt and Babylon. His religious inclinations were idolatrous so he had little time for Jeremiah and his message (Jer. 26:20; 9:26).
609	In his Temple Address Jeremiah castigated the people for their superstitious trust in the Temple (Jer. 7:1-8; 12). He announced that it would be destroyed, thereby provoking public anger. His earlier experience at Anathoth was thus repeated (Jer. 11:18-23).
606	The first deportation: Daniel and others were taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar.

605	Pharoah Necho marched his army to the River Euphrates but Crown Prince Nebuchadnezzar moved his own army from Haran and defeated the Egyptian army at Carchemish. Judah became a Babylonian tributary.
605	Nabopolassar, King of Babylon, died and Crown Prince Nebuchadnezzar became King.
600	Jehoiakim rebelled in a bid for independence despite Jeremiah's warnings regarding the outcome (Jer. 22:18).
598/7	The Babylonian Army invaded Judah and captured Jehoiakim who died before his deportation. He was succeeded by his son Jehoiachin (Jeconiah or Coniah) who initially shut the gates of Jerusalem against Nebuchadnezzar's army but then surrendered after three months. He was taken captive to Babylon, together with many skilled workmen (second deportation). Zedekiah (Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle) was placed on the throne by Nebuchadnezzar as a puppet ruler (2 Kgs. 24:17).
589/88	Despite warnings from Jeremiah (Jer. 37:6, 38:1), a weak and vacillating Zedekiah was unable to prevent intrigue with Egypt among the ruling class who constantly urged rebellion in alliance with the new Egyptian Pharaoh Hophra. The Babylonian army invaded Judah in December 589 and besieged Jerusalem throughout the year 588 and into the year 587. Judah was urged to surrender by Jeremiah (Jer. 21:1; 34:1; 37:3; 38:1).

587	Jeremiah and Baruch attempted to leave the city, but were imprisoned, even though Zedekiah sought the advice of the prophet. The city fell in the mid-summer of the year 587, and was then pillaged. Zedekiah and all the leaders were captured and executed by Nebuchadnezzar. The Temple was burned and the city walls demolished. The third deportation to Babylon occurred. (There are two opposing views: the first holds that the Siege was 18 months in length, thereby ending in 587; the second holds that it was 30 months in length, thereby ending in 586. The author has adopted the first position.)
587	Jeremiah and Baruch released by Nebuzaradan and treated with respect. He appointed Gedaliah as Governor of Judah, who was joined by Jeremiah at Mizpah (Jer. 40:1). After the murder of Gedaliah, the Judahite remnant fled to Egypt, forcibly taking Jeremiah and Baruch with them (Jer. 42:1). Jeremiah passed his last days at Tahpanhes, together with Baruch, where he prophesied the ultimate defeat of Egypt by Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 43:8).
571	Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army invade Egypt.
562	Death of Nebuchadnezzar. Jechoniah released from prison in Babylon and given a place of honour at court.
550	Cyrus of Anshan (in Persia) conquered his Median overlord Astyages and then proceeded to conquer Lydia.
540	Cyrus conquered the Elamite Empire.

539	Cyrus defeated the Babylonian army at the battle of Opis on the River Tigris and entered the city of Babylon unopposed.
538-537	Cyrus issued a declaration that allowed subject peoples to return to their lands (Ez 1:1-4). Thus ended the Captivity.
537	First return of Exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem.
536	First attempt at rebuilding the new Temple.
536-530	The Temple rebuilding halted by an edict from the King of Persia.
520	The Temple rebuilding resumes after an appeal to the King.
516	The inauguration of the new Temple in Jerusalem.

CHAPTER

11

AN ORPHAN OF THE CAPTIVITY

The city of Babylon, “The Destroyer of Nations,” has a name that causes a dark shadow to fall like a ragged curtain across the sunlight. What has been written of her that does not evoke fear and loathing and send a shudder down the spine of all the surrounding nations? She shall ever be called the accursed city, the mother of all evil, where rebellion against the God of Heaven was first attempted.

Our story began in this city one early morning in the summer of the year 550 BCE as the rising sun glowed on the edge of the horizon. Lazy and content in her dominance, the city lay astride the great River Euphrates as a reptile sprawls over its kill. The boy, whose name was Boaz, was waiting just outside the side-gate for the Market of the Fruit Vendors to open. Others had begun to move earlier, or had never slept. A vast shuffling army was already on the move. Flowing like a river in flood to the horizon, the encampments outside the city walls near the river-docks had disgorged armies of shackled slaves and captured prisoners moving like locust swarms feeding on the spring crop. The young and healthy were sold at market prices to work in the houses or labour on the estates of the wealthy. Others were merely

fodder sent out to die quickly in the heat and dust of the stone quarries and sun-drying brick kilns spread across her empire that fed the ever-growing city. Babylon had winnowed the nations from the Nile to the Euphrates and beyond. In the storm of her coming, their chaff had been discarded to die in exhaustion and hunger.

One by one the cities of the nations had fallen to her sword. The educated young males of the wealthy and the merchant classes had been deported back to Babylon to be trained as clerks, secretaries, translators, and even teachers, to serve the bureaucratic machine. The young women were taken as slave girls to be used or discarded at will in the houses and pagan temples. Only a few lived to reach a dignified middle age. The old were left to die around the many ruined walls of the conquered cities of the surrounding nations. Of those deported, the weak soon died and the hardy were the only ones who reached this city alive.

Babylon destroyed any nation that resisted her will, while simultaneously salvaging its talent to be put to its own use. It was a meat-grinding machine, feeding on the wealth of nations and growing ever fatter. Now the largest city in the world she left a deserted wasteland of her conquered neighbours.

Boaz stood both fascinated and horrified as the daily grind of the wheels and blades of this machine whirred in motion before his eyes. The survivors staggered half-dead from the slave-ships at the wharves, and were then marched out to the camps to be processed. Having been born into this city meant its motions and odours were no surprise to him, but fear still gripped his heart as he surveyed the sight before him. None of his people could forget that they were merely a remnant that had been spared the meat grinder that he saw in operation before him. This could have been his fate, or might still be if he made a mistake or was just unlucky.

As his name would suggest, he was a descendant of the remnant from Judah which had been deported before the destruction of Jerusalem a generation before. The deepest and most dangerous thoughts of this remnant were never to be expressed in public, but if they were written in the sky in bold letters they would spell out

“Babylon, the destroyer of the Temple, and the leveller of the walls of Jerusalem.” She would never be forgotten nor forgiven for all generations.

Whatever lay deep within his subconscious mind, Boaz was no different from any other young man roused from his precious bed too early for his growing teenage body, and commanded by his elders to fulfill his allotted duty. The transport of the regular fruit order – plums, melons, prunes, dates, citron – was not an arduous duty. Nevertheless, his long, awkward teenage body made a rather comical sight, like an ant pushing its burden back to the nest. His sleepy morning feeling was quickly dispelled by the effort of trundling the heavy cart and within him awoke the voracious breakfast hunger that only the young experience.

Suddenly a traffic jam of tangled carts and people appeared in the narrow streets ahead of him. He had been taught the wisdom of being careful not to provoke others by a show of aggression in such circumstances. An empty, noisy shouting match could turn to personal violence, which might escalate into mob violence against his people. For a triviality like this, too many had been shipped off as slaves to die miserable early deaths in the quarries. All that for a few minutes delay.

“Stay quiet boy, and learn patience,” a gentle, kindly elder had once whispered in his ear. “One day your time to speak will come.”

He waited and waited and mused on the city itself. Across the river lay some of its great sights, such as the Etemenanki Ziggurat, its elaborate gardens and some of its eight gates. Among the more pious Judahites there were parts of the city that were forbidden, for the simple reason that they were associated with the Babylonian idol religions and the worship of their master-god Marduk. In their own eyes, the citizens of Babylon saw their city as the centre of the world and a symbol of the cosmic harmony that had come into existence when Marduk defeated the forces of chaos. The pious among the exiles saw this paradise on earth very differently. It had been impressed upon those willing to listen that the hundreds of pagan temples and shrines that littered the street corners were little more than prostitution

shops, served by bevvies of sad slave girls and boys who were forced to serve their clientele in the name of some idol deity. Sickness, disease or just plain grief made an end of most of them before they were hardly out of their teenage years. "Keep away boy, do not go there" had been the whispered injunction. Unlike other boys, whose curiosity would have been aroused, it had always been the famed, enormous, thick walls that had fascinated him. He did not ask, as others did, "How can men build such things?" for he knew that tens of thousands of slaves, including many of his own people, had died labouring in the quarries and hauling the huge stones that now sat so benignly in serried rows.

"If those stones could talk, what stories would they tell?" He then dismissed this as a thought unworthy of everything he had been taught. It was absurd to ask if stones could talk. The nations had laboured and exhausted themselves to build a wall made from objects that never moved, yet many in this city went to temples and prayed to gods carved of the same stone. The Babylonians believed themselves to be tormented by the ghosts and evil spirits of men who had experienced unhappy lives or who had suffered violent death. These spirits haunted their dream-world, or so they thought, which caused them to part with hard-won gold while fervently asking for protection or elaborate favours from the pantheon of idol-gods in those same temples.

Boaz had been taught rigorously, but furtively, that such crude pagan beliefs and forms of worship were forbidden to his people. He had even heard stories that they were in this very city because their own fathers had once indulged in such forbidden practices, but it was talked of only in whispers.

The trail of wagons in front of him moved suddenly, waking him from his reverie. Half an hour more saw him guide his load through the side-streets along the pathways by the wall, trodden mainly by the servants and slaves of the houses. This way, he knew, led back to the Residence and food. That is not what they called it in Hebrew but as an anonymous public name it did well enough not to draw attention to its function.

Few of the residents ever wondered how it was that their commune survived the struggles, riots, and sporadic violence that erupted

in the city, provoked by the princely factions that rose and fell over the years. The royal princes of Babylon, the descendants of the younger brothers of the now deceased Nebuchadnezzar, were many. Known for their rapacity, they fed off the plundered wealth and talent of the nations, taking their share and much more besides. Few survived who resisted their will. The great merchant families of all origins who had grown from nothing, rising on their skill in money-making in markets of plundered goods, or even in simple everyday food and fruit, had to pay protection money to survive.

Boaz had only recently become conscious of how tenuous was the life of any merchant family. His close friend Mordecai had recently disappeared when the great Persian merchant Teresh, for whom he worked as a secretary and clerk, had lost his business. Overnight it had been shut down and its houses and goods had been sequestered by a faction of soldiers under the orders of a Babylonian prince. The merchant family had disappeared overnight, as had his friend. To ask after Mordecai was futile. No-one would know except, perhaps, an anonymous slave-secretary who made out the lists of those that had been sold. It was also dangerous to inquire, for there would be those whose malignant curiosity would be aroused over his questioning which might make him a marked man. Clandestine gossip said that the protection money old Teresh had paid was not enough and negotiations had become too slow. None was exempt when a great prince in the city was desperate for money, and it was money that slipped through their blood-stained hands like water.

The Residence was a long, low-slung building that backed against the city walls. Superficially it looked like an unobtrusive warehouse or barracks, giving it the air of a giant lean-to shack. The few windows that existed at street level had stout wooden bars to discourage thievery and the inquisitive. Its anonymous visage said that it was content to remain so, with stores and workmen dribbling in and out of its lesser doors. The interior revealed a series of levels that went deep underground, all of which backed onto the city wall whose huge stones kept it cool in the summer heat, particularly in the afternoon. The floors were supported by large, horizontal wooden beams embedded

in the wall at one end and the frontage at the other, with the main weight being taken by vertical wooden posts. The frontage itself was built of layers of typical Babylonian mud-brick sealed together with bitumen. Openings in the front wall at various upper levels captured the breeze and allowed the air to vent, which was an absolute necessity, given the heat and the number of people it housed. To Boaz, it was just home – the boys, the girls and the old men and women living on separate floors. He had no real memory of anywhere else. The vast interior, so much more capacious than its outer appearance, smelled overpoweringly of olive oil that permeated everything. In the twilight of the lower levels the oil lamps burnt round the clock leaving even the stones with an oily feel.

It functioned as an orphanage, school, hospital and a wayside home. Of his father no trace remained, if it had ever existed. Only soft, faint childhood recollections of his mother occasionally stirred his subconscious. None spoke of them for there was nothing to say. The wholesale genocides of the last half-century, mingled with fever epidemics that had carried off even more, had sliced into ancestral and community memories, leaving only survivors with a forgotten past and a precarious future. All that Boaz knew was that his ancestors belonged to the two groups exiled before the Great Siege of Jerusalem.⁴ More than fifty years before his time, the Babylonian army had moved swiftly westwards and had defeated Egypt in a great battle at Carchemish⁵ in a bend of the River Euphrates. Many battles are irrelevancies in the great scheme of things but Carchemish was a hinge on which had turned a great page of history. From that point Babylon had become the new great power in the region, flexing her muscles and demanding both financial and cultural tribute from all the surrounding nations, even from those beyond the River. The little Kingdom of Judah had been one of these, which is why the great Daniel had arrived in Babylon as a very young man. From this human tribute, which was just another name for a set of hostages, a select

4 587 BCE.

5 605 BCE.

group of young men had been chosen to be trained and indoctrinated into Babylonian ways. This was the first deportation. The plan had been to show their own people back home how things were going to be done in future. Eight years later, the Babylonian army had captured Jerusalem⁶ after a three-month-long resistance, driving off the ever-meddling Egyptians in an easily won action, after which a second and much bigger set of deportees had been demanded and had arrived in the city of Babylon. Accompanying them was their new King, an eighteen year old Jehoiachin, with his foolish, fawning uncle Zedekiah replacing him as a puppet on the Judahite throne. The thousands of these second exiles had included many skilled craftsmen and smiths. Not only were people exiled to Babylon but also the vessels of the Jerusalem Temple. Ten disastrous years later, the rebellion against Babylonian rule, and the subsequent Great Siege, had produced a third ragged set of deportees, emaciated and exhausted. Few had survived the journey and even fewer had lived long enough to put down roots. They had trusted in Egypt yet again to no avail. Nebuchadnezzar had flown into manic fury at being defied which had resulted in the eradication of the Temple, the city of Jerusalem and the Kingdom of Judah – nothing after it would ever be the same again. This catastrophe had also turned the Judahite exiles in Babylon itself into a potentially treasonable element, forever under suspicion. It was thus a miracle that a remnant of their people had survived. Other neighbouring nations had just disappeared in the deluge of the Babylonian storm. It was from within the more pious Judahite survivors that a desperate and despairing craving grew to return to their land and rebuild.

Of the Judahite people in Babylon, only their royal family, who now had some status at the Babylonian royal court, and a few thousand families of the first and second deportations could reliably trace their lineage back in the history of Judah. For the rest, the Great Siege itself lay like a great jagged chasm, cleaving through and eradicating their history leaving an orphaned generation in its wake. As one of these children of the captivity, Boaz had been placed in the Residence by a kindly, anonymous hand. All he had been told was that his

family had been of Levitical descent. Perhaps he had been a large baby because his name in Hebrew meant 'strength is within him'. Not only was it the name of the great grandfather of King David who had married Ruth the Moabite, it was also the name of one of two bronze pillars, eighteen cubits high, which had once supported the porch of the now demolished Jerusalem Temple built by King Solomon.⁷ Indeed Boaz was well-named for he was tall, akin to a pillar, and still growing rapidly.

The Residence also doubled over as a rest home for the elderly, but now increasingly a terminal hospital. Of the details of the history of the Residence no record had ever been written and never would: it was just there, and had been before his birth. The few who had survived to reach a full age were now at the dying age and it was here they saw their last hours. Boaz had noticed how the old lived more in the past than the present. He was always amused when one of them would begin a sentence with the words "I remember ..." for then it would be followed by interminable recollections, but for many of that generation the memories were what they wished to forget but never could. In the old days tradition dictated that Boaz would have lived in a Levitical community with all its necessary rituals and observances. That life had been destroyed beyond imagining. Boaz was simply a random brand plucked from the fire, or so he thought, a survivor mixed in with the rest. The crushing and dismemberment of a nation could not have been more complete.

From day to day the exiles survived as best they could. Some worked for, and were looked after, by the older families who themselves had to pay protection money to stay safe. Their futures, particularly the merchants, rose and fell with the fluctuating political fortunes of the times. At best, survival was precarious. Others were slaves of the great houses and estates spread across the empire, doing the bidding of their masters day by day. For them, nothing could be done, but the Residence itself was there to shelter those who fell outside these networks within and around the city. This pattern was replicated all around the empire. To the young, only semi-conscious of

7 2 Chron. 3:17.

their own tattered history, it was just their home, and a place for food to assuage their constant hunger. Strangely, it never occurred to them to ask who paid the bills.

As each day passed they thanked the Lord God of Israel for one more day of peace. Any refugee survivor group was ripe for plunder and the Judahites were always the first on every list. Babylon was a pot seething with people, from whom recruitment by the princes into one of their private, half-trained, ill-disciplined militias was easy. Once the great Daniel had retired, the usurpation of his powers had given encouragement to their enemies. Each day they waited apprehensively for the heavy mob of one or another of these princely militias to pour in through the doors, taking axes to the wooden window bars, stripping everything, leaving only wreckage, even though they owned nothing of value. The old and alert watched and wondered in bewilderment how their Residential haven of peace could survive, but survive it did. The trouble milling round the streets always seemed to miraculously stop short of them.

At the back of the building, in the low, constant, twilight near the base of the city wall, was the part assigned to the old. Here they expired gently, alone with their sad memories, and nursed their grief in silence. Despite the coolness of the stones, it was not necessarily the best place for them because this deeper part suffered from dampness during high-river periods after heavy rains in the far-off mountains of Cappadocia in the north western part of the Median Empire. A few, a very few, of the old were mobile, and these would wander around the building, snoozing away the day curled on one of the many rush mats that littered the place. One of these old men Boaz actually knew, at least by sight. Some days this old man had an ancient look with wrinkles deep like rock crevices, shuffling along with a stoop. On other days he looked forty years younger with a smoother skin and an upright bearing. How old was he? Boaz did not know nor did he even think to ask the question, for he was of an age when anyone of the next generation looked old to him. The great Daniel was now very old, he knew, but how old was beyond him. Anyway, the whispers said that

Daniel lived in retirement, protected, unseen by the envious, vengeful, prying eyes of the princes.

“How was the fruit market today, boy?” asked the old man. “It’s Boaz, is it not?”

“Yes sir, my name is Boaz,” he replied listlessly. He had still not quite emerged from the attitude of automatic sullenness, deference and denial that schoolboys of every age have adopted to adults around them. “The market was the same as ever, sir, but I never stay long. The order is pre-arranged and I am just the collector.”

“Ah, quite so,” said the old man in a low voice, “it is wise to avoid getting close to those slave-trains and the poor creatures in the lines.” Then, in a muttered aside, he said “I once knew how it was – too well. Those lines were like the Nile in flood. You should have seen it – like rivers to the horizon.”

“The Nile, sir? Is that not in Egypt? I have only heard of Egypt. It is said that none of our people living there ever survived to come here after” He hesitated, and then said “after the King” His voice trailed away into silence, for he knew he was speaking of only fourth and fifth hand tales, distorted by the legends that always grew with the telling. Who knew what was true? Whenever these were raised, an elder quickly quashed any talk. Talk like that was dangerous, for it could be maliciously interpreted as the beginning of a conspiracy.

He assumed the conversation was over. The young always thought that their polite, puzzled exchanges with the old were about ancient memories, the things of long ago tangled in a web they were unable to unpick. This community was different, for their memories of long ago made people shudder and reduced them to silence. The young soon learned not to ask too many questions and he knew he was treading on difficult ground.

Boaz turned away in his embarrassment but suddenly the old man spoke again.

“Yes, Egypt, a place I once knew but never will again ... darkness,” he muttered and then fell silent. He suddenly shrank into his skin, like an old man, and looked a thousand years old. “Stick to this place, boy. Do not get a craving to wander the earth, as young men

do. This is not a time to see the world, for the world has come to you in this city. You have friends here, more than you know. Unknown hands here, even in Babylon, have been sent from on high, that will protect you.”

Then, with a cheerfully dismissive wave of the hand, he said “Never mind me, boy. Take no notice of my rambling,” and wandered off.

There was vague rustling among the floor-rushes as if someone had been listening and had scurried off. No event, not even a whispered conversation in such a place, was ever really private and wicked talk said that some here had been bribed or blackmailed to report back to the authorities.

Boaz thought nothing of this as his mind was distracted by his amusement at the words of the old man. Do the old always talk like this in vague aphorisms, kindly meant, that lack any practical meaning or sense, all based on past memories? Even so, the mention of Egypt remained with him. It was said that many who had fled down to Egypt from the ruins of Jerusalem after the Great Siege had been lost, including the fabled prophet Jeremiah and his secretary Baruch the scribe. Later on, the wholesale slaughter in the wake of the harrying of Egypt by King Nebuchadnezzar had accounted for even more. Dark rumours said that none of the Judahite remnant had ever come to Babylon by way of Egypt. If this was so, how did the old man speak of Egypt in this manner? He tried to dismiss the thought.

It was time to eat with the rest of his group at the rough tables made of planks and bench-like seating. Boys of his age were always noisy and irrepressibly boisterous, consuming good barley flatbread and vegetables like wolves. For the older boys there was also diluted barley-beer, the local brew. The cry “Not too much, not too much” was in his head. The matriarch Deborah, who ruled over them, made sure of that. She could freeze you with a look and strike terror into even the stoutest of the older men but she was genuinely kindly and could not hide it. Moreover, everyone knew it, which diminished its effectiveness. Malingerers were dealt with by a smack of the back of her hand but the genuinely ill were looked after as if they were a son. He

felt lucky, for she seemed to like Boaz. She knew he was a gentle boy, cut out more for the life of a secretary or scholar than as hired muscle.

His mind came back to the wine barrels he had recently seen loaded at one of the merchant houses. Babylonians did not usually drink wine but those who had conquered and visited other nations had learned to like it. Someone had once told him that the wines of Sibnah in Moab had been the most coveted. The Residence had occasionally been given the odd barrel or two, but of ever changing variety. It appeared at odd times, sent by cart from one of the sympathetic merchant houses, spare barrels shipped off the sleek, gliding ships on the great River coming from somewhere, going anywhere. Who knows which set of vineyards had been plundered by the great and then their barrels sold for silver, ending in the cellars of one of the great houses whose trading arms littered the river bank. The Residence was content to accept the left-overs, the spare barrels nobody else wanted, for then no offence was given and they could go on living in the shadows. Only the old asked for how long.

Yes, the wine again: how many times in their lessons had those passages in Proverbs on not drinking too much wine been force-fed into them? Boaz had been taught the language and content of the Scriptures of his people since childhood. The elegance of Hebrew lived within him but the practicalities of street life meant using Aramaic, the language of the street and the bustling markets. He was currently being trained with a view to becoming a scribe, a fledgling teacher of the Law of Moses, of the old prophets and of the wisdom literature of his people. His elders had planned this for him and this was what he wanted too. Would it work out? Much depended upon the necessary financial support being available over many years. A more likely route would be for him to end up as a secretary or man of business in a merchant trading house. That would mean dealing in the trade and politics of the city. He was not the sort of personality to be consumed by ambition or anxiety.

Despite the failings of their fathers and the catastrophe that had befallen them, did all Judahites care about their ancestral history? Some were happy to live in the Babylonian way and gave no thought

to their ancestral traditions, but for the pious remnant who were trying to walk in the ancient paths, survival in the seething Babylonian melting-pot meant a precarious balance between a rigorous separation from the local pagan rituals of daily life, and assimilation into its ways. To their enemies, the separatists stood out as obvious targets, while even the assimilated could be suspected of undermining the existing order simply by being assimilated. Despite these contradictions, it had been impressed upon Boaz that silent absorption and neutral conformity was the way to pass unnoticed. His most influential teacher, the scribe Itamar, had taught him that a successful military commander began by trying to understand how his opponents thought. What influences them? What moves them and drives them? Get inside their head to know what move they will make in this great and deadly game before they know it themselves. To do this in Hebrew meant peering through a fog. To do it in Aramaic meant you had already breached their walls. He could think and speak in either language without any conscious switch. For an innocent young man like Boaz, such was the daily balancing act. What of the great dreams that reside in the eye of the mind of every teenage boy? The great soldier, standing proudly victorious on the field of battle? Riches beyond avarice? Women? Boaz had no such dreams, or, if he did, they came only in a kaleidoscopic flicker, to be quickly extinguished. Survival for a child of the Captivity meant living in the present, to get through the day, the next day, the next week, the next month. Next year could look after itself.