

1. The Compound

1. The castle of the Jew's daughter

Just before dawn each day, not far from what was once the land of Goshen, Baruch ben Neriah, the prophet Jeremiah's lifelong friend and trusted scribe, would often waken sighing. When one is held captive few things change, yet Baruch never failed to look past his problems and whisper praises to the Lord. "I thank you, living and eternal King," he began each day with deep conviction, though he was an exile with no country and, most would say, no hope.

Uninclined to tiptoe past his several snoring jailers in the dark, Baruch would splash his face with water, roll out a barracks window then cross a courtyard to a bench beside a wall. Through cracks in the old wall's stone, as the light grew bit by bit, he would watch gulls dart above a fogbound marsh and feed on clouds of insects.

And the clarity of their struggle seemed to comfort him.

One such morning, with the Egyptian sun a pale orange disk and the air having turned quite cold, Baruch found his prophet standing peacefully beside him. "Take your cart and mule out to the road," Jeremiah said, never bothering to greet him, "then head west."

When Baruch began to blink, confused, Jeremiah hooked his arm then led him past a sleeping guard and out their prison's gate. "That way," he said, pointing, "but go past where you now fetch our salt and turn south to find a rock pit."

This had not been their first unclear exchange. Knowing better than to ask more questions, Baruch waited patiently and the prophet soon said more. "Harvest several large, smooth stones from the quarry you shall surely find," he said, "and bring them back to me."

Baruch nodded that he understood and Jeremiah smiled (though the corners of the prophet's mouth bent down sadly, with resolve, not up, with satisfaction). "I'll need big, cut rocks," he added, "and I'll need them soon. Best start now if you hope to return before dark."

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Prophets of God are not practical men nor are they the sort with whom men argue, so Baruch gently urged his mentor to explain himself more clearly. "I'm to go far from here," Baruch began, "in the flimsy cart upon which we came?"

"Perhaps 70 miles past where you have gone before," Jeremiah nodded.

"With only my aging mule to pull it?"

The prophet narrowed his eyes, thinking.

"And the large rocks that you require..." Baruch began, but Jeremiah interrupted.

"The Lord demands them," he said, "not I."

"And what do you suppose one rock might weigh?"

Jeremiah answered with what had become by then a rote recital, "*Take some large stones in your hand,*" he spoke from memory, "*and hide them in the mortar in the brick terrace which is at the entrance of Pharaoh's palace in Tahpanhes, in the sight of some of the Jews.*" He paused to point back through the gate. "Is this not Tahpanhes?" he asked. "Is it not the place the locals now call *Qasr Bint al-Yehudi*, the *Castle of the Jew's daughter*, where King Zedekiah's three orphaned girls now are forced to sleep?"

"So, you desire that I, alone," Baruch said, "with my old cart and balking mule, travel an uncertain distance to an unknown place then retrieve a load of unseen stones? And I am to complete this chore today?"

It is hard to imagine that a withered man, raked with scars and bent by decades of service to a thankless population, could suddenly glow with delight but, after further thought, the prophet did so. "Agreed, then," he said, "you will need assistance. Take some men with you."

"None from here, surely," Baruch said, "but I may find a few willing souls at Sena."

"Then do it," said Jeremiah, "for the work must soon be done."

After almost forty years in Jeremiah's service, Baruch felt comfortable enough, just then, to set his hands upon the prophet's shoulders and pat gently. "And what will you make of the stones?" he asked.

"I'll lay them side by side in the sand here, exactly in the manner required by the Lord."

"Even now," Baruch sighed, "though Judah is no more, you hear him?"

"Even now," the prophet said, "he speaks."

"Then I shall find a way to do as you've asked but, please, sir, understand. It shall likely take some time."

"Then you best get started," Jeremiah said.

Then he stepped away and left Baruch alone and nodding on the highway.