

Prelude

587 BC

Pft-pft-pft-pft. Another barrage of flaming arrows sizzled through the dense night air and over the northern wall into the city of Jerusalem.

Jeremiah glanced up in time to gauge that the arrows landed in and around King Zedekiah's inner courtyard, perhaps seventy feet from where Jeremiah stood in the outer court of the dwelling where he was held prisoner.

Arrows carrying fire were slung into the city every hour or so. Jeremiah surmised they were shot as much as a form of mental warfare as for the damage they inflicted, lighting fire to rooftops but rarely striking and killing anyone.

As each day passed in Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem, hunger gripped the Israelites' stomachs ever tighter. Water in the cisterns lowered ever closer to the critical level, and fear-driven tension boiled in the streets and homes of the Jewish capital, causing dissension and even fist fights. Food and water rationing was entering its tenth month and taking a toll on the people's stomachs and minds in equal fashion.

Besides all this, Nebuchadnezzar had demolished monuments, tombs, and other buildings surrounding Jerusalem and was using the material to build siege towers. Apprehension twisted the faces of the young soldiers who had climbed the stairways to the battlements of Jerusalem's outer wall—anxiety that had turned into wide-eyed fear when they descended those steps.

Soon the siege towers would be high enough for heavy steel-and-wood ramming beams to be suspended from them and used to pulverize the city's walls—one course of Jerusalem stone at a time, top to bottom.

“Master, master!” Baruch, his scribe, interrupted Jeremiah’s thoughts. The young man ran out of a nearby building and stood at the prophet’s side. But Jeremiah maintained his gaze upon the scores of people scrambling for cover from the flaming arrows as they left their evening prayers.

“How soon?” Baruch asked. “We’ve been under siege for more than a year.”

“The Lord has shown me another year, and then Jerusalem will fall, and the Babylonians will burn the city.” Jeremiah’s voice was laden with sadness. His dark eyes lowered, lines of grief etched across his forehead.

Baruch bowed his head and muttered, “As the Lord wills.”

Suddenly, Jeremiah held up a hand in pause.

“What is it, sir?” Baruch asked.

“Hanamel, my cousin, is coming. The Lord has told me he will ask that I buy his field at Anathoth. Since the land is in the territory of Benjamin, I have the right to redeem the field and possess the land.”

“He has asked you?” Baruch said.

“Not yet. The Lord has shown me this.”

“But the siege,” Baruch said, waving his arm toward a small fire in the distance set by one of the arrows. “As you have prophesied, we will all be carried off into slavery.”

“Nevertheless ...”

“But, why buy land when—”

“Baruch, I have argued with God about this. I have mentioned the siege mounds, the sword, the famine, the pestilence, the fiery arrows, the destruction everywhere.”

“And?” Baruch’s eyes went wide.

“He answered, ‘Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh. Is there anything too hard for Me?’ So, Baruch, I buy the field.”

Several moments passed as the two men observed the turmoil around them. Then, a small, thin figure emerged out of the darkness.

“Jeremiah, my cousin!”

Jeremiah stepped forward, extending his arms in welcome. “Hanamel!”

The two men exchanged greetings.

“You look fine,” Hanamel said. “I thought you might be in one of those prison pits ten feet underground, dirty and looking depraved. But look at you!”

Hanamel took a step back and widened his arms, looking over Jeremiah from his bald head to his sandaled feet.

“They treat me well,” Jeremiah said, “and Baruch is here at my side always.”

Hanamel nodded greetings toward Baruch and lowered a conspiratorial voice. “You’d think the king would be ashamed of imprisoning you for foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem and his ultimate capture. All he need do is look about him ...” Hanamel tapped his temple with his index and middle fingers. “... and say to himself, ‘Maybe that Jeremiah was right after all. I’ll set him free. Indeed, I’ll invite him into my court, drape him in purple, feed him lamb, and ask him what I should do now.’”

Jeremiah chuckled and said, “Kings and humility are too often distant relatives.”

“I’m not here simply for a visit, cousin.” Hanamel lowered his eyes. “Father has suggested that I inquire of you to buy my field at Anathoth. True, you have the right to redeem and possess this land, to buy the field for yourself. But I told him only a madman would—”

“The price?” Jeremiah interrupted.

Astonished, Hanamel stuttered, “Why, why ... seventeen shekels.”

“So be it.” Jeremiah looked at Baruch and said, “Fetch me the money, my friend.”

Baruch said nothing, just hustled away toward Jeremiah’s housing, shaking his head and muttering to himself.

Jeremiah laughed at the sight, then turned to the courtyard and called out to two klatches of fellow prisoners who had apparently decided they could safely come back outdoors. He waved for them to approach.

A minute later, the men had gathered around Jeremiah and Hanamel, while Baruch had scrambled back with a cloth bag bulging with coins.

Jeremiah handed the seventeen shekels to his cousin and announced, “Today you are witnesses I have bought from my cousin the property of my kinsmen in Anathoth.”

A startled expression overcame the tallest of the witnesses, and he mumbled, “What fool thing?”

Jeremiah shot him a piercing look. The man’s mouth clamped shut, he shrugged and looked at his two companions. In unison, they responded, “We are witnesses.”

“Thank you,” Jeremiah said and dismissed them. They walked away, whispering to themselves, the tall one throwing his arms into the air in a gesture of disbelief. Jeremiah watched them depart, knowing their thoughts but better knowing and trusting his God.

After a few minutes, Jeremiah and Hanamel hugged their goodbyes, and Hanamel walked away into the darkness from where he came, a bag of money in hand. Once his cousin was out of sight, Jeremiah passed his scribe the purchase deed and its copy.

Catching Baruch’s eyes in his own, he whispered, “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Take these deeds, this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, that they may last a long time.’”

“Yes, prophet,” Baruch said, then turned and scurried away.

Jeremiah felt a twitch in his shoulder as if a weight had been lifted from him. He looked up at the city's northern wall and envisioned drawbridges being lowered there from Nebuchadnezzar's towers and the hand-to-hand combat that would follow. He heard men's battle calls driven by aggression and fright but hampered by hunger and thirst, and he cringed at their screams of pain.

He saw bodies fall and others stand over them, bloodied swords in hand. The wailing of women and crying of babies filled his head. Anguish clutched at his spirit, and a single tear trickled down his cheek.

Then Jeremiah pictured the field in Anathoth, the meandering curve of a swale and a hollow, wheat flowing in a summertime breeze. The imagined smell of flowers was so strong he awakened from his reverie.

He shook his head as if breaking a cobweb, looked to the heavens and wondered *Lord, beyond our capture, beyond our exile, beyond all those years ahead of us, what exactly is Your plan? And why buy that field?*