

I Adam

Covenant and Redemption – A Promise Fulfilled

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This book is the first in a quintet of books inspired by the Bible. They have been written in a novel way, pun intended, to encourage us all to read through the Bible as one would read a novel, to develop the full context from which the quotations and short passages we are familiar with are drawn, and add to their richness.

The quintet is:

I Adam: The Old Testament told through the eyes of its major players, those who could stay faithful to God as Adam could not but whom Adam in Limbo wished he could be. “So the first man, as Scripture says, became a living soul,” (Corinthians 15:45)

I Mary: The New Testament told through the eyes of Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

I Paul: The Acts of the Apostles dealing with the life of Paul, interspersed with his Letters in their chronological order.

I Peter: A biography of the life of Peter - his early life, his life as a follower of Jesus, his life and death as the first head of the Christian Church, his letters.

I Joseph: A biography of Joseph, the husband of Mary and foster father of Jesus.

Foreword

Adam and Eve introduced sin into the world by their act of free will, believing Satan's false promises and rejecting God's commands. They were God's creation and only God could make up for their sin and only if He chose to. They were made in God's image so the expiation would be by someone also made in God's image but not by just another man. Only God can atone for a sin against God. So, God's Son became a man and by his obedience to the Father, even to the extent of death on a cross following hideous torture, Jesus expiated the sins of mankind.

Through the Eucharist and faith in him, Jesus made us all part of himself. The generations of mankind both before, during and after his brief time on earth, have all had their sins expiated if they have true sorrow and true belief and act in accordance with God's commandments: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole mind and with thy whole soul, and thy neighbor as thyself.

But why did God wait for several thousand years before he redeemed mankind? Why did he go through the long process of selecting a Chosen People and enduring, all too often, their endless acts of repeating the sins of Adam and Eve in preferring other gods to Him, even to the extent of allowing their leaders to orchestrate the passion and death of His Son?

As Job makes clear, man will never fully know the mind of God. Part of the answer to His plan may be that He wanted a series of men and women whose lives would be totally faithful to His wishes. Given the infidelity of Adam and Eve, could humans ever prove to be truly faithful? There are a few humans like that in the Bible, people like Noah, Job, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, Judith, Esther, Deborah, to name the early ones. Through their faith in God, even if they sinned and repented as did David, they made up for Adam and Eve's sin, at least as much as humans can. The sum of all their faithful lives may mean a lot to God, after all, Abraham negotiated the saving of Sodom if just 10 faithful men could be found there. Alas, no!

In this book "I Adam", we follow the lives of many of these towering Biblical figures as if they were chosen by Adam with God's approval to contribute to the redemption of mankind by ordinary men, allowing Adam to say, "You gave me another chance; look what I achieved." And indeed, God eventually did exactly that, through the redemption wrought by Jesus Christ, the New Adam.

"So the first man, Adam, as scripture says, became a living soul; and the last Adam has become a life-giving spirit." (I Corinthians 15:45)

I ADAM

I walked with God, I talked with God. I knew I was not the equal of God but he said he had created me in his own image and likeness. It happened this way. I opened my eyes, now I know for the first time, and my mind grappled with what I could see, not that I knew what seeing was, I mean I had never seen before, nor thought, nor even realized I was a being. I looked into a pool of water and saw myself, although that took a bit of figuring out. I now know I was a strapping, well built, handsome and totally naked young man. Then God spoke to me. I could not see him but I heard a voice, I felt a presence. I walked with him in his garden as he called it, my garden now. He showed me animals and birds and plants and trees and rivers and streams and hills and mountains, he had names for all of them. I learned very quickly, it just came easily to me.

Suddenly it became hard to see, then impossible at ground level. But I looked up and there were millions of twinkling lights, stars he called them, saying it was now night and I should sleep; I just stopped thinking and lay down and ceased to exist I guess. But then my eyes blinked and opened and I could see again, trees and animals and birds. Then a great big hot bright ball burst over the far hills and God came back to explain night and day and the sun and the planets and where my garden was; earth he called it.

I went for a walk, climbed a hill, then a mountain and saw beyond it a huge pool of water, so big it did not seem to have an end. An ocean God told me and that dry land was where I stood. He said there were many oceans and smaller ones he called seas and dry land stretching so far I could walk it for days and days and days. I just said "Wow!" I marveled at the power of God who could create all this and me as well. Why he created all this I did not know and he never told me, maybe he was lonely and wanted someone to love. But I was not his equal, he made that clear, so I was lonely for another like me. He did even better than that, he created a woman, a beautiful totally naked being with different physical parts than me. I saw her breasts and the mound between her legs and my heart fluttered. She must have seen my strong body, my penis and testicles, names God had for them, and her heart pounded too. She talked with me and touched me and I her and our desire turned to love. She was my equal in every way but totally different to me, much softer and gentler, much prettier too! I wanted to be with her all the time and when night came we lay

together and our bodies came together in a very natural way giving us great pleasure but a oneness so more important to each of us.

We ate the fruit of the trees in the garden, walked with each other and walked and talked with God. But God had given both of us something else, something much more subtle, something we came to realize slowly. God wanted us to love him, to obey him, to do his will. But he wanted this to be our free choice otherwise we would not love him, just serve him. He had given us free will.

There is always a test of love. There was another presence in our garden, again no face, but it spoke through one of the animals. It spoke of possibilities. God had created us in his own image and likeness, why could we not be gods also, able to create anything, masters of the universe, his equal. The evil presence, as we can now call it, worked on our weakness and lust for power. It said it could make us God's equal, all we had to do was to say that we would obey it and not God. So, we agreed, prostrated ourselves before this presence, and then all hell broke loose, literally.

Gone was our delight in one another, Eve blushed, covered her lower parts with her hands, ran to break off palm fronds and tried to cover her nakedness. I did the same. But now the animals were not our friends, many scuttled away, others snarled at us and showed their teeth, others slid by us and hissed their hatred. The winds blew, branches fell down from the trees, narrowly missing us. Thunder and lightning crashed and struck around us. We were terrified and devastated. Then God came, made us confess what we had done, showed us enough pity to fashion animal skins to clothe us but he was oh so angry. He cast us out of our beautiful garden, out into a barren land where we would struggle for the rest of our lives for food and water. Why he did not annihilate us I do not know. I was so ashamed, so guilty, so scared. I could have blamed Eve for leading me astray but she was all I had now, and I knew I could have chosen otherwise.

Our real punishment seemed slight at first. We now knew both good and evil and the difference between them. We had a conscience, an inner voice that critiqued us, criticized and tormented us and filled us with shame and guilt. We were free to act as we wished but the consequences of the wrong choices were huge. We could have simply done what God wanted us to do and our lives would have been joyful and easy, but we had chosen the broad path, the seductive path, the road to damnation.

So now we worked. Built a shelter from boughs of trees, huddled together from the cold at night, sought shelter from the sun by day, fed on the over-ripe fruit that fell over the fence from

the garden, planted their seeds, learned to catch small animals, learned to feed the fire started by lightning, learned to make fire by rubbing sticks together. We were by a large river, its plains were fertile enough to grow our food. We began to cook and eat meat, the animals no longer our friends.

But mostly we sought to make recompense to God. We built an altar, killed animals on it, offered their lives to the glory of God, shunned the advances of that evil presence. But God was silent now.

Our love for one another survived all this although it was never the same. But we often lay together, kissed and cuddled and made love. Eve gave birth to two sons, Cain and Abel. She gave birth in agony as God had foretold us, part of our punishment. We reared our sons to fear God and to give glory to him. But our sin was in them. Cain killed Abel out of jealousy because God made it clear he preferred Abel's sacrifices of lambs and kids to Cain's sacrifices of corn and fruit. We were devastated but God's silence told us we had started all this.

Eve gave birth to Seth to replace Abel and then to daughters. Cain and Seth took the daughters to themselves and thus began to propagate the earth. I was 130 years old when Seth was born. God had intended that I live forever but I lived just another 800 years and by then there were thousands of men and women. God allowed a man to have several wives, so most men had very large families. But each of these human beings was afflicted with our sin, they all committed many acts of evil, worshipping the evil presences, killing and doing violent acts, lying and committing deceitful deeds, stealing, sleeping with prostitutes, committing adultery, lusting after others' wives and husbands, committing acts of incest between father and daughter, mother and son, sexual relations with children, with animals, with the same sex, insane jealousy of others, libel and envy.

I wept as I lay on my death bed. Too often I now heard other men boasting of their wicked deeds and reveling in the acts of evil they could perpetrate on those weaker than themselves. The earth was full of the sin and wickedness I had unleashed upon it. There were perhaps some good men but not many. I knew almost none.

I died, but not before God spoke with me one final time, not he himself as in the garden but through a messenger, an angel he said. The angel said God was pleased with my sacrifices and my repentance. Eventually the world would be redeemed, my sin expiated. For now, my sin would be in all people, it would be as if I were in them, had been reborn in each person.

More, I could, one at a time, choose a man to live through, a leader whom I thought would always be faithful to God. The angel basically said, let's see if you can do better than the first time, if you can gradually remake the relationship between God and man that you destroyed.

“So, the first man, Adam, as scripture says, became a living soul.” (I Corinthians 15:45)

I Adam watched from Limbo, a place between earth and heaven. I heard the angels saying that God was growing more and more angry with the wickedness spreading everywhere. He was thinking he should destroy everything, again maybe thinking he should have destroyed Eve and myself before we propagated. He regretted having made the earth with its animals, birds and reptiles, trees and plants and particularly mankind.

I waited until I could find a man I thought would be totally faithful to God, someone I could be with. After I had been in Limbo for 250 years, I finally chose Noah.

I Noah

I am a God-fearing man, living a pure life, worshipping the one true God. Several hundred years later, I heard God speak with me and it was as if he were speaking to me as Adam once again.

It was to be almost back to square one, to just a few humans and some animals and birds and reptiles, trees and plants, a garden full of love and joy, all of creation faithful to God. The task of propagating the earth with mankind was to begin again.

I was over 600 years old when my wives gave birth to Shem, Ham and Japheth. My father, Lamech, was the ninth in the line of long-living patriarchs stretching down from me Adam, born over 1000 years before. But enough members of that line had stayed true to the one true God. I was brought up to worship God and to make the ritual sacrifices of animals, birds and produce, offered for his glory. It was not easy to stay true to God. My neighbors and “friends” scorned me and ostracized my family. They stole our sheep and oxen, burned our crops, raped our women, killed our servants. But God never allowed them to go too far, to eliminate us entirely. Seth, Ham and Japheth grew up strong and fearless, smart and talented warriors. They married beautiful and fertile wives who themselves began to worship the one true God. A small number of servants joined us willingly, taking up arms also when we were attacked.

Then God spoke to me. This angry God my soul had heard before, an anger once directed at Adam. But this time the annihilation of the human race was near, mankind seemed doomed. “Why,” said God, “should I put up with the wickedness that covers the earth?” I heard God say to me, “The end has come for all things of the flesh.” I shuddered.

I and my household would be spared. Together, over a number of years, despite the aggressions of our neighbors and the many battles we had with them, we built an ark, a huge boat with many decks. Then it began to rain. My household, my sons, their wives and our faithful servants and myself, we all boarded the Ark. A clarion call brought a steady stream of pairs of animals and birds and reptiles from the surrounding area. There was peace among them, although formerly many were the prey of others. The rain continued to fall and the region to be flooded. We had built the ark on a hill. The plains surrounding it filled with water. Our aggressors mounted a last attack, desperately trying to escape the rising waters, but we repelled them easily and then the flood waters reached us, drowning them all and the other hundreds of animals, birds and reptiles

that sought the higher ground where we were. The earth was cleansed by the rain that poured from the sky for 40 days and nights. The swollen rivers and flooded plains stayed that way for 150 days, no living thing outside the Ark survived.

Our Ark came to rest on Mount Ararat. We sent out birds to reconnoiter, at first they returned telling us that only water surrounded us. But then one came back with a branch, the final one did not return, dry land began to reappear.

So we left the Ark, made a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God and commenced again the task of repopulating the earth through my sons and daughters-in-law. But first God made a covenant with us. There would never again be a flood that destroyed the earth. The sign of God's pledge was the rainbow, a reminder to God himself of his covenant. As for me, God said, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth. Every living and crawling thing shall provide food for you, no less than the foliage of the plants." And fruitful we were, my sons alone having over 20 children between them. But again brothers married nieces and nephews married cousins and God protected those who worshipped and obeyed him.

I Adam returned to Limbo, Noah's task complete. He had remained faithful to God, but this was not enough to expiate my sin, mankind needed to be rebuilt. I was busier than ever, searching for those faithful to God. My task was not easy, take this for example.

Throughout the earth men spoke the same language with the same vocabulary. Hundreds of families migrated east to the fertile plains between the two big rivers. They decided to come together, to build a walled city, to settle into town life. But God was wary of them. They were beginning to be too powerful, to feel invincible, nothing impossible for them. To have no need of my God would come next. So God confused their language, made them speak in many dialects and tongues, disrupted the building of their town and the tower at its center, a town we called Babel. With no common language they scattered all over the earth. My task became harder.

I looked much further afield and found a man blessed by God. It was not by accident, we witnessed an encounter between God and Satan, that evil presence from my garden.

We heard Yahweh say to Satan, "Have you noticed my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." We heard Satan's

response, “Yes, but Job is not god-fearing for nothing, is he? You have blessed all he undertakes, his flocks throng the countryside.” Then Satan threw down the gauntlet, “But stretch out your hand and lay a finger on his possessions; I guarantee he will curse you to your face.” Yahweh accepted the challenge, “Very well, all he has is in your power, but not his person. Do your damnedness!”

I Job

I was a farmer, a very rich farmer. I worshipped no other God but Yahweh and I regularly offered him sacrifices of the best of my produce and animals. And Yahweh blessed me, first with a loving wife, then with seven sons and three daughters, then with 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 she-donkeys and many servants besides.

I lived a wonderful life, my sons and daughters got on really well together and we were one big happy family, my children taking it in turns to entertain us in their houses. They were gathered together this day, my wife and I were preparing to join them.

Then my life fell apart. A servant came bursting into our house; an arrow still pierced his tunic, he gasped, "The Sidonians have taken all the oxen and donkeys and killed the rest of your farm hands." Then he died. We were shocked and speechless, but then another servant burst into the room, blood flowing freely from a huge gash on his head. He shouted valiantly, "We were struck by lightning, many times, the storm was fierce, branches fell on our heads, your sheep and all their shepherds were burnt to death, I'm sorry." Then he too dropped dead. We slumped down on our chairs, not knowing what to say. But then yet another servant came running into the room, blood flowing from a huge wound on his arm. "Three bands of Chaldeans raided the camel yards and drove them away, killing all the handlers, only I escaped." But then he too fell to the floor, dead.

Could it get any worse? Yes, another servant came running in, exhausted and nearly speechless. "A huge gale sprang up suddenly. It levelled your son's house, everyone in it, all your sons and daughters are dead. I alone escaped."

It was all gone in the blink of an eye. But Yahweh was my God, him I held blameless. In agony I tore my gown and shaved my head, fell to the ground and prayed,

"Naked I came forth from my mother's womb,

Naked I shall return.

Yahweh gave, Yahweh has taken back,

Blessed be the name of Yahweh."

Those in Limbo watched, shocked but exhilarated. I Adam thought to myself, "If only I had had his faith." Then we overheard God and Satan continuing their discourse. Yahweh basically

said, “You lost, in vain you provoked me to ruin him, but he has remained as faithful as ever.” But Satan did not give up that easily, replying, “A man will give away all he has to save his life. But stretch out your hand and lay a finger on his bone and flesh, I guarantee he will curse you then.” So Yahweh again said, “You may not kill him, but do your damnedness.” We watched Job’s reaction to Satan’s choice.

I Job sat on a dung heap picking away at huge, suppurating boils that covered my whole body, oozing black and yellow pus all over me. My wife banished me from the house, I was such a disgusting sight. She was shocked that I still had faith in Yahweh, “Curse God and die!” she shouted at me. But through all this I uttered no sinful word, saying, “If we take happiness from God’s hand, must we not take sorrow too?”

My friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar heard of my misfortune, they hastened to come and solace me. The sight of me was so distressing they sat in silence by my side for a whole week. Then we began a long dialog. My friends argued that my suffering must be punishment for sins I had committed, but I contended that my life had been sinless. Another friend, Elihu, arrived and he told me I needed to humble myself and submit to the trials and tragedies God had struck me with so that my life would become pure.

I silenced them with questions of my own.

“Who can bring what is pure from the impure? No one!”

“But man dies and lies prostrate; man expires and where is he?”

“If a man dies, will he live again?”

Then Yahweh rebuked my friends and grew angry with them for giving me incorrect guidance. He declared human beings do not know everything, they certainly do not know the mind of God. But I begged forgiveness for them and they made an appeasing sacrifice to our God. Then Yahweh turned to me, convincing me also that believers do not always know what God is doing in their lives and why. I agreed there was much I did not understand.

My God was merciful and bountiful to me. My health returned, he blessed me with twice as much as I had before my trials began. Wives, children, flocks, servants and wealth in a twofold measure.

I Adam had learned much from Job and Yahweh's jousting with Satan. Time to move on, Job was not to be the progenitor of God's chosen people. The line of succession from me as Adam, the line of the patriarchs for the first 1200 years after my sin, had stretched to me as Noah and then to our eldest son, Seth. Seth had stayed true to God as did enough of his descendants. Of course most other men strayed into sin and wickedness, my original sin embedded in them, weakening their power to resist the false promises of the evil presences. I could not be critical, that presence of sin was not in me when I strayed.

The ninth Patriarch was Terah and he gave birth to Abram and his brothers Nahor and Haran, some 300 years after the flood. I left Limbo for the third time, I chose Abram.

I Abraham

The jet of blood sprayed across the surface of my roughly built altar and across my arms and vest as my knife cut across the animal's throat. The lamb, one of my finest, gave one last lurch, one last bleat, and was still. I looked to the heavens and cried out to my God, "Yahweh, all things on earth and in the heavens are yours, to thine be the power and the glory. May I always be faithful to you and may the blood of this lamb be a worthy offering to you, to sustain your loving protection of we thy faithful servants, surrounded by our enemies." Through his angel I heard my God say, "You are indeed a faithful and much-loved servant. I will always protect you and yours." My household, enlarged by that of my nephew Lot, worshipped with me. Lot, the son of my brother Haran, had decided to join me when I started my journey to Canaan at my God's command.

From my hilltop I looked to the south and saw the peaceful Edomites' flocks, to the south west where the sneaky Moabites ruled, to the east across the Jordan river whence my mortal foes the Amorites came stealthily to rob and rape and pillage, to the far east where the Ammonites tribes grew stronger and more daring every year, to the near north where the Bashan hordes menaced every other tribe, to the far north where the cowardly Hittites ran further north whenever threatened. The great sea bordered my lands to the west but tucked into the southwest where the land bulged into the sea were the lands of the worst and most lethal of my foes, the Philistines. I would come to own all the land I guarded from the intrusions of these pagan tribes, spurred on by my hatred of the evil presences they worshipped, a land of milk and honey known as Canaan, my hold on it always precarious at best. Why none of them had possessed this fertile valley before me was clear, not one was strong enough to hold off its enemies. So, Canaan sat there, a virtual no-man's-land, a fattened fawn surrounded by snarling wolves, waiting for a deliverer.

At first, I also did not have the army to fight them all off, so I pitched my tents in the Negeb desert at the southernmost reach of Canaan, its starkness consistent with its eastern border, the sands of the Sea of No Life that the Jordan emptied into. My enemies did not pursue me there, believing it was not worth the effort. But my crops grew in secluded valleys, my flocks flourished from feeding in the nearby fertile Jordan valley, my sentries giving plenty of warning when hostiles came near. And travelers from further south, even from Egypt, came by, sampled our hospitality, and many asked to dwell with us, seeing our peacefulness, that we wanted for nothing and that we

worshipped a loving God, one not wanting or needing violence, war and human sacrifices. So my household and my army grew and my whole company worshipped the one true God.

I married Sarai, a beautiful young virgin who loved me dearly and gave me great pleasure. But despite everything we tried, all the techniques our “medicine men” suggested, Sarai could not conceive, a devastating truth for a young wife, causing murmured insults and open scorn from all the other wives who conceived and propagated with ease.

Then came the drought. For months, years, it did not rain, not only in Negeb but in the Jordan valley. We used up all our reserves of grain and tired of trekking north repeatedly to search for the fresh water flowing from tiny springs into the Jordan. At God’s command we folded our tents, loaded our camels and mules and journeyed south to Egypt where the drought had not occurred.

I didn’t ask God’s forgiveness for what had to be done, he was strangely silent over my actions. We were such a large party that the border sentinels reported our presence to Pharaoh and he sent a messenger to bring us to him. But that messenger raced ahead and told Pharaoh about the exquisitely beautiful young woman in our party. Pharaoh set his price. “Who is this girl?” I read the winds of caution wisely, Pharaoh meant to have Sarai. So I blurted out, my heart torn, “She is my sister, sire.” That settled it. “Here’s the deal,” said Pharaoh, “You and your household together with your livestock can dwell in a fertile valley my messenger will show you. You will live under my protection, safe from harm.” I stammered out, “And in return, sire, what of my possessions can I offer you?” “Just this mere girl,” said Pharaoh, “She can join my family as one of my wives.”

I was devastated, but what could I do? I agreed. And though I was terribly lonely and full of shame and guilt from this time on, my household prospered and grew. But barren is barren and my Sarai did not conceive from Pharaoh’s seed either. Double trouble for her, she grew more and more sad and despondent. Now Pharaoh was not a bad man, compassionate might be a stretch, but he noticed her growing malaise. One does not lie to a king, so when questioned she told him the truth, “I am not Abram’s sister,” she said, “I am his wife,” and, bursting into tears, she cried, “And I couldn’t become pregnant with his seed either, I am cursed. I cannot have a child and I have lost the man I love.”

I guess if she hadn’t been so pretty the end might have been very different, the chopping block or a brothel. But Pharaoh had come to love her, she was in his bed much more often than any of the others of his wives, and in his cries of passion he often called her name even when the naked

body under him was not hers, you can imagine how the other wives hated that. So they wanted her gone but to get even with them Pharaoh decided to discharge her with dignity.

I was summoned before him. “She is your wife,” thundered Pharaoh. I cringed. But then he laughed and basically stuck out his tongue at the other wives. “Tell me why you did this to me,” asked Pharaoh. So, I stammered out my excuses, trying not to actually say I was scared sick that had I admitted Sarai was my wife, terrified by the lust in his eyes when he first saw her, that he would have me killed and take her anyway. He frowned at that rambling answer and said, “Abram, my dear man, you have misjudged me. I am more honorable than you think. In any case, your wife is braver than you, she told me the truth. So, I will forgive you both. And for each one of the years she has been wrongfully mine, I will reward you ten times with gifts of gold and animals for your flock and virgins for your young men to have as wives. But go in peace back to Canaan since the drought is over and the famine gone, go with my blessing.”

We left and as I exited walking backwards, I heard him say to his advisor, “You have one month to replace her with ten virgins, each more beautiful and exciting than the best of my pathetic wives. Get going! Maybe I will send some of them to the brothels. Maybe I will make you their pimp.”

Now extremely wealthy and head of a large family and powerful, well-trained army, I led my household back to Negeb, not at all fearful of the pagan tribes that were to be my people’s eternal enemies. We were a much larger number now and a division of loyalties took place between my followers and those of my nephew Lot. The shepherds and farmers began to argue over who had access to the prize areas and some violence occurred. So, I asked Lot to come and see me. We embraced and admitted the faults were on both sides. We decided to separate. Lot and his household journeyed further north into Canaan and the fertile Jordan valley, the better land but closer to our enemies. They settled close to Sodom, not caring that it had a bad reputation as a city of sinners. On my part we expanded our protected lands into the lower part of Canaan but were then content with what we had.

I missed my nephew greatly and eagerly looked forward to any news passing travelers could bring to us. I also feared for his safety since our enemies surely knew of our expanding land holdings and would view with envy the succulent crops and fat, healthy beasts Lot produced in the fertile valley. However, individual tribes of our enemies posed little threat as long as no one drifted off alone, we were too numerous for any serious foray into our territory.

But then four kings of these tribes formed an alliance. They surrounded Lot's village with their combined armies and forced surrender, taking Lot and his household, family, servants, beasts and possessions back to their kingdoms. One of Lot's servants escaped and bloody and exhausted came running to my house, crying aloud, "My lord has been taken." Within a day we were on their trail, 318 of my best soldiers jogging behind me as I led them on my horse. We reached the enemy in two days, didn't need a battle plan, just a full scale assault; it was all over in a day, we slaughtered over 50 of them, including two of the kings, and the rest fled. We recaptured Lot and his household together with all their possessions, animals included, and took them back to their lands, conducting a long sacrifice to our God in thanksgiving.

So that ended well and the bond between Lot and myself grew stronger. But I gradually became very despondent and drifted into despair. I was very wealthy and very mighty but for what. I had no heir from my own loins to leave all this to, to carry on my name. I complained to God even as I regularly made sacrifices to him of the best of my beasts and produce. Then one evening he came to me in a vision. What he said amazed me. He told me that my reward for my unwavering faithfulness to him would be very great. I basically said, "Big deal. I am childless, what else matters. I will have to leave all this to one of my household, not one of my blood." Then the vision said to me, "Look up into the heavens. Can you count the stars? But your descendants will be much more than their number." The evil presence tried again to outmaneuver God but I put my faith in him as I always had and laughed away my despair.

God's promise was fulfilled in a way I would not have guessed. My beloved but barren Sarai came to me with a proposition. When we left Egypt, Sarai had brought with her a slave girl, a young girl at the time but now, as I looked more carefully at her, a rather stunning young woman. Sarai cried as she said to me, "My lord Abram, I have failed you. I have not given you an heir, a son of your loins. May God forgive and protect me but take Hagar to your bed and make her the mother of your child."

Well it wasn't any great hardship to take such a beautiful maiden to my bed and to make love to her every night. Within two months it was clear that she was pregnant. I was oblivious to the change in the relationship between Hagar and Sarai, blinded by my love for my future child, a son I hoped, and so very grateful to the woman who would give him to me. But the slave girl wanted her revenge. She made snide remarks to my barren Sarai, words that soon turned into open scorn, free from punishment since I so obviously favored her. Sarai was devastated, she complained to

me, I did not listen, she complained to God and he did. Then I listened, felt a real scumbag, but I allowed Sarai to send the pregnant Hagar packing with almost nothing.

But our God is a fair God. Hagar had done nothing wrong, nothing seriously wrong anyway, so he sent his angel to talk to her as she lay despondent by a spring in the wilderness. He told her to go back to Sarai but to lose the attitude and submit to her. And cheer up he told her because your son, yes it's a boy, will be the first of a countless horde of descendants. And he told her to call the boy Ishmael and foretold that he would be a wild-ass of a man, against every man and every man against him, setting himself to defy all his brothers. No mention yet of another boy.

I was in seventh heaven. Hagar was back, Sarai was happy again and then, finally, I had a son and called him Ishmael as his mother requested.

It got better, even more so. God himself appeared to me, saying he wanted to make a covenant with me, a quid pro quo. On his part he would give to me and my descendants the whole of Canaan, the land we were living in, to own in perpetuity, and he would be our God. On my part I was to circumcise myself and all my followers and every son born from this time would be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. By this would his followers be known. And my name was from now on was to be Abraham.

As for Sarai, she would from now on be known as Sarah, and, unbelievably she would conceive and bear a son. I hid my face from God and laughed up my sleeve. "Is a child to be born to a man 100 years old and to a wife 90 years old?" Sarai too laughed derisively when I told her the good news. But God was patient with us, said it was from Sarah that my line would come, she to be the mother of my descendants, the mother from whom nations and kingdoms arose. I remonstrated with my God. How about Hagar and how about Ishmael, why can't that be the line of my ancestry. How I loved that boy – and his wild streak!

God was firm but fair. Sarah would bear a son, call him Isaac, and God would make his covenant with Isaac and not with Ishmael. Again, Hagar and Ishmael have done nothing wrong, they too would be the first of many and generate many nations. But the covenant would be with Isaac and not with Ishmael.

That day I circumcised Ishmael and all the men in my household and all my servants and soldiers and I had myself circumcised as well. I started with a newborn infant, just eight days old, showed them all the loose flap of skin that covers and protects the penis and cut away this foreskin with a sharp knife I sterilized in a flame. One of the older women, well versed in natural healing

balms, provided an ointment that lessened the pain. Even then we men squirmed in pain for several days afterwards, voiding urine was a very painful experience, making love out of the question. The baby recovered much more quickly.

Now I had heard from Lot about the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah. The sins of many of the inhabitants of these towns were disgusting and sickening. They committed sexual acts on animals and had animals commit sexual acts on them, the men committed sexual acts with other men and women with other women. Adultery was widespread, fornication and sex outside marriage was commonplace. They were not content with the sex that leads to conception but in disgusting ways degraded the act of love that God had given to man to ensure the propagation of mankind.

When the three men sent by God, without my knowledge, came by our tent, I hurried to give them hospitality and Sarah quickly prepared food and drinks. As we chatted I became suspicious. They had been sent by God to do what? And they were on their way to Sodom. When they left I opened up a conversation with my God. I guess, I said, they are messengers of death from you. But what if there are just and God-fearing men in these towns, will you destroy them too? Perhaps there are 50 such, what about them? As always, my God was just and merciful. He replied, "If you can find 50 just men in these towns, I will spare everyone." I grew bolder. Would 45 suffice, agreed said God, how about 40, agreed again, or 30, agreed again. I grew even bolder but the negotiation stopped at 10.

That was enough to spare Lot and his immediate household including his family. For when the angels in the guise of young men reached Sodom, Lot offered them the same hospitality as had I and even a lodging for the night. But the townspeople heard about these new handsome young men visiting their town and came by torchlight to have their way with them. Lot remonstrated with them and finally offered them his two daughters, both virgins, to do what they wanted with them. But the violent lust-filled crowd of men pushed Lot aside and assaulted his door, intent on seeking sex with the handsome newcomers and Lot too if he got in the way. Then the angels, for that is who they were, struck all the mob with blindness. They never saw again. That very next morning the angels convinced Lot to take his wives and future sons-in-law and the virgin daughters and flee. The daughters would stay virgins for some time more since the future sons-in-law scoffed at Lot and decided to stay. In the afternoon the volcano exploded, the whole region was devastated

by fire and brimstone and everyone left behind perished. That day the whole earth saw the anger of God, his terrible vengeance when people continue to defy him and defile themselves.

As for the two daughters, well God was silent on this one too. With the destruction of their home lands the daughters had no hope of finding a husband, the few eligible males were dead and the years were passing by. Only pagan tribes surrounded them and they had no wish to desert their God. They remembered their father had offered them to the mob. So they got their father drunk and slept with him and conceived and so life goes on.

I could hardly criticize them when I was informed because in my weakness and cowardice, I pulled the same trick on Abimelech, the king of the Philistines, as I had on Pharaoh. Abimelech had a vast army, caught me by surprise, and forced my surrender without any blood being shed. Once again the negotiator messenger told him about Sarah. The years had been very kind to her and she was still a very beautiful and desirable woman. Abimelech summoned us before him, I saw the lust in his eyes and the swords in the hands of his guards and I panicked. "This is Sarah my sister." So, Abimelech offered his protection as a trade for Sarah and she was escorted into his harem. But her turn for the regal bedchamber did not come for a few months and in that time none of the royal wives became pregnant and those who were pregnant all miscarried. Abimelech grew suspicious but, believing he was acting in good faith, he put Sarah on that night's roster. Now Abimelech was not the most faithful of my God's followers but he did believe and he worshipped only my God. That evening an angel of God came and told him if he did have intercourse with Sarah he would be doomed since she was a married woman. God would not forgive a sin of that magnitude.

Terrified, Abimelech summoned me again and had Sarah brought in also. He was furious. "What have you done to me? What wrong have I done you that you bring so great a sin on me and on my kingdom? What possessed you to do this?" So, once again, I admitted I did it out of cowardice, saying there was no fear of the true God in this place and that you would have me killed and take my wife anyway.

Abimelech was still shaken to the core by his visit from God's messenger, God was clearly on my side. He gave me sheep, cattle, men and women slaves and he gave me back my wife, Sarah, showering her with one thousand pieces of silver in compensation for how she had been treated. God was pleased and the wives of Abimelech became fertile again, yielding him 17 children in the next year alone.

And God was pleased with Sarah too. As promised, she conceived and bore the son to be called Isaac. But Sarah had had enough of Hagar and her brat Ishmael, an ever-present threat to her son's relationship with me. She demanded I send Hagar and Ishmael away. I resisted, she insisted, then God stepped in on her side. A few mornings later, in tears, I kissed Hagar and Ishmael goodbye and off they went into the wilderness with just a skin of water and some bread.

Years later I heard the result. They were close to death in the desert when God heard the boy's cries and asked Hagar what the problem was. When told, he created an oasis around them, full of edible plants and fruit and clear water pools, and promised the boy would be the founder of many nations and that they had nothing to fear. As time went by Hagar found the wild-ass boy an Egyptian wife and it all happened from there as God had promised.

I didn't love Isaac as much as I had loved Ishmael. But I had expelled Ismael into the desert, almost certainly to die. I knew Isaac was my God's chosen one, so I would protect him with my life and allow no harm to come to him. I needed an heir, Isaac must grow up strong and very much alive. So, the command I received from my God stupefied me. I was to sacrifice my own heir on an altar on that far mountain! But, ever faithful to my God, I set out on my horse, Isaac following on his pony. The last day we walked or rather climbed. I built the altar of sacrifice on a small knoll. Isaac, ever curious, asked what we were going to sacrifice. When the altar was built I grabbed Isaac and tied him up, ignoring his squeals. I placed him on the altar and drew my sword. He screamed but I ignored him and raised my sword, exclaiming, "Oh Lord my God, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." I brought the sword down, down towards that fragile beautiful young neck, down swiftly to get it over with, tears streaming down my face.

But an angel stilled my downward thrust. Another angel untied Isaac and consoled him. My God spoke. "Since you were willing to obey me without question, even to the extent of sacrificing your own son and heir, your reward will be great. I will make your descendants as many as the stars of the heavens and the grains of sand on the seashore. Your descendants will gain possession of the gates of their enemies, conquering them all."

Then I saw a ram caught up in a thorn bush. Isaac and I sacrificed it to our God. I explained to Isaac what had occurred and what his place would be in human history. He was somewhat mollified but it took many months for his faith in me to be restored. Nevertheless, he stayed faithful to our God and worshipped him as I did.

My Sarah's life was done. I guess I had done some pretty terrible things to her also but her love for me was very deep and transcended all that. I held her hand as she died and interred her body amid much wailing and my heartfelt tears, Isaac with his hand upon my shoulder as we saw her body for the last time. She had lived for 127 years. I would live 50 years more.

It was now Isaac's turn. First he needed a wife, one who feared and worshipped our one true God. None such dwelt anywhere near us. So I commissioned one of my servants to go back to the land where I was born and find there a wife for my son Isaac. I sent him off with gifts of 10 camels and lots of other fine presents. He told me later that when he reached the town that had been set up by my brother Nahor he sat down by the well and asked my God to tell him which of the maidens who came to draw water was the chosen one. He asked for the sign that in response to his request for a drink from a girl's pitcher that she respond, "Drink my lord, and when you are done, I will draw water for your camels too." One of the maidens actually used these very words in response to his request for a drink of water. She was Rebecca, the daughter of Bethuel, son of my brother, Nahor. A stunningly beautiful virgin whom no man had touched.

So my servant gave her a gold ring and silver bracelets and asked her who she was and if there was room for him at her father's house that night. The girl ran back to her mother and her brother Laban came out to thank my servant and offer him a bed for the night. He accepted their hospitality but would not eat or drink until the whole household were listening as he told his story.

"I am the servant of Abraham. God has overwhelmed Abraham with many blessings and he is now very wealthy. He has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, men slaves and women slaves, camels and donkeys. Sarah, my master's wife, has borne him a son, Isaac, in his old age and he will be Abraham's heir. Abraham has sent me here to find a wife for Isaac since the only women in Abraham's region are all pagan Canaanites. My master told me what to ask the maidens who came to the well to draw water. Your daughter and sister Rebecca was the only one who gave the correct response. Tell me if you are willing to let her return with me."

Both Bethuel and Laban agreed it was not in their power to defy God, so they told my servant to take the girl. Then they all ate and drank and slept on it. But the doubts crept in, they loved Rebecca, they would never see her again. They asked my servant to let Rebecca stay with them a few more days, then some more days, and so on. But my servant would not be dissuaded. "Ask the girl," he said. So they did and Rebecca answered, "Let me go with this man, it is God's will."

But would this union of my son and a girl he had never seen, would it work?

Isaac was out in the fields when he saw the caravan of camels at his well. He recognized the livery of his father and knew it was the returning servant's entourage. He ran to the well, walked quickly by all the women on the carts, lifted the veil of those who seemed younger, found himself gazing into a face of ineffable beauty. He smiled, she smiled, the bonds of everlasting love leapt from one to the other. All was well with the world. I could now die in peace, my brother's granddaughter wedded to my son. My descendants would remain faithful to my God and worship only he.

I died when I was 175 years old. My sons Ishmael and Isaac put aside their differences and joined in burying me. I was ready to go to my God, knowing Isaac would carry on the covenant with our God but that Ishmael would also flourish under the protection of the same God.

I Adam returned to Limbo. I was confident the descendants of Abraham would be the chosen people through whom Yahweh would fully populate the earth with people as faithful to him as Eve and I should have been. I did not tarry in Limbo, my next choice was easy.

I Isaac

Even after he died, I still did not know what to make of my father. I still had nightmares, there I was, a boy, tied up into a bundle, prostrated on a rock, screaming as my father, with a wild look in his eyes, lifted his sword up with both arms, then plunged it down towards me. I fainted, then came to life in the arms of a young man who comforted me and told me that what had happened was a test demanded by our God. I was flabbergasted, still am. Really, what father would do this?

But the old man nearly made up for it by his treatment of that whore Hagar and her horrible son, Ishmael. Ishmael was 13 years older than me and I could not fight back when he bullied and tormented and slapped me around. It was a wonderful day when my father banished them and for many years I was left in peace.

Then my father really did make up for his treatment of me and his obvious favoritism for Ishmael. He found Rebecca for me and she was all I had hoped for in a wife and then some. Except she was barren! But I prayed to my God for her and sure enough, she did conceive. As the supposed baby grew in her womb, she felt a fight within her, she often screamed with the pain, we knew then she would have twins, boys certainly.

And so it happened. The first boy born was a red hairy ugly scary being. I gasped but then the second boy immediately came out, so immediate he was grasping his brother's heel, like, let me be first! We called the boys Esau and Jacob. They were not like twins at all, certainly not in appearance since Jacob was handsome, as handsome as his mother was beautiful. I preferred Esau, took him hunting, he loved the outdoors. Jacob, well I just put up with him, he was his mother's child, a homebody, not my kind of male. Not a problem anyway since Esau was the eldest and would inherit my place in history.

But Jacob was devious, a trait I did not perceive early on since his mother shielded him and did not tell me his doings and his true character. Rebecca proved to be devious also but her I could forgive since my love was blind.

I pushed Esau so hard that day he came back to our tents close to death, almost crawling on the ground. Jacob saw his plight, waited his chance. For Esau said "Let me eat that soup, I am exhausted." Jacob replied, "I will give you soup but you must give me your birthright, swear an oath that you will." So my Esau agreed, not really caring about the birthright but knowing his father would never make Jacob his heir in any case.

We were faced with a long, long drought. I thought about heading for Egypt as my father, Abraham, had done but God came to me in a vision and told me to stay where I was, close by the kingdom of the Philistines, with Abimelech still its king. He then made the covenant with me, that my descendants would be as numerous as the stars and God would give them all this land. Not that I had earned this, it was the reward my father had earned through his obedience, for God said, “He kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes and my laws.”

I copied my father. When the Philistines saw my stunningly beautiful wife, they asked who she was, their lust for her obvious. I told them she was my sister. But then Abimelech came upon us one day in his garden and we were kissing and cuddling, fondling and smooching. “Aha,” he said, “She cannot be your sister, she must be your wife.” I nodded, too scared to speak. He screamed at me, “What were you doing to us. One of us could have slept with her and then God would never forgive us that sin, he would probably destroy us.” But Abimelech was a merciful king, one who worshipped our God in his own way. So he protected us, anyone who touched Rebecca would be executed. As for me, I planted my crops in a fertile valley away from the drought areas and reaped a hundredfold. My cattle, sheep and goats grew fat and I became very wealthy. But the Philistines then had another reason to hate me, I was rich and I had Rebecca. They started with small things like filling in my wells with dirt. I retaliated with the sword. But Abimelech did not want violence, he summoned me and said “Leave us, you will soon become more powerful than we are.”

I led my followers north and we started again, the drought broken by now. Strangely, Abimelech came to me a few years later, accompanied by his generals, smiling and wanting the hug and kiss of friendship. I was flabbergasted, “You kicked me out and now you come visiting. Why?” But again Abimelech proved to be a worshipper of our God, saying “It became clear to us that God is with you. So all is forgiven.” He sought a covenant, we swore an oath of peace, we were to be friends from that day on.

My life passed by peacefully after that. We made our ritual sacrifices to God and he blessed us with peace and prosperity. I grew so old that my eyes failed me and I could no longer see. That crafty little Jacob and his mother in whom I could never see fault, they ganged up on me. I called Esau and had him go hunting for a nice fat fawn so I could have one last sumptuous meal before I gave him my blessing and passed his birthright to him. Rebecca eavesdropped on our conversation, had Jacob slaughter two fat kids, prepare a dish from them, one of my favorites.

Jacob complained to his mother, “What’s the point since once my father touches me he will see I am not the hairy Esau.?” But Rebecca was more inventive and more determined than her son. She dressed Jacob in Esau’s clothes, covering almost all his skin, and those bare patches she covered with the hairy skin of the kids. I almost suspected the deception but contented myself with touching my son and smelling his clothes to make sure he was the hairy Esau. Then I blessed him and gave him my inheritance. It was to be the second born Jacob with whom God would remake the covenant and not my first born Esau.

I was dismayed beyond belief when Esau turned up with his dish of a fattened fawn, seeking my blessing and his inheritance. But what could I do? The deed was done, I could not take back my blessing, I accepted that this was the will of my God.

Not so Esau. He was terribly angry and hated Jacob intensely, swearing he would kill him as soon as I was dead. Again Rebecca intervened, not wanting to lose husband and son on the same day. She came to me and we discussed a future bride for Jacob. Given the covenant she could not be one of the pagan maidens available locally. So I called Jacob and told him to leave immediately and go to the land of Laban, Rebecca’s brother, and choose a wife from Laban’s daughters. Esau could not stop him leaving, he consoled himself with taking as wife one of the daughters of my brother Ishmael, again abiding by his father’s wish that neither of his sons should marry a pagan woman. Over the coming years his anger cooled. When I died after 180 years on earth, they both stood by my tomb.

I Adam immediately moved on to choose Jacob, confident this was the leader to ensure Yahweh’s chosen people would never stray from his worship.

I Jacob

As I journeyed on my lonely way, fleeing the wrath of my twin, Esau, I was visited at night by my God and the covenant was formally passed onto me. He spoke thus, “I am the God of your fathers Isaac and Abraham. I will give to you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. I will keep you safe wherever you may go and not desert you until I have done all that I have promised you.” When I awoke I swore my oath; I had not been the best of God’s followers but that was to change. I swore, “If Yahweh goes with me and keeps me safe on this journey and I return safely to my father then he will be my God.”

Again it happened at a well, there I first met Rachel. When the shepherds watering there told me she was Laban’s daughter, I kissed her (and wanted to go one kissing her) and told her I was Isaac’s son and her cousin. Rachel liked the kiss and ran off in a whirly daze to tell her father who was coming. So Laban ran out to meet me and we warmly embraced. I asked to stay for a month (until Esau’s anger cooled) and of course Laban was delighted to have me.

But farms need work so Laban negotiated with me. “You can stay and help but you can’t be working for nothing,” he said, “What wages would you have me give you?” I was smitten with Rachel but she was still very young, I would have to wait. I offered to work for Laban for seven years to win Rachel. Now Laban turned out to be every bit as devious as me, maybe God thought it time for me to do penance for deceiving my father and stealing Esau’s birthright. But I worked for Laban for seven years with a good heart, being head over heels in love with the beautiful young Rachel as she, thank you God, obviously was with me.

After seven years I asked for Rachel’s hand in marriage. Then came Laban’s deceit. He had another daughter, an older and quite comely daughter called Leah, he needed to have her married to someone. So Laban acquiesced and arranged the wedding feast the following evening, the marriage to be consummated that night when we first slept together and had intercourse. Unfortunately I had a little too much to drink, staggered off to bed, Rachel following. But Laban had her held back and instead he led Leah into the dark marriage bedchamber, stifling Rachel’s cries. So Leah and I made love and that sealed my wedding pact with her.

Of course, the next morning I was very angry at Laban, but Laban still had a bargaining chip in Rachel. When I finally cooled down Laban said, “I’ll be fair. In a few days I will arrange another wedding feast and this time Rachel can be your bride. OK? Oh, but then you must work for me

for another seven years!” I gulped but smelled Rachel’s perfume, saw her smiling coyly at me, thought of that wedding night in just a few days’ time and agreed.

How I loved Rachel, how I loved having her in my bed. Leah I couldn’t care less for, but God did. For Rachel remained barren, year after year, so in desperation I bedded Leah and she had a son we named Reuben. Then she had Simeon, Levi and Judah, but no more. So many sons I became quite fond of Leah, ugly as she was. Of course Rachel became viciously angry, incredibly jealous. She screamed at me and demanded I give her a child. I said, “Are you mad? I didn’t refuse you motherhood. Take it up with God, not me.”

It was to be Abram and Sarai all over again. Frustrated, Rachel demanded I sleep with her slave girl, Bilhah. I did, she conceived, she gave birth to Dan. And Rachel pretended he was her son, saying, “God has heard my prayer and given me a son.” I didn’t mind, I wanted peace among my three women and now I had it, although Leah was a little peeved, not too much so since Rachel was still barren. Then Bilhah had another son, a boy we called Naphtali. Ever more envious, Leah demanded equal treatment and that I sleep with her slave girl, Zilpah, since she herself no longer could conceive. So I did, she was nice looking and a good lover, and she conceived and gave birth to Gad and then Asher, my family was growing fast. But with Zilpah often in my bed, I did not need to pretend with Leah. Rachel became my number one wife, Bilhah and Zilpah my concubines.

Esau had traded his birthright for some soup, Rachel and Leah traded a night in bed with me for some mandrakes. Leah came once more to my bedchamber and, wonder of wonders, once more she conceived. She proved to be very fertile, birthing more sons, Issachar and Zebulun, as well as a daughter, Dinah. Not that we celebrated the birth of daughters but Dinah turned out to have her own story.

So Leah was on cloud nine, six sons she had given me from her womb and two from her slave girl’s. Poor Rachel, she could only claim the two sons from her slave girl. But finally God heard her prayer. She conceived and gave birth to a son. We joyfully named him Joseph. I loved him from the moment I saw his chubby cheeks and heard his wailing entry cry to this earth. He was the son of my beloved Rachel, my life, my love. He would be the most famous of my sons, one we as a family would come to owe everything to, but God would not make the covenant promise with him alone, the promise that their descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens, living under his protection as long as they were true to him.

I and my sons worked for Laban for 20 long years. I built up his herds and flocks so that he became extremely wealthy. All I had was his two daughters, whom he saw every day, and eleven boys whom he could glory in as their grandfather. He had it all. But he didn't reckon with my ability to deceive. Enough was enough I thought.

I met with Laban and told him I needed more than just living on his land, living well, but not in my own household, my own camp, just in his compound. "What wages do you want?" he asked. "Nothing, no money," I replied, "Just the few black sheep in your flocks of pure white beasts, and the few speckled goats in your flock of grey animals, these I will cull out and you can check for yourself that I have not stolen any others."

So I culled them out, he inspected, and my sons drove them to a secluded valley unknown to Laban. Then I worked my wizardry with strips of bark from the trees placed by the well so the white sheep and un-speckled goats that came to drink could see them as they mated. And, lo and behold, they bred huge numbers of black sheep and speckled goats, and my sons drove them away as soon as they were weaned to my secret valley. I became extremely wealthy and Laban grew poorer, his animals seemingly not breeding for some unknown reason.

Laban grew suspicious, his own sons adding fuel to the fire, claiming I was cheating them. It was time to go. We fled by night on camels and drays, my wives, my sons, our slaves and our huge flocks, across the Euphrates, and on to Mount Gilead. But Laban and his sons easily caught up with us since we were slowed by the flocks. He searched our tents for anything we had stolen, found nothing; I didn't realize Rachel was sitting on some family jewels she had taken, declining to rise, claiming it was that time of the month. She was every bit as good a deceiver as I was!

Heartened by his failure to find anything, I grew extremely angry and Laban backed down. So we became friends again, offered a sacrifice to our God and parted the next morning after Laban kissed his daughters and grandchildren goodbye. He would never see them again.

So that was easy enough but next I had to face Esau, a much less pleasant meeting since the last time I saw Esau he was ready to kill me. One of my servants, the forward scout, added fuel to my temerity, saying Esau had heard we were coming and was on his way to meet us with 400 men. I was scared stiff. But I had nowhere else to go, certainly not back to the 20 years of servitude I had spent with Laban.

When he saw me, Esau jumped off his horse and came running, grabbing me in a fierce bear-hug. Evidently all was forgiven, in any case Esau had control of all our father's wealth in servants,

flocks and riches and I would receive nothing. But I was returning with a huge entourage of people and animals and drays full of goods – obviously I wanted none of what Esau had, nor he of mine.

But it was more than that. Esau clearly missed his twin brother and was delighted to see me again after all this time. He was amazed at my huge family, my wives, concubines, sons and daughters as well as all my servants, flocks and goods. Nevertheless, I made him take a huge gift of the best of my possessions, I wanted no more trouble. Against his protestations I led my party to a different place, purchasing land from Hamor, a friendly Hittite.

I was away that day searching out other land to buy, after all I had eleven sons to look after. Hamor's son Shechem caused the slaughter that followed. He saw my beautiful daughter Dinah drawing water from the well, lusted after her, carried her off screaming to a distant grove of trees and raped her. When she came crawling back, bloody and disheveled, my men wanted instant revenge, but Hamor intervened, saying his son was sorry for what he had done but realized, even as he defiled her, that he wanted more; he quite liked her; he wanted to marry her; he would pay a huge price for her.

Deception is as deception does. My sons told Hamor and his son that this was not possible. They were not followers of the one true God and Dinah could only marry one such. Certainly there were now many other eligible young men available, Esau's camp was not far away, Dinah did not need to marry a pagan. But Hamor insisted, he wanted peace with us. "What can I do?" he pleaded. So my sons consulted together and came up with a plan. They told Hamor that he and his entire household needed to be circumcised, to become part of the covenant with God, then Shechem could marry their sister.

The mass circumcision took place that very afternoon. My sons enjoyed the sight of dozens of men writhing in pain, cursing and moaning and I don't think their surgery was too carefully done, nor were healing and soothing balms used. But that was not the end of it. That night, as Hamor's males lay in their beds, my sons and their men came stealthily to their tents, lifted the flaps and slaughtered every one of them. Then they turned their attention to the nearby town, a town founded by Hamor, and they slaughtered every male in the town and added their livestock to our herds, their goods to our goods, their women to our concubines, servants and slave girls.

When I returned I was appalled at what had happened. I complained to my sons that we were now the enemies of everyone else in that region. But my sons were undismayed, "Is our sister to

be treated like a whore?” they rebutted. However, we left that place and went much further afield to land I had found in the land of Canaan. I offered sacrifices to God in contrition for our actions and he accepted them. He blessed me again in a vision, “Your name is Jacob but from now on you will be known as Israel and your descendants as Israelites. A nation, indeed a group of nations will descend from you. Even kings shall be numbered among your descendants. I give you this land of Canaan, as I gave it to your forbears Abraham and Isaac, yours forever. You will be my people, protected by me.”

Tragedy struck soon after. My beloved Rachel conceived again but this time she did not survive a difficult labor. She died soon after giving birth to my twelfth son. I was inconsolable, we buried her with much tears and wailing, for many months I neither smiled nor feasted. We named the boy Benjamin. He and Joseph were full brothers, sons of Rachel and myself. Joseph loved him dearly and was his teacher and protector. I did love him but Joseph was always my favorite son.

Then my father Isaac died. Esau and I, reconciled now, buried him and wept together.

Do bad things come in threes? I was away making peace with our neighbors. I learned of this later. My eldest son Reuben seduced Bilhah, Rachel’s slave girl, pretending to comfort her while she was in mourning for her mistress. He made love to her and she conceived. She gave birth to a boy but I disowned him. I confronted Reuben, but I only had the whining anger of an old man, I was powerless against him. He did not sneer at me but he ignored my words and swaggered away, full of his own self. My other sons were unconcerned, a slave girl is just a chattel, a nothing, they said, even though two of them were from her womb. But Bilhah had been in my bed so often, had born two of my sons, we had comforted each other when Rachel died, I guess I loved her a little, maybe a lot. Feeling helpless and ignored, I was ready to pass on the baton of the covenant. Reuben was my eldest but my eleventh son, Joseph, was my choice and I was the great deceiver! As it turned out all my scheming was for nothing, no longer would Yahweh make his covenant with one man at a time.

With Israel in his declining years, his part done, from Limbo, I Adam, saw a huge epic story begin to unfold. I was sure God would pass the covenant on to this young man so I chose him.

I Joseph

I knew I was my father's favorite, but so did my ten older brothers. They came to hate me, Reuben the eldest, less so, but he presumed he would receive the birthright and that I was no threat to him. I was a regular little smart aleck, I told my brothers I had had a dream, there would come a day when they would all, their father included, fall down and prostrate themselves before me. Even my father scolded me for that one.

There came that fateful day, the toddler Benjamin at home, when we eleven young men were out shepherding the flocks. My brothers plotted against me, grabbed me, tore off my multi-colored cloak that Bilhah had woven for me, beat me up and threw me into a dry well, prevented from killing me on the spot by the eldest, Reuben. Then they spotted a passing Ishmaelite caravan and, at Judah's suggestion, I was sold into slavery. On their return home, knowing how much their father loved me, they concocted a story about a wild beast that had killed and devoured me, offering the cloak, now torn and bloodied, as evidence.

Jacob was devastated but what could he do? He grilled the boys individually, not wanting to believe their story, looking for inconsistencies in their different accounts. But my brothers held the line. He would never have found me anyway, within a month the Ishmaelites were in Egypt and they had sold me to Potiphar, the commander of Pharaoh's guards.

Many years later I came to know about Judah's incestuous mating with his daughter-in-law. His suggestion had cast me into slavery. His guilt drove him away from our family home. He went to dwell with a pagan Canaanite, liked it there, married his daughter, Shua. They had three sons together. Judah found a wife, Tamar, for the eldest when he came of age but God was unhappy with his pagan leanings. He died early on so Judah made the second son take Tamar as his wife, a decision she was totally against, as was the second son, he wanted a virgin for his wife, not a hand-me-down. Knowing Judah would also insist that any child would be known as the eldest's son, this second son split his semen on the ground whenever he and Tamar made love. God was appalled, the second son died in agony without a child being fathered. Then Judah told Tamar to go back to her father's household and wait for the youngest brother to come of age when the ritual concerning the eldest son would begin again.

Tamar had had enough. It was payback time, she was not a piece of meat or a gourd of wine to be passed around for men to dine on. She waited some years until Judah's wife, Shua, fortuitously

passed away. When Judah came near on his way to shear his sheep in her father's barn, Tamar dressed herself as a prostitute and veiled her face, knowing no man as virile as Jacob could go too long without needing sex. Sure enough, Judah chose this veiled prostitute for his bed that night, she made sure the lights were low, they had intercourse, he paid her with the promise of a kid from his flock and she went on her way. But, with his permission, she took with her his seal, cord and cloak as an IOU against the delivery of the kid. He did not recognize her, nor did she give a name.

When Judah sent a man to deliver a kid to her, she could not be found. He was assured no prostitute had ever been in the area; he left perplexed. About three months later Judah was appalled to find that his daughter in law, Tamar, had committed adultery and was found to be pregnant, no one knew who the father was. She should be stoned to death. Now came her revenge. She sent a messenger to Judah, saying the father was the owner of the goods wrapped up in this cloak. Judah opened the cloak and was confronted with his seal and cord, the evidence of his incestuous bedding down of his daughter-in-law. He was forced to let her go in peace.

Six months later Tamar gave birth to twin boys. The first one born she called Perez. It would be Perez with whom God would continue the line of redemption, God's ways are indeed strange. It would be in the time of the judges when Canaan would be partitioned into Judah and Israel, the descendants of two of my brothers splitting from those of my other nine brothers. To the Romans in their language the name Judah became Jew, to the British Empire much of the land of Canaan would become Israel and given back to the Jews. God delivers what he promises.

I was only 17 when I was taken into slavery. My master, Potiphar, was very kind to me, had me educated and began to entrust me with responsibilities. Within a short time I became so good at the job that he put me in charge of all his affairs. It was easy for me to do the deals and grow his wealth, I had his full confidence. He relaxed into a life of ease and luxury, his lieutenants handling the work of training and rostering Pharaoh's guards and me his affairs.

But his young wife lusted after this handsome young slave. "Sleep with me, or else," she demanded. I resisted her the first few times but she came upon me often, flirting and giggling and playing with her breasts, grabbing my testicles. There came the day when she embraced and kissed me with no one looking and as I broke away she grabbed my tunic, tore it off my back. She slapped her face with her hands to redden her cheeks, loosened her hair, tore her blouse and ran screaming all the way down the passageway to where Potiphar came running. She waved my tunic and continued to scream what I had done to her. Potiphar did not doubt her, he had me thrown into

Pharaoh's prison, to lie there and rot for the rest of my life. The guards made sure every day was hell.

I gradually made friends with two of Pharaoh's servants who had fallen out of favor with him and been thrown into this same prison. One, the chief baker, had a complicated dream and asked me what it meant. I didn't hold back, "In three days you will die on the gallows," and so it came to be, mightily impressing his fellow servant. This other prisoner was Pharaoh's wine steward, maybe he tasted too much and left too little for his master! But Pharaoh was only a little displeased with him, he was a funny guy; Pharaoh had him released for his birthday party. The steward promptly forgot about me, at least until Pharaoh had a dream which none of his wise men could interpret, then the steward remembered me. I was given a bath and a shave, dressed up in fine clothes and presented to Pharaoh. He told me his dream about seven fat cows and seven lean and ugly cows. I told him what the dream meant, or rather my God told him through me.

Egypt would have seven years of enormous bounty followed by seven years of the worst famine imaginable. Pharaoh was impressed, Potiphar seized his chance to further ingratiate himself with his master and told Pharaoh what a great job I had done for him, growing his fortune and handling all his affairs, no mention of the wife with the wandering hands.

Then, unbelievably, right there on the spot, Pharaoh gave me his signet ring and made me his Chancellor. I would be the Governor of all of Egypt! And he gave me Asenath, the beautiful virgin daughter of his high priest, as my wife. The mansion, servants, wealth in gold and silver came with the deal. Soon I was very busy, travelling the breadth and width of Egypt with my operatives. We had seven years to fill the silos, the barns, vats and the storage units with the food and wine we would need for the following seven years. They quickly overflowed, we built many more. I had full authority, no one dared cross me since Pharaoh would order their instant execution.

The people may have been unhappy with my dictatorial ways but when the seven lush years were done and the rain never fell and the streams and rivers dried up and the seed they planted never germinated and their animals died in droves, the people came to Pharaoh for food and wine and he sent them to me. Now I was their savior.

This was not just an Egyptian famine. The whole world was without rain and shortly without food; thousands of refugees poured into our land. Among them were my ten brothers, sent by my father Jacob, the child Benjamin remaining at home. I recognized them instantly, they had no idea

who I was, not now a brash 17-year old Israelite, but a mature, powerful, haughty 30 year old Egyptian prince.

I took my revenge. I could have had them all cast into prison on some pretext and let them experience a little of what I had to endure. But then I would never see my father or Benjamin again. I accused them of being spies, had them confirm they were the sons of Jacob and that they had a young brother, a boy called Benjamin. I threatened them with death, repeatedly saying I was convinced they were spies, sent ahead by some rival to find our weaknesses and enable another to conquer our land and steal our food. “Prove you are not,” I thundered, my interpreter telling them my demands, since they were not to know I knew their language. “Leave this one (Simeon) with me as a hostage and return to your own lands and then bring me the youngest boy, Benjamin. Do this and I will know you are truthful.” We sent them on their way, their camels laden with food and other goods, returning their money, which unbeknown to them, we placed in their sacks of corn.

Jacob listened to the strange story his sons came home with, even stranger the return of their money. But no way was he going to let Benjamin go to Egypt. His favorite son was dead, his second son a hostage, Benjamin would not be next. But the famine did not let up. Weakened and powerless, Jacob sent his sons back to Egypt, taking with them double the gold and silver they took the first time, as well as Benjamin. Judah had emerged as the spokesperson for his family, he argued successfully that Benjamin must return with them and he vouched for his safety.

When I saw their party returning and my beloved Benjamin coming towards me I could not restrain my tears of joy. I ordered my servants to prepare a feast for them all, had Simeon returned to them, leaving them bewildered and anxious at this sudden turn about. Not spies now but favored guests? I had my servants load their camels and drays with an over-abundance of food and goods. But my desire for revenge was not yet satiated. I had my servant put my silver drinking cup in Benjamin’s sack. My brothers left, still bewildered, and set off on their return to Canaan. My soldiers caught up with them later that day, searched them all and found the cup in Benjamin’s sack. They were all bound hands and feet and brought before me. Benjamin would become my slave.

Judah intervened again, saying Benjamin’s fate would be the end of their father, his heart would be broken. He offered himself in Benjamin’s place. I remembered it was Judah who convinced my brothers to sell me to the Ishmaelites rather than killing me, so many years ago. My heart

broke. I had the room cleared and told my brothers who I was. They were left open-mouthed but as we talked more in their language about our early lives together they came to accept the miracle of who I was now and how much I could do for them, since I had forgiven them. Benjamin, of course, could not leave my side, his joy obvious to all.

When Pharaoh was told how I had found my brothers, he was delighted, he ordered their caravan be filled with food and clothes and silver and gold and told me to tell my brothers to hurry back to Canaan and bring their father and all his household to Egypt since there were still five years of drought to come. He would give them the best of the land that Egypt offers and they would live off the fat of the land.

I would love to have been there when they returned to Canaan and met with Jacob to tell him that not only was I Joseph alive, but I was the second most powerful man in Egypt, witness the treasures we have brought with us, they smiled. My father was overwhelmed but the evidence was there, more so when my brothers told him all the stories of my early life, stuff only I could have known.

You may have been to a big feast before, but no-one had ever eaten such a huge feast as the one I gave my father and my brothers, their wives and children, in Pharaoh's banquet hall, he himself presiding over the merriment, laughing with delight at his Chancellor's good fortune. I met with my father privately and told him the full story of my disappearance so many years ago. We wept together and I convinced him to let bygones be bygones, my brothers had been punished enough.

I was totally beholden to Pharaoh, so I decided to repay him as best I could. When the Egyptians and other peoples came regularly to me seeking food, I first took all their money in payment, then I took all their livestock and finally I took all their land, so that everything in Egypt came into Pharaoh's possession. After seven years the drought broke, the famine would soon cease. Then I instituted my tax plan so that Pharaoh's wealth would grow each year. I made the people Pharaoh's serfs. I allocated land to each family, gave them the seed to plant, gave them herds to breed and eat. In return I told them the land and animals were still Pharaoh's but they could keep four-fifths of their harvests and newborn animals each year, the other one-fifth to be given back to Pharaoh. And so it happened and there was peace within the whole land.

As for me, my beloved wife Asenath had given me two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, before the famine descended on all the known world. In gratitude to me for saving his family, my father elevated them both to the same status as my brothers and I by adopting them as his sons.

When my father Jacob died we honored his wishes. With Pharaoh's blessing the whole family travelled back to Canaan to bury him in the same burial chamber where lay the remains of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rachel and Leah. We all wept profusely at the passing of the last great Patriarch, the man to whom God had bequeathed the covenant. As God had promised, we, Jacob's fourteen sons, would inherit, conquer and possess Canaan, the land of milk and honey. The covenant would be with all of us, the sons of Israel, and our descendants. Canaan would be divided up between ten of my brothers and my two sons by Asenath, twelve in all. My brother Levi's tribe would become the priests, serving all the other twelve but not possessing an area of Canaan.

I Adam returned to Limbo. It would be four hundred years before I returned to earth, these people were "OK" but none seemed able to wear the mantle of God's chosen, all were too meek and helpless. But they did stay faithful to the one true God. I listened and waited. I heard this story told many times.

I, the Slave

As the years passed, we descendants of Israel prospered. We became a united population that grew to hundreds of thousands. Other Pharaohs came and went, our worship of the one true God continued, we never worshipped their gods. But there came a time when a Pharaoh became convinced that we were too powerful and too numerous. He enslaved us, took away all our lands and possessions, made us manual laborers to do his will. The guards' whips broke across our backs, resistance brought death. We were called Hebrews, river crossers, maybe a racial slur to the Egyptians but it had no meaning for us.

But still our numbers grew. In desperation, Pharaoh commanded our midwives to kill every boy child, to throw them into the river, trying to stop our propagation. But they could not bring themselves to do that, we became a ghetto nation, hiding the newborn boys within our guarded walls.

From Limbo, with growing anticipation, I Adam watched and waited for Yahweh's intervention. Then I chose him, right from the cradle.

I Moses

My mother hid me for three months when I was born but an Egyptian woman became suspicious, she heard a baby's cry, could not believe it was a girl, demanded to see the baby. So my mother left by the back door, took me to the river, fashioned a raft of reeds and floated me away. My sister stayed to see what would happen. My raft drifted towards the shore, to the banks where Pharaoh's daughter was coming to bathe. She saw my crude vessel, then me, ordered her maid to fetch me to her. I was a cute little fellow, she was smitten. Of course she knew I was a Hebrew child, but she wanted me. I cried with hunger, my sister seized the opportunity. "Shall I find a wet nurse for you?" she asked, bowing very low. So I was given back to my mother, to suckle at her breast, she being paid for the duty! But when I was older Pharaoh's daughter asked for me, I went to live in the palace, she treated me like a son. I became an Egyptian prince but I knew I was really an Israelite, a Hebrew to her.

I sneaked off at every opportunity to see my mother and sister and I saw the harsh way in which my fellow Israelites were treated. I had a quick temper; I saw an Egyptian strike a Hebrew with his whip. I drew my sword and killed him. Stupid thing to do, if Pharaoh heard about this he would have me executed! I fled to the desert, to the land of Midian, still dressed as an Egyptian.

I was resting by a well when seven girls came by herding a flock of sheep, intending to water them at the troughs by the well. But some boorish shepherds shooed them away and made a game of scattering their sheep whenever they came too close. I drew my sword, they took one look at me and scrambled. The girls watered their sheep and asked me to come with them to meet their father and I did. I stayed with them and their father came to appreciate the protection I offered his family as their shepherd guardian. In gratitude he let me choose one of his daughters to marry. I chose Zipporah and we had a son together. I was happy enough but I missed Egypt and my family.

I had been circumcised but I was not brought up as an Israelite, worshipping their God. My mother had told me my heritage. My line was from Jacob's son Levi to his son Kohath to his grandson Amran. Amran married his aunt Jochobed and she gave birth to me. I also had an older brother named Aaron who loved me dearly as did my sister Miriam. My mother had tried to explain the covenant to me but I could not take part in the sacrifices and rituals since I was an Egyptian to the Hebrew men. They wanted nothing to do with me.

I was totally unprepared on the day when I was tending some sheep and a voice spoke to me from a bush that suddenly burst into flames. Yahweh, he spoke his name, told me he saw the miserable state of his chosen people, he had chosen me to be their deliverer, to lead them from the land of Egypt to the promised land of Canaan.

I remonstrated with my God. “You want me to negotiate the release of thousands of Hebrew slaves with Pharaoh, the workforce that builds his monuments and feeds his empire. And you want me to convince the same Hebrews to follow me out of Egypt, me an Egyptian prince to them! No way this can happen.”

But Yahweh insisted, saying the Hebrews would believe me. I remained unconvinced. Yahweh told me to throw my staff to the ground. I did that readily but jumped out of my skin when it turned into a serpent and hissed at me. “Grab its tail,” ordered Yahweh. I did and it turned back into my staff. That should do the trick, I thought to myself. No, I needed more, I had no gift of oratory, I was terrified and tongue tied when I had to speak to a crowd.

Yahweh was becoming tired of me. I needed to stand on my own two feet. He reminded me of my brother Aaron, a gifted speaker, a leader of our people. He said, “Aaron can do the speaking, you bring the staff.” He told me what to tell Aaron and what Aaron was to say to our people.

I returned to Egypt with my wife and son. On the way we circumcised the boy, we were to be Israelites from now on. In our village I found Aaron who was delighted to see me, not so much so when I told him our orders from God. But he admitted Yahweh had also spoken with him. He was as scared as I was but we agreed he would put the proposition to our elders and I would deal with Pharaoh.

We met with the elders in the ghetto meeting place and were surprised at our reception. All were thoroughly tired of the treatment being handed out by the Egyptians. They were easily convinced, particularly when Aaron performed the signs Yahweh had taught him and turned the staff into a serpent.

We trembled as we stood before Pharaoh. I asked for permission to lead the Hebrews into the wilderness to make a feast and sacrifices in honor of our God. We would be gone for just three days. He scoffed at us, saying there was no way he was going to be deprived of three days’ labor. Worse still, as soon as we left he ordered his overseers to double the output of his Hebrew slaves and to flog their foremen if his orders were not met.

Aaron and I were blamed for the outcome of our fruitless meeting with Pharaoh and the extra trouble it brought on our people. Yahweh intervened again and told me to tell the people that he would free them from their slavery and bring them to the promised land of milk and honey, to the land of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. But they would not listen to us, we had brought only more misfortune upon them. A staff is a serpent is a staff had no impact on them at all.

Back we went to Pharaoh at Yahweh's urging. "Let my people go," became our catch-cry. Aaron took my staff and threw it at Pharaoh's feet making him jump backwards from the serpent. But then his sorcerers came in and threw down their staffs with the same result. Pharaoh told us to get lost.

Next we met with Pharaoh on his barge and turned all the rivers and canals into blood. The fish all died and the land stank to high heaven. But Pharaoh's sorcerers did the same and again Pharaoh told us to scram.

At Yahweh's orders we brought down plagues of frogs, then mosquitoes, then gadflies. Finally Pharaoh relented and said he would allow us to lead the people into the desert for our three day pilgrimage if we got rid of the flies. We did but he did not keep his share of the bargain.

So Yahweh killed the Egyptians' livestock, their horses, donkeys, camel, herds and flocks but left those of the Hebrews untouched. Still Pharaoh would not let our people go. Back came Yahweh with plagues of boils, hail and locusts, all to no avail. This Pharaoh was one stubborn fool.

After three days of total darkness Pharaoh finally relented. "Go!" he said. But I had had enough too. "Let us take our live stock with us," I demanded. "We need to make sacrifices to our God." Pharaoh smelled a rat. "Out of my sight," he thundered. "Never appear before me again or you die." I retorted, "You yourself have said it, never again shall I appear before you."

Obedying Yahweh's instructions, I told the elders to have the people prepare a meal as Yahweh had dictated to me. Lamb and unleavened bread, the blood of the lamb to be sprinkled on the doorposts of every Hebrew household. At midnight the angels of death came by every house in Egypt. They slew the firstborn child of every Egyptian family, designated by the absence of blood on their doorposts, but they left the Hebrew firstborn alone. A huge wailing of grief swept over all the land, Pharaoh's palace joining in. A shocked and distraught Pharaoh summoned Aaron and myself in the wee hours, "Go, take your flocks and all your possessions and leave Egypt before nothing remains."

We went back to the elders and told them to have the people go to the Egyptian homes and demand gifts of silver and gold and precious possessions. In their grief and shock and fear the Egyptians quickly gave everything they could, they wanted no more agony and death. Then the Hebrew families quickly packed up all their possessions, loaded their pack animals and slipped into the night, to the appointed rendezvous where 600,000 men gathered, their families, households and flocks beside them.

Aaron and I led our people north towards the Red Sea that barred our way to the desert beyond which lay the promised land. We were slowed by the flocks and by noon of the next day our sentries told us they could see the dust of a huge army rapidly approaching. Pharaoh had once again changed his mind. He had no intention of setting his slave workforce free.

We were at the bank of this wide sea, its waters deep and forbidding. But Yahweh was with us.

He sent his angels to make a thick fog between us and the approaching Egyptian army so they could not see us, indeed had no idea which way was which. Yahweh commanded me, "Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and part it for the sons of Israel to walk through the sea on dry land." I did just that but for good measure I did it again. Stupid me, I had doubted my God. Aaron had agreed, he too skeptical.

Ever faithful, Yahweh ignored that for the present. The waters parted, first the Levites, then 600,000 men with their women and children, in ranks of the twelve tribes, walked across the dry sea bed before the Egyptians could find us. When they did their commanders halted at the sight of the towering seas bordering our escape route, but Pharaoh himself urged them on. On they came, two hundred thousand horse and foot soldiers, all eager to sink their swords into the Hebrew scum. But when they were all deep into the trench and we Israelites safe on the other bank, Yahweh released the waters upon them and weighed down by their armor they all perished.

Watching them die, we all sang a song of triumph, a song honoring Yahweh, the true leader of his chosen people. When the men quietened down, my sister Miriam led the women in a dance of joy.

Into the desert we went. It didn't take long for the complaining to begin. "Where's the food?" they whined, "We had plenty to eat in Egypt, have you brought us here to die?" they grumbled, their hands on their weapons, their scowls directed at Aaron and me.

Again Yahweh came to our rescue. I told them, “Yahweh will give you meat by night and bread by day, then will you believe?” They kept on muttering among themselves. But that night huge flocks of quail appeared and the birds were easily caught, and the next morning the skies darkened as bread rained down from heaven in the form of dew. We called the bread manna. The matter of water to drink was more easily dealt with. With the elders watching I struck a rock with my staff at Yahweh’s bidding and a huge stream of pure water came bubbling out. I could repeat this as often as necessary, it was fun, some light relief.

Finally the Hebrews accepted that I was their God appointed leader. They began to bring to me all their problems and disagreements, asking me to be their judge. This was too much, even my father-in-law, who had joined us with his daughters, could see that I had no time for anything else. So I appointed other judges to adjudicate disputes and to administer justice.

We seemed to be meandering through the desert with no particular route in mind. I thought Yahweh must have a reason for this. My final campsite, before his revelation, faced Mount Sinai. The people gathered around its face, warned not to venture near its slope. I spoke Yahweh’s words to them. “You have seen what I did with the Egyptians, how I carried you on eagles’ wings. Know if you obey my commandments and hold fast to my covenant then you of all the nations shall be my very own.”

The next day, the people bathed and clothed in clean attire, Yahweh came in the form of a dense cloud and gave them his commandments.

1. You shall have no other gods but me.
2. You shall not utter the name of your God in vain.
3. Remember you keep holy the Sabbath day.
4. Honor your father and your mother.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor servant, not anything that is his.

We were by that mountain for months. I would be the first and greatest of the prophets, of God's messengers, indeed all future prophets would derive their messages from the Law God gave to me. For it was on that mountain, on its peak, where I was given the details of the Covenant and the Law, a host of other prescriptions for matters such as the altar for the sacrifices. the treatment of slaves, homicide, violence, blows and wounds, theft of animals, compensation for offences. violation of a virgin, sorcery, intercourse with animals, worship of false gods, hospitality, usury, lies and false assertions, observance of the Sabbath and the great feasts: Passover, Harvest, Ingathering, the entry into Canaan, the building of the Sanctuary tabernacle, details of its construction and furnishings.

My brother Aaron was to become the first High Priest, his sons to become priests also. Yahweh delivered strict instructions for the Sanctuary they would care for: a lampstand, fabrics, hangings, its framework, veil, altar and court, lamp oil, the priests' vestments, the ephod robe of the high priest, the pectoral of judgment, the diadem. Finally I was given a list of the craftsmen who would build it.

Further instructions came for the consecration of the priests, Aaron and his sons: their purification, clothing, anointing, investiture, the offerings and sacred meal. The altar of holocaust was also to be consecrated in a particular manner, the holocausts to be made daily, the use of a bronze basin, chrism, incense to be according to a further strict instruction. Yahweh repeated his strict ruling that we must all rest on the Sabbath, with violators to be put to death.

Then I came down from the mountain after 40 days, carrying the two stone tablets with the commandments inscribed on them by the finger of God. I came down to chaos and evil unbounded.

Yahweh had forewarned me. In my absence the people had argued to Aaron, "Make us a god to go ahead of us, we do not know what has become of Moses." So Aaron gave in and melted down all the gold they brought him, fashioning the mold into a golden calf. The people worshipped this idol saying, " Here is your God, Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt."

My God told me he would annihilate them, he was terribly angry. But I pleaded with him, asking him to remember the covenant he had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, that he swore he would make their descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens. He relented, but his wrath was passed onto me.

I strode into their midst, threw down the two tablets so violently they smashed to pieces. I seized hold of the golden calf, smashed it also and ground it into dust. I was so angry and violent

that no man dared approach me. I shoveled the gold dust into a pitcher of water and forced the elders to drink it. I shouted at Aaron, “What has this people done to you, for you to bring so great a sin upon them?” He had no answer, he was pathetically weak.

I took up my sword and stood at the gate of the camp and shouted, “Who is for Yahweh? To me!” All the sons of Levi rallied to me. I commanded them, “Take up your swords and start killing your brothers, your friends, your neighbors.” Three thousand people died that day and from then on the tribe of Levi became the priestly tribe, the guardians of the people from lapsing again into idolatry.

I pleaded with God, “Yes, they are a headstrong people but I have punished them. Now forgive us our faults and our sins and adopt us again as your heritage, your chosen people.” And so it was. I climbed the mountain again, again God wrote the 10 commandments on two stone tablets and again God made the covenant with his people, that they would possess the land of Canaan forever and live under his protection, provided they obeyed his commandments and worshipped only him.

Using God’s list I called for all the craftsmen to come forward. I gave them the directions for the building of the mobile Sanctuary or tabernacle building, (the forerunner of the Temple), as Yahweh had commanded me. And within the Sanctuary, to be shielded by a veil from the outer court, the craftsmen, led by Bezalel, built the Ark of the Covenant, within which would be housed the two stone tablets listing the 10 commandments, Aaron’s miraculous staff and a jar containing some manna. Before the Ark was the altar on which sacrifices would be made. All the furnishings God had described were also constructed. A huge amount of gold, silver, linen, leather, acacia wood, jewels and precious materials were used in these constructions, so much so that no Israelite wore any ornaments from this time onwards, all had been contributed to the Ark and the Sanctuary construction and furnishings.

Finally, the tailors made the priestly vestments for Aaron and his sons as God had directed me. Evidently Aaron’s meddling in idolatry had been forgiven.

When all was complete I anointed Aaron and his sons with holy chrism to be the high priest and priests who would guard the Sanctuary and perform the ritual sacrifices as God had written through me. Then Yahweh took possession of the Sanctuary in the form of a cloud. That cloud we followed from that day onwards, resting when it was hidden, marching onwards when it rose above the sanctuary. We should be in Canaan a mere two years after we left Egypt.

Thanks to my upbringing as an Egyptian prince, I had learned how to write. For many months in the desert I sat at a table and wrote what the Lord, my God, dictated to me. His instructions filled four books and I interspersed our wandering history amongst his words.

Yahweh told me, that as the golden calf incident illustrated, the people's concept of God had been distorted during the 400 years of slavery in pagan Egypt. I wrote the book of Leviticus to teach the people how to achieve the holiness that our holy God required.

The centerpiece of my message was that their sins could be atoned for by sacrifices. I outlined for them the offerings required from both the priests and the common man. Our spiritual leadership would rest with Aaron and his sons and their descendants so Yahweh dictated to me how they were to be consecrated.

All of us were now to avoid unclean food, pork or any meat with blood in it, and to adhere to specific practices in the areas of childbirth, women's menstrual cycles and various ailments and diseases. Each year on the Day of Atonement we were to make sacrifices to atone for the cumulative sins of all the people.

I finished Leviticus with a host of regulations which, if obeyed, would govern the people's way of living, basically a practical guide to achieving holiness. Knowing how weak and fickle the people were, Yahweh had me include not only the blessings, but also the curses that would result from either obedience to, or neglect of, God's commandments.

I commenced writing the book of Numbers in the second year after our exodus from Egypt. Yahweh commanded me to organize and train a huge army, its divisions based on the twelve tribes named after the sons of Jacob, with the names of Joseph (replaced by Ephraim and Manasseh) and Levi (the priestly class) deleted. I was to count their number.

Yahweh told me who to appoint as the chief census officials for each tribe. They assembled the people into twelve groups headed up by the leaders of each tribe and the officials counted the number of men over the age of twenty who were fit and able to bear arms. The tribe of Judah had the largest number at 74,600 but no tribe had less than 30,000 men. Altogether my army would have 604,000 soldiers. We would have almost forty years to train them, to form the most powerful army in the known world

As for the Levites, it was the priestly tribe of Levi that would care for the Sanctuary tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant and its furnishings within. No other man dare approach it. Of course many curious ones tried to do that exactly that, they all died in a puff of smoke. The Levites

dismantled and reassembled the Sanctuary each time we move camp and pitched their tents around it to guard and protect it with their lives.

Yahweh dictated how our huge camp was to be set up. The formation was like a clock with a rectangular face. The twelve tribes occupied the hour symbols, the Sanctuary and the Levites' tents lay in the center. I dwelt with them at Yahweh's command.

We set out for the Promised Land, hopeful that our journey would soon be complete. But again the people began to complain, wailing and crying, "Who will give us meat to eat? Think of the fish we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic! Here we are wasting away, stripped of everything. There is nothing but manna to eat."

I met the full wrath of an angry God. But I remonstrated with him. I could not bear the responsibility, the insults and threats alone, my few judges were no help. "Help me or kill me," I pleaded. This time Yahweh agreed and he appointed seventy elders to help me. But he demanded the people be punished for their lack of faith in me as his appointed representative. If it's meat they want, meat they shall get.

A powerful wind blew quail in from the sea, so many they lay a man's height thick on the ground around the whole of our encampment. The people were up all night collecting quails. Then they feasted on them and feasted again, overeating so much that many became ill. Yahweh punished them for their greed and disbelief as the meat went bad and thousands died, writhing in agony.

Yahweh was ever my protector, me his humble servant. My brother Aaron and my sister Miriam dared to criticize me since I had taken a Cushite woman, Zipporah, as my wife when I fled Egypt after killing the Egyptian. She was not an Israelite. I did not cause this. God took my side, Miriam suddenly became a white wraith, a leper. She screamed and ran away to hide, Aaron was flabbergasted, suddenly it was a different tune, "My Lord," he began to plead. Yahweh let them both agonize for seven days, then he relented and she was cured. After that there were no more complaints, they were definitely on my side!

We were approaching Canaan, the desert left behind. I sent twelve men, one from each tribe, to reconnoiter what lay ahead of us. We were coming into Canaan by the back door, up through Negeb then east to the highlands and finally west across the Jordan.

My spies headed off with instructions to find out what sort of people the inhabitants were, strong or weak, nomads or townspeople, few or many, and what sort of land they had, fertile or barren, wooded or open. I also instructed them to bring back some of the produce of the farmlands.

Forty days later they returned. They brought with them tasty succulent grapes and pomegranates. The whole community assembled and they gave their report. "Canaan is indeed a land of milk and honey. This is a sample of the rich produce. But the inhabitants are a very powerful people, the towns are fortified and very big."

They echoed the words of our father Abraham hundreds of years before when he approached this same region through the Negeb. The spies continued, "We saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekite hold the Negeb area, the Hittite, Amorite and Jebusite the highlands, and the Canaanite the sea coast and the banks of the Jordan."

Then a nasty disagreement broke out amongst the twelve spies. Caleb and Joshua, from the tribes of Judah and Ephraim, insisted that our army would be able to march in and conquer this land. But the other ten spies disagreed, saying these nations were stronger than us, all of their men were fierce and huge, all of them giants.

The people believed the cowardly ten spies and grunted against Aaron and myself. Some even said, "Let us appoint another leader and go back to Egypt, we have no wish to die here." Aaron, Caleb, Joshua and I fell down, faces to the ground. We implored the people, "Do not rebel against Yahweh. If Yahweh is pleased with you he will lead us into the land of milk and honey and give it to us. Do not be afraid of the people of this land, we will gobble them up!"

But the people persisted in their refusal to obey Yahweh and prepared to stone us to death. A very angry Yahweh appeared in a cloud before the entire, open-mouthed assembly. He told me he was ready to strike them all with deadly diseases and to disown them. He said to me, "Of you I shall make a new nation, greater and mightier than this mob is, or any of the nations ahead of you."

I remonstrated with my God, arguing that the Egyptians would revel in this, scorning our God, saying, "Yahweh was not able to bring this people into the land he swore he would give them and so he has slaughtered them in the wilderness." I uttered the words that would come to haunt me.

"No, my Lord! It is now you must display your power according to those words you spoke. Yahweh is slow to anger and rich in graciousness, forgiving faults and transgressions, and yet letting nothing go unchecked, punishing the father's faults in the sons to the third and fourth

generations. In the abundance then of your graciousness, forgive the sin of this people, as you have done from Egypt until now.”

There was a pause, then Yahweh said, “I forgive them as you ask.” Then came the kicker. “But not one of these doubting people shall see the land I swore to give their forefathers. Only Caleb and Joshua shall live to see that day!”

“As for you,” the people trembled, “You shall learn what it means to reject me. Here in this wilderness to the last man you shall die.” At these words the ten cowardly spies who argued against our invasion fell dead at our feet, of all the spies only Caleb and Joshua remained alive.

Well now the people were convinced. But again they were headstrong and foolish, not very good listeners. They argued if Yahweh wants us to take Canaan then let’s go! I remonstrated with them, reminding them that Yahweh had said not one of them would ever see the promised land. “Stand down!,” I commanded. But off they went, thousands of them, pressing hard to be the first into Canaan. The Amalekite and Canaan armies saw them coming, came down from the hillsides and slaughtered most of this leaderless and reckless invading horde.

That rebellion was quickly over. The survivors came limping back to our camp. We pulled up stakes and retreated, forty years of wandering aimlessly in the desert began. The 600,000 men who left Egypt all died in that desert, as did sons and grandsons, only a purified Israelite nation would enter Canaan. That would not include Aaron or myself or our families.

Each generation had to learn its lessons the hard way. There was another rebellion some years later, the desert is a hard taskmaster. Yahweh punished those unbelievers with another plague and 16,000 men perished. There were many much smaller incidents, there are always a few troublemakers in any large family. All met the same end.

First Miriam died. I claim my grief caused my stupidity. We needed water so I struck the rock with my staff as did Aaron. We had done this many times before, but this time we did not allow any time for the water to flow and we struck the rock again. Well the water flowed and the people drank but Aaron and I were doomed. Because of our lack of faith in Yahweh, strike it once he had said, both here and at the Red Sea, we would not lead the people into the promised land.

Second, Aaron died in this desert. I wept and felt very alone. As the High Priest his funeral was huge and the period of mourning for this great leader stretched for 30 days.

I knew I would never see the promised land but God instructed me to begin the invasion. I led the people eastwards and north to the land of Edom. I asked for clear passage through their land,

we had no designs on this nation. But my request was refused. We retreated. Yahweh made his commands clearer.

We marched north to Negeb. We sought clear passage from the Amalekite. Again this was refused but this time we fought and conquered, slaughtering most of them as we sent wave after wave of our warriors against them. Their land of Negeb would become part of ours.

The Moab were next but when they saw our numbers and heard the fate of the Amalekite, they sought peace. We settled for a while on their lands. My people were so weak, so fickle, so uncommitted to Yahweh despite what he had done for them, despite how easy were our victories. They quickly joined the Moabites in worshipping idols, were seduced by the daughters of Moab into debauchery and sin. After a few more months of this, at the Yahweh's command, I ordered the leaders of the tribes to be arrested by my guard. We impaled them on stakes and left them to die in the blazing sun. Yet another plague infected those who had transgressed and twenty thousand men died, writhing in agony.

My time on this earth was nearly done, I would not leave the land of Moab although from a mountain I could see the promised land. How I longed to be there.

At Yahweh's request I made a second census of the Israelite men. The count was much the same as forty years ago. They numbered 601,730 but not one of them was counted in the first census, all 603,550 of those men had died in the desert.

I appointed Joshua, the faithful spy, as my successor, and the new High Priest anointed him as such. He would lead the Israelites into the promised land, taking it by force and bloodshed. Caleb would lead the most numerous tribe, that of Judah, they would spearhead our assaults.

Together Joshua and I passed on to the leaders of the twelve tribes the divinely appointed boundaries of the promised land and the regions within it to be occupied by each tribe. Within each tribe's region there were to be towns assigned to the Levites, forty eight towns in total.

We were in Moab for several years, close to where the river Jordan flows into the Sea of No Life, waiting for Yahweh's signal to take Canaan by force, beginning with the conquest of the fortified city of Jericho. I spent those years writing my fifth book which I called Deuteronomy. The book included my final three farewell addresses to God's chosen people.

I was by now a very old man, so I could be pardoned for reminiscing about past times and the great deeds done in them. In the first address I recounted the forty years of wandering in the desert; in the second I urged the Israelites to follow Yahweh by being faithful to the commandments and

laws I had passed on to them; in the third I admitted that at times the people would again be unfaithful to God and even lose the promised land, but that with repentance, all would be restored.

I gave the people my blessing, formally passed on the mantle of leadership to Joshua and quietly passed away, joining Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Aaron in Limbo, awaiting a savior who would deliver us all into the presence of the God we had so faithfully served.

From Limbo those who had made the Covenant with Yahweh would watch as successive genocides cleanse the promised land of all its pagan inhabitants and of all its false gods. I Adam was ready for those wars. I knew the man to do just that, this choice was easy.

I Joshua

Moses had trained me well. I would be the sword of Yahweh, his instrument to deliver the land of Canaan into the hands of the Israelites.

Yahweh made his covenant with me and gave me my orders. “Rise – it is time – and cross the Jordan here, you and all this people with you into the land I am giving to the sons of Israel as I declared to Moses that I would. From the wilderness and Lebanon to the great river Euphrates and to the great sea westwards, this shall be your territory. As long as you live no man shall stand in your way; I will be with you as I was with Moses; I will not leave you or desert you.”

My orders were to conquer all the land within those boundaries, then partition it into twelve regions, each to be occupied by one of the twelve tribes, the descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob, with that of Joseph being replaced by his two sons whom Jacob had adopted. That made thirteen tribes, but the tribe of Levi would not be given a region. Their priestly caste would be given cities in each of the regions and the Levites were to be further distributed across the whole land, their mission to keep the people faithful to Yahweh by prayer and sacrifice. Their main city was Shiloh where the Sanctuary and its Ark would be placed and protected by them for the next several hundred years.

The first order of battle was Jericho, the fortified and strongly defended city across the Jordan from our encampment. I sent two spies to bring back information on its approaches and weaknesses. Their mission was extremely dangerous since all of Jericho could see the dust and smoke arising from our camps, they knew we were coming! My two spies managed to sneak into Jericho almost undetected but were soon running for their lives. A prostitute named Rahab figured out who they were and decided to help them, realizing that her city would almost certainly be taken and she would need protection. She hid them on her rooftop under bundles of straw. The king of Jericho sent hundreds of his soldiers to apprehend them but to no avail. They scoured the city and the surrounding countryside, setting up barricades at all the city gates and on all the roads. Rahab was a very resourceful young woman. She made my two spies take an oath that she and her family would be spared. When the hubbub subsided somewhat she lowered them down the outside of the city wall (her house was against the city wall) on a rope and they used the darkness to come back to our lines. Their message was very welcome: “The inhabitants tremble at the thought of us.”

I got the credit but Yahweh gained the victory. The priests took the Ark to the banks of the Jordan and then began to carry it across. As with the Red Sea, the waters parted before them. They stood in the middle of the river on dry ground and the whole Israelite nation crossed that river without a sandal being wet. We surrounded Jericho, its walls were very high and very wide. We waited.

Our scouts fanned out across the countryside. They reported that the kings of the Amorites and the kings of the Canaanites in the region between the Jordan and the great sea, the land of milk and honey, were terrified when they heard of our miraculous crossing. They hadn't seen anything yet!

First things first. Not one of the 600,000 men who left Egypt were to enter the promised land. How would we tell them apart from the sons and grandsons who would be born in the desert and not be held accountable for their fathers' idolatry and disbelief? For that reason the rite of circumcision was suspended during the desert years, to tell the two populations apart. But now Yahweh commanded us to renew the covenant. On his part he would give us Canaan, on our part we were all to be circumcised and so we were. Two other events occurred. First, we celebrated the feast of Passover, it would have a double meaning from now on. Second, the manna from heaven stopped falling, from this time on we would feed on the produce of the land of milk and honey.

Now for the big event. For six days our huge army marched around Jericho in total silence, its inhabitants' fear obvious as they gazed down on us from the top of their wall, their faces white as snow. We were led by priests carrying the Ark and others carrying trumpets, again all in total silence. On the seventh day we marched seven times around the city walls, then the priests blew their trumpets and we raised a thunderous war cry and the walls collapsed. Into the city we raced and put everyone to the sword, razing and burning every house except that of the harlot, Rahab, identified by the rope on its doorway, the rope that sent our two spies back to us.

Oh, Israel, I weep for you. Yahweh had given us a strict ban. Only gold, silver and things of bronze and iron were to be taken and they to be put into the treasury of the Sanctuary, everything else was to be burned and destroyed. Achan of the tribe of Judah disobeyed the ban and took some booty for himself. We would again see the wrath of Yahweh.

First came the punishment of all the people. On the advice of my spies I sent only 3,000 soldiers against the kingdom of Ai. They were slaughtered, I was devastated. This defeat meant that the

other kings would grow confident, the fall of Jericho a distant memory, they would all march against us, we could be destroyed. Yahweh gave me neither sympathy nor reassurance. “Fix the defaults on the ban, or else,” he ordered.

We took Achan and his wives, sons and daughters and all his flocks to a far valley and thousands of us stoned them all to death and piled a great cairn above their remains. Then Yahweh forgave us. “Be fearless now and march against Ai.” This time I took a huge army, I was learning the tactics of war. I sent 30,000 of my best soldiers in a flanking move around the town, having them move quietly and not be discovered. I concealed 5,000 troops in each of the two ravines to the east and west of our path. Then I led the rest of my troops against the town, a feint, since we retreated fast as soon as the king of Ai’s army came confidently forth from the city intent on slaughtering us with ease as they had before. But they had left Ai undefended. My 30,000 soldiers swept in from the rear, subdued the little resistance there was and put the town to the torch. When the king saw the smoke, he tried to hurry back but he was quickly surrounded as we turned and pursued him, those in the ravines attacked and those in the city came out. It was all over in a few hours. We captured the king and I hanged him from a tree by the city gates. Now all of Canaan would know we were invincible and tremble at our approach.

We made an altar of undressed stones out there on the plains and offered sacrifices to Yahweh of the best of the flocks of our defeated enemy. Surrounded by all of Israel, I read them the Law as written by Moses, reminding them of our covenant with Yahweh and assuring them that all of the promised land would be ours if we but stayed faithful and obedient.

It would not be easy. Our spies returned to tell us that all the kings on both sides of the Jordan, in the highlands and in the lowlands, all along the coast of the great sea towards Lebanon, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and Jebusites, all had formed an alliance to fight together against Joshua and Israel.

Not so the Gibeonites. They came to us dressed in rags saying they were from a distant country and wanted to make a treaty with us. We did not consult Yahweh, stupid us, and made the treaty. But as we marched forward, the very next towns we came upon were those of these Gibeonites, including the very large regional center of Gibeon itself. We were stymied, could not attack and kill them because of our treaty. But we evened the score, we made these people our water carriers and woodcutters, our virtual slaves.

We left a battalion in Gibeon and had moved on by the time messengers came to tell us that the kings of Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish and Eglon had joined forces and laid siege to Gibeon, intending to reclaim it because of its regional importance. Yahweh urged me on, together with all my fighting men. We marched back through the night and caught them unawares in the early dawn. They broke ranks and fled with our soldiers pursuing and slaughtering as we caught up with them. Their army was totally destroyed. We returned to our base.

My scouts came to tell me the five kings had taken refuge in a cave in the hills. I ordered an advance party to seal the cave with rocks and keep guard until I arrived with my army. I had the kings prostrated on the ground and told my troops to put their feet on their necks, demonstrating the power of Yahweh and the submission of all our enemies to him. Then I had them hanged from a tree, their bodies dumped in the cave and its entrance sealed with huge stones. The news of that spread far and wide and all were terrified they were next.

We sacked a succession of the southern towns of Canaan, hanging their kings and slaughtering all of their inhabitants: Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish, Eglon, Hebron and Debir. We left no man alive and adhered to the ban on their possessions as Yahweh had instructed us. Then we returned to our base. The south was ours.

Not so the north. The kings of Hazor, Madon, Shimron and Achshaph, those of the northern highlands and the valley south of Chinneroth, of the lowlands and the western hills, eastward into Canaan, in the highlands the Amorite and Hivite and Pezzerite and Jebusite, the Hittite and Mizpah, all of these formed an alliance and set out with all their troops, a horde as countless as the sands of the sea, with innumerable horses and chariots. They camped near Merom and debated how to fight against us.

I feared them not, Yahweh was by my side. We surrounded and attacked as they were still talking. Disorganized, they fled, we pursued and slaughtered them, not one was left to escape. As Yahweh had commanded we hamstringed their horses and burned their chariots.

The king of Hazor had organized this ill-fated coalition. I began with his royal city, capturing and hanging him, slaughtering all the inhabitants and burning the city to the ground. Then I did the same with all the other royal cities and their kings. For months my army marched northwards, leaving a scorched landscape behind and not a single living man or animal, as Yahweh had ordered me.

I was the master of the whole country, the highlands, Negeb, Goshen, the lowlands. Altogether I had subjugated more than 30 kingdoms, hanging the kings, burning the royal cities and putting all their subjects and their animals to the sword.

And that part of the country had rest from war.

But I was too old by now for more of this. I was the greatest tactician this world had ever seen but I could scarcely stay mounted on a horse. Yahweh reminded me that much of the country remained, still to be subdued, including the regions of the Philistines to the southwest, and the Geshurites, the Sidonians and the Gebalites to the north. But, said Yahweh, the time has come to divide up the land we have conquered between the tribes: Manasseh, Reuben, Gad, Ephraim, Benjamin, Simeon, Zebulun, Issachar, Asher, Naphtali and Dan. Caleb, in deference to his special role in our conquest, would have the leadership role in the land allocated to Judah.

I met with the elders of the tribes and set the boundaries of their allocated regions as well as the locations of the cities to be allocated to the Levites. With the land devoid of enemies the twelve tribes separated and began the task of rebuilding the towns, planting crops and growing herds and flocks.

I lived with the reality that there was always a division between the tribe of Judah and the other ten tribes, that of Benjamin choosing Judah's side in the end, the Levites staying neutral. The division stemmed from the time of Joseph's fateful day. On that day Judah stood up for Joseph and convinced his brothers to sell him into slavery rather than kill him. Nevertheless, full of guilt Judah left his father's house and went to live in the land of a Canaanite. This tribe occupied a central strip of the promised land, we had conquered the land to its north and to its south but not this territory itself. Its capital was called Jerusalem.

Judah was given the land immediately to the south of Jerusalem, Benjamin the land immediately to its north, The tribe of Simeon was close to Judah so they were assigned the land even further south, right down to Negreb. This whole region came to be called simply Judah since Judah was by far the most populous of all the tribes. The other tribes, named after the sons of Jacob whom God renamed Israel, were assigned different areas of the land north of Jerusalem and this total region came to be called simply Israel. This division did not exist in the desert and there we simply called ourselves Hebrews or the descendants of Israel aka Jacob, but for now our land was divided into Judah and Israel.

We had a final national meeting at Shechem. I gave my last address, urging the people to stay faithful to the God who had given them all this land as he had promised, first Abraham, and then a succession of the patriarchs. Shortly afterwards I died and the people buried me in the highlands of Ephraim.

I Adam joined the others in Limbo.

The story of the Israelite conquest of the promised land was to become twelve stories as each tribe settled in the region allocated to it. We watched in disbelief from Limbo as the tribes disobeyed Yahweh. His orders were to exterminate the pagan tribes, to leave no man alive in the territories they conquered. But the leaders of the tribes stopped well short of this. They allowed many of their enemies to remain alive and formed alliances with them, sharing the country and its resources. Their sons married the daughters of these pagan tribes, let the pagan daughters marry their sons and, inevitably, soon began to worship their false gods. Yahweh was very displeased, we in Limbo could not believe this was happening after all Yahweh had done for his chosen people. He stopped helping them and the unconquered regions remained just that. Some of all of Israel and Judah would always be at war, hounded by the aggressors they should have disposed of. The pagan tribes on their boundaries began to counterattack, no longer facing the huge army of the Israelites but only the smaller forces of the single tribes.

At Yahweh's command, I waited for my chance. God would appoint judges to rescue his people once they returned to him. I easily chose the first one, a faithful follower of Yahweh but a leader, due to his breeding.

I Othniel

The king of Edom made the first move against Judah. He regained all his territory with ease since the Israelite population had lapsed into idolatry, serving the pagan god, Baal. Yahweh let him have his way, the chosen people were to be punished. They were Edom's slaves for eight years.

Then the people returned to the worship of the one true God and cried out to Yahweh for deliverance. I Othniel, the nephew of Caleb, Moses' spy, raised an army and, with Yahweh's support, we easily overcame Edom, slaughtering its king and most of his subjects, bringing peace for the next forty years. I died in peace.

I Adam briefly returned to Limbo, then I chose a similar faithful leader.

I Ehud

Once again, with their judge-leader dead, the Israelites lapsed into idolatry and this time the king of Moab easily conquered them and they became Moab's slaves for eighteen years. Same old story, the people went back to worshipping Yahweh and cried for deliverance. He sent me as Ehud to deliver them. I was more sneaky this time. I happened to be left-handed so I wore my weapons on my right hip, most people at a quick glance thought I was unarmed. I sought an audience with the big fat king of Moab to deliver the monthly taxes. That done I went to leave with his guard, but suddenly came to a halt and said, "Oh, I have a secret message for the king, be along in a minute." So they left me alone. I went back to the king to whisper in his right ear and as I did that, I drew my dagger with my left hand and plunged it into his gross belly. It made a huge sucking sound. I left the throne room, locking the doors behind me.

Once the guard had escorted me to the outer gates, they returned to find the throne room locked. The big fat king had a digestive problem, often locking the door as he sat on the other throne, so the guards suspected nothing at first. It was a good hour before they broke down the door, I was long gone by then!

I went to the highlands and sounded the horn of battle. The Israelites flocked to me and when they learned the king was dead and Moab leaderless, they assembled into a fighting force and attacked the Moab forces as they were crossing the river in pursuit of me. They were all slaughtered to a man, 10,000 died that day, the cream of Moab's fighting forces. With I Ehud as their judge the people of Israel enjoyed eighty years of peace and worship of the one true God.

But then Ehud died and I Adam returned to Limbo to be with the patriarchs and also with my wife, Eve. Limbo embraced all the men and women who had been faithful to Yahweh in their lifetime, but none saw the face of God yet, none saw heaven.

I Eve watched also from Limbo as once again, their judge and leader dead, all the people of Israel and Judah drifted into idolatry and forgot Yahweh. They were easily conquered and then enslaved for twenty years by the king of the Canaanite. This king had a huge mobile army with

nine hundred iron-clad chariots and thousands of foot soldiers, commanded by his ruthless general, Sisera.

We in Limbo found a woman to save the chosen people. Deborah was a prophetess who sat under a palm tree in the highlands of Ephraim and people came from all over, from any of the tribes, to have her settle their disputes. She had remained faithful to Yahweh all through this time, one of the very few to do so. Adam chose her, I Eve was given the privilege.

I Deborah

Yahweh listened to the people's cry for help, he sent me as Deborah to deliver them. But I was a woman not a fighting man, so I called the best I knew, Barak of the tribe of Naphtali, to do the hard work. But Barak would only assemble a fighting force if I went with him, so I did! Barak assembled his forces at Mount Tabor. Sisera couldn't get there fast enough, his chariots in the lead. Barak had the height advantage, the mountain slopes where the chariots could not go. His 10,000 men routed the attackers, slaughtering first the charioteers and then the following foot soldiers.

Sisera fled the battle field, seeking refuge in the home of Heber, a friend of the king of Canaan. Jael, Heber's wife, met the exhausted Sisera as he thumped with his sword on her door. She let him in reluctantly, gave him some food and drink and watched as he fell asleep. The king was no friend of hers, let alone his general. She took up a mallet, placed a tent peg above Sisera's left eye and drove the peg into his brain; he died instantly. Barak found him there, dead, as he came in pursuit. He gave Jael a nod of appreciation, returned to his troops and led them in search of the king, utterly destroying him and his kingdom.

Barak and I sang a song of victory celebrating the end of Canaan, the defeat of Sisera's army and his death at the hands of Jael.

I Eve really enjoyed my turn to be Yahweh's sword. I returned to Limbo. The land had peace for forty years.

I Adam and the patriarchs in Limbo knew it would be just a matter of time before the people lapsed again, continuing the cycle of sin and rescue. A different kind of salvation would be needed. We watched from Limbo, not seeking to be involved in this next chapter, its principal actors were on shaky ground at best.

I Gideon

For again the people lapsed into idolatry. This time the Midianites dominated them for seven years. The people took to hiding in the mountain caves but the Midianites simply destroyed their herds and crops in the valleys and left them starving. They wailed their grief and Yahweh took pity on them.

It was a struggle for me to have faith in Yahweh, in any case I was a bit of a smart aleck, certainly not bowing to any man. His angel came to me on the threshing floor of our secreted cave, greeting me with “Yahweh is with you, valiant warrior.”

“Really,” I answered, “forgive me, but if Yahweh is with us then why is it that all this is happening to us now? And where are all the wonders our ancestors tell us of when they say ‘Did not Yahweh bring us out of Egypt?’ But now Yahweh has deserted us, he has abandoned us to Midian.”

At this Yahweh himself spoke to me, saying, “Go, you will rescue Israel from the power of Midian. Do I not send you myself?”

Unchasten, I boldly replied, “Forgive me, Lord, but how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the least important in my family.”

Yahweh endured my obstinacy, saying, “I will be with you and you will crush Midian as if it were just one man.”

I Gideon blandly replied, “Give me a sign that it is you speaking to me.” (You can now see why we shuddered in Limbo).

Then I Gideon thought I had better back down. “I beg you, do not go away until I come back. I will bring you an offering.”

(We continued to be amazed. No one had ever spoken this way to Yahweh.)

Yahweh answered, “I will stay until you return.”

I put my offering on a rock. The angel placed his rod on it and immediately fire consumed it. I was convinced – for a while!

Yahweh wanted my blind obedience, we had a long way to go! He commanded me to destroy the altar on which the townspeople made their sacrifices to Baal and to build another for him, making a sacrifice of a young bull. I was petrified. But I sneaked out under the cover of darkness and did as he asked.

The next morning the townspeople wanted my head. But my father defended me, saying, “If Baal is indeed a god, then let him do the deed. If not, then may Yahweh be our God.”

I suddenly became fearless. I sounded the horn and the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali rallied to my side. That was easy!

But I was still not fully convinced. I asked for another sign. I would spread a fleece upon the threshing floor and in the morning I wanted it to be covered with dew but the surrounding floor to be dry.

(We shuddered at his impertinence.)

So it happened. This was fun, I said, “Please do it again tonight.” And again the fleece was wet and the ground around it dry. I was finally convinced. But Yahweh was not going to let me off this easily.

I sounded the battle cry and led my huge army out against Midian, surely I cannot fail, I thought. I will be the man! But Yahweh cooled me down, saying my army was too big, victory almost certain. Then he said, “Israel will claim the victory, it will not be mine.” He astounded me, commanding me to proclaim, “If anyone is frightened, go home.” 22,000 promptly left, leaving 10,000. Hmm!

“Still too many,” said Yahweh. He told me to have the men drink from the stream. I was to keep only those who stood and lapped the water with their hands, those who knelt to drink I sent home. I was terrified, only 300 remained. But Yahweh was now calling the shots, not me. His would be the victory.

We surrounded their huge camp in the early hours, carrying only lanterns and trumpets. My troops shouted together, “For Yahweh and for Gideon.” Then we blew the horns. The bleary-eyed Midianites were totally confused. They grabbed their swords and started swinging them wildly, in the dark blindly attacking their own comrades. Thousands died, the rest fled towards the river.

Now my 30,000 plus men could join in. I sent messengers on horseback to the highlands, telling them to collect the returning soldiers and have them hold the fords over the river. Down they came and slaughtered the fleeing Midianites as they struggled across the river. I was delighted when they brought me the heads of two of the Midianite chieftains on two pikes.

Not so delighted when with my weary three hundred we were refused food and drink by the Succoth as we passed through their lands in pursuit of two other Midianite chiefs. You will keep for another day, I thought to myself.

When we caught up with the two chiefs they had only fifteen thousand soldiers left, over one hundred and twenty thousand had fallen at first their camp and later on the river fords. Many of my other soldiers had now caught up with us, we easily disposed of the enemy and I put the two chiefs to the sword. Then we returned to Succoth and repeated the slaughter. Yahweh is a vengeful God.

Well I returned to our people in triumph. I could have anything I wanted, including being their king and my sons and grandsons after me. But I was done with all this, too much limelight, too much responsibility. So I said, "It is not I who shall rule over you, nor my son, it is Yahweh who must be your Lord."

(Maybe we were wrong, this guy is good, I should have left Limbo to be him.)

But then I Gideon got greedy. "Instead, give me all the spoils from your plundering of the Midianite cities." So they gave me a huge amount of gold and silver and precious stones. I went home and made a statue of all this material and, naturally, it became an object of worship as had Aaron's golden calf! After all, I did the work, not Yahweh.

No, we in Limbo were right, we breathed with sighs of relief. Who could be next? No obvious candidates, but I needed to choose someone, maybe the son would do better, but I hesitated.

I Abimelech

I was next in line for the leadership role, being Gideon's son, even if it was by his slave girl. He might not have wanted to be their king but I had so much quibbling. Besides, my father had given the bad example and soon the people of Israel began to prostitute themselves again for the false god, Baal. They were ungrateful to Gideon and his family for what we had done for them, I would soon change that!

Can you believe it, Gideon had 70 sons. They all wanted to be the ruler. I went to the leading men of our town, Shechem, and asked them whether they wanted to be ruled by seventy or by one. They were scared of me for some reason, quickly agreed with my opinion and gave me lots of money to get started. I recruited some low life scoundrels from the taverns and paid them up front. We went to the houses of my brothers that night and slew them all. I would have no opposition. I was proclaimed king.

We had missed Jotham, Gideon's son by his first wife. I had the power but was not yet organized. He called a meeting of the elders and told them what I had done, about the murder of Gideon's family. Then he put a curse on me and escaped into the desert before I could find him.

I ruled Israel for three years, living a life of luxury and ease, debauchery and sin, idolatry and godlessness. But I fell out with the goody-goody elders. The king of Ebed learned of the discord. His son ambushed my party in the mountains but I was too strong for him, routed his forces and had him hanged.

I had been betrayed. My revenge was merciless. We burned Shechem and killed many of the inhabitants. But then the curse of Jotham came true. A woman threw down a rock from the tower we were attacking, it crushed my skull. I had been killed by a mere woman, my legacy was a joke.

I Adam retreated to Limbo, the list of potential candidates to lead Yahweh's people was exhausted. In Limbo we were relieved that embarrassing chapter of our history was done. The era of kings was short-lived and unwanted. Yahweh is our king. But over the next sixty years we watched with bewilderment as the twelve tribes went their own ways and lapsed into idolatry,

repented and were freed by a succession of dubious judges. Would these cycles never end? If so, how? I mean, take this guy. I watched over him but certainly never chose him.

I Jephthah

I am the son of a concubine, not my fault! I grew up strong and fearless, a formidable warrior. But my father had many legitimate sons. They drove me away, saying I did not merit sharing in our father's inheritance. They were without conscience as was all of Israel in my day, all serving the false gods of the Ammonites whom Yahweh had allowed to enslave them. I listened with a smirk on my face as the people cried out to Yahweh for deliverance. I heard he reminded them that they wouldn't be in this state if they had remained faithful to him. But they admitted their sins, I thought that was weird. I mean I had moved to a lawless coastal town, my companions were people like myself, no allegiance to anybody, either man or god. We lived by robbery and deceit although we never hurt women or children, we did have some standards! The Philistines and Ammonites stayed well away from us, we were meaner than them!

When the elders of Israel came to meet with me, I was intrigued. Then they asked me to rid them of the Ammonites. Well I had no love for them either but business is business. "What's in it for me," I asked. "Besides, I see a few of my family here, I was driven out of my father's house, no one helped me, why should I help you?"

I thought for a while, my men started sharpening their swords and nodding at me. "Here's the deal," I replied to the elders, "If you take me home to fight your oppressors and Yahweh puts them at my mercy, then I am to be your leader and commander." They must have been really desperate. They swore, with Yahweh as their witness, that I would be their leader.

I gave the fool a chance. I sent a messenger to the king of the Ammonites, seeking peace if they would withdraw from our lands. But he would not listen. So we went to war.

But first, in my arrogance and new-found religion, I swore a vow to Yahweh. "If you deliver the Ammonites into my hands then the first person to meet me on my return shall belong to Yahweh and I will offer him up as a holocaust."

It was a tough campaign but we finally routed the Ammonite army, slaughtering them by the thousands and sacking over twenty towns. They were a nation no longer. We were free again.

I returned in triumph. Then my only child, my beautiful daughter, came running out of my house to meet me. Alas, I knew despair. I told my daughter of my vow, she said I must keep it, she was stronger than me. She asked for two months grace so she could go into the mountains with her friends and grieve for her virginity, she would never know a man. I hardly breathed that

whole two months. Then I kept my vow. I lived for just six more years as the leader of the Israelites but took no pleasure or pride in it, my grief was too much to bear.

In Limbo we watched all this happen with disbelieving eyes. Through me, Yahweh certainly chose some very odd men to be his agents on earth, ourselves excluded of course! Twenty-five more years passed, the fickle Israelites needed three more judges even in that brief timespan. They sinned, they were oppressed, they wailed, an exasperated Yahweh delivered them. But then came the Philistines, now the oppression became extreme, these pagan tribes were powerful and ruthless. Israel needed an exceptional leader to deliver them. I was relieved when I found this man.

I Samson

My mother was barren for many years, indeed until an angel of Yahweh appeared to her and my father, giving them strange commands. My mother would give birth to me but I was to be brought up as a Nazarite, no wine, no unclean food, no razor to touch my head.

When I was about 25 years old I went down to one of our towns, one under Philistine occupancy. I saw this gorgeous Philistine girl and was smitten. I went home and told my parents to get her for my wife. They objected, saying I needed an Israelite wife, but I was adamant. On my way back to her town I was attacked by a lion. I tore it to bits with my bare hands, totally surprised at my strength. I mean I knew I was strong but this was unbelievable. I kept going, found the girl and soon we were married, living among the Philistines.

I was a great joker. I posed a riddle to my friends. They couldn't solve it but my companions took my wife aside and begged her to find the answer. She worked her charms on me, made my passion override my good sense. I told her the answer, swearing her to secrecy. Later my friends told me the answer to my riddle. I knew she had revealed it to them, she could not be trusted. Beautiful and sexy as she was, I was devastated. Overcome by intense anger I left the house, went to another town and in my rage killed thirty Philistines, taking their clothes and throwing them at my friends. "See what you made me do," I shouted. I went back to my father-in-law's house. "What about your wife?" my best man called after me. "Keep her," I said, "You sleep with her. I'm out of here."

I didn't actually think he would do that, surely realizing I was overwrought. A few weeks later I went back to see her, to make amends with a gift of a kid. But my Philistine father-in-law had actually done what I said and my wife was gone with my best man. I exploded and began a campaign of terror. I burned their crops and started killing every Philistine who crossed my path. The whole countryside trembled with fear.

The Philistines countered by attacking my tribe, that of Judah. The elders came to me, demanding I give myself up, the Philistines wanted me, not them. I meekly allowed them to bind my hands and off we went to meet the enemy. When I saw them, my strength returned. The ropes binding me snapped into pieces, I grabbed the nearest weapon, the jawbone of a donkey, and went on a rampage. They told me I killed a thousand men. In awe, they made me their judge and we had peace for twenty years.

But I still had a taste for pagan women, prostitutes for a while. Then I saw Delilah and had to have her as my wife. What a perfect woman Yahweh had created in this one, and she proved to be as good in bed as her looks suggested. I would do anything for her, well almost anything. I knew she wanted the secret of my strength, her curiosity was barely restrained.

I did not know that my enemy, the Philistine leaders, had her in their power. They gave her money and forced her to find out my secret. Once again a woman wormed a secret out of me, I seemed to become powerless when they worked their wiles with me, my passion driving every other thought out of my head. Submitting to her constant refrain of “If you love me, tell me,” I told Delilah the secret. If my hair was shaved, my strength would be gone.

Then I learned what her love was worth, a few pieces of silver evidently. As my parents had warned me, my taste in women was pathetic. She brought a barber into our bedroom and while I slept off our love-making he shaved off my hair. The Philistine soldiers took me easily, I had no resistance to offer.

Well it was a really big deal when I was captured. I had wrought havoc on the Philistines for years and almost everyone of their families had cause to hate me for some personal loss. They paraded me before the huge booing crowds, then put out my eyes with burning coals and threw me into a dungeon. But the hair that had been shorn off began to grow again.

I became a circus act. At their festivals they brought me out to mock me then amuse them with acts of strength, lifting weights and animals and carts. I waited for the really big festival, the one celebrating their pagan god. The boy who led me by the hand took me into the middle of the temple where a huge crowd had gathered to watch me perform. I had the boy tie me to the two central stone pillars then sent him outside. I teased them as I pulled on the ropes, snarling and growling like an animal. They laughed at my fate. Then I jerked the ropes with my full strength, the pillars collapsed and the roof came crashing down. I died but so did three thousand leaders of the Philistines. My revenge was sweet. I was honored, my brothers and my whole family found my body and buried it in a cave in our homeland.

We patriarchs in Limbo watched the unfolding of the story of Samson and honored its conclusion as the manifestation of Yahweh, again in what we thought was an odd manner since

there is no evidence that Samson acted on God's orders, let alone worshipped him. The time was coming for a real change since in those days there was no king in Israel and every man did as he pleased. I Eve again thought it time for a woman to exert her influence, through Yahweh of course. I Adam chose this girl for her.

I Ruth

I am a Moabite woman, the religion of the few Israelites I knew was a mystery to me. But then I married one of the sons of an Israelite family that had come to Moab seeking food, there was a severe drought in their land. Naomi was my mother-in-law and I came to love her deeply. Alas her husband died about ten years after they arrived. Then her sons died, including my husband. So there we were, an Israelite woman of the town of Bethlehem and two Moabite daughters-in-law, all of us widows.

Naomi had no ties in Moab and she missed her homeland. She set out for Bethlehem and we two dutifully tagged along for a while. But then Naomi surprised us, giving us our freedom and telling us to go back to our families in Moab since she was now too old to birth sons who could marry us when they came of age. My sister-in-law cried on Naomi's breast, kissed her goodbye and left for home.

Naomi prevailed on me to also leave her but I could not, saying,

*Wherever you go, I will go;
Wherever you live, I will live;
Your people shall be my people,
And your God, my God.
Wherever you die, I will die,
And there will I be buried.
May Yahweh do this thing to me and more also,
If even death should come between us!*

And so Naomi returned to Bethlehem with me, her Moabite daughter-in-law. It was the beginning of the harvest. Yahweh was with me and Naomi.

Naomi sent me into the fields to glean ears of corn from the leftovers of the harvest. I asked the other women doing the harvest if I could do this and they agreed to let me. But Naomi had not sent me into just any field, she knew this one belonged to her rich relative, Boaz. I could tell Boaz liked me right away. He asked who I was and then told me to keep on gleaning, indeed to go to no other fields but his, and to make sure I drank plenty of water from his well. I was bewildered,

asking how could he show so much consideration to a foreigner. He told me he knew of my devotion to Naomi and of the help I had given her when she was widowed. Then he had me sit with his servants and brought me a meal of roasted grain. I ate my fill and got up to go back to the harvest leftovers. But no, his overseer told me to join the main harvest, I could take what I wanted from the best of the corn.

I couldn't get back to Naomi fast enough to tell her about this wonderful man and his kindness to us. She then told me Boaz was a relative of hers, indeed, according to the law regarding widows, he was one of the men who could bring us under his protection.

Naomi thought about what Boaz had done, she had not even seen him yet, let alone how he looked at me. But she was a woman and a very wise one. She washed and anointed me, dressed me up in the little finery we had, and sent me that evening to the threshing floor, to wait until Boaz had finished that day's work, had eaten and imbibed (a little too much) and was settling down to sleep. When he started to snore, I covered his feet with a blanket and lay down nearby. He awoke in the middle of the night, in the darkness, but he could see my form. He asked, "Who are you?" I told him I was Ruth, the Moabitess, and that he had a claim over me to be my protector and me his servant. He was deeply moved by that and by my kindness to him.

But he knew of another relative who had priority over him in this matter, he said he would visit him the very next morning. And so he did, and, thanks be to Yahweh, the other relative chose not to claim protection of the widow Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law. It actually took a bit of maneuvering on Boaz's part. The other relative was eager to claim protection once he knew it was Naomi who had her husband's inheritance. But when Boaz told him a Moabite girl was part of the deal, he backed off quickly.

So we went to Boaz's home, but not as servants. He claimed me immediately for his wife. I was delighted since I loved him the first time I saw him and I already knew him to be a kind and honorable man. We had a son, we called him Obed. Of course Naomi was his devoted nurse.

I Eve returned to Limbo. What a lovely story I could tell them. What does this have to do with Yahweh and the Covenant, we wondered. We knew Boaz was a descendant of Perez, the illegitimate child born to Tamar after her deceptive coupling with her father in law, Judah. The

line of succession was Judah, Perez, Hezron, Ram, Amminadab, Nashon, Salmon and Boaz so Boaz was in the direct line of succession from Abraham. What we did not yet know was that he would also be the great grandfather of King David, let alone who would be his wondrous descendant.

I Eve could also sense the coming of another woman. I could never forget the curse God put upon the evil presence in the garden, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed. She will crush your head and you will strike her heel.” I could not wait for my revenge.

As for me, I Adam could not get down to earth fast enough, we could sense huge changes were about to happen. Could my redemption also be at hand? What was happening wasn’t just about the Covenant any more, something else was afoot.

I Samuel

I was given to Yahweh, under the protection of his high priest Eli, once my mother weaned me. My mother was a drunken whore, or so Eli thought when he first saw her crouching by the temple gate, slobbering and sobbing. He was forced to apologize once he realized his error. Not a new story by now but my mother was barren, she had come to the Sanctuary at Shiloh to beg Yahweh for a child. So Eli blessed her and interceded with Yahweh on her behalf. I was conceived the very next time my parents had intercourse. But my mother had promised me to Yahweh in gratitude, so here I am, barely able to crawl, a temple brat as we are called. They made me a cot right by the Ark of the Covenant, beyond the veil dividing the Sanctuary. I was evidently special as I came to realize.

Now Eli had two sons, both priests. As I grew older I watched them with horrified eyes. Garbed in the full vestments of the Levi priests they would go to the Outer Court and solemnly take the people's offerings, the fat lambs and kids, the plump birds, the ripe corn and place them on the altar of sacrifice within the Sanctuary, shielded from the crowds outside. They would light the sacred flame and immolate the offerings as worship to Yahweh. But when the offerings were browned and baked but not yet scorched, they would take their knives, carve off succulent pieces and proceed to gorge themselves. I stayed very quiet but they laughed with glee, having no fear of Yahweh at all, nor of their father since he saw what they were doing, later he even joined them at times.

They were wrong about Yahweh! When I was a teenager he called my name in the night and I went running to Eli but he denied calling me, again this happened, and again, but this third time Eli told me to stay put and listen, he knew it was an angel of God. He was wrong about that too, it was Yahweh himself. He gave me his message, I lay in fear and trembling, wondering how Eli would react. Because of his son's blasphemy and his own omission, Yahweh would destroy his house, his sons, his family, his whole household. I would be the second prophet of Israel, divinely appointed to urge the people to remain faithful to the Law of Moses and the commandments of Yahweh.

So it happened. As I grew older my voice was heard throughout the whole of Israel and all knew Yahweh was speaking to them through me. But Eli and his sons continued their wicked

behavior towards Yahweh. My God's patience was exhausted, this family could not be allowed to continue to be the guardians of the Sanctuary.

For the Philistines mustered to fight Israel and they had the upper hand, killing about four thousand of our best troops. In desperation our leaders sent for the Ark. It was brought to the field of battle by Eli's sons and the Philistines became afraid, they knew its power. But fearing they would become slaves of Israel if they put down their arms, they attacked again and Yahweh let them have their way because of the unworthiness of Eli's sons and Eli himself. They routed our army, slaughtering over thirty thousand of our troops. They killed Eli's sons and took the Ark away to their own country.

A survivor came running to Eli in Shiloh. He gasped out that the two sons were dead and the Ark has been captured. Shocked, the big fat glutenous Eli fell backwards off his chair, broke his neck and died. His sons were dead, his family would not continue the line of the high priests. The mantle passed to Eleazar, the elder of a totally different line of Levites.

Yahweh did not defend the Ark against the Philistines but it would bring them only trouble and no joy. They put it in the temple of their god, the one rebuilt on the site where Samson had destroyed its predecessor. Their god's image fell to the ground, worshipping before the Ark, shocking them all. Worse, the people of that town began to get the most horrible tumors. They sent the Ark to a different town, the same curse flourished there. And to the next town and so on. They finally gave it back to a nearby Israelite town and watched to see if the tumors afflicted its population.

They did not, but seventy men who did not join in the celebration and sacrifices at the return of the Ark, well they all just dropped dead. So that town took the Ark to another town and there it stayed for twenty years.

I Samuel travelled the width and breadth of Israel during this time, urging the people to return to the worship of the one true God. When there were finally enough good men I summoned all the men of Israel to Mizpah and prepared them for war. The Philistines must be punished for taking away our Ark.

The battle was intense. We slaughtered thousands of their troops and drove the remainder back into their own land. We then went city by city and purged all of our cities of the overbearing Philistines, we were finally a free nation once again. The Amorites saw all this and they also sought peace. I set up an altar at Mizpah and we offered our grateful thanks to the one true God. I

became Israel's judge as well as its prophet. Each year I travelled throughout the whole country setting disputes and bringing justice to all.

I had watched Eli's sons drift into sin, I now watched my own sons do the same. I trained them to be judges to assist me, but they were weak, they took bribes and perverted justice. My popularity with the people plummeted. I was old by now, they didn't want one of my sons to succeed me, they wanted a king, just as all the other nations had a king.

In vain I pleaded that Yahweh was their king. But Yahweh acquiesced, first having me tell them the woes of having a king, the taxes, the forced taking of sons to his army and daughters to his bed, the forced taking away of the best lands and properties to be given to his cronies. No one listened to me.

Those of us in Limbo watched with interest but also concern, as the next chapter unfolded. I Adam left Samuel to travel the earth to find a suitable man. I thought I chose the ideal person.

I Saul

I met Samson when I came to his town searching for our lost donkeys. I thought he could find them for me, he was some kind of seer, wasn't he? He told me later that Yahweh had forewarned him that I was coming. I could see he was surprised how tall I was and how strong I looked. I knew I was very handsome, everyone told me that! He gave me the hospitality of his house and when I was leaving the next morning he told me I would be chosen to be the king of Israel. He then anointed me as such. I was petrified, quite a step up for an unknown. On a minor note, he said the donkeys have been found. I was too shocked to hear that.

Samuel summoned the whole nation to Mizpah, come get yourself a king. I watched as he conducted a lottery. From the twelve tribes the lot fell upon that of Benjamin. From the clans of Benjamin the lot fell upon Matri, from the men of Matri the lot fell upon me. I could see that coming and hid myself, but they found me and brought me out into full view. The people were delighted at the Yahweh's choice of this tall, handsome, strong, young man, crying out "Long live the king." I was scared stiff, what was I getting into?

But I still had to prove my worth. Having nowhere else to go I went back to my father's house and my chores, like ploughing the fields with a team of oxen.

It was the Ammonites who broke the peace. Their nasty general, Nahash, laid siege to one of our towns. The elders sued for peace. "OK," said Nahash, "but first I will put out the right eye of all your men, you will be a total disgrace." "Give us a few days to think about this," they quickly replied.

Their messengers went all over Israel, seeking help. Most people just cried and waved their arms, not so me. Hot and bothered from the ploughing, when I heard the news I grabbed a sword and angrily cut the team of oxen into pieces. I sent the bloody pieces by messengers all over Israel, their message being, "If anyone will not march with Saul, this is what will be done to their oxen!"

That did the trick. Three hundred thousand Israelites and thirty thousand more from the tribe of Judah collected together at my town. This huge army marched on the Ammonites in the early hours and struck them down until high noon. My standing was confirmed, I was indeed the king of Israel and of Judah.

I thought Samuel would be a problem, we did not need two leaders. I was relieved when he told the people he was now too old, in future I would lead them. He recounted all that Yahweh

had done for his chosen people and urged them to remain faithful to only him, the one true God. His own role from now on would be just that of a prophet, the intermediary between Yahweh and his people.

I guess I became too full of myself, my son Jonathan also. He took a small band deep into Philistine territory and smashed their sacred pillar. When the Philistines learned of this act of defiance they assembled a huge army to put Israel back under bondage. They came with three thousand chariots, six thousand horses and troops as numerous as the sand on the sea shore.

I sounded the call and all of Israel rallied to me. We waited for Samuel to come to conduct the ritual sacrifice prior to the battle. But he did not come that day, nor the next, nor the next. Some of my troops started drifting away. I panicked, went to the altar myself and conducted the ritual sacrifice, then prepared for the battle. When Samuel finally did come, he was appalled. Even though I was the king, I was not divinely appointed to conduct sacrifices to Yahweh, I had grossly overstepped my boundaries. I pleaded my case, that my army was deserting, I needed to do something. But Samuel was disgusted with me; I was a fool for disobeying Yahweh through my impetuosity. Then came the dreadful edict, my sovereignty was finished, Yahweh would find another man to lead Israel. On that note Samuel left me and so did all but six hundred of my soldiers. We fled to the caves to hide from the enemy. In any case we had only a few weapons, the occupying forces of the Philistines had confiscated almost all of our weapons.

Jonathan had started all this, he continued with more daring moves. The Philistines did not pursue us into the caves, they set up an outpost in the pass, waiting for us to try and escape. Jonathan and his bearer had two of the few swords we had. They attacked the outpost, slaughtered twenty and were holding their own when we arrived, the dust from the skirmish alerting us to something going on. Our soldiers poured out of the caves, picked up the weapons of the fallen and went to work. The outpost was destroyed, we had the Philistines on the run.

Jonathan again. In gratitude I ordered a fast, no one to eat anything before sundown, the penalty for non-compliance being death. My command was Yahweh's command. But Jonathan didn't hear what I said, he ate some honeycomb lying on the ground. I wanted to pursue the Philistines, but mindful of my previous impetuosity, I waited for the priests to conduct the ritual sacrifice before a battle. They came to tell me Yahweh wasn't listening to them, something was wrong, some sin had been committed.

I asked Yahweh what was the problem? By signs it was narrowed down to Jonathan, my eldest and most beloved son. When questioned, he admitted he had eaten some honeycomb, he was ready to die for his oversight. Sick to my stomach I ordered his execution, but the people remonstrated with me saying Jonathan had given Israel a great victory, should he not be spared? This time Yahweh agreed, but we did not pursue the Philistines. They retreated back to their own land.

A few months later I rounded up, equipped and trained a huge army. It was payback time, the tribes on our boundaries needed to be dealt with. I went to war with Moab, then Ammonite, then Zobah, then the Philistines, then Amalekite. Yahweh gave me victory after victory. I could only surmise he was pleased with me that, like Abraham, I was willing to sacrifice my son at his command. I was back in his good graces. Men flocked to our cause, any strong or valiant man I observed I immediately recruited into my personal service.

Even Samuel came back to meet with me. His message from Yahweh was that it was time to pay back the Amalekites for their opposition when our people first tried to enter Canaan. I was ordered to kill every man, woman, child and animal, the Amalekite nation to be totally eliminated.

The battle was short. We put every living thing in Amalek to the sword. But I spared Agag their king and the best of their livestock.

On my return I met a terribly angry Samuel. "You idiot," he exclaimed, "You were back in Yahweh's good graces, all you had to do was obey my instructions, you are a lost cause, your kingship will end with you."

I pleaded my case. I spared Agag but I brought the animals back to sacrifice them to Yahweh in gratitude for our victory. Samuel continued his rant, then he took a sword and hacked Agag to pieces in front of everyone. As he stormed out, I grabbed his cloak to argue with him, but the cloak tore off in my hands; I never saw Samuel again. Samuel knew Yahweh regretted having made me king of Israel. I felt my soul desert me.

I Adam returned to Limbo. I had made the wrong choice, I must start again. I will choose someone very young next time, and without the big ego! I could just follow Samuel. He knows Saul will kill him if he is obvious in his search for another king. When he quietly goes some-

where he doesn't normally go, that will be a likely time to tag along. That was how I chose this boy.

I David

I liked to sing the little ditties my mother taught me when I was caring for my sheep, I had a musical ear. At twelve years of age I felt very important that the care of our sheep was entrusted to me, after all there were foxes and wolves and maybe some robbers. I practiced hard with my slingshot and one time I scared off a big brown bear. Another time I killed a lion, not a big one, just a young one! Of course, when one of my sheep jumped the fence and I ran after them, it was amazing how quickly one of our servants came running to help, it was almost as if someone was always watching me.

I really wasn't very far from my father's compound. The loud "Cooee!" came clearly to me. I looked up and heard the call, "David!" So, I walked my sheep back to the pen, locked the gate and went to the house. Their safety was my first concern, that I understood very clearly.

Everybody knew who Samuel was, but what was he doing in my home? All my brothers were in the room with my parents. They all looked crestfallen as if they had failed some test. Even my big, handsome eldest brother had a grim face. Then Samuel yelled, "That's the one, come here boy!" I felt like bolting back to the field but my father raised his hand in a calming gesture and smiled at me. So I stepped forward. The old man poured some oil on his hand and anointed my forehead with the oil. "You will be the next king of Israel," he intoned. I felt a spirit take hold of me, a very strange feeling. The whole episode was really weird. I went back to my sheep.

It got even more weird. I loved music and I loved playing my harp. Even my brothers told me how good I was. I was again in the field when I saw my father coming towards me. He had a guy in uniform with him, and introduced me to the king's chief steward. "You mean King Saul," I stammered. "Indeed I do," he replied. "The king has a favor to ask of you. He gets these terrible headaches and music soothes him. They tell us you make the best harp music of anyone around, the king wants you to come and play for him, to come to the palace whenever he needs relief. What do you say?" I mean, I was thirteen years old by now, my father's chest was swelling up with pride, I replied, "OK."

I really liked the king, he was like another father to me. And Jonathan, his eldest son, became my best friend. I loved both of them and my harp music really did soothe Saul when the malaise hit him. In between times I went back home to shepherd our sheep.

The Philistines were our worst enemies. Whenever they set up their lines for battle I came to watch from a far hillside, no one cared about a little boy. This time there was a lot of shouting going on and no action. I strolled down to the battle lines, trying to look nonchalant. “What gives?” I asked, but was of course ignored. Then I saw this giant Philistine dominating their first line of battle. I heard his challenge. “I am Goliath, you are all cowards. Send out your best warrior, we will have a duel, one on one. If I win, you become our slaves, if you win, we will become your slaves, not that that will ever happen!”

I could see that none of our men wanted the role, even though Saul promised his daughter in marriage and untold riches to whoever succeeded in besting this giant. “Let me at him,” I cried out. Then my eldest brother saw me and told me to scram, to get back to our sheep and grow up.

But the king was passing by, he recognized me and called me over. “Hi David,” he said, “What were you saying?” I told him I would fight the giant, he smiled, “But you are only a boy, he is a trained warrior, he will eat you for breakfast.” So I told him I had killed both lions and bears (a little exaggeration) and I could kill this giant also. Well no one else fronted up. We would be slaves of the Philistines in either case.

Saul suited me up and off I went to fight the giant. Goliath rolled with laughter and all the Philistines joined him in a gale of mirth. There was I, not much more than three cubits tall, too small to even carry a sword, and there was the giant, broader and taller than any upright brown bear and growling twice as fiercely. I taunted him, “This day I will cut off your head and all this assembly will know that Yahweh has the victory.” He snorted and came rumbling towards me, his sword held high. I reached into my satchel and took out a stone, loaded it into my slingshot and hurled it at his forehead. In it went with a huge thump and down went the giant, not beaten yet, just stunned. I raced forward, picked up his sword which had fallen from his hand and hacked at his throat, again and again, until his head rolled away from his body. The Philistines panicked, took off in full retreat, but our army pursued them and thousands were slaughtered. I grabbed Goliath’s head by the hair and took it to the king.

I was never far from Saul’s side after that day. As I grew older and stronger my duties as the harp player were extended. I became the king’s armor bearer, he sent a messenger to my father than he wanted to keep me in his court. OK by me.

If you have never been jealous, been cursed with that vice, you have no idea what jealousy is, how it eats away at you, deadens your soul. When we had entered the royal city, Goliath’s head

on a pike, the crowds went haywire over me. Saul became jealous. He had won many, many victories, me just one. He deserved their thunderous adulation, me just a smattering of applause.

He was never the same with me after that day. Not so Jonathan, he remained my best friend, he was delighted with what I had done, I matched his own warrior spirit. A few years later, mostly spent in training for war, I led a brigade against an encroaching enemy tribe. We slaughtered them, my officers loved me, my tactics made their job easy. I was becoming too popular again, Saul feared me. I was again playing the harp for him one day when his headache and jealousy overwhelmed him. He took a spear and threw it at me but I ducked and scampered away. I was very careful around him from then on.

I had been leading more and more troops, the men recognized me as their best general. But Saul took that away also, giving me only one thousand troops to conduct campaigns against the enemy tribes. I was still successful but in a smaller way.

Saul had promised one of his daughters in marriage to whoever overcame Goliath. I was old enough by now so he offered me the lovely Merab in marriage. I was delighted, made all the preparations, had the feast, went off to the marriage chamber to disrobe and await my bride.

She never came, that night Saul gave her in marriage to one of his cronies. I was devastated and ashamed. But two can play that game. I began to woo Micah who was every bit as pretty as her sister, she fell head over heels in love with me. Saul hatched up a plan, this time I would be killed and he be rid of me. His servants came and whispered that Saul would let me have Micah but there was a price, one hundred Philistine foreskins! No way could I survive an attempt like that, thought Saul. Well I loved that girl to death. Off we went, just ten of us, surrounded an encampment of enemy troops and came in slashing with our swords and thrusting with our spears. We were unstoppable.

The surviving enemy fled, we unsheathed our knives and took two hundred foreskins back to Saul. I counted them out in front of him, right there in his throne room, in front of all his advisors and generals. Saul was compelled to give me his daughter, Micah, in marriage. But he hated me all the more for that, hated me even more intensely when I proved time and time again that I was the best of his generals and the most-loved by the people. He determined to kill me, making no secret of that to his son Jonathan and Micah, my wife. They remonstrated with their father but to no avail. "What wrong has he done?" they asked. But jealousy does not need a wrong to feed it, it is not revenge, it is an evil, a canker, a poison, an affliction without a cure.

Saul still needed my harp music to soothe his headaches but several times I was again forced to flee the room when he went into a dreadful rage, screamed and threw a spear at me. It finally came to a head, there came the day when both Jonathan and Micah told me that Saul intended to kill me that night. I fled.

I went to Samuel, I had nowhere else to go for protection, my father could not fight off Saul's guards. Three times Saul sent his agents to arrest me, three times Samuel sent them into ecstasy; they foamed at the mouth, shouted in strange tongues, rolled on the ground and were rendered powerless. Then Saul came himself, the same result, this time a king in ecstasy! The onlookers smirked, is Saul now also a prophet?

I could no longer expose Samuel to the king's wrath. I met with Jonathan, we swore everlasting peace and love to one another. Saul had told Jonathan that I would take away his kingship birthright, he should kill me, but Jonathan's love for me transcended that threat. I went into the desert to a sanctuary city of the Levites. I had no weapons but a priest gave me the sword of Goliath, the one I had used to cut off his head. I went south into the land of the Philistines but they recognized me. I feigned madness, my clothes in rags. I muttered inanities, slobbered at the mouth, screamed obscenities. They left me alone, their god had taken revenge on me, I was possessed by an evil spirit. But I did not feel safe and this was no way to live. I felt deserted by everyone, including my God.

In total despair my thoughts became words for my twenty second song. I would complete it in due time.

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

Why so far from my call for help, from my cries of anguish?

My God, I call by day, but you do not answer; by night, but I have no relief.

Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the glory of Israel.

In you our fathers trusted; they trusted and you rescued them.

To you they cried out and they escaped; in you they trusted and were not disappointed.

But I am a worm, not a man, scorned by men, despised by the people.

All who see me mock me; they curl their lips and jeer; they shake their heads at me:

"He relied on the Lord, let him deliver him; if he loves him, let him rescue him."

But I always knew I was under Yahweh's protection. Even when all seemed lost I kept my faith in him. I had plenty of time to think, I composed another song, hoping one day I would put these words to music on my harp. I wrote of what I knew as I lay surrounded by my enemies. This is my twenty-third composition.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the
Lord for ever.*

Reinvigorated, I went back to our own land, my men eagerly gathered to me. Saul sent three thousand of his best troops against us, claiming we were initiating a rebellion. Jonathan came to warn me, again swearing his love and loyalty to me. "You will be the next king, I Jonathan will be your second in command."

Saul spent the night before our battle in a cave. I sneaked in undetected and cut off a piece of his robe. The next day, on the battlefield, I approached him under a white flag, carrying the piece of his robe in my hand. He instantly recognized the missing piece and realized what it meant. "You could have killed me," he said, "Why didn't you?"

I asked him why he was intent on killing me, I had done him no wrong. Saul's heart broke, he wept for the loss of the love he once had for me. He was amazed that I had not killed him, no one would spare an enemy intent on his death if it were in his power to kill first. His heart turned back to Yahweh, he admitted I would be the next king of Israel. He simply asked that his family and family name be protected. Then he went his way and I went mine.

Alas Samuel died. The whole country came to bury him, all in tears and foreboding. Saul was their only leader now and he was flawed. I certainly knew he was flawed and not at all repentant. He gave my wife Micah in marriage to one of his supporters. Yahweh does not forgive adultery, particularly when it is against his anointed one. That man eventually died a horrible death, a

disgusting cancer slowly eating him away. But Micah was lost to me, too much time had passed. She had borne him five sons and switched her allegiance.

I needed to feed my men, so I sent scouts forward to find us food. They went to the home of Nabar first. This man proved to be a scoundrel and a bad-tempered wife beater. He had a wife called Abigail, forced to endure his beatings. He laughed at my soldiers saying, “Who is David, he means nothing to me, get lost!” Now everyone in Israel knew who I was and that Yahweh protected me. Nabar’s insults were also against Yahweh, not that he cared about that. I led my army against him, intending to put this blasphemer to the sword.

Abigail came to meet us on the road. She pleaded for his life, even though she had no love for him, nor he for her. She was a very pretty young woman. I gave Nabar a pass and we detoured around his farm. But that very night when he was about to hit Abigail for no particular reason, she told him how she had saved his worthless hide. He was very drunk, reared up to strike her down, but it was he who went down, a massive heart attack took his life.

When I heard of this wondrous event I quickly sent a messenger to her asking if she would be my wife. We had only met the once but a spark had leaped between us, promptly extinguished since she was married. To my joy she came with the messenger to our camp, we were married soon after. I also married a lovely virgin named Ahinoam and thankfully my two wives enjoyed each other’s company. I enjoyed each of them in my bed.

I needed a safe haven, Saul had broken his oath of friendship and was again intent on my demise. I led my men into the land of the Philistines and asked them to take us into their army, we would fight with them against Israel. But when it came to the day of battle they drove us away, fearing we would turn on them in their weakness once the battle was over. Maybe we would have!

We went back to our base in Ziklag, a town in the land of the Philistines. We came back to a scene of utter destruction. With the Philistine army away, an Amalekite raiding party had stormed Ziklag, burned the city to the ground and taken away the women, children and all of our wives. I had lost Abigail and Ahinoam. I wept and my men wept with me. Worse still, those left in the region blamed me, there was talk of stoning this Hebrew to death.

I found an Egyptian with a story. He spoke of a raiding party that had sacked several cities in the Negeb, he had eaten with them and shared their wine in their hideout. He believed they were resting up in that same place, enjoying the fruits of their forays, particularly the young virgins, the older women would be next.

We hit them at dawn three days later. We left none of them alive, hanging their bodies upside down from the trees whether they were still alive or dead. I had a joyful reunion with my two wives, they had not been touched. We took all the prisoners and the plundered possessions back to the region of Ziklag. There was no longer any talk of stoning.

Then came the saddest day of my life. After we left them, the Philistines had engaged Saul and his army in battle. No longer was Saul invincible, Yahweh was not with him. The Philistines carried the day. Saul was mortally wounded, he begged his armor bearer to kill him but the man would not. So Saul fell on his own sword and died. His body lay alongside those of his sons, Jonathan included. All of his family, except one son, Ishbaal, perished.

My grief knew no limit. I cried aloud to Yahweh, berating him. I had lost Jonathan whose love was to me more precious than that of any woman. He forgave me, my heart was broken, I knew not what I did.

I was born in Judah. As a mortally wounded animal will do, I came crawling back to my birthplace, preferably to my mother's womb, my grief profound. But the people needed a king. The land of Judah was separated from the lands of the other ten tribes by a strip of heavily defended Canaanite land, its capital Jerusalem. To many of the people we were two nations, Israel to the north and Judah to the south. Now there would be two kings.

The elders of Judah came to me to be their king. I knew I had already been anointed, I could not refuse to be king of Judah. But Abner, Saul's army commander, propped up the weak Ishbaal, Saul's remaining son, and insisted he be the king of Israel. Saul was of the tribe of Benjamin whose lands were directly north of Jerusalem, so his son Ishbaal was acceptable to the ten northern tribes.

But Abner wanted it all. He marched against Judah. We defeated them in the first encounter, losing just twenty men. But Abner was not taken, the war continued for months, my Judah gradually gaining ground and Israel growing weaker.

Abner grew sick and tired of the pathetic Ishbaal, blaming him for their continuing losses. Mockingly he took Saul's concubine to his bed, Ishbaal's objection ignored. Ishbaal became very afraid of him, fearing Abner would kill him and take the throne for himself.

Instead Abner negotiated with me, offering me Israel's throne, I would be king of both Israel and Judah. I only went to meet with him on the condition that my first wife, Micah, was returned to me. A first love is a first love! His terms were acceptable, he had already convinced the elders of Israel that I should be their king and not the weak Issbaal. He left our meeting in high spirits.

But my army commander, Joab, had jousting with Abner all this time; there was no love lost on either side. Once he found out Abner had been here to meet with me he went haywire. He galloped after Abner and challenged him to a duel. The much older Abner lost. It was more like an execution.

I was really annoyed. I had the throne of both kingdoms in my grasp but Abner's death put it all in jeopardy. I did as best I could, making sure everyone knew I was not involved in his murder.

It turned out well but in a way I could not abide. Two of Ishbaal's chieftains assassinated him as he slept. They brought his head to me, thinking I would give them a big reward. Well their reward was to be hung from the gallows. I made sure Issbaal's remains were treated with dignity. He was given a funeral fit for a king.

Finally the elders of Israel came to me. I was anointed king of Israel. I had been king of Judah for nearly eight years, I would be king of both Israel and Judah for another thirty years.

I first needed the two regions to be unified so we marched on Jerusalem and subdued its defenders. I built my fortress in that city, claiming Israel and Judah were getting equal treatment.

The Philistines had killed Saul and Jonathan. With Yahweh's blessing, I gathered a combined army of 30,000 men to me and I marched on them and gained the victory, driving them way back to their own land.

Again at Yahweh's urging my army went to the town in Judah where the Ark had finally ended up after its loss to, and regain from, the Philistines. We brought it to Jerusalem, this city to be both the political and religious capital of our people. I thought I might build there a permanent temple for the Ark to replace the mobile Sanctuary. We celebrated with a big party and I danced with my people. Well Micah thought I was making a fool of myself and told me so. I answered that I was dancing for Yahweh. She flounced off, but one does not insult Yahweh. She hated me for taking her away from her children, not enough excuse, Yahweh made sure she would never have any more children.

First things first, we must have peace. Our enemies had seen the turmoil we were in with Saul's death, a divided kingdom, an assassination and the sacking of Jerusalem. They smelled blood and began to raid across our borders.

One by one my army, under Yahweh's protection, destroyed their nations. First the Philistines, then the Moabs, then Zobah, Aramania, Edom, the Ammonites, Amalek. I imposed Governors on all our conquered countries and brought the booty to the Sanctuary treasury in Jerusalem to make

us the wealthiest nation in the known world. I ruled from the Euphrates to the great sea as Yahweh had promised.

I was Yahweh's faithful servant. I had my own prophet, Nathan. He brought me Yahweh's message that I should build the Temple to house the Ark, we had the money to purchase the finest materials to be found and the gold and silver to clothe a house worthy of our God.

I had done really well. I had never transgressed against Yahweh, I was his faithful servant, obeying the Law of Moses and the ten commandments. I had the time now to sit on my rooftop, play my harp and compose hymns to my God, songs of praise and thanksgiving. This was my ninety-sixth first attempt.

Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.

Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day.

Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.

For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.

For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.

Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.

Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it.

Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.

Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.

I had seven wives, Micah the daughter of Saul, the virgin Ahinoam, the fortuitously widowed Abigail and finally four virgins whose royal fathers made pacts of peace with me. They were Maacha, Haggith, Abital and Eglah. They were all fertile and gave me children, except for Micah but she caused her own fate. They gave me twenty children, all boys except for Tamar.

Yahweh did not object when I also slept with concubines, the slave girls attending my wives. I was blameless before Yahweh, a king, indeed an emperor, wealthy, my empire at peace, my bed filled by a succession of beautiful women. In gratitude I would build my God a temple, an architectural masterpiece way beyond anything the world had ever seen.

Then I saw Bathsheba. I was on my rooftop, way higher than those of the surrounding mansions. She came out onto her roof top, attended by her slave. She dropped her robe and, stark-naked,

stepped into her bath. I watched as she bathed, her breasts cresting above the water. I watched as she left the bath, as her servant dried that stunningly beautiful body. I lusted after her, ignoring the tenth commandment: Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife.

My go-to-man found out who she was. She was married to Uriah, one of Joab's lieutenants. He was away fighting my wars. I sent for her, I bedded her several times, she conceived, I ignored the sixth commandment: Thou shalt not commit adultery.

But when Uriah found out she was pregnant, he refused to sleep with her, he would be a problem. I sent a message to Joab to put his unit in the front line for their next battle. Uriah died there as I intended, ignoring the fifth commandment: Thou shalt not kill.

Love is blind, lust even blinder. I saw no evil in what I did, I was the king! Bathsheba obeyed the ritual period of mourning, then she had no other option but to come to me, her master and father of the child growing in her womb. We married, the baby was born, I now had eight wives and twenty- one sons. I loved Bathsheba above all my other wives, our child would be my heir.

Nathan, my divinely appointed prophet came to see me. He told me a story of a rich man with many flocks who nevertheless entertained a guest by killing the only lamb a poor neighbor had and feeding it to his guest. "What is your verdict?" he asked. Well I said we should throw the book at him, then "Who is this scoundrel?" "It is you my king," answered Nathan. I was shocked, suddenly aware of the evil I had done. I dreaded the punishment of Yahweh, I admitted my sin and desperately asked forgiveness.

I was not to die but the child from Bathsheba's womb died that instant. And Yahweh rejected me as the builder of his temple.

I consoled Bathsheba, we slept together, she conceived a second time. We called the boy Solomon and Nathan assured me he was a favorite of Yahweh from the day he was born. I would not be further punished other than by my own conscience. Shame and guilt are a nasty combination.

Or so I thought.

My first-born son Amnon became obsessed with his sister, Tamar. He lusted after this beautiful virgin. I myself, unsuspecting, sent Tamar to his house with something to eat since he said he was too sick to come to my table. But he overpowered her, ignored her pleas and raped her. Then his obsession turned to hatred, he threw her out of his house into the street. My son Absalom saw her, dusty and distraught. He knew Amnon's lust, he made Tamar confirm what had happened. He

waited, revenge is best served cold. Two years later Absalom gave a feast for all my sons, a pretense at solidarity. In front of them all, his servants put Amnon to the sword. Then he fled my wrath, for he knew I loved Amnon, my first born.

The years passed, my anger subsided. Joab, my army commander had always had a soft spot for Absalom. Through an intermediary he sought my forgiveness for the murder of my son. I gave it but with a caveat. Absalom could return to Jerusalem, but I never wanted to see his face again, beautiful as it was, more beautiful than that of any other face in all of my kingdom, his long hair a glory on his head.

More years later, again at Joab's entreaty, I forgave Absalom, we met and embraced. But I should never have trusted him. He began an intrigue against me, standing by the city gates and intercepting any man on his way to seek justice from his king, giving them what they wanted. Thus he gained favor with the people and seduced their hearts. Even my trusted counselor, Ahithopel, went over to his side. A rebellion was being stirred up, again the people of Israel plotting against those of my tribe Judah.

I fled ahead of Absalom's assassins, leaving only ten of my concubines to look after my palace in Jerusalem. When Absalom with his army entered the city, to show his dominion over me, he took the concubines one by one to his bed and let the whole population know what he was doing.

Two could play this game of shifting loyalties. I sent another of my trusted advisers, Hushai, to Jerusalem. He convinced Absalom that he too was shifting his allegiance from me to him, but in reality he was still my man. So both of Absalom's new advisers knew my battle strategies intimately.

Absalom was determined to eliminate me. Hushai and Ahithopel advised different strategies but those of Hushai impressed Absalom more. He made his plans accordingly and Hushai sent them to me that very night. The next day we destroyed Absalom's army, our surprise totally complete. My beloved son Absalom I would have spared, but as he fled the battlefield on his horse, his long trailing hair caught on the bough of a tree and he was left there squirming, feet dangling above the ground. Once Joab was told of this he hastened to the spot, ran Absalom through with his lance, slashed his hair so his body crashed to the ground and let his troops carve my son's body into pieces with their swords. Over one thousand of Joab's men threw his remains into a ravine and, from the rim, threw stones down onto his body until a huge cairn covered him forever.

I mourned for my son, but was not allowed to do so for long. Other conspiracies began to spring up, others wanted my throne, or at least the Israel part. Individuals I could deal with but the uprising spread like wildfire until a full scale war seemed likely between Judah and Israel. But the common people of Israel had little taste for battles between royalty that would bring them only grief. Several of the heads of the leaders of the uprising were thrown over the town walls as Joab laid siege to them. The rebellion was over, Joab returned to Jerusalem as did I.

I gave my ten concubines a lovely home, provided them with all they needed, but I never wanted or saw any of them again.

I was back in total command. In my pride I ordered a census, how many subjects did I have? The count of men capable of holding a sword was eight hundred thousand in Israel and five hundred thousand in Judah. I was delighted, Yahweh not so. A pestilence killed seventy thousand men before I admitted my sin of pride to Yahweh. I built an altar and made sacrifices to him until the pestilence subsided.

I was getting too old for all this. Nathan, my prophet, became aware of yet another conspiracy against me. He came with Bathsheba to tell me that Adonijah sought my throne. He already had heard some people chanting, "Long live King Adonijah." I had promised Bathsheba that Solomon would be my successor and she reminded me of this vow. So I took a vial of oil and anointed our son Solomon as the next king of all of Israel. Then I had Nathan proclaim this to the whole country.

The rebellion was quelled, Solomon was the king, I could die in peace after forty years on the throne. I made my peace with my God, admitting my grave sin against Uriah. I prayed this my 51st song, knowing my God forgives with love those who seek his forgiveness with an honest heart.

*Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving kindness:
According to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, And cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions; And my sin is ever before me.
Against thee, thee only, have I sinned,
And done that which is evil in thy sight...
Hide thy face from my sins, And blot out all mine iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God; And renew a right spirit within me.*

Cast me not away from thy presence; And take not thy holy spirit from me.

Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation....

O Lord, open thou my lips; And my mouth shall show forth thy praise.

For thou delightest not in sacrifice; Else would I give it:

Thou hast no pleasure in burnt-offering.

The sacrifices to God are a broken spirit:

A broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

Nathan's final words to me gave me great consolation.

When your days are done and you lie with your fathers,

I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own issue,

and I will establish his kingship.

He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish his royal throne forever.

I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me.

And so I died and joined my forefathers in Limbo.

I Adam did not hesitate to move on to the son. Maybe I should have. This young man proved to be a curious mixture.

I Solomon

My father taught me well. I am just a young man but not a stupid one. I had Adonijah, the pretend king, quietly executed for treason. On my father's final advice I also had Joab eliminated, he was becoming too powerful and thought I was not warlike enough. It would be only a matter of time before his ambition blossomed into my removal. That took care of the immediate internal threats.

For my long-term security, early in my reign I went to Gibeon and made a series of sacrifices to Yahweh. He would always be my God and I would never betray him. In a dream he asked me what gift he could give me as a reward. I chose wisdom, a choice he was very pleased with, so pleased he also gave me wealth and the promise of a long life.

I want a peaceful reign, no external threats. I married Pharaoh's daughter, a comely lass, but a jewel in her father's eye. Under his protection my country embraced peace both within and without.

My gift of wisdom soon became well known. Two prostitutes came before my judgment throne, each claiming to be the mother of the infant lying in a basket at my feet. "Cut the child in two with your sword and give them half each," I ordered my servant. One screamed, "No, give the child to her." The other smirked, victory was hers, she thought. Stupid woman, I sent her to prison and gave the child to its rightful mother.

I have surrounded myself with teachers, my knowledge extending to every discipline. Now I can talk enthusiastically about all kinds of plants from the cedars of Lebanon to the ivy growing on the wall, about all kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and fish. Above all I understand the different natures of men and women.

I love the arts and have my father's gift for music and rhyme. I have already composed three thousand proverbs and over fifteen hundred songs. My courtiers love these proverbs the best:

1. Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.
2. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.
3. Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.

4. A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.
5. Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are careful to discipline them.
6. A friend loves at all times, and is born, as is a brother, for adversity.
7. The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.
8. Many are the plans in a human heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.
9. Fools show their annoyance at once, but the prudent overlook an insult.
10. Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion.

I am now building for Yahweh the temple my father was not allowed to build. I purchased the best materials available in the many countries my father had conquered, no detail left uncovered in the building of this monument to God's glory. My design is simple but solemn, an exterior courtyard, a rectangular temple building divided by a veil, an altar of sacrifice in the forward section, the Ark of the Covenant to be housed in the back section.

I am a hands-on administrator, maybe not too popular at times, but no one else has my vision. I organized a workforce of 30,000 slaves culled from all the conquered lands to be my workforce. I was kind to them, they would have one month on, two months off. Guarded by my Israelite army, I sent them all over the world to bring back the very best building materials including cedars from Lebanon, marble, granite and stone from the best quarries in the known world.

When the woodwork and stonework was finished, the shell of the temple complete, I ordered the Sanctuary treasury to be opened. There lay the booty taken from the Egyptians on that first Passover night but, much more, the booty from all the conquests my father, David, had won for Yahweh. I had the interior of the temple covered in exquisite fabrics, precious metals and jewels and commissioned the best workers in iron and bronze to make the furnishings and utensils Yahweh had specified.

At the same time another set of laborers built my palace, so sumptuous it took 13 years to build. I spent the years forging a closer relationship with the kings of the countries my father had conquered and imposed Governors and taxes upon. How to do this peacefully, well again I married their daughters! By the time I died I had acquired 700 wives of royal rank, from Egypt, Moab, Edom, Sidon, the Hittite tribes and dozens more. Obviously I needed a very big palace. Not to boast, but I also had 300 concubines, any woman who caught my eye, I invited into my bed.

Alliances are one thing, shows of strength quite another. I built a huge army as well as 1,400 chariots and a cavalry of 12,000 horsemen. Both love and fear produce acquiescence.

Then I wrote. I first wrote a song book. I didn't love all my wives and concubines, really, I scarcely knew most of them. But I longed for love and began to express my understanding of it in song. My model was Yahweh's love for his chosen people, a love that never wavered whether we stayed true to him or lapsed. I wrote the songs as an allegory, a beautiful picture of the ideal Israel, the chosen people whom the Lord leads by degrees to a greater understanding and closer union in a bond of perfect love.

The woman says,

Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer.

"I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves."

I sought him, but found him not. The sentinels found me, as they went about in the city. "Have you seen him whom my soul loves?"

Scarcely had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul loves.

I held him, and would not let him go until I brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is perfume poured out; therefore the maidens love you. Draw me after you, let us make haste.

The man replies,

How fair and pleasant you are, O loved one, delectable maiden!

You are stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters.

I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its branches.

Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,

and the scent of your breath like apples,

and your kisses like the best wine that goes down smoothly,

gliding over lips and teeth.

Next I wrote about wisdom, the gift I had chosen from Yahweh. My sons, of course, wanted it also, so I needed to explain what it actually is. I told them wisdom is not just intelligence or knowledge or even understanding. It is the ability to use these to think and act in such a way that the choices we make are the right ones. I told my sons that they could not get wisdom from my psalms or proverbs or other writings or from me.

Then how? I told them experience is the most valuable teacher in acquiring wisdom. Wisdom begins and ends with the fear of the Lord by which is meant a deep, abiding, holy reverence and respect for God. From this fear comes obedience to his law and commands. Without this respectful fear, wisdom cannot grow in a person. Knowledge and understanding will teach you what is the right way to live, what your conscience says is the right way, but you still must live and choose and act. I Adam murmured, “You have free will”.

To sum it up, I told them, try to live your life in accordance with the law and commandments of Yahweh and as you get it right or get it wrong (your conscience will tell you which), let those experiences be your guide to a closer relationship with Yahweh. Then you will become truly wise.

When the Temple was complete, we consecrated it with ritual sacrifices of thousands of animals, sheep and oxen, an eight day dedication ceremony attended by all of Israel. Several times over the building years Yahweh came to me in a vision to praise what we had done in honor of his glory and to repeat that Israel would forever be under his protection while we remained faithful to him.

I had many visitors, the magnificence of the Temple and the tales of my wise judgments were broadcast all over the known world. The doubting Queen of Sheba herself came with a huge fleet. I was surprised to find her a very intelligent, smart and self-contained lady. Too old for me and not my type in any case, but she was charming and fun to be with. She had a long list of difficult questions, questions like, “Why does your God allow pain and suffering to happen to his followers?” I answered them all to her satisfaction. She stayed for several months, observing the peace and tranquility of my court. She was astonished at how content my people were, how faithful they were to our God, how wealthy we all were, the quality of what we wore, ate and delighted in. In gratitude and awe she had all her merchant ships unloaded onto our wharves by the great sea, leaving behind a fortune in gold, silver, incenses, fabrics and jewels. I was sorry her country was so far away, I would have loved to see more of her.

Several of my wives meant more to me than the rest. They began to work on me and, wise as I may have been, their wiles prevailed over my good judgment. I allowed them to worship the pagan gods of their upbringing and I allowed them to do so publicly, giving them the funds to do so. They built altars and shrines to Astarte, Sidon, Milcom and Amnon, to name a few. They and their servants and slaves worshipped these false gods, making sacrifices on these altars. Gradually, some of my own people began to join them.

The prophet of Yahweh came to me. Yahweh was terribly angry. My punishment would be huge, the loss of my kingdom. Because of David my father, this would not happen in my lifetime, but my son would have ten tribes torn away from him, leaving just two tribes for him to rule over. I wept but to no avail.

My empire started to fall apart. The weakest of my Governors lost control of their regions, then this snowballed with multiple uprisings. My army could not reassert control over all of them. Hadad, the prince of Edom, led an uprising, we put that down and hanged him. Then Rezon, the leader of a marauding tribe that had been harassing us for years, attacked and took control of Damascus, declaring himself its king, continuing the raids. Closer to home, one of my generals, Jeroboam, stirred up trouble against me. I tried to have him killed but he fled to Egypt and started weakening that alliance.

I grew old, I had reigned for 40 years, I knew my end was near. I finally realized that the pursuit of wisdom is not at all easy, writing,

*I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven.
It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with.*

I had tried everything in an attempt to find lasting happiness, I concluded:

*All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them.
I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my
labor and this was my reward for all my labor.
Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had
exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after the wind and there was no profit under the
sun.*

I now realized that when we die we take nothing with us.

“As he had come naked from his mother’s womb, so will he return...”

Finally, I accepted everyone will eventually die and all the deeds of man are vanity (useless) without obeying God.

The conclusion, when all has been heard, is:

Fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person.

In Limbo we watched in deep sadness as the empire and kingdom created by David fell apart. Egypt began to assert herself, Aram with its capital Damascus rebelled and became united under Ben-Hadad. Aram would be a constant threat to the northern kingdom for 150 years until Assyria defeated it, leaving Israel to an even worse fate.

I did not choose anyone, none were worthy. Rehoboam, Solomon’s eldest son, became king but he could not hold the kingdom together. He decided the whip was better than the carrot and imposed strict laws upon the people. They rebelled, he was forced to take sanctuary in Jerusalem, a virtual prisoner. Nine northern tribes and that of Simeon formed their own kingdom, just Judah and Benjamin gave their allegiance to Rehoboam. The rival kingdoms were again called Israel and Judah, reflecting the division between the tribes that began centuries before, David’s efforts at unification were short-lived. I Adam would search for leaders faithful to Yahweh in each kingdom. My search for a faithful king in Israel was fruitless, I would have more luck in Judah. But let me first tell you about Israel, then we can wind back the clock and talk about Judah.

In Limbo we certainly wanted nothing to do with this man, we knew Yahweh would be appalled with his actions. He had not been appointed a king by Yahweh in any case.

I Jeroboam

I had returned from Egypt once I learned of the death of Solomon, bringing with me an alliance with Pharaoh and his promise of military support. My revolt against Solomon still fresh in their minds, the elders promptly anointed me as the king of Israel. I made my palace in Shechem in the land of Ephraim.

I was no lover of Yahweh but I knew the majority of my subjects were, they still wished to worship the God whose temple was in Jerusalem. Frequent pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the big feasts would breed unrest, a desire for peace with Judah, a desire to re-unite the kingdoms. They would stone me and my family to death, eliminating any opposition to reunification. I consulted Pharaoh and he helped me. I set up a rival religion with a false god, a temple, priests and feast days and I forbade any pilgrimages to Judah; we closed the borders.

I knew nothing of Limbo, I certainly never made it there.

In Limbo we watched Yahweh's anger growing hotter against Israel. Jeroboam died and certainly was never admitted to Limbo. Neither was his son Nadab who continued the worship of a false god. Then one of the generals, Baasha, assassinated Nadab and for good measure killed every member of Jeroboam's family, thus destroying that mini-dynasty. He took the throne but proved to be no better. He ruled with an iron fist and he viciously promoted the spread of the new pagan religion, the people's memories of the glorious temple in Jerusalem were still too fresh; radical measures were required.

Baasha's son Elah had a short-lived reign, less than one year. He was assassinated by his army commander, Zimri, who promptly had all of Baasha's family killed to eliminate any obvious threat to his throne.

But the people rose against him for murdering their king, saying he wasn't such a bad guy. Another general, Omni, laid siege to his royal town and, in despair, Zimri obliged by killing himself. Thus Omni became king, but he too went bad, promoting the worship of the pagan god. His legacy was the new royal city of Samaria and his son, King Ahab.

From Limbo we despaired of finding a ruler in Israel who would restore the kingdom to Yahweh. We also were terrified at the growing threat of Assyria, the empire to the east of the

Euphrates. Under David we controlled the land to the west of the Euphrates but our hold on it was weakening rapidly. We did not think any of the kings of Israel would retain it, given their worship of pagan gods and Yahweh's refusal to support them. It was not a military leader we needed. I made a different kind of choice, a spokesperson for Yahweh, a prophet.

I Elijah

I left my home in Israel with fear and trepidation. I knew Yahweh was with me, I knew King Ahab was a weak man, but I also knew his pagan wife, Jezebel, was a tigress and a murderer. No man spoke against her and lived.

We all knew Ahab was terrified of the growing threat of Assyria, that he needed the protection of a powerful ally, that for this reason he married the daughter of the King of Sidon who doubled as the high priest of the pagan religion that worshipped the god Baal and his wife Astarte. Jezebel had been brought up in this religion and its vicious culture suited her own nature perfectly. The fact that Ahab was a weakling also suited her just fine, she knew she would actually rule Israel, be the power behind the throne.

At her urging, Ahab ordered a temple dedicated to Baal to be built in Samaria and Jezebel had hundreds of prophet-priests brought from Sidon to be its ministers. The borders with Judah were strengthened some more, the people forbidden to worship Yahweh, disobedience death.

I stood before the two of them, trembling and tongue-tied. But Yahweh spoke through me. Jezebel had ordered the murder of hundreds of the prophets of Yahweh, she wanted only the Baals to be the people's gods. Obadiah, one of Ahab's counsellors but faithful to Yahweh, did manage to save the lives of many by hiding them in a cave as Ahab's soldiers conducted the cleansing sought by Jezebel.

I told the two of them that Yahweh would bring a long drought to Israel in punishment for their sin against him. And so it happened. Near the end of the drought I fronted up to Ahab again. I was more confident this time. I answered his insult, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel," with "I have not made trouble for Israel. You and your family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals."

Ahab needed more than words. At Yahweh's command I asked him to have all of Israel come to Samaria. We would have a contest, the sacrifice of two bulls, one to each of our Gods. Jezebel's 400 prophet-priests tried everything to have Baal incinerate their bull, nothing happened. At my command, Yahweh incinerated the bull dedicated to him. The winner got to take it all, I won the prize and the people joyfully assisted as I slew every one of Baal's prophets.

Jezebel was furious, but stopped by such a huge number of witnesses. I fled as the crowd dispersed. But I was now a pariah, no one dared help me or give me shelter and food. Her army

searched everywhere for me; I had heard her threat, I would be next to die. I went even further into the wilderness. I came across a widow whose son was dying. She scornfully asked whether I was there to complete his demise, but he was already dead. I raised him to life, at least I now had two supporters!

I continued to skulk around, camouflaging myself and keeping a low profile. But that was not what Yahweh wanted. He found me in a cave and ordered me to go back. I was to anoint Hazael, ben-Hadad's son, as the next king of Aram, its capital Damascus, Jehu as king of Israel and Elisha as my own successor, the next prophet of Israel. This trio would inflict Yahweh's punishment upon Ahab and Jezebel. I found Elisha first, he followed me willingly. We proceeded to find Hazael and anointed him as Yahweh dictated.

Nevertheless, his father Ben-Haddad raised a huge army and laid siege to Samaria. But Yahweh was not finished with Ahab. We found him in his army base outside Samaria. With Jezebel a virtual prisoner in Samaria the weakling Ahab was ready to listen to Yahweh and denounce Baal. I met with Ahab and told him that Yahweh would give his army the victory if he followed my plan. And so it happened, Ben-Haddad fled as his army was being slaughtered.

We went to Ahab a second time in his army base where he was busy rebuilding his army although his losses were slight, warning him that by year's end Ben-Haddad would have raised another huge army and would seek revenge. Ahab was ordered to kill everyone of them, Ben-Haddad included. So Ahab raised a huge army himself, the people flocking back to Yahweh and against Baal. Yahweh did indeed give Israel the victory, 100,000 Aramites were slaughtered on the first day alone. Ben-Haddad fled and sought to disguise himself in sackcloth, but Ahab's soldiers found him and brought him before Ahab. Stupid man, clearly Yahweh was on his side, but he disobeyed Yahweh's command and let Ben-Haddad live, making a pact of peace with him.

We came to Ahab a third time to give him Yahweh's verdict. His kingship would soon end and his family be eliminated. Ahab sought repentance, clothing himself in sackcloth and walking with his head bowed low. This time Yahweh told us he was pleased with Ahab's repentance, but the disaster to his family would be delayed only until his son took the throne.

Ahab dragged himself back to Samaria, into the arms of his wife, Jezebel. He seemed to be in deep despair, Jezebel wondered why. He gave her the excuse that he had asked his neighbor Naboth to sell him his vineyard. The vineyard was close to his palace, he wanted it. But, he told

Jezebel, with tears in his eyes, Naboth refused to sell it since it had been in his family for generations.

Jezebel was beside herself, what a pathetic little mouse she was married to. She told Ahab, “You make a fine king of Israel and no mistake. Get up and eat; cheer up, and you will feel better. I will give you the vineyard of Naboth myself.”

A week later Jezebel invited a whole bunch of elders to a feast, Naboth included. Then she had one of them accuse Naboth of blasphemy against Yahweh and cursing against the king. Two witnesses came forward and testified to these crimes. The elders promptly condemned Naboth to death, not knowing Jezebel had paid the witnesses to bear false testimony. Naboth was led outside the town and stoned to death, dogs came and licked his blood off the stones. Jezebel told Ahab, “Go and take possession of your precious vineyard, wimp!”

Yahweh told me where to find Ahab, he was in the vineyard with Jezebel, sampling the grapes. I gave them Yahweh’s verdict for their crimes of murder and usury. “In the place where the dogs licked the blood of Naboth, there they will lick your blood too.” Again Ahab sought forgiveness, but to no avail.

I watched as his last days unfolded. Full of courage after he bested Naboth and gained a vineyard, he launched another campaign against Aram. Baal’s prophets assured him of victory. The king of Judah actually offered to help but I sent the prophet Micaiah to dissuade him and he withdrew his offer.

Ahab led his army forth, clothed in a common soldier’s uniform for disguise, he was not that brave. As he galloped his chariot forward an enemy archer shot an arrow through the gap in his armor. He bled to death on his chariot, the king was dead, the battle was over. His soldiers took his body back to Samaria and left the chariot outside the town walls and the dogs came to lick the blood from it. Naboth’s remains lay close by, just as I, Yahweh’s prophet, had predicted.

Ahab and Jezebel’s son, Ahaziah, became king of Israel. He was as bad as the two of them, worshipping Baal. He had a bad fall and consulted Baal as to whether he would recover, Moab had rebelled against Israel, he needed to be up and running to counter the threat.

I sent him Yahweh’s condemnation. My messenger gave him my curse, “The bed you have got into, you will not get out of, you are certainly going to die.” Enraged, twice he sent 50 men to capture me, twice fire flamed down from heaven and consumed them. The captain of the third

contingent of 50 pleaded with me for their lives. Fortuitously Ahaziah died, so he was off the hook.

Ahaziah left no children so his brother Jehoram took the throne. Another son of Jezebel, he too worshipped Baal, ignoring my warnings. In any case I kept a low profile, Jezebel was still intent on killing me.

Yahweh told me that Jehu, Ahab's army commander, was a true believer, albeit a secret one. This worship of Baal would never cease whilst the family of Ahab and Jezebel held the throne. Elisha and I sent one of our prophets to anoint Jehu as the next king of Israel. He did so and the army backed Jehu to a man, it was time for a military coup.

Jehu lead the uprising. He personally killed Jehoram with an arrow to his heart. Again the body was thrown into the field where Naboth's body lay buried, and again the dogs came and licked the blood from his tunic.

The wicked witch was next. Jehu rode his horse up to the city wall, Jezebel spotted him from the window of the harem and asked facetiously, "Is all well, you murderer of your master?" Jehu yelled, "Throw her down." She was not loved, two of the eunuchs threw her out of the window and Jehu trampled her body to death with his horse. Totally unconcerned he went in to eat and drink. Relenting a little later, he told the servants to go bury her, she was after all a king's daughter. But all the servants found was her skull, feet and hands, the dogs had already eaten the rest. There would be no tomb for Jezebel, the dung of the dogs would spread her corpse over the fields, so that no one can say, "This was Jezebel."

Elisha and I encouraged Jehu to bring this to a final conclusion. Jehu and his men searched Samaria and all of Israel. They killed every one of the House of Ahab, his sons, his advisers, his close friends, his priests; they did not leave a single one alive. Jehu then sent platoons all over Israel, forcing all those who worshipped Baal to come to his temple in Samaria. His army slew them all, then totally destroyed the temple of Baal, turning it into a latrine.

Thus the worship of Baal was wiped out in Israel. My task was complete. I passed the mantle of Israel's prophet onto Elisha. My end was quite spectacular. Yahweh sent a chariot of fire and horses of fire to surround me and then a whirlwind took me up into heaven. I joined the patriarchs in Limbo.

I Adam wondered what would happen now. Would Israel return to the worship of Yahweh? I quickly found Elijah's successor.

I Elisha

Elijah had trained me well and Yahweh had gifted me with the same power of miracles and prophecies. Like Elijah I could part the waters of a stream and cross dry-shod, make tainted water pure, have bears attack brats who teased me for my bald head, make a widow's lamp stay alight long after its oil should have been used up, bring a dead child back to life, take the poison out of soured soup, multiply a few loaves into a feast for hundreds, heal the army commander of Aram of his leprosy, stop the Aramean raiding parties in their tracks.

My relationship with Ben-Haddad, the king of Aram, was complicated. We had anointed his son, Hazael, as the next king of Aram, thinking that would build a bridge of peace between the two kingdoms. Also King Ahab had conquered Ben-Haddad's army when they laid siege to Samaria and lost the battle. He let Ben-Haddad live, even made a pact of peace with him against Yahweh's orders, but Ben-Haddad broke that peace pact almost immediately, he wanted to defeat Ahab and take Israel.

But I knew he was dying so I went to Damascus, not willingly, since I knew he blamed me for his misfortunes and battle losses. I made my peace with him before he died and I left Damascus in good graces with his son, Hazael, the new king.

I went back to a mess in Israel. Jehu, given the kingdom by Yahweh, lapsed into the worship of false gods, not Baal but two golden calves. I remonstrated with him to no avail. So Yahweh let Hazael fulfil his father's wishes. His army defeated Israel's throughout the breadth and width of the land; Israel was in chaos, all its major towns given over to an occupying force.

Jehu died and his son, Jehoahaz, took the throne. He initially persisted in the idolatry begun by his father but as the losses against Aram mounted, he turned back to Yahweh with my guidance. Yahweh heard his plea and a succession of victories followed. Stupid man, he again lapsed. An exasperated Yahweh allowed Hazael to destroy the Israelite army. And so it continued, Israel was burning from one end to the other.

Jehoahaz died, his son, Joash, succeeded him. But he was no better, again an idolater. I pleaded with him in vain, time after time. I was very tired, I lay on my death bed in great despair. Joash did come to visit me. I reluctantly obeyed Yahweh and offered him victory over Aram, not for what he had done, but because Yahweh remained faithful to the covenant he made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I died, Hazael died, Joash defeated Hazael's son, another Ben-Haddad, and

recovered many of the Israelite towns that Aram had occupied. Yahweh was not yet ready for Israel to be totally destroyed.

Now in Limbo, I Elisha was pleased with that result. I Adam thought the worst would soon happen. But Israel's next king, named Jeroboam after the first king of the separated Israel, ruled for 41 long years, all of them spent in the idolatrous worship begun by his infamous ancestor, Yahweh's vengeance on hold. In Limbo we could feel the tension building. I Adam found this man. What was the importance of Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria?

I Jonah

I must be the most reluctant prophet Yahweh ever commissioned. He told me to go to Nineveh and tell them their wickedness was making him very angry. Who cares, I thought, those people are pagans, they will torture and kill me, I'm not going there! Why would I want to prophesy to non-Israelites anyway? Who cares about the Assyrian empire!

I fled to the wharves, found a ship sailing the opposite direction and booked my fare. We were way out to sea when the storm struck, our sails were ripped to shreds, the waves were huge, five stories above our deck, we were going down any minute now. I was the new addition, these sailors were very superstitious, it must be my fault, they made me confess everything. A Hebrew running away from their God, he must be behind this nightmare. Over the side I went, baggage and all.

But Yahweh was not finished with me, he gave me another chance. A huge fish scooped me up, for three days I lay in its foul-smelling stomach, maybe I gave it indigestion. I rethought my priorities, making my peace with Yahweh, I would do his will. The whale vomited me onto a beach, I stumbled away, heading for Nineveh.

I found out that Nineveh is a huge city, it took me three days to cross it. I preached a single message wherever I went, *"Only 40-39-38 days more and Nineveh is going to be destroyed."* I was surprised, the people believed in my God. They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth as did their king when he heard my dire prediction.

God saw their efforts to renounce their evil behavior and relented; he did not inflict on them the disaster which he had threatened and which I thought they thoroughly deserved. But I was not finished with Yahweh yet. I angrily said to him,

"Isn't this exactly what I predicted, what did you need me for, I knew you were a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich on graciousness, relenting from evil."

I sat sulking under a shade I made from my cloak. Then Yahweh arranged for a castor oil plant to grow over my head and give me a lot more shade, I was delighted, at last some recognition. But the next day worms came and ate my shade away, the sun beat down on my head, I wished I were dead. Yahweh was amused. He spoke to me, "You are only upset about the castor oil plant which cost you no labor. Am I not to feel sorry for the great city, Nineveh, with 120,000 people who can't tell their left hand from the right, to say nothing of all the animals."

I sulked all the way back to my home.

In Limbo we smiled at his childishness. I found a replacement.

I Amos

I am a simple man, a shepherd. But Yahweh called me to preach to Jeroboam's subjects. They were mostly way wealthier than me, the gap between the rich and the poor huge. The poor huddled by their doorsteps, malnutrition and thirst obvious, their exploitation by the rich unchallenged. Well I challenged it and the mockery of their religion, all pomp and ceremony, no real worship and humility. I warned them all that Yahweh would come as a warrior to judge the nations that rebelled against him. Israel in particular would be punished for her violations against God's covenant. I demanded they repent and quickly, Yahweh could not allow their sins to go unpunished, their nation would be destroyed.

But they did not listen to me.

In Limbo we shuddered. The Assyrian empire was growing stronger every day. Maybe the people would listen to a poet. I chose this one.

I Hosea

I am a prophet of Yahweh. This is what I had to deal with. Zechariah took the throne of his father Jeroboam but not for long. Six months later he was assassinated by an army commander, Shallum, who then took the throne. Just one month later Shallum was assassinated by a rival general, Menahem, who became king.

Things were no better. Menahem worshipped false gods. Yahweh punished him with defeat by the king of Assyria who exacted a huge toll of silver and gold. After he died 10 years later, his son, Pekahiah, continued the worship of pagan gods. His sentence was yet another assassination. Pekah, his equerry, killed him and succeeded him.

I could not believe my ears. Yahweh spoke to me, that was hard to believe. But what he said to me was even more so, “Go, marry a whore, and get children with a whore, for the country itself has become nothing but a whore by abandoning Yahweh.” Then I thought of all the kings I had known and how they all abandoned Yahweh for false pagan gods.

At first I took Yahweh literally. I married a whore, Gomer. She gave me three children but then she left me for another man. I found her, he was treating her badly, I forgave her and brought her back home to my house and made this bargain.

*“Then I said to her, ‘You shall stay with me for many days.
You shall not play the harlot, nor shall you have a man;
so I will also be toward you’.”*

I put into verse my sorrow over her unfaithfulness but when I read the words they were not mine, not about me, but Yahweh’s words about the unfaithfulness of Israel to him, yet his undying love for her.

*How can I forget and leave My loved one?
How can I depart from her, wounded is My heart.
How can I forget that I’m compassion,
How can I depart from her nearer to My heart.
O Israel, why have you pierced My heart?
Why have you gone?*

*See your love is melting like the dewdrop, dry and fallow lies your ground,
 withered is My heart.
 How can I forget that I have made you?
 Given you My life and love, promised you My heart.
 How can I forget that you do need Me,
 Even though you leave me I shall woo your heart.
 O Israel why have you gone so far in search of love?
 Can't you feel the coolness of My shadow?
 Water when you're thirsting, rain when you are dry.
 I shall call until My heart will find you.
 Lead you to My wilderness, speaking to your heart.
 I shall give you back your fruit and vineyard.
 I shall give you hope and love as when you were young?
 O Israel how can I keep you back and make you Mine?
 I will heal the wounds inflicted on you. Comfort I will bring you, tender is my heart.
 Will you be free? Will you return to Me, and be My bride?
 I shall make you mine My love forever.
 Give Me back your faithful love give Me back your heart.
 O Israel will you return to Me and be My bride ?*

Pekah ruled Israel for 10 years. There was no remorse, no return to Yahweh. The unfaithfulness of the Israelite nation continued. I walked through Israel, I walked through Judah, warning the people of the fate soon coming. No one listened. There came that dreadful day.

The Assyrians had tasted the blood of the Israelites once, they came a second time. The new Israelite king Hosea quickly surrendered and agreed to pay an annual tribute to Shalmaneser, now Assyria's king, doing just that for several years. But then Hosea stupidly decided to play a double game. He sent messengers to Pharaoh, seeking the umbrella of Egypt's protection, and thinking he had a deal, he did not send that year's tribute to Shalmaneser. Well he miscalculated somehow, Pharaoh turned a blind eye on him, the Assyrians returned a third time, captured Samaria and deported the entire Israelite population to Assyria; Hosea they imprisoned in chains.

In Limbo we wept. Samaria was totally destroyed as an Israelite city, only a few poor people remained. Then Shalmaneser brought people from Babylon and other pagan countries and settled them in Samaria and all over Israel. He relented a little and sent back one of the priests of Yahweh to continue the poor people's religion. For some time there were a few true worshippers in Samaria and the countryside but through inter-marriage a hybrid religion began to emerge. The people did not worship Yahweh in a proper manner and they worshipped pagan gods as well. In exile the Israelites also continued to worship pagan gods, the ten tribes were lost to Yahweh forever, part of the chosen people no more. If the chosen people were to survive as a nation, it would all come down to the land of Judah, inhabited by the tribes of Judah and Benjamin and a scattering of Levites. We switched our attention to Judah, winding back the clock to reminisce over all of its history post-Solomon.

It had not begun well. Rehoboam, Solomon's eldest son, had no feel for government. Solomon had imposed a system of taxation on Israel; the people resented this burden since most of the money went to build the Temple and the Palace but these were in Jerusalem and Jerusalem was in Judah. Rehoboam increased the taxes even more and subdued any complaints with violence. So the northern kingdom rebelled and gained its independence, following Jeroboam who had returned from exile in Egypt once Solomon died, Rehoboam too powerless to prevent the schism, indeed prevented by Yahweh's prophet, Ahijah, from going to war with his brother Israelites.

Worse still, Rehoboam allowed the worship of pagan gods, even allowing sacred male prostitutes. Yahweh punished him by allowing Pharaoh to sack Jerusalem, taking many of the treasures of the Temple and the Palace back to Egypt. He died, his son Abijam succeeded him but proved to be no better, continuing the pagan practices.

In between my choices of prophets in Israel, I also chose prophets in Judah, even one king.

I Asa

My mother was an Israelite, she reared me to worship the one true God and him only. All my youth I was appalled at what my father allowed, the disgusting practices of the many pagan religions that poisoned my fellow countrymen. When my father, Abijam died, I became king and went to war against all who practiced idolatry, Judah was cleansed, the pagan shrines destroyed, the sacred male prostitutes put to the sword.

My fellow king, Baasha, wanted it all, not just Israel but also Judah. His Israelite army built a fortified city on the border with Judah and laid siege to our northern cities. Through the prophet Elisha I sought an alliance with Ben-Haddad, king of Syria, the country to Israel's north. I paid him with silver and gold, taken from what was left of the treasures in the Temple and Palace. He invaded several cities in northern Israel, he wanted that land in any case to expand his domain. Baasha was forced to retreat and return to Israel to defend the north. We destroyed his fort, the threat was over.

For the rest of the 41 years of my reign, Judah was at peace, resting under the protection of Yahweh, whom we all faithfully obeyed and worshipped. I died in peace, knowing my son, Jehoshaphat, would continue my redemption of our people.

I Adam returned to Limbo. Finally the people of the south of the promised land were reunited with Yahweh, the covenant renewed. For the next 25 years Jehoshaphat kept Judah faithful to Yahweh while the evils of Ahab and Jezebel kept Elijah busy in Israel.

I Elijah (part II)

My travels over the promised land knew no borders. I went to see Judah's king, I had a message for him, a message from Yahweh. Poor Judah. Jehoshaphat's son, Jehoram, married a daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. Back came the worship of the Baals, back came the vengeance of Yahweh, back came me. I warned Jehoram what would happen but he ignored me.

Years before Judah had occupied Edom after the final subduing battle, eliminated its leading princes and nobles and there was peace in that region. But now Yahweh allowed a king to arise in Edom, he raised an army and went to war with Judah. He won. Edom threw off the domination of Judah and was again free.

Then another occupied province, Libnah, also revolted. Jehoram's eight year reign was disastrous. He was succeeded after he died by his son Ahaziah.

Ahaziah was no better than the father, but he lasted less than a year. He formed a friendship with another Jehoram, the king of Israel. Together they challenged Hazael, king of Aram, in battle, but Yahweh did not support them, they lost. Jehoram was wounded; lay on his sick bed for weeks. Ahaziah went back to Jerusalem but later came to visit Jehoram again after he recovered.

This was when Jehu, the Israel army commander was plotting to take Jehoram's throne. The two kings, each in his own chariot decided to visit Jehu and observe the battle he was fighting against Hazael. Well, in the confusion of a battle many things get overlooked. Jehu put an arrow into Jehoram's heart, Ahaziah fled, Jehu's personal guard pursued and slaughtered him. Both of these kings had promoted pagan religions, neither a great loss! That opened the way for Jehu to become king of both Israel and Judah, but a conniving woman put an end to that.

I Elijah returned to Israel, crossing paths with Elisha on his way to Judah.

I Adam returned briefly to Limbo, then made the transition.

I Elisha (part II)

I tried to reason with Athaliah, the mother of the dead Azariah, but she would not listen. Power went to her head. She and Jezebel made a great pair. Athaliah wanted the throne. She promptly executed everyone of royal stock, all Azariah's brothers and sons. Not exactly a role model for grandmothers! But she missed a boy, actually a baby, Azariah's nephew, his name was Joash. Azariah's sister, the boy's aunt, hid him away in the Temple in Jerusalem for six years.

During the time we had Queen Athaliah as our ruthless leader, the people hated her. In the seventh year the chief priest revealed who his secret guest was. The army commanders hated Athaliah also and, at the chief priest's command, they executed the despised queen. The seven year old Joash became the king of Judah, the chief high priest the power behind the throne.

That was OK by me and by Yahweh. The boy king was brought up in the strict observance of the Law and the Covenant and, under his guidance and the chief priest's surveillance, the people returned to the worship of the one true God. When he was older he further arranged the complete renovation of the Temple and the restoration of the gold and silver ornaments and treasures that invading armies had taken away. Judah was almost back to its finest state but there were still pockets of pagan tribes in the mountains, ready to spread their poison given the chance.

Alas the army commanders did not want a theocracy, to be ruled by a priest, albeit in the shadow of a young man. They assassinated Joash and his son Amaziah took the throne. I Elisha was pleased with him, he continued the change begun by his father in the worship of Yahweh.

The army commanders had miscalculated with Amaziah. He rounded up and executed everyone involved in his father's assassination. Then he conquered Edom which Jehoram had lost, Yahweh was definitely on this man's side.

I Elisha returned to Israel, my life was nearly at an end.

I Adam returned briefly to Limbo. Israel was a nightmare but Judah was redeemed. Or so I thought. Then Yahweh urged me to choose this young prophet, so I returned to earth.

I Joel

I am a prophet of Yahweh. I walk through Judah telling the future to every person I met. I tell the people Judah will be ravaged, like a corpse, bare bones, flesh stripped away. Total desolation. The land a desert, crops, animals, trees all gone. “Repent and pray!” I thundered.

But after this, I console them.

I Yahweh will pour out my spirit on all mankind. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions.

Yahweh spoke through me,

I am going to gather all the nations and put them on trial for what they have done to my people.

When that day comes, the mountains will run with new wine and the hills flow with milk, and all the river beds of Judah will run with water. Egypt will become a desolation, Edom a desert waste on account of the violence done to the sons of Judah. But Judah will be inhabited forever, and Yahweh will make his home in Jerusalem.

I Adam returned to Limbo. Everything seemed fine in Judah, what was this prophecy all about? We soon found out. Amaziah foolishly challenged Joash, king of Israel, to a test of strength. Well, Joash easily won the battle, made Amaziah a prisoner, demolished the gates of Jerusalem and took all the gold and silver, all the treasures in both the Temple and the Palace, took them and hostages back to Samaria.

Amaziah was ransomed and released. He did reign for another 15 years but his spirit was broken. A plot was hatched against him, he fled but was caught and killed. He was the last of his family, the people of Judah chose a new king.

I Adam chose a rising prophet, there was a sea change in his message. The future is less about the observance of the Law of Moses and more about the coming of a Messiah, a savior, one man

who would deliver us all from our sins. I Adam wept, could my sin be erased? Would I actually see the face of God, be with him for eternity, in heaven?

I Isaiah

I grew up among the rich and powerful in Jerusalem, they scared me not, even when Yahweh commanded me to spread his message. My first king was my first cousin Uzziah, we argued a lot towards the end of his reign.

Uzziah was only 16 years old when he took the throne, he reigned for almost 52 years. He started well, worshipping the one true God. But he did not eliminate the pockets of pagan worship in the mountains. Yahweh struck him down, he became a leper to his dying day, confined to his room. His son, Jotham, was master of the palace and ruled the country. When his father died Jotham, my second cousin, became king and ruled for 16 years. He worshipped Yahweh, I made sure of that, but he also did not destroy the pockets of paganism. I could do nothing with him about that.

His son, Ahaz, my third cousin, began the decline. He actually began to make sacrifices to the pagan gods at their shrines still standing in the mountains. The people followed him and lapsed from the worship of Yahweh. His 16 year reign was not peaceful, Rezin, king of Aram, led his army down from the north, laid siege to Jerusalem but could not capture it. While that was going on the king of Edom drove the men of Judah out of his capital city and the other towns, so Edom was again lost to Judah.

Ahaz made a disconcerting decision. He sent a messenger to Tiglath, the king of Assyria, further to the northeast of Syria, asking for his help. Help came, Tiglath came south, captured the Syrian capital, Damascus, deported its people to be his slaves, defeated Rezin as he hurried back, captured him and put him to the sword. In payment, Ahaz gave Tiglath all the silver and gold remaining in the Temple and the Palace, stripping them bare, creating a dangerous precedent.

Assyria was clearly an empire in the making. Shortly afterwards Tiglath invaded Israel, laying siege to Samaria, capturing it and deporting the Israelites to Assyria. I wondered if Judah would be next, maybe not while Ahaz was alive, but what then?

My words came to me in a vision. The people of Judah had abandoned Yahweh, God must punish them, but will afterwards redeem them. I foresaw the exile of the Jews, the people of Judah. But I also foresaw their return from exile and the rebuilding of the chosen people. Salvation was the core of my message, but not so much the salvation of the Jewish race, more so the coming of

a man, a Redeemer, who would save every single human being who believed in him. How would this happen? How mysterious are these prophecies?

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness. From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.

I told the Jews that the Messiah, their redeemer, would personally pay for their sins with his own death. As Adam's soul, I shuddered to hear this, what had been unleashed by Adam and Eve listening to the evil presence in the Garden?

*Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted.
But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.
All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.
He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth.*

I proclaimed Judah's fate, the fate of the Gentile cities and nations: Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, Ethiopia, Egypt, Edom, Arabia and Tyre as well as Israel and the city of Jerusalem.

I calmed the people with my final message. Through the greatness of God, Judah would be delivered from bondage and slavery. Much more, the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, would come.

I could not get a hearing with Ahaz in his lifetime. I did much better with his son, Hezekiah. His mother was a true believer, she brought her son up to be the same. He not only destroyed all the idols in the lowlands but he also destroyed the shrines in the mountains, returning all of Judah to the worship of Yahweh. He was by far the pick of all the kings of either Israel or Judah, his commitment to Yahweh impeccable. Further he broke the tenuous alliance with Assyria, paid for by the Temple and Palace treasures, refusing to serve their king. He refurnished and gilded the Temple and he drove the Philistines out of the south of Judah, laying their territory waste.

Assyria was not done with Judah. It was in Hezekiah's 14th year that Sennacherib, Tiglath's son, now king of Assyria, had demolished Israel and carried its people off into exile in Assyria, never to return. He then attacked the fortified towns of Judah and captured them. Hezekiah paid him more gold and silver but Sennacherib was not mollified. He sent a messenger to tell the Jews how dare Hezekiah rebel against him. He threatened the Jews of Judah with the same deportation to Assyria that was Israel's fate.

Hezekiah was totally distraught. He sent for me, I told him he was Yahweh's favorite by far, Jerusalem would not fall into the hands of Assyria. He went to the Temple to beseech Yahweh, and Yahweh listened to his prayer. I gave him Yahweh's promise.

*He will not enter this city, he will let no arrow fly against it,
confront it with no shield, throw up no earthwork against it.
By the road that he came on he shall return, he shall not enter this city.*

That night we, but really Yahweh, counter-attacked. We killed 185,000 Assyrians, Sennacherib fled to Nineveh, his sons beheaded him in disgust, they could not abide a loser.

What a king we had had in Hezekiah. What a funeral we gave him when he died. His son, Manasseh succeeded him. Why he went bad I have no idea, but bad he was, ultra bad. He set up altars to Baal on the lowlands and shrines to the hill gods in the mountains; we were back to the worst of times, many people blindly following his example. The land of Judah ran red with the blood of those who opposed him and his false gods.

It did me no good to either remonstrate with him and criticize him publicly. I was quietly arrested, condemned and executed by being sawn in half in a hollow log. At least I made it to Limbo!

I Adam returned to Limbo. We watched as Judah fell into a worse state, Manasseh reigned for 55 long years, his son, Amon, a replica of his father, for another two years. But not all worship of Yahweh was eliminated, even in those 57 terror years. The end came suddenly; the army commanders initiated a coup, they killed Amon in his palace. But these were not the leaders the people wanted, the ordinary folk set up a counter revolution. Led by a simple peasant, they struck down all those who had plotted against and killed Amon. They restored the monarchy and made Amon's son Josiah their king.

But the prophecies of Isaiah about the coming of a messiah, a savior, filled me with hope. Would my sin finally be expiated, would I finally see God? The years dragged on, who would help keep the people faithful to our God? Maybe this woman? I chose her for Eve; a woman in the days of Nebuchadnezzar on the rise.

I Judith

I was beside myself when my husband, Manasseh, died suddenly from sunstroke. He wasn't even 40 years old. I buried him in Judah and went into seclusion, as the Law commanded widows to do. For over three years I wore sackcloth, fasted, lived a hermit life, worshipped Yahweh. Only my attendant, Susanna, ever saw me. I wanted for nothing, Manasseh had left me a fortune in gold, silver, lands, flocks, manservants and women servants. I hired a woman, Dinah, to manage my affairs and found her very trustworthy, my attendant being my intermediary.

Susanna kept me informed of the news of the day. It was all about Nebuchadnezzar, the king who ruled Assyria from its capital, Nineveh. The other emerging empire at the time was Babylon. Its king, Arphaxad, went to war against Nebuchadnezzar in the great plain formed between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. Nebuchadnezzar decided to play it safe, he sent messengers to a whole bunch of countries whom he thought were his allies, countries like Damascus, Lebanon, Carmel, Israel, Edom, Moab, Ammon, Egypt and Judah. But they all ignored him, he appeared to be isolated, better not to incur the wrath of Babylon were it to win.

Nebuchadnezzar went ballistic. He swore to take revenge on all these so called allies. He went to war with Arphaxad and won the day, slaughtering his entire army, decimating his chariots and cavalry, finally killing Arphaxad himself. The victory feast lasted 120 days.

Then came payback time. Holofernes, the general of Nebuchadnezzar's army led 120,000 foot soldiers and 12,000 cavalry down from Assyria. Each "ally" country in their path was destroyed, its citizens, men, women and children slaughtered by the thousands, their fields set on fire, their animals taken to reinforce Holofernes pack horses and replenish his pantry, their treasures seized for booty. All their places of worship were destroyed, only Nebuchadnezzar was to be worshipped.

Holofernes stopped for a month to rest before he tackled Judea. Isaiah, Jeremiah and other prophets led the people in prayer, beseeching Yahweh to deliver them from this menace. We prepared for war, closing the mountain passes, fortifying the hills and building barricades on the plains. A prophet tried to get Holofernes to back off but he was full of confidence. "Why should we be afraid of the Israelites? They are a weak and powerless people, quite unable to stand a stiff attack. Forward! Advance! Our army will swallow them in one mouthful!"

Israel's neighbors turned treacherous, better Israel sacked than their own countries. For centuries Israel had defeated invading armies with huge numbers of cavalry and chariots by

retreating to the hills, their archers cutting down the charioteers and cavalry men when their assaults ground to a halt, the slopes too steep to go further.

Moab led 10,000 Assyrian foot soldiers into the foot hills and seized the Israelites' springs and wells. Edom and Ammon led 5,000 soldiers in a flanking move, up to even higher ground than that occupied by Israel and Judah, escape avenues were cut off. Water supplies quickly ran out, the Israelites would be forced to surrender. All knew that meant the sword. The elders of the tribes agreed that surrender was, however, the only option. Without consulting Yahweh, they gave it five days more, promising surrender.

My time had come. I sent my manager Dinah to arrange a meeting with the elders of the tribes. I castigated them for their lack of faith in Yahweh and their five day promise to a people slowly dying of thirst. How dare they negotiate without Yahweh. He would help them when he was good and ready, by his timetable, not theirs. I demanded they give me three days, I would rescue my nation.

I went home and prayed to my God. Then I shed the sackcloth, bathed away the ashes and dressed myself in the clothes I feasted in when my husband was alive. Perfume, makeup, hairdo, rings, bracelets, I knew how to make myself a knockout, no man could resist a second or even third look when I floated by. But no man would ever touch me again, only Manasseh would bed me.

The troops and guards before Holofernes' tent parted like the Red Sea when I made my entrance into the Assyrian camp. They all lusted after me, but it was clear that Holofernes would have first choice. I fell at Holofernes feet. His men immediately raised me. His lips parted, his tongue protruding as his gaze ran up and down my body, his eyes bulging with desire. I felt defiled but engaged his eyes and smiled. He told me not to be afraid of him, his best opening line I guess. I went to work.

First I praised Nebuchadnezzar, long life to the king of the whole world I said. I voiced my words in a husky tone, men love that, Holofernes struggled to stay still, he wanted me, badly. Then I praised him, his military genius, his quick mind, his stately presence (actually I thought him a big fat slob, but this was no time for truth!). I begged his protection, saying the Israelites are done for, dying of thirst and starvation, I need a protector, I want to live. I smiled at him as I said this, we both knew what protection I would get, a night long tumble of naked bodies in his bed. More after that if I pleased him, the sword if I did not.

But I could not be a pushover, he would suspect treachery if a woman as stunningly beautiful as me succumbed to his seductive wiles too quickly. Even handsome men suspect too quick a conquest, Holofernes knew he wasn't that handsome, he didn't need to be, a knife at a girl's throat is just as conducive to compliance as a rose and a glass of wine backed by love music.

I waited for three days, drawing out the inevitable. I set up a pattern of behavior, my attendant Susanna and I left the camp each evening to pray to our God, the guards watched us come and go, grew more and more unsuspecting. Each time we took cushions to kneel on.

Holofernes' eyes followed me wherever I walked, his whole body twitched with desire. He thought he could have me, but it is a man the way to whose heart is through his stomach. He gave a big feast in my honor, I had been to many before, again I dressed myself to the nines, my perfume alone would have roused a sick man from his deathbed. I sat at his right hand, not that it didn't stray to my thigh many times. But I just kept smiling, sipping my wine, matching his great gulps of hard liquor.

The guests finally left, his guard took us both to his chamber. He needed propping up most of the way. His valet undressed him down to his underwear, not going any further, thank you God, what a revolting body. It lay unmoving in his bed, strange sounds coming from his mouth and belly. Susanna played with my clothes to keep the valet happy, undoing my hair, loosening my undergarments. He ruffled my pillow, grinned and left.

I took Holofernes' scimitar from its sheath by his bed and slashed down three times. His revolting head rolled off the bed at my feet. I grabbed it by the hair and put it into a pillow case, wrapped in a towel. Then my attendant and I left the camp with our "cushions", supposedly for our evening prayer.

The elders were waiting for our arrival. They all fell on their knees, worshipping Yahweh, he had struck down Holofernes with the hand of a woman. I assured them, "My face seduced him, only to his undoing; he committed no sin with me to shame or disgrace me."

I told the generals what to do: "Hang Holofernes head from the battlements, let the Assyrians grow fearful when they can't find Holofernes and realize whose head this must be. Then lead your army down the hills and slaughter them in their confusion. Tell the other counties to our north and south what has happened. Have them join in cutting down the fleeing Assyrians."

And so it was done. I went home, resumed a normal life, well sort of, I was a legend. Suitors by the dozens came to my door. But Manasseh was a man among men, only he would have my love.

I Eve returned to Limbo, very pleased with myself. If only I had dealt with the evil presence in the Garden as Judith did with Holofernes!

I Adam chose another savior of Judah in exile, another young prophet.

I Jeremiah

I hated being a prophet, I was lonely too, never to be married. But Yahweh came to me in many visions, beginning when I was a child. He said things like, “I have appointed you as a prophet to the nations. Do not say “I am a child”, I am putting words in your mouth. Go to those to whom I send you, do not be afraid of them. I am with you to protect you.”

I had walked all over Israel, where, Yahweh told me, “A disaster is boiling over.” Despite my youth my language was extreme. I lashed out at the people for their idolatry, some of them were even sacrificing children to pagan gods. I warned everyone of a coming invasion from the north, I could see in my mind’s eye the Assyrian hordes sweeping down from the north, annihilating Israel’s defenses, carrying the people away into an exile from which none would ever return. Yahweh was very angry, their fate was well-deserved, they would not listen to me, threw me into prison for a year. Unwanted, I returned to Judah, to the land of Benjamin where I was born, went to see Josiah’s mother, he being only 8 years old when he gained the throne.

My fellow male prophets, Habakkuk and Zepaniah, the prophetess Huldah and myself welcomed Josiah with open arms and he us. He was only eight years old so his mother, Jedidah, ruled by his side. She had remained true to Yahweh, hiding her faith during Amon’s reign of terror. She brought Josiah up in the worship of Yahweh and he surpassed her rapidly. As the boy king he was a temple brat, allowed to wander all over the sacred place. It was he who found a real treasure, the Book of the Law written by Moses. It had been lost in the detritus of the Temple grounds as successive kings stripped it to pay for their rash decisions. The high priest, Hilkiah, was astounded and of course delighted.

But Huldah warned him that because the people still worshipped other gods, Yahweh would still destroy their nation. Josiah and Hilkiah held a conclave with the elders of the tribes. In his unbroken voice, Josiah read them everything that was written in the Law about the covenant between Yahweh and the people.

I thundered Yahweh’s warnings about idolatry. The cleanup started. Down came the idols of the Baals, down came the sacred poles of the other pagan gods, their priests were stoned to death, their female and male sacred prostitutes were put to the sword, their altars burned. On the altars burned human bones. All of Judah was cleansed, the lowlands, the hills and the mountains.

I had become friends with Josiah, I was not that much older than him. The rite of the Passover had long been ignored. Josiah and I celebrated the rite for the first time in his palace in the city of Jerusalem and the people celebrated it also in their homes. No king had ever sought greater forgiveness from Yahweh in such a dramatic fashion.

But I Jeremiah was not to be a bearer of good news. Yahweh was still very, very angry at the people because of all the provocation Manasseh offered him years before. I warned Josiah of the impending doom. He maintained he was faithful to Yahweh and no harm would come to Judah in his lifetime.

Nor did it. But shortly thereafter the Pharaoh of Egypt was on his way to a meeting with the king of Assyria. As his large retinue went northwards they accidentally came across Josiah and his small party, out on a hunting trip. Josiah was promptly killed, Pharaoh looking for Assyria's good graces. Also in the hunting party was the 23 year old Jehoahaz, the next in line for the throne. He did not bow to Pharaoh, he was put into chains, carried off to Egypt to die in prison there. Josiah's other son, Eliakim, was more to Pharaoh's taste. He made Jehoiakim, his new name, king of Judah, and promptly demanded a huge payment of silver and gold. Jehoiakim had no alternative but to impose a hefty tax upon every citizen. Judah was stripped of its wealth as it was of its God, since Jehoiakim worshipped Baal, not Yahweh.

I continued my task, walking all over Judah, castigating the people for their unfaithfulness to Yahweh. They did not want to listen, yelling and screaming at me, so much so that even Yahweh himself told me to desist, but I did not, I loved my people, I kept praying for them.

Then came Babylon. Babylon first destroyed the Assyrian empire, then broke up Egypt's rising threat, the whole world was theirs, their king Nebuchadnezzar. He laid siege to Jerusalem and Jehoiakim promptly surrendered, Judah becoming subject to Babylon for the next three years. Then Jehoiakim died and his 18 year old feckless stupid son took the throne. His worst stupidity was not obvious, he needed Yahweh's protection, but he continued the worship of pagan gods. He would not listen to me, my dire predictions totally ignored. He was stupid in more ways than one.

After just three months this young king Jeroiachin rebelled against Babylon, overcoming the occupying forces and declaring Judah free. Nebuchadnezzar personally led the reprisal. Jerusalem was easily taken. Jeroiachin and his entire family with all their household and all the nobles and notables, all the tradesmen, 10,000 people in all, were carted off to exile in Babylon. The Temple

and the Palace were stripped, only the bare skeleton left standing. I hid from the invading army and stayed in the land of Benjamin with my family.

Nebuchadnezzar left a puppet king behind. He was Jehoiachin's uncle, his name was changed from Mattaniah to Zedekiah. I tried to establish a relationship with him but he was too pumped up with his own taste of power. I prophesied to him the Babylonian captivity of all the people, including his subjects left behind. He would not listen so I stood outside the Temple and shouted out to the people that Yahweh's vengeance would soon come. The chief priest and the priests put me on trial for prophesying against the city, I did not back down, Yahweh in me was a vehement defender. The elders, remembering past prophets ignored to their regret, set me free.

Nine years on Zedekiah thought he could go one on one with Babylon. He disposed of all the occupying forces and threw down the gauntlet. Nebuchadnezzar again led the reprisal, this time he meant to inflict real punishment. His army lay siege to Jerusalem for two years, the people starved, many died. Zedekiah snuck away through a hole made in the city wall but the enemy caught up with him, his guards quickly deserting. Nebuchadnezzar ordered Zedekiah's sons slaughtered before his eyes, then put out his eyes with burning coals. In chains he was carted away to Babylon, imprisoned in exile.

Nebuchadnezzar had had it with Jerusalem. He left for Babylon, leaving the cleanup to his general. The Babylonian troops entered Jerusalem and burned every building to the ground, the Temple was totally razed, all the remaining notable people, including the chief priest, were slain. Leaving only a few farmers behind, the entire population of Judah was carried off into slavery in Babylon. Judah was no more. I was just one among many taken away. Our exile would last for 70 years, that much I knew. My fellow prophets told me what Isaiah had proclaimed, I too told the people as we walked together, a messiah, a savior would come, their sins would be expiated.

See the days are coming-it is Yahweh who speaks-when I will raise up a virtuous branch for David, who will reign as true king and be wise, practicing honesty and integrity in the land.

In his days Judah will be saved and Israel dwell in confidence.

And this is the name he will be called: Yahweh-our-integrity.

I Jeremiah marched alongside the people, knowing, with both Israel and Judah wiped off the face of the earth, the surrounding pagan tribes would soon move in and take possession of the promised land. The remnants of the Jewish race would flee to Egypt.

In Babylon I wept with my people, lamenting the tragedies that had fallen on sinful Judah, the horrible destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. I echoed their feelings,

Oh how lonely she sits, the city once thronged with people.

She passes her nights weeping, she suffers bitterly.

Now the people were ready to listen. They agreed God was just and righteous in his dealings with them. They repented and turned again to the worship of the one true God. I assured them God would not reject them forever.

This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope.

The Lord's loving kindnesses indeed never cease.

For his compassions never fail.

Our captors wanted us to sing songs as we toiled for them. I wrote a poem for them, weeping in the silence of their agony.

By the rivers of Babylon there we sat weeping when we remembered Zion.

On the poplars in its midst we hung up our harps.

*For there our captors asked us for the words of a song; Our tormentors, for joy: "Sing for us
a song of Zion!"*

But how could we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land?

If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget.

May my tongue stick to my palate if I do not remember you,

If I do not exalt Jerusalem beyond all my delights.

I left Babylon quietly, in disguise, trod my solemn way through the devastation of Israel and Judah, crossed the desert of our exodus, went to Egypt to find the people who had fled there, offering them solace. But they killed me, no prophet was welcome in their misery.

I Adam went back to Limbo. Jeremiah's end was tragic. But another young prophet caught my attention. His contribution to the salvation of our people might be even more dramatic!

I Daniel

The four of us young men were abducted from our families, dragged into King Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian court and forced into the king's service. We knew the conquering king chose all the handsome, athletic young captives from Israel to be trained for his personal service, so I guess we were just next.

First we were given Babylonian names, bad enough, but we refused to be defiled by eating the unclean royal table meals of meat with blood in it and wine. We were Israelites, we lived by the Law of Moses. Timotheous, the official in charge of our training for royal court, was terrified for his life that our health would deteriorate. If it did his own health would deteriorate very suddenly! I took pity on him, suggested a ten-day trial. We would eat just vegetables and water, relying on Yahweh to keep us safe. And so He did, at the conclusion of ten days of this diet, we four boys were much healthier than our counterparts. We met with the king who was told of this remarkable test. He quizzed us on many things, found us to be ten times better than all the wise men in his service, again Yahweh was with us. My companions told Nebuchadnezzar that I had a particular gift for dream interpretation.

Maybe they should have kept quiet about that. Shortly afterwards Nebuchadnezzar had a bad dream and asked all his wise men, including the four of us, to interpret it but he would not tell us what the content was. None of us had a clue, we protested this was unfair, at least give us a hint. He must have been in a foul mood, he sentenced all of us, men and boys, to death.

As I lay in the dungeon, I asked Yahweh for help and that night I had a vision that explained everything. Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed of an enormous statue with a head of gold, breast and arms of silver, belly and thighs of copper, legs of iron, and feet of mixed iron and clay. The statue was destroyed by a rock that turned into a huge mountain, filling the whole earth. In the vision, I was told that the statue symbolized four successive kingdoms, starting with Nebuchadnezzar, all of which would be crushed by God's kingdom, which would endure forever.

The next day I sought an audience. Nebuchadnezzar was mightily impressed when I told him about his secret dream. He made me the chief of all his wise men and appointed the four of us to rule over all the chief cities of Babylon. But then he built the statue.

I was visiting one of our cities. My companions, Ananias, Azariah and Mishael refused to bow to the emperor's golden statue and were thrown into a lighted furnace. Nebuchadnezzar saw a

fourth figure appear in the furnace with my three friends and this angel of God preserved them from the flames. Nebuchadnezzar was greatly impressed. When I arrived and heard the whole story, I was glad I had been spared this ordeal, but not really surprised at the outcome. Yahweh was always with us and we gladly worshipped and obeyed him.

Our king sure had some funny dreams. He told me he had a dream of a huge tree that was suddenly cut down at the command of a heavenly angel. I said, (don't kill the messenger), the tree was Nebuchadnezzar himself, who for seven years would lose his mind and live like a wild beast. And that is exactly what happened. Nebuchadnezzar went mad for seven years, then I went to him and gave him the the chance to acknowledge that "Yahweh and heaven rules". He did so and his kingdom and sanity were restored.

We had an easy life in Nebuchadnezzar's court, we were his favorites. But some years later he died and was succeeded by his son, Belshazzar. A typical royal punk, he had only contempt for us and we certainly avoided him as much as possible.

He was stupid and surrounded himself with equally stupid loutish friends. They thought it would be a great joke to defile the Israelites' sacred objects. He and his nobles blasphemously drank from the sacred Jewish temple vessels, offering praise to false gods, until a hand mysteriously appeared and wrote some words on the wall of the dining room. Terrified, the horrified king summoned me. I (meekly but happily) interpreted the words as,

Mene, Mene – God has numbered the days of your reign and will bring it to an end.

Tekel – You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting,

Upharsin – Your kingdom will be divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

That very night Belshazzar was killed in a sneak attack by Darius the Mede who took over the kingdom. Persia now ruled our world.

That suited me fine. Darius knew my reputation so he elevated me to a very high position. But his other officials became very jealous. They tricked the king into issuing an edict forbidding worship of any other god or man for 30 days. I, however, continued to pray three times a day to Yahweh, so they accused me of disobeying Darius's edict. Forced by his own decree, Darius had me thrown into a lions' den. But God tamed the lions and shut their mouths and the next morning Darius found me unharmed. He was delighted and immediately cast my accusers and their families into the lions' pit where they were instantly devoured.

I like to think we four Israelites brought the reverence for our God into the pagan courts of our captors.

I Adam returned to Limbo. The Israelites - the tribes of Judah and Benjamin with a smattering of the tribe of Levi - were in captivity, but they had found true faith, a deep and reverent relationship with our God. It was now a woman's turn. Again I let Eve choose one.

I Esther

The Persian policy was to spread exiles all over their empire, many Jews were moved from Babylon. I lived in Persia under the protection of my cousin Mordecai. Why Mordecai? Well I was orphaned when I was just a few years old, Mordecai raised me and I loved him dearly. We lived simply, kept our heads down, not wanting the arrogant Persians to trouble us.

Nevertheless, Mordecai told me, the Persians allowed us to practice our own religion as long as we weren't too ostentatious about it, they did not want our religion to unify us, making us a threat to their rule. So we made sacrifices to Yahweh in quiet places and in small groups. Our priests led us in prayer and rituals. Mordecai remarked somewhat facetiously, "We are more faithful to Yahweh now we are captives than we were when we were free!"

We laughed when we heard this story. The Persian king we called Xerxes was married to a real piece of work. His imperious queen treated everyone with contempt, even having those she thought disrespectful put in prison, even put to death.

Anyway Xerxes threw a huge party to celebrate yet another victory but his wife, the queen, refused to go. She thought herself above his fawning nobles. Xerxes was so angry he deposed her and threw her out of his palace, to the delight of the entire population.

But he needed a queen, he was young, he needed a wife. He decided to find one in a novel way. He held a beauty pageant, every pretty young girl in Persia was obliged to present herself. His eunuchs judged the first few rounds, he himself the final. I was shocked, he chose me, the most beautiful girl in his empire he called me, to be his new queen. He did not know I was a Jewess and I certainly wasn't going to tell him, in his frustration at going through all this he might well have me executed.

I was able to improve the lot of my cousin, Mordechai, he became a Government employee, a detective in the palace guard. Lo and behold, shortly afterwards, Mordecai uncovered a plot to assassinate the king. He told me about the conspiracy, and I reported it to Xerxes, giving credit to Mordecai. The plot was thwarted and Mordechai became a favorite of the king, indeed the head of the palace guard, the chief protectors of the king.

There is always a fly in the ointment. The king's highest official, his chancellor, was a wicked man named Haman who hated Jews, little did he know I was one. But I was the queen and he was forced to bow down to me. He came to hate Mordecai whom he jealously thought had too much

of the ear of the king. In his arrogance he demanded Mordecai bow down to him, prostrating himself on the ground. But only Yahweh has that right, Mordecai refused to bow down to him, a half nod maybe. Their relationship was frosty at best, even worse when he suspected Mordecai was a Jew.

The treacherous Haman thought up a scheme to have every Jew in Persia killed. Without fully realizing what he was agreeing to, the king accepted the plan, agreeing to annihilate the Jewish people on a specific day. But again, Mordecai learned of the plan and shared it with me and urged my intercession, saying,

“Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”

I was terrified. I knew this could cost me my life. I was never sure what Xerxes himself thought of the Jews. But I trusted in Yahweh. I invited Xerxes and Haman and the whole court to a banquet, waited till everyone was seated and went to the middle of the dance floor. I praised Xerxes, told him I loved him, told him I was a Jewess. He frowned at my confession. Then he smiled, came to me, hugged me, kissed me. I told him my speech was not finished, he laughed at this little mouse become a lion, and went back to his throne. I put my gaze upon Haman, he sneered at me. I told the whole court of Haman's devilish plan “to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, infants and women, in a single day.”

Haman laughed, said “So what, you too shall die, Jewish bitch.” Xerxes was incensed, Haman had guessed wrong. Xerxes preferred me, his beautiful young wife, ordering the devious Haman to be hung on the very gallows that Haman had built for Mordecai's execution the next day. Haman was carted off in chains, sobbing and screaming.

Xerxes asked, “Where is Mordecai?” My cousin was brought up from his cell, totally confused. I cried tears of joy. “Guess, who is my new Chancellor?” said Xerxes, his arm around me. I loved him even more.

Thus Mordecai was promoted to Haman's position and the Jews were granted protection throughout the land. Xerxes demanded all respect our religion and not belittle our God.

I Eve returned to Limbo. I had another lovely story to tell. My God's influence was spreading throughout the pagan lands. Had the chosen people had been punished enough? I Adam joined in prayer with a prophet of the Babylonian and now Persian exile.

I Baruch

This is my prayer before all the people.

And now Lord God of Israel, who brought your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, with signs and wonders, with great power and with outstretched arm,

it is time to win yourself a name renowned today.

We have sinned we have been irreligious.

Lord God we have broken all your commandments.

Let your anger turn from us since we are now no more than a remnant among the nations.

Listen, Lord, to our prayer, to our entreaty, deliver us for the sake of your honor and grant us your favor for all our captors to see it, so that the whole world may know that you are the Lord our God, since Israel and its descendants bear your name.

In Limbo we wept for joy as Yahweh heard the prayers of his reformed people. Cyrus, now king of Persia, issued a proclamation that brought joy to every Jewish heart. I joined him for the big announcement.

I Cyrus

Thus speaks Cyrus, king of Persia, “Yahweh, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth; he has ordered me to build him a Temple in Jerusalem, in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all his people, may God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah to build the Temple of Yahweh, God of Israel – he is the God who is in Jerusalem. And let each survivor here, wherever he lives, be helped by the people of that place with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, as well as voluntary offerings to the Temple of God which is in Jerusalem.”

I Cyrus was no fool. Yes, I admired the Jews’ devotion to Yahweh but I also realized that it is much easier to rule people who are happy in their own homes and who are not trying to overcome their rulers. Hopefully the dissidents and unhappy folk would leave Persia. When they sorted out Judah I would get some revenue from them, they would remain a province of Persia, always under the threat of another war and exile if they got out of line.

I Adam returned to Limbo, then decided to join the huge migration of 42,360 Israelites, 7,300 slaves and maidservants. However, a large proportion of the Jewish population chose to remain in Persia, not wanting to go from the empire’s center to a far away province. With us on our journey back to Jerusalem were huge flocks of sheep and goats, and herds of cattle, horses, mules, donkeys and oxen.

Once in Judah the people dispersed to their own towns in Judah and Benjamin, the priests, Levites and some of the people settled in Jerusalem. They cried for its past glory, it was now just a pile of stones. I Adam chose the chief priest, Zerubbabel.

I Zerubbabel

We built the altar of sacrifice on its old site in the destroyed Temple. The rock on which Abraham agreed to slay his son, Isaac, was still in place, it remained the altar's foundation. We then called all the migrants from their homes and towns and together we gave thanks to Yahweh with sacrifices of the best of our animals and produce.

When the other occupants of our province, eternal enemies of our tribes, heard what we were doing, they came under the guise of friendship and asked to join us in worship. I was wise to that one. Remnants of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin may still have remained in Judah but I knew their worship of Yahweh was now tainted with their worship of other gods, a smorgasbord rather than a single divine entrée. I refused their offer. They would harass and frighten us for many years to come.

I could offer no response when they wrote a letter to King Darius, the son of Cyrus, to tell him that while we were rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem to make it a fortified city, we were not paying him our share of the province's taxes. He believed them, we were forbidden to do any more work on the walls. We remained at the mercy of the surrounding tribes.

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah came to our rescue. At their urging we recommenced building the city walls. This time, when our enemies complained to Darius, the prophets countered with a request for the king's files to be searched. The key document was Cyrus' edict, bidding us migrate back to Judah and rebuild the Temple. The document was found; Darius was an honorable man, an edict of any king of Persia holds for its term, he decreed. We held a huge feast when the good news reached us, and a weeklong series of sacrifices to our God. But we knew we didn't have the numbers or know-how to finish the job. We sent for more help.

I Adam moved on to another migrant and another big migration.

I Ezra

I am a scribe, my job to write and teach the amendments and explanations of the Law of Moses and to ensure it is followed faithfully. King Xerxes, also called Darius, chose me for the next phase, commissioning me to lead a second migration from Persia to Judah. He gave me a huge treasure of gold and silver and wagon loads of food, wine and oil, more money to buy herds and flocks. My role would be to keep the people faithful to the Law and to ensure the Temple was rebuilt to his own specifications.

With 5,000 selected men, along with their wives, servants and slaves, I entered Jerusalem three months later. I was just in time. The Jewish society was on the ropes. Hundreds of mixed marriages between Jewish men and pagan women had polluted our religion and confused our people. I was terrified, but I knew what I must do. Under the authority given me by Xerxes, Zephaniah happy to stand aside, I called all the people together. I told them that Yahweh was very angry with their treachery, did they want another exile? I told them to send the pagan wives and the children of these mixed marriages back to the tribes they came from, our nation must be cleansed. Many objected so, following the example of Moses, I set up a council of 71 judges to decide their cases. We called the council the Sanhedrin. There were some nasty moments but we managed to cleanse the Jewish race in Judah without bloodshed. Of course the relatively few Jewish virgins were in high demand!

I sent Hanani and some others back to Persia with a list of what we needed. The work on the walls had dragged to a halt, only the foundation stones were laid for the Temple.

Hanani knew who to go to, money was not the issue, it was building and organizational talent. He told the whole sad story to his brother, Nehemiah. They drank some wine together, they cried together, they prayed together, they planned together.

Well Nehemiah was not just anybody. He was the king's cupbearer, he chose and tasted the king's drinks and stood by his dining chair. Xerxes asked him why he was so sad. So Nehemiah told him of the impossible odds that the Jewish migrants faced in Judah. "Let me go to Jerusalem and rebuild it", he begged. The king agreed, he loved Nehemiah and was bound by Cyrus' edict. He made Nehemiah the Governor of Judah, even gave him an escort of cavalry and army soldiers, his personal guard.

I was overwhelmed when his party reached Jerusalem. Of course the leaders of the other tribes in our province were furious. But we had the protection of the king.

I joined Nehemiah at dawn the very next morning. We walked around the city. The stones from its walls lay in huge heaps, any army could soon penetrate into the very heart of the city. Nehemiah set to work with my 5,000 selected men and many volunteers. Several gates were built between the rubble and the stones repositioned to form a sufficient barricade. We had a wall, our enemies would have to scramble their way through and our archers could deal with that.

I soon found out they were furious and preparing to attack us. Time for counter measures. We divided our workforce in two. Half would continue the rebuilding, the other half would man the walls, ready for any invasions. Everybody, workers included, carried some sort of weapon, if only a knife. Our enemies were scared off.

When enough of the rebuilding was complete, I called the whole Israelite population together beside the main city gate. We sacrificed and feasted for seven days and each day I read them the Law. They were to be Yahweh's people from now on, to become holy in his sight, that to be attained by strict adherence to the Law of Moses.

Our people had failed Yahweh for centuries, every now and again returning briefly to him. I declared a national day of atonement. Dressed in sackcloth and ashes we assembled for a three day fast. Each Israelite stood and confessed his sins and the sins of his forefathers, then prostrated himself on the ground, begging the forgiveness of Yahweh. We made a series of written promises to Yahweh, setting in stone our obligations to him, not the least that we will not give our daughters to the sons of pagan tribes nor take their daughters for our sons. We were to be purified in both body and soul.

We needed a much larger population in Jerusalem, its defense our priority. We chose by lottery one in ten of all the men living outside the city to move there with their families. And we kept on rebuilding the wall. Finally it was finished. I blessed the completed wall, the sacrifices and feasts went on for days. I bid the leaders of Judah come to the top of the wall and we organized two huge choirs. They walked around the wall in opposite directions until they stood either side of the Temple. The women and children joined in from down below, the joyful singing could be heard from far away. We were a purified nation once again, as pure as we were when we sacked Jericho. We made a proclamation that no one of foreign descent would ever enter the gates of Jerusalem.

I Adam returned to Limbo. There were so many souls here now, male and female, all waiting for redemption. Now would we enter heaven and see the face of God? But we did not know what to make of God's promise that his chosen people would possess the promised land of Canaan. They certainly did not possess it now, subject as they were to the Persian Empire and sharing it with impure tribes who practiced so many variations of our religion. But our people were faithful to Yahweh, we knew he would not abandon us while we remained obedient to him. I chose the High Priest.

I Simon

Judah was at peace, my people faithful to our God. I, Simon the Just, the Chief High Priest, knew this could not last. We all watched and worried about a world in turmoil. Travelers brought us the news. The king of a tiny state, Philip of Macedonia, one of the city states of Greece, dreamed of an empire. He raised an army and went to war. First he subdued all the Greek city states, turning Greece into a nation, a huge achievement since the city states had fought one another tenaciously for hundreds of years and were normally much stronger than Macedonia. During that time Persia was invited by one of the losing states to give it military and naval aid. That came at a price, Persia was now a force in Greece. But Philip's battle-honed army threw the Persians out, the Persian empire and Greece were now at war.

Philip knew Macedonia was the least sophisticated Greek state, he imported teachers and philosophers from Athens to educate his people. In particular, he hired the great Aristotle to educate his own son. Then Philip died.

We were mesmerized as his 23-year old son took the reigns, literally if homophonically. He was a tall young man and his white stallion was even taller, together they were a formidable sight. Alexander the Great, his own name for himself, challenged the Persian empire, amazingly conquered it and then much of the rest of the world. He wanted all the countries from the Atlantic to the Pacific, he certainly conquered India, but Rome and its conquered nations still remained to be overcome.

We elders had made a big mistake. We were a Persian province, although we did not want to be, we had backed Persia in its war with Alexander. We knew Alexander was on his way to Jerusalem, then on to Egypt. Should we fight or make an armistice? We chose the latter, fortunately.

For when Alexander arrived at the gates of Jerusalem with his army, he surprised us all. He jumped off his huge stallion, hurried towards me and bowed to me! Why? He told me he always dreamed of an angel the evening before he went into battle, the previous evening the face of the angel was mine. Because of this he respected our God and even wished to join us in a sacrifice. So I invited him into the Temple, he was amazed at its magnificence, he respectfully joined me in the sacrifice of a young bull.

Instead of destroying us, his original intention, he made an incredible arrangement with us. As long as we remained his loyal vassals and paid our taxes we could remain an autonomous nation, in every other aspect governing ourselves and practicing our own religion. Of course, in gratitude for his largesse, over the years we invited Greek teachers into Judah and many of us learned the Greek language, even giving many of our children Greek names.

Unwittingly we allowed the Greek culture to merge with ours. Everything was just wonderful. But then Alexander the Great, but not the Immortal, died at the age of 29. He knew he was dying, he did not want to leave a world in chaos, he divided his empire up between two of his generals, and each ruled as a king: Seleucid I in Babylon, Ptolemy in Egypt.

My country is south of Damascus, the capital of Syria, but north of Alexandria, the capital of Egypt. Damascus and Alexandria became the centers of the two new empires, we were caught between them and immersed in the inevitable power struggle between them. It didn't help that we had the Greek culture imbedded in us, both wanted us.

I was powerless to stop the gradual loss of our pure identity. My Orthodox party in Judea struggled against the infusion of Greek culture led by the Hellenist party.

From Limbo we watched, helpless. The two kingdoms were not at peace. Seleucid I was driven out by family rivals, sought refuge with Ptolemy, was murdered by him and Ptolemy had it all, including Judea. But after he died a succession of four weak kings lost much of the Persian Empire. Antiochus III, or the Great, did regain most of it but by now Rome had become a power player. Greece lost Egypt and all the countries from Rome to the Atlantic. The next king, Antiochus IV, tried to regain Egypt, barreling through Judea. Judea became a ping pong ball in a battle of empires. We needed another warrior. I Adam chose this man.

I Mattahias

Our enemies were both within and without, all bearing the label Grecophiles, lovers of Greek culture whether by birth or by indoctrination. I am a priest, a very orthodox one!

I stood silently by as Antiochus led his troops by us on his Egypt campaign. The Hellenists requested an audience. They asked for an accord to be reached with the pagan tribes on our borders and for a pagan temple to be built in Jerusalem. Antiochus acquiesced. Idolatry was practiced within the very walls of our holy city.

Worse was to come. On his return, victorious over Egypt, Antiochus looted the Temple treasures and destroyed its fittings leaving the place a shambles. Not content with that, two years later he returned with his army and destroyed much of the city and its walls, took many women and children captive and turned David's fortress into a Greek citadel. On the sacred altar of Yahweh, lying solitary in the ruins of the Temple, his priests sacrificed pigs to their pagan gods. Anything to do with hogs was contrary to the Law. I grew very angry.

Much worse came. Antiochus issued an edict that the whole of his empire was to adopt a single, pagan religion. In Judea, sacrifices to Yahweh were banned, the Law to be abandoned, we were commanded to eat the flesh of pigs and not to observe the Sabbath. Women who had their sons circumcised were put to death. Thousands of my fellow Israelites complied, those who publicly did not were executed.

The story of the teacher Eleazar and the widow with seven sons sparked our revolution. It happened in Jerusalem while the king was present.

They arrested Eleazar for non-compliance and dragged him into the Temple. Antiochus' priests forced Eleazar to open his mouth and tried to shove pork down his throat but he spit it out. They beat him to death with their staffs.

Next came the mother with her seven sons. They would not eat the pork either, were whipped and scourged but did not cry out or plead for mercy. The eldest son told them they were wasting their time, the family would die before breaking the Law of Moses. The king personally gave the execution orders. The boy's tongue was cut out, his head scalped and his private parts cut off. Then he was fried alive on a large pan set over a roaring fire. One by one the other six boys

suffered an identical fate. All of them defied the king with strong words before they could be silenced, one saying,

“You have power over men, mortal as you are, and can act as you please. But do not think our race has been deserted by God. Only wait, and you shall see in your turn how his mighty power will torment you and your race.”

The mother watched her sons die, urging each of them to remain faithful to our God, to disregard the promises of wealth and forgiveness the king plied them with. She was the last to die, her death especially horrific since Antiochus thought she was ridiculing him, can you blame her!

In our town of Modein, where I dwelt with my five sons, John, Simon, Judas, Eleazar and Jonathan, we also refused to comply. The kings’ commissioners came to make us obey. I killed their priest who approached our altar to offer a sacrifice of pigs, then we killed the King’s commissioners. We fled to the desert.

Many of our countrymen also fled to the desert, wanting to get away from this madness and to worship the one true God. A strong detachment was sent to round them up and have them returned to their homes. They refused to go, offered no resistance and were all slaughtered.

My sons and I decided that we would not go so easily. We could not do this alone, wonderfully we were joined by a large fighting force, the Hasidaeans, stout fighting men who supported the Law. We began the process of cleansing the countryside, dismantling the pagan altars and ensuring every boy and man was circumcised. I died but not before I passed the mantle onto my son, Judas also called Maccabaeus.

I Adam moved to Limbo, then on to the son.

I Judas

The Governor of our province mustered the pagan soldiers in Judea and a large force from Samaria to fight against us. We defeated them, Yahweh on our side, I personally killed the Governor. More was to come, the commander of the Syrian troops thought he could make a name for himself. He had many more troops than we had, became overconfident I guess, we made a surprise attack and again won the day.

But I, Judas Maccabaeus, was becoming too well known. Rebellions were one thing but the rebels were not supposed to keep on winning. Antiochus himself decided enough was enough. He raised a huge army, then finding his treasury would not support such an expenditure - he was used to giving lavish bounties to his troops - he and half of his army left for Persia on a fund raising trip, leaving a general, Gorgias, to go against us with just half the army.

Then Gorgias split his forces in half again, he and one group pursuing us in the mountains, the other half staying in the Greek citadel in Jerusalem. We skirted around Gorgias and his troops and attacked Jerusalem, killing over 3,000 of the occupying forces, the rest fleeing with my men in close pursuit, Jerusalem was ours, the last remaining enemy soldiers under siege in the citadel.

We prepared for Gorgias. But that battle never materialized. His forward scouts saw we had Jerusalem, his forces disintegrated, fleeing into the land of the Philistines. We let them be. Time for sacrifices of thanksgiving to our God.

We wept when we saw the altar of sacrifice, the ruins of the Temple, the shocking state of Jerusalem itself, its walls in ruins, its buildings ransacked and forlorn. Our first task was rebuilding the Temple, the walls, the buildings. Now we could defend Jerusalem against any pagan reprisal.

I left a battalion in Jerusalem and began my campaign to rid Judah of the pagan tribes. We conquered Idumaea, Ammon, Gilead, Galilee, Philistea, my brothers or I leading divisions of our army against each tribe. Poor Antiochus, he was no Alexander the Great. We heard with joy that he went into deep depression over the loss of Judah, blaming it on his looting of the Temple treasures, creating an angry God. He wasted away to death on his bed, leaving his friend Philip as regent since his son Antiochus was just a baby. Philip ignored the baby and headed back to Persia with an army to seize control of the capital, he wanted it all. But Lysias, the king's general, with his own army, wanted the baby to be the next emperor so the stage was set for civil war.

The good news for Judea was that Philip needed food and supplies so as he marched north through Judea he made a treaty with us in exchange for what he needed. Onwards he went north but when he met Lysias' army he was soundly defeated. So Antiochus V became the infant emperor.

Not for long. Demetrius, of the Seleucid royal line, had been imprisoned in Rome, leaving the way clear for a succession of Antiochus kings. He escaped, the Seleucid patriots rallied to him, they captured Lysias and the babe and cut off their heads, eliminating any further threat from an Antiochus.

They had rival emperors, we had rival chief high priests. Alcimus got into Demetrius' ear and convinced him that I Judas and my brothers had "killed all your friends and driven us out of our country." So Demetrius appointed the godless Alcimus as the chief high priest and sent him to Jerusalem with a huge army in support.

Our friends the Hasideans sued for peace but only got treachery, 60 of them were arrested and executed. Alcimus was appointed Governor as well as Chief High Priest. But he was no military man, we harassed his army and went around the whole country eliminating any of his pagan supporters. Wimp that he was, he went crawling back to Demetrius, never daring to bring his whole army against us.

Really annoyed by now, Demetrius sent an army headed by his best general, an Israeli hater named Nicanor. He met with me under a flag of peace but I saw his guards' hands on their swords as I rode up so I quickly reversed course and galloped away, a few arrows flying over my head.

We met on the battle field, our 3,000 against his army and another that joined him from Syria. These poor pagans, they never seemed to heed the history of their battles with the forces of Yahweh. We drove a wedge through their lines, aiming right at Nicanor. I smiled at him and cut off his head. His soldiers fled, we cut them down until we tired of chasing them.

We had no more threats from Persia for quite some time, they were preoccupied with the rising dominance of Rome and so were we. But we heard only good things about the Romans. They ruthlessly put down any opposition to their territorial expansion, but they treated all other countries with decency if they sought peace. We sent two envoys to Rome to negotiate a deal, not with an emperor, for they had none, but with a senate of 300 councillors, they were almost a democracy, rule by the people. We were willing to become an ally of Rome, coming to their aid if they were

attacked and vice versa. We needed Rome's protection from Demetrius, it would only be a matter of time before he counter-attacked.

Sure enough he sent an army of 20,000 soldiers and 2,000 cavalry against us. I had only 3,000 men and many of them panicked when they saw the size of the enemy forces, I was left with just 800 men. I was aghast but "it is what it is" as they say. "Up! Let us face the enemy, we may yet have the strength to fight them," I shouted.

They came at us in a huge V formation. The right wing looked stronger so I chose to attack that, we fought our way through to the apex, slaughtering thousands and pursuing the rest when they broke and fled. But the left wing whirled and followed us, they were too many for us and too fresh. I fell, mortally wounded, my few remaining soldiers fled. We had lost, the pagans again took over Judea, both from within and without.

In Limbo Judas watched the huge funeral the people gave him, all Judea wept for his loss and mourned him deeply. All of us in Limbo watched as the pagan-worshippers came out of the hiding they hastened into when Judas pursued them. We watched as Demetrius' general, Bacchidis, chose political figures from their number. We watched as the true believers were arrested, condemned, imprisoned or executed, their goods confiscated, their families torn apart. The friends of Judas chose his brother to replace him and deliver them from this scourge, I Adam chose him also.

I Jonathan.

We were immediately forced to flee into the desert, Demetrius' general, Bacchidis, was personally coming to kill me. We engaged them by the Jordan, killing over 1,000. I had Bacchidis set up for a strike with my lance but he evaded my thrust and fled. We swam the Jordan and escaped, his army not following.

We had nowhere to go. Bacchidis fortified Jerusalem and many of the other towns in Judea. He took dozens of hostages, followers of Yahweh and us and imprisoned them. They would die if we attacked. What to do? Yahweh again determined that. The pagan chief high priest, Alcimus, was rebuilding the Temple to turn it into a pagan place of worship. He suffered a massive stroke, became totally paralyzed and died a slow death in agony. Our prophets made sure Bacchidis got scared, he quickly returned to Demetrius. We took over the cities, our land at peace again.

But we were still infiltrated with pagan worshippers. A while later they sent for Bacchidis, convincing him we were no longer on the alert, my brothers and I could be taken in one night and the land theirs again. We were not that stupid, we had our spies in their camps also. Bacchidis found himself confronted with a huge army, our supporters, both Israelites and friends, had rallied to us. He didn't want another war, he sought peace and once again quickly returned to his own country, we were finally rid of him for good.

The people appointed me as their Judge. I began to rid Judea of the godless. Yahweh was our God, under his protection we need fear no one.

Persia had its own problems. The blood lines of Seleucid and Antiochus spawned would-be emperors in each generation, one at enmity with the other. Alexander, son of Antiochus V, raised an army and challenged Demetrius.

Wonder of wonders, Demetrius sent an envoy to me asking for military support. We smelled a rat, he had never been anything but a treacherous foe, I refused him help. Instead I offered it to Alexander, a wise choice, his forces routed those of Demetrius, killing him and most of his men. When he heard how we had refused help to the fallen king he invited me to his court, to his right hand at table, ignoring the protestations of the ungodly Israelites who came fawning to his court.

More wonder of wonders. My father had been a priest, my brothers and I also. Alexander appointed me as the chief high priest of Judea. I accepted but remained the military commander also, we prepared for war, ever alert.

But it turned out well. Alexander decided to be content with what he had. He successfully sought the hand in marriage of Cleopatra, the daughter of his potential Egyptian adversary, Ptolemy. I was invited to the wedding, it was quite a big do!

Then another adversary appeared. Demetrius II came out of exile to challenge Alexander for the throne. The meek little Alexander retired to his fortified city, Antioch, Demetrius had the kingdom. He appointed Appollonius as governor of the greater Syria which included Judea and he promptly challenged me to battle. He let me pursue his army to where 1,000 cavalry lay in hiding, waiting to ambush us from the rear as we passed them by. But we knew of his plan, my brother Simon's force lay also in ambush, waiting until the cavalry galloped past, then we turned and slaughtered the cavalry surrounded both front and back. Then we turned again and pursued the main party, putting over 8,000 to the sword.

We had peace but not Alexander. Evidently Cleopatra was not a good trade for peace. Her father Ptolemy visited Antioch with protestations of peace, but he was accompanied by a huge flotilla of ships loaded with cavalry and foot soldiers. He landed and proceeded to occupy several towns, his intentions not at all clear to Alexander. Demetrius was another proposition, he wanted to know what was going on. So Ptolemy sent for his daughter who sneaked out of Antioch and came willingly to his side. He gave her in marriage to Demetrius as a sign of good will.

Then Ptolemy sacked Antioch, driving Alexander into exile where an Arab king killed him. It didn't do much good for Ptolemy, he dropped dead of a heart attack three days after he heard the good news. So Demetrius gained both kingdoms, as well as the girl!

The pagan renegades in our midst tried to turn Demetrius against us but he preferred peace with Judea as long as we paid our taxes. We agreed, entering into an uneasy peace. Demetrius unwisely disbanded much of his army, it cost too much to keep.

Now Alexander had a son, another Antiochus, who was being reared by the Arab king who killed his father. One of Alexander's supporters, Trypho, bought the boy for a lot of money and, legitimized, proceeded to launch an attack on Demetrius for the throne. Demetrius didn't have the troops to fight him, he sent envoys to me for help. So I led 3,000 men against the Trypho's army and we defeated them. We took as much booty as we could from the battlefield but Demetrius gave us not so much as one word of thanks.

Back came Trypho with an even larger army. We were not going to help the ungrateful Demetrius again, nor were the troops he had dismissed, they actually turned against him, mercenaries have no loyalty, it's all about the money. Demetrius fled, to where no one knew.

The young king, Antiochus sent me a letter. I had stood aside, my reward was confirmation of my high priesthood and his license to pursue a war against the towns and villages of Demetrius' land. There was opposition, but we quickly extinguished it.

Who could I trust? I again sent envoys to Rome to confirm and renew our treaty of friendship. They were well received. I went with my men to Jerusalem and proceeded to rebuild it, my brother Simon did the same to create a network of fortified cities.

Still who could I trust, surely Trypho! But I did not know he was super ambitious, he wanted all of Asia. He suspected I would not agree with him so he made a pact with one of the cities we were fortifying. When I went there unsuspectingly, the people seized me and my men. They were all killed, I was made a hostage.

I Adam went briefly back to Limbo then I chose the brother.

I Simon

When I heard the fate of my brother and that Trypho was sending troops throughout all of Judea to eliminate his supporters, I raised an army to oppose him. The fighting men flocked to my side, I was the last of the Maccabees, their last hope for continuing freedom. Trypho tried to convince me he only held Jonathan captive because he owed money to the exchequer in payment for the offices he held. I ignored that obvious ruse. Wherever he went in Judea I confronted him, he never engaged me, just went away when the winter came. Jonathan's corpse he left behind. All Israel mourned him for many days.

We heard that Trypho killed the young Antiochus, his usefulness at an end. I sent a delegation to Demetrius, along with expensive gifts and flowery words. We entered into a pact of peace, all debts and transgressions forgiven on either side. We set about removing all pagan influences in Judea and banishing or executing all pagan worshippers, Yahweh was our God, only Yahweh.

To the people I was the great high priest, military commissioner and leader of the Jews. I became their king.

Again I sent envoys to renew the alliance with Rome, they were well received. Locally, Antiochus VII, son of Demetrius, became very friendly, sending me a letter in which he recognized all my titles. Finally we thought we were at peace with this Greek offshoot and that he would cease trying to change our religious culture into his pagan one. In any case he went to war with Trypho, eventually forcing him into the city of Dor which he laid under siege, not knowing Trypho had already escaped into exile.

I sent 2,000 troops to assist him but he refused my offer, a surly tone to his message to my commander. He didn't need us now, except to rule us again. His appointed general in the west began to invade Judea, imprisoning the people and massacring them. I gave my orders to my sons, Judas and John, I was too old now to lead in battle. I selected 20,000 fighting men and watched as they marched off to battle.

John proved to be the tactician I had been, maybe Judas would have been also but he fell early in the day. Our troops routed the enemy, we pursued them for days. I did not have a peaceful death, dying by treachery in the dining room of a professed ally. He tried to kill John too, but our dynasty survived.

I Adam returned to Limbo.

We watched as a succession of kings of Judea followed Simon, his son, his son's son, and so on for over 100 years, the so-called Hasmonean dynasty.

We watched as the Romans invaded Greece and also conquered the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire in the Middle East. Though we Jews were granted some measure of autonomy in Jerusalem, Judea was in reality ruled from Rome.

We watched as, following a failed Jewish rebellion, the Romans turned Judea into a regular Roman province, and installed the Jewish King Herod the Great as administrator beginning the Herodian dynasty in 37 BC. Knowing he was not a king in the Jews' eyes, Herod the Great tried to bolster the legitimacy of his reign by marrying a Hasmonean princess, Mariamne, and drowning the last male Hasmonean heir at his Jericho palace.

Isaiah spoke to us all again, as if in a trance; words he first uttered hundreds of years before.

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness. From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.

We watched as a star appeared in the East, and three kings followed it to a stable in Bethlehem, the city of David, involuntarily causing the beheading of over 2,000 boys in the region under the age of two by Herod's thugs. Something unbelievable was afoot.

We watched a boy child taken on time into Egypt, and his return to Nazareth when Herod died.

We watched the boy become a man.

We watched John, son of Zachariah and Elizabeth, baptize him in the Jordan and heard God's voice once again, praising his own son.

We watched as he preached and cured throughout the promised land, proclaiming his divinity. We were counting. Judea had, despite the pagan Hellenists within, remained faithful to Yahweh since the exile, a period of over 600 years. The reward for keeping the Covenant would be the possibility of redemption for every person, of individual salvation, the fulfillment of the Covenant. How would this happen?

We watched, aghast, as he was crucified, the Chief Priests, Herod and the Roman governor in collusion.

Again Isaiah intoned,

*Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced
through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-
being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way; But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on
Him. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth.*

We watched, as if with bated breaths, as our savior rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, summoning us to his side. Finally, we left Limbo and saw the face of God.

I Adam was needed no more on earth, there was a new Adam now. I had been replaced by the Son of God. He expiated the sin Eve and I had committed and inflicted upon every man, woman and child for thousands of years. All were now redeemed and could choose to be with God.

I Eve saw the new Eve, his mother Mary, sitting at his right side, a crown of stars on her head. She would strike the serpent's head.

Limbo ceased to exist.