

Sacrifice

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716 BC

Bethlehem

The sun's heat pressed on Deborah as she wandered through the market. When she ran her fingers over her dry lips, her husband handed her the water skin.

“Here, drink. If you want, we can leave, walk to Jacob's house.”

After tipping the bag to drink, Deborah smiled. “No, Ruben, I just ...” She glanced around, her eyes searching. “Do you feel the difference today from the other market days? I know we don't come to town often, but usually market day has been louder, more joyous. Today, people seem quiet, pensive.”

Ruben shrugged. “Perhaps a bit, but the day is hot.” He took the water skin and slipped it into the bag slung across his shoulder. “Also, since the local soldiers have been sent a distance away to settle an uprising, something, the townspeople may feel anxious.”

“And, you are probably thinking I'm being silly.” Deborah smiled. “At least the children are as playful as ever.” She watched their daughter and grandson run around booths with another boy.

“Look, Jacob seems in a hurry.” She nodded toward the young man half-running toward them.

“Mother, Father, hurry to the house. The rebels sent word that Barrack is on his way with his soldiers.” Jacob waved a hand toward the road. “I don't know why, but it can't be good. The king's angry that few children are being sacrificed to Moleck, and Barrack does what the king wants.” He ran one hand over his short beard. “Bethlehem as avoided any sacrifices.”

“Barrack? You can’t mean ...” Ruben wrapped an arm around his wife. “I thought we were safe from him.”

Jacob nodded. “Yes, your cruel father in person. He’s pushing the sacrificing of children above what’s done.” His shoulders rose as he huffed a sigh. “Hurry, I’ll get the children. We mustn’t let him find you. He doesn’t need that kind of reward.”

Ruben placed his hand in the middle of his wife’s back, urging her to the dirt roadway to their son’s home. “We’ll see you there,” he called, but Jacob had left, nearly lost to sight among the shoppers.

The middle-aged couple didn’t speak for several minutes as they trod the dirt path curving up the hill through houses lining the narrow way. Deborah’s heart fluttered in her chest, and she placed one hand over the spot, surprised she couldn’t feel the frantic beating. “I thought we had escaped him,” she whispered.

“I know, my dear, but he hasn’t found us yet. He’s probably not here about us at all. We’ll leave for home as soon as Jacob brings Sofai.” He exhaled with a whoosh. “Let’s save our breath to climb this hill.”

The couple trod the crooked path past the last of the houses and continued upward until the way took a right turn and stopped in front of their son’s house and barnyard. Both stood a minute to catch their breaths before continuing to the door. Before they reached it, the door opened, and their son’s wife, large with child, stood in the entry.

“Welcome. I have the noon meal nearly ready.” She peered past them. “Where is Jacob and the children?”

“Sara, something odd is happening in the village. Jacob went after the children and told

us to hurry here.” Deborah placed an arm around the younger woman and led her into the house.

“I’m sure they are right behind us, as slow as Ruben and I are.”

“Good, you made it.” Jacob closed the door after entering.

Sara frowned. “Where are the children, Sofai and Nathan? Where is my son?”

Jacob wrapped his arms around his wife. “They are safe. In fact, we’ll go to the roof where you will see them as they hide.”

“How can they be hidden if we can see them?” Ruben shook his head at his father’s question. “Why did you not bring them here?”

“Father, Abba, to take them from where they already hid and race them across the town and here would put them in more danger than to leave them. Barrack and his soldiers will be here any time. Come, let’s go to the roof.”

Deborah grumbled as she prodded up the steep steps to the rooftop. She heard Jacob ahead of her trying to calm Sara. When he opened the door to the rooftop, the brilliant sunlight poured over her.

“Come to this corner, look there, Sara, you can see people huddled on that roof on the other side of the town square. Come,” he motioned to his mother, “Mother, Emma, you can see both Sofia and Nathan way to the back.” Ruben and Deborah crowded close to Sara and searched the area of the town below them to find the spot Jacob indicated, frantic to see their grandson and his younger aunt.

“There, I see them.” Ruben nodded before he asked, “Are you sure they are safer than here? I don’t know what Barrack plans, but I would feel better if the children were with us.”

Before Jacob could answer, the sounds of metal clinking and creaking leather, marching feet, and horses’ hooves echoed through the streets. They couldn’t see much of the room to

Jerusalem because of houses blocking the way, but a hazy cloud rose above the house tops. The thud of feet grew louder and swirls of dust filled the village as the small army thundered past the buildings nearest the road and poured into the square below. People scattered before the wave of swords – laughter and idle chatter became screeches and shouts of alarm.

“No, no, what are they doing?” Sara cried. “Are we going to die?”

A scream forced Deborah’s attention from her son and his wife. Her brain couldn’t believe what her eyes witnessed. Horror gripped her.

One of the soldiers ripped an infant from a woman’s arms, yet she fought him. More shouts and yells joined the first woman’s. Soldiers grabbed children as they tried to run. They wrestled youngsters and infants from the arms of fathers and mothers. The din of screams, cries, and wails caused those on the roof to cover their ears.

Deborah bit her lower lip to stop herself from screaming. *A nightmare. It’s a nightmare.* Her eyes squeezed shut, but the escalating screams and wails caused them to fly open again. The two men and two women watched the soldiers round up the children as if herded goats bleating for their mothers. The soldiers marched them from the square toward the road leading away from town, toward the idol of Moleck. They prodded the uncooperative children with a poke from a sword or fist to the head or back. Parents and grandparents became a mob, chasing after the children, crying for the soldiers to stop, to let their children go, hitting the soldiers with tree limbs, pelting them with rocks. A riot erupted.

Jacob swore and moved as if to leave, but Ruben wrapped his arms around his son. “No, no, you can’t do anything now.” Jacob struggled for a moment before sagging against his father.

“You know where they are taking the children, don’t you, Abba? Bethlehem wouldn’t allow a statue of Moleck to be placed in town, so the king’s priests put it there, where they are

taking the children.” He moved away from the edge of the roof. “I watched a sacrifice once, and it made me ill. The smell of burning flesh; the wails of the infant so loud the 100 beating drums could not drown out the sounds; the heat beating upon them from the sun and radiating from the red-hot brass idol ... I have horrible dreams of that day even now.”

“Oh, no,” Sara wailed and pointed downward. “She has no chance against a soldier.”

A woman grabbed a leg of one of the mounted soldiers. “Please, don’t take my baby,” she yelled. The soldier slung the baby by one leg and wacked the mother in the head before drawing his sword and decapitating her. Her body crumpled in a bloody heap. The soldier rode on, swinging the squalling baby.

A man ran from a house, a metal rod in his hands, striking any soldier he could reach. One soldier laughed before plunging his sword into the man’s chest. Chaos reigned as men and women fought to save their children; children and infants screeched and bawled; soldiers marched out of the village with their “spoils,” at least twenty children crying for their mothers, with the mob pursuing.

“There he is; there’s the monster who said he was my father.” Ruben stared at the chariot sitting at the intersection of the village street and the road toward Jerusalem. The driver stared straight in front. The noble in his flowing robes watched the chaos, a sneer visible.

“Get down behind the edge, everyone,” Deborah whispered. “If he should look up, he would see us standing here.” They lay behind the rim of the roof trim and peeked above its edge.

On the roof top where the children hid under an awning, a woman started to rise from her crouching position behind the half-wall ringing the roof. A ragged looking man pulled her down.

As if sensing eyes on him, Barrack glanced around him and then toward the tops of the houses. He bent over the side of the chariot and spoke to one of the four body guards. The soldier

motioned for another to join him. The two marched toward the nearest house. After breaking open the door, they entered. In moments, they left that house and moved to the next. On the roof across the square, everyone dropped on their faces, pulling mantles over their heads. Deborah, Ruben, Jacob, and Sara also dropped out of sight.

Soon a rough voice yelled, “Don’t see anyone on any roofs.”

Another, more cultured voice, called back, “Return. We need to oversee the sacrifices. The fires should be hot enough.” After a pause, he shouted, “Leave guards at each road so no one leaves.”

After the sound of wheels lessened, Sara whispered, “Are Nathan and Sofai all right?”

Jacob rose to his knees and searched the area around him before he stood. “Yes, they are still over on the other roof.”

Ruben sat crossed-legged. “How do you know they will be cared for? Might those people leave them without protection when they attempt to escape?”

“Amzi is with them. He’s one of the rebels who has been helping mothers escape with their children from becoming sacrifices.” Jacob dropped beside his wife and held her. “I believe he’s connected to the people he’s with, someway.” He took a shuddering breath. “He will die protecting all of them, including Nathan and Sofai. He’s that kind of man.”

Deborah studied her hands as they twisted in her lap. The terror she witnessed and the fear she felt for her daughter and grandson tightened into a knot in her chest. Breathing hurt. “Now what do we do?” she whispered. “I can’t lose another daughter and a grandson because of Barrack.”

Ruben scooted closer to her. “We need to wait until the soldiers are out of the way before we try to get the children and head for home.” He grasped her hands in his. “I want to go as far

from here as we can and be safe.” He brushed tears from her face. “I know my being a coward allowed us to lose Nava. I’m sorry didn’t stand up to Barrack and refuse to leave before we found her.” He stared into the sky. “I told him she wandered off but would return. I ... I was afraid of my father.” He wiped a hand over his eyes. “We should not have left no matter what he said.”

Deborah shook her head. “I could have insisted they leave us, that we would catch up after she came back.” She raised her head. “I was at fault, too. But it’s too late for us to choose what we should have done. Now, I want to take our baby home.”

“If you don’t mind, we’ll go with you.” Jacob hugged his wife one-armed. “I thought if we lived so far above the rest of the village we would be protected. Now, I don’t know. At least we can’t see the idol from here, and the wind blows away from us.”

The four people sat numbly, lost in their thoughts. From time to time, one of them would check the roof across the way. Hours later they heard marching feet, hooves plodding, the creak of leather and metal.

“They return.” Jacob moved toward the partition around the edge of the roof. “The children are still on the other roof.”

“What will happen now?” Sara asked.

Deborah sighed before she said, ““The people of Bethlehem will either give their children to be sacrificed and save their own lives, or they will fight to the death to try to save their children.” She brushed tears from her face. “Unless the soldiers with family here return, Bethlehem is doomed.” She crawled to kneel beside her son. “I see dust clouds from the returning soldiers and people.”

The people arrived first. Some stumbled as if asleep, eyes staring blankly at nothing. When a woman fell, another pulled her to her feet. Men shook their heads as if denying the experiences of the day. Faces showed shock, grief, and anger. Behind the town's people marched the soldiers, swords and spears in hand. The chariot with Barrack standing straight and regal even in the dust bellowing around him, followed. Last rode the mounted soldiers. Barrack rode in his chariot to the middle of the square.

"So arrogant," Jacob muttered.

"What is that woman doing?" Ruben nodded toward the roof across the way. As one of the women behind the elaborate half wall started to stand, an arrow pierced Barrack's neck. He grabbed at the shaft before crumbling to the bottom of the chariot.

One of the mounted soldiers shouted, "Halt." Those marching turned to face behind them. The people never paused but stumbled toward their homes.

Bedlam erupted among the mob below. Soldiers ran or rode to circle the chariot. The groups on both roofs watched as one of the local soldiers swung from a different roof top, followed by five other men. They ran among the people, shouting and pushing. "Get into your houses." "Bar your doors and windows." "Hurry, hide." "Protect yourselves."

Deborah raised her eyes to the roof where the children had been. "They're gone. Sofai and Nathan are gone!"

"Emma, Amzi will watch over them." Jacob turned away from the roof edge. "Now, we need to go below and lock the windows and doors. After dark, we will leave by the back way." He tried to smile. "I'll ask around before we leave and discover where we might find the children. The priest, Aaron, is in town and usually knows everything. I'll find him first." He stooped enough to peer into his mother's eyes. "We will find them. I know Amzi."

Jacob slipped back late in the night. “I’m sorry I didn’t return sooner. I couldn’t. I had to sneak from location to location, avoiding soldiers.” He dropped to a cushion. “One of the local soldiers, his wife was the one decapitated, killed Barrack. Barrack’s men tortured and killed him. Now they are milling around town, unsure what to do except kill anyone they find outside a building.” He picked up one of the bundles his wife, with his mother’s help, had packed and placed near the door. “We need to leave, now. I overheard some soldiers plotting to search throughout the town and houses close to town to find any others who may have helped with the attack on Barrack.” Jacob paused and turned back to face his wife and mother. “The priest said he knows who has the children, and they are safe. He will have his assistant, Hosea, bring them to us tomorrow.”

Ruben lifted the remaining bundle. “We’re ready. I hope you know a path away from here without us having to go back through town.”

“Abba, Nathan and I have explored all the area between here and the farm. We won’t travel any closer to Bethlehem than we are now.”

Deborah extinguished the lamp before she followed Sarah and the men from the house. “Jacob, why don’t you allow me to take the bundle so you can help Sarah?”

“Right.” He handed the pack to his mother and placed his arm around his wife. “Just follow me.”

By the time the two couples traveled over the rough ground, using paths worn by sheep over the years, Deborah felt as if she had walked forever. The tiredness covered the anxiety of being separated from her daughter and the sights and sounds of the day. A dim light through the

now grayness of the sky let her know her son, who lived at home still, left a lamp burning for them.

Once they entered the door of the modest house, she said, “Let’s get some sleep. We can talk in a few hours.”

“Good idea, Emma. Sara is exhausted. We’ll use the room we usually do.” Jacob looked at his wife’s head, sagging against his chest. “I’ll get the bundles later.”

Deborah lay sleepless as the sky lighten into dawn. Her thoughts returned to the massacre of the day before and the assignation of her father-in-law, the monster of her personal nightmare and the nightmare of mothers across the land. Her silent prayer filled her mind: *My poor Nava, I hope you were found and cared for, not sacrificed to Moleck like those children yesterday. I’m so sorry we didn’t wait. We all knew you liked to wander and would return.*

Tears flowed as she felt the continuous pain of her lost daughter mixed with the terror of the day before. She slipped from her bed and silently dressed before going to the kitchen and beginning the morning meal. She opened the shutters covering the window and stared at the sun rising over the hills, her mind and body listless.

Arms wrapped around her waist. “Sophai will be home before long, my dear. We didn’t lose another daughter.” Ruben pulled her against his chest. “I have regretted more than words can express that I allowed my fear of my father allow him to dictate our lives.”

“I know, Ruben; I know, but we must let the past stay there. We both regret, but we thought we had no choice. We both were foolish.” She turned to face him and raised a hand to touch his cheek. “We need to be thankful now for what we have. Our youngest will be home soon.”

Four hours later, the family stood outside watching a cart pulled by a donkey arrive. A

thin man held the reins. “Good day, I’m Aaron’s assistant, as Jacob knows. I have your children covered behind. We were afraid for them to be seen by any of the soldiers.” His smile changed his haggard face into one of beauty. “I need to return to Hadara quickly, but I have a message for Deborah and Ruben. Hadara would like to visit you and bring you good news when the soldiers have left.”

Deborah looked up from hugging her daughter, “Hadara? Who is she? What good news could she have for me?”

“I have no idea, but you will hear from her. Now, I must hurry back before I’m missed.” Hosea smiled once more before he reined the donkey back to the road and in the direction from which they had come.

“Why would this Hadara want to see us?” Deborah asked Ruben as they walked into the house, their daughter between them.

“We’ll discover that later, but now, let’s celebrate we have our daughter and grandson with us.” Ruben smiled at Jacob. “Don’t you agree?”

“Whether he does or not, I do.” Sara laughed as she hugged her son another time. “I’m so glad our children are safe, but my heart aches for the parents who lost theirs. We have much for which to give thanks.”

“Thankfully, our children didn’t become a sacrifice.” But, Deborah’s eyes turned to watch the cart disappear down the road.

*To learn more about Hadara, Deborah, Ruben, and the others living under the reign of King Ahaz and his desire to sacrifice children as a burnt offering to the idol Moleck, watch for the release of the novel **Burnt Offering** by Vivian Zabel.*

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