

## PROLOGUE

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Like a serpent's tongue, the fire flickered hungrily skyward, awaiting its next morsel.

The screams of the last infant only an echo in the crowd's ears, they watched as the king stepped forth to receive the next baby. A young mother in a drugged stupor came forth and approached the king, her arms half cradling, half dangling, a crying baby boy.

“Oh great Dagon, Lord of the air, accept this sacrifice and bring rain to our land!” intoned Jehoiakim, son of Josiah, king of Judah as he took the child from his mother's arms. Accepting the baby, the king carried it up the altar's steps to the waiting Pashur, the Chief Priest of the Temple of Solomon.

Pashur took the infant and turned to face the Topheth. The flame, having retreated into the pit of the idol's belly, awaited its next victim. Its outstretched arms still glowed a dull red

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from the intense heat they had absorbed. Poised to place the baby boy in the Topheth's arms, Pashur froze as a booming voice called out to him from the fringes of the crowd.

“Stop, you adulterous murderer. Spare this innocent blood!” From beyond the arch of light cast by the idol's fire, an old, slightly stooped man stepped forth. He grasped a staff with a weathered hand, pointing an accusing finger at Pashur. His bearing demonstrated a physical power which, though faded from its youthful prime, spoke clearly of a man used to having his commands obeyed. Stepping closer so that Jehoiakim and Pashur could see who now addressed them, Uriah the prophet, son of Shemaiah, pointed his staff at the two leaders of Judah.

“By day, you worship the God of Abraham and Moses. By night, you gather at the Topheth to shed innocent blood in the worship of foreign gods.” His lips curling into a sneer, Uriah's eyes swept the crowd, reminding them of their own guilt in this matter. “Listen to the word of the Lord, you rulers of Judah, you citizens of Jerusalem! The Lord God of Israel will bring a terrible evil upon this place, so terrible that the ears of those who hear it will shrivel up. You, oh Israel, have forsaken Me and turned this valley into a place of slaughter. The kings of Israel have filled this place with the blood of innocent children!”

Uriah approached the idol as he spoke, the king's guards standing transfixed, unable to lift a sword to stop him. Reaching the Topheth, he turned to face the crowd as he pointed his staff at Jehoiakim and Pashur. “They have built high altars to Dagon, and there they burn their sons in sacrifice. The day is coming, declares the Lord, when this valley shall no longer be called ‘Topheth’ or ‘Ben-Hinnom Valley,’ but ‘The Valley of Slaughter.’ I will let invading armies kill you here and leave your dead bodies for vultures and wild animals to feed upon. I will see to it that your enemies lay siege to the city until all food is gone, and those trapped inside begin to eat their own children and friends.”

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“Enough!” roared Jehoiakim. Seeing Pashur had not moved since Uriah had spoken, the king tore the child from his hands. “Silence that madman and take him away,” Jehoiakim shouted to his guards. Turning to face the idol, a sickening grin darkened his face as he placed the screaming child onto the outstretched hands of the Topheth. In response, flames leapt up to devour their newest victim. Galvanized by Jehoiakim’s actions, the soldiers swarmed over Uriah, beating him senseless as they carried him away.

*“Remember Uriah, My servant, and walk in his sandals,” said the voice of the Lord to a praying Jeremiah.*

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Pitchfork in hand, the man stood his ground as the Babylonian horseman rode him down. With a sweeping arc of his sword, the warrior decapitated the brave, hapless father. The invader’s eyes shifted to the man’s screaming wife, running from her house, child clutched to her bosom. Spurring his steed onward, the Babylonian raised his sword in anticipation of claiming his next victim. Throughout Jerusalem, his fellow warriors wreaked similar destruction.

In the distance, the Temple of Solomon burned as the Babylonian invaders completed their destruction of the City of David. The Captain of King Nebuchadnezzar’s bodyguard watched from his command post overlooking the city of Jerusalem. The treachery of Judah’s king, Zedekiah, had left him no choice but to order the destruction of the city. Now, as his lieutenants approached with their captive firmly in hand, a smile managed to brighten his grim-faced countenance. His men were bringing him the one man he had hoped to find.

“Leave us,” Naaman commanded after his guards finished hauling the prophet Jeremiah before him, dashing him to the ground. “I wish to speak with this man alone.” As the Babylonian guards withdrew, Naaman dismounted his horse to assist the prophet to his feet.

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“The Lord your God has brought this destruction upon your people, just as He said He would. It is because of your people’s sin that your temple now crumbles in flames. You know this, do you not?”

Jeremiah shivered, the chains binding his hands and feet making a clanking sound as he did so. The Babylonian’s voice held a trace of sadness he had not expected. His mind, dulled by weeks of starvation and now the brutality of his captors, tried to force his lips to ask how this Babylonian knew about the God of Israel. Wracked with pain and exhaustion, he could but nod his head and grunt in acknowledgement of what the man had said.

Naaman withdrew a key from his belt and began to remove Jeremiah’s chains. He continued, saying, “I am willing to make you an offer – you, and you alone of your people. I am freeing you. You may come with me to Babylon if you wish. If so, you will be fed and well cared for. If you do not wish to come with me, then you are free to come or go as you please. If you stay, go to Gedaliah. He has been appointed governor of Judah by my king, Nebuchadnezzar. It is up to you.”

Naaman turned to his horse and reached into the pouch of his saddle. Withdrawing its contents, he turned back again to Jeremiah. “Here is food and gold. Take it and do as you will.”

Jeremiah took the food and money. Then, the vision of the Captain of the Babylonian bodyguard dimmed from his sight.

*“Remember, though Jerusalem be destroyed, yet a remnant will remain that will follow Me. Go and prepare, Jeremiah, for that time,” said the voice of the Lord to a praying Jeremiah.*

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The old, hunched-back man arranged his thin white hair behind his ear to keep it out of his eyes as he unrolled the Scroll. Across the table from him sat the conqueror of Babylon, the ruler of the world.

“Oh great king,” intoned Belteshazzar the Magi. “Behold the Scroll which from olden days foretold of your rise to power.” With these words, a host of memories flooded Belteshazzar’s mind. Chief among them was the vision of a day when a boy had carried this same scroll out of Jerusalem. In his mind’s eye flashed the face of his mentor, dead these many years. Today began the consummation of a prophecy made years ago by that same man. In an instant flashed all the years, from then until now, as Belteshazzar considered the mission God had chosen him to execute. He leaned across the table to speak to his new liege-lord.

“Oh king, I have sworn loyalty to you, and you alone. Yet, there is a power in Heaven which even you must obey. Read now the words of the Scroll, and the commandment which the Lord of the Universe has spoken unto you.”

The king leaned forward to read the ancient scroll, written centuries before his birth. Upon seeing his own name recorded in the prophecy, his head jerked up, his eyes fixed questioningly on his chief Magi, Belteshazzar. “As it is written here, so shall it be. Go and fulfill the commandment of the Scroll,” said the king in a subdued whisper.

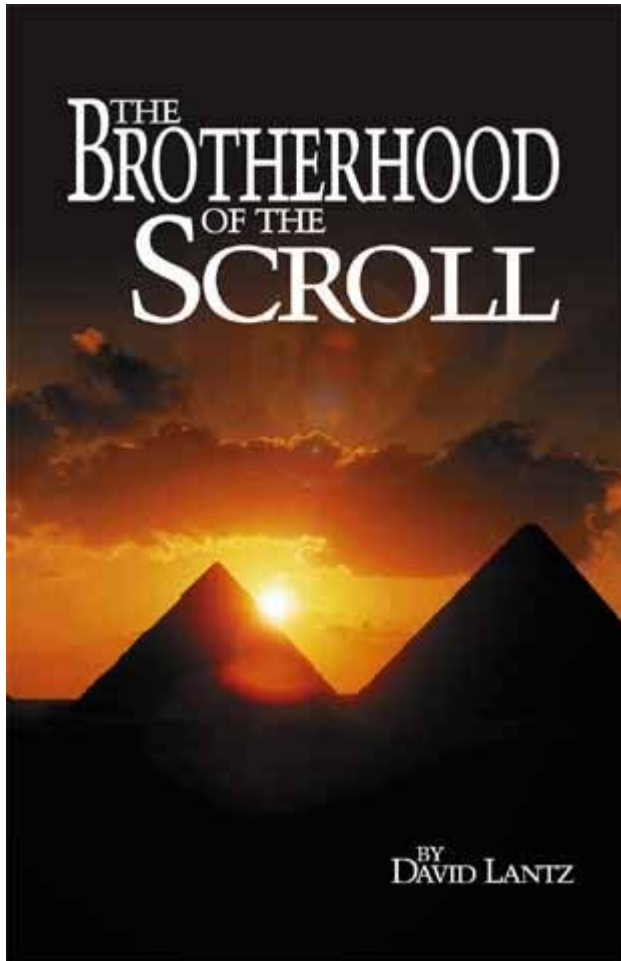
Rolling up the Scroll, Belteshazzar bowed his head and exited the room.

*“This is the vision which I will bring about. Go now, and do as I have commanded you,” said the voice of the Lord to a praying Jeremiah.*

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With a start, Jeremiah's eyes opened. His face determined, he knew he would not live to see the work of the Lord consummated. God had shown him how to begin. He would not walk this journey alone, but see God's work completed by a holy Brotherhood of the Scroll.

Jeremiah rose. There was much he needed to do.



For more information, including how to order *The Brotherhood of the Scroll*, please visit us on the web at [www.brotherhoodscroll.net](http://www.brotherhoodscroll.net).

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