

## 2. Around the bend of the Western Sea

Long before the day on which Jeremiah asked Baruch to gather stones, Yohanan ben Kareah, a former captain in sovereign Judah's army, had stooped to serve his conqueror, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. Yohanan and his troops, who had all somehow remained unscarred throughout a long and brutal war, agreed to "protect" Judah's few survivors at Mizpah, a lonely hilltop fortress near Jerusalem. Soon other Jews who had run for their lives to Moab, Edom and other far places also returned to live there.

Nebuchadnezzar appointed a Judean named Gedaliah to be their governor, propped up by traitorous Yohanan and a small Babylonian guard. "*Do not be afraid of serving the Chaldeans,*" Gedaliah had urged his people. "*Stay in the land and serve Babylon's king that it may go well with you.*" But after nearly six years passed, another Jew named Ishmael, revolting with ten henchmen, murdered Gedaliah and many Babylonians as well.

Fearing Babylon's vengeance, Yohanan and his men fled Mizpah, forcing the remnant to come with them. After they had run south for quite a while, they stopped to rest at a place called Geruth Chimham, where the remnant learned that Yohanan planned to abandon Judah forever and live in Egypt.

Most among them were eager to leave but a handful of others objected. When unable to agree among themselves, Yohanan grudgingly, and insincerely, allowed them to seek counsel from the Lord. Baruch recorded their anxious plea to their prophet in a scroll. "*Please let our petition come before you,*" they asked Jeremiah, "*...and pray for us to the Lord your God, that is for all this remnant...that the Lord your God may tell us the way...the thing that we should do.*"

After ten days at prayer, Jeremiah answered...

*Thus says the Lord the God of Israel... "If you will indeed stay in this land, then I will build you up and not tear you down, and I will plant you and not uproot you for I will relent concerning the calamity that I have inflicted on you. Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon... Do not be afraid*

*of him," declares the Lord, "for I am with you to save you and deliver you from his hand."*

It was the seventh month, pleasant weather, an ordinary day by any measure, but Baruch had never felt such joy upon hearing a revelation. "Praise God!" he shouted to his countrymen. "The Lord remains with us, by his mercies we are saved."

Neither Yohanan nor his officers spoke during the assembly but had mounted their horses instead. "We all know Nebuchadnezzar," the captain told them afterward. "If we stay here, we shall die."

"Was your seeking a word from the Lord then a mockery?" Baruch challenged. "Has God himself not just spoken to us otherwise?"

All eyes turned toward Jeremiah. "The Lord has made it plain," he said, sighing, weary and amazed by their faithlessness. "If you abandon your homeland and run you shall all surely die by sword, by famine and pestilence."

Yohanan turned his horse until he no longer faced the prophet. "Form ranks," he ordered his troops, "we are leaving." And even those few Jews at Geruth Chimham who trusted God and Jeremiah were forced to come along.

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They fled 200 miles around the bend of the Great Western Sea. At Tahpanhes, an abandoned ruin on Egypt's eastern frontier, they stopped to occupy a rotting barracks encircled by an outer wall and built upon a man-made mound surrounded on three sides by shallow water.

Among the old fort's few benefits were its proximity to the seacoast and an onshore breeze that sometimes, but not always, kept away the wetland's hordes of noxious bugs.

Not far north lay a freshwater lake that teemed with fish, and there were ancient, mud-brick basins nearby from which, when it rained enough or the distant Nile flooded, they collected drinking water.

Wholly despised by the others, Yohanan's troops kept to themselves. The other men in camp were mostly bent and old. The women were all widows, some young, most gray, all heartbroken,

who earned their keep by cooking, mending, cleaning and keeping order for the men.

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The moment they arrived, Yohanan assigned quarters to each man, woman and soldier within the compound's musty barracks. He set tasks, posted schedules and attempted to oversee all that was done, but the remnant largely ignored him (for it is difficult to control those who, in their minds, have all but died).

Jeremiah and Baruch especially annoyed the captain. The prophet ate, slept and spoke out as he pleased. Baruch, without asking permission, staked claim to a room in an outbuilding in which he stored the prophet's scrolls; words from the Lord he had refused to leave behind in Judah despite Yohanan's objections.

Baruch had also angered the captain by carrying with him in his little, mule-drawn wagon, rolls of clean papyrus upon which he planned to write again. And it proved good that he had done so. Not long after they arrived at Tahpanhes, the remnant heard from their prophet's lips a command that would change their lives.

*Take some large stones in your hand...*

But none who heard those words, except perhaps the man who spoke them, understood clearly what they meant, and months passed before Jeremiah set out to obey them.