

Jonah

IN THE TIME OF THE KINGS



A Novel by

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Also by Anthony Barbera:

The First Rains of October
Catching Baby Moses

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Author's Acknowledgment

Writing Jonah was more than simply writing a story, or even the retelling of an ancient tale. It was a journey, an exciting adventure into the land of a friend, where at times I wasn't sure how we would ever reach Nineveh. I am most certain that I am going to miss my daily journeys with Jonah. My desire is that this novel gives you a glimpse into the heart of someone who, although he lived a long time ago under much different circumstances, was perhaps a lot more like you and me than we might imagine.

Without friends along the way, and the engagement and excitement of sharing ideas, the long and sometimes arduous process of writing a book would be unfulfilling. During this three-year journey, I have had the loyal help of a handful of accomplished editors and readers who have assisted me. To them I thankfully extend heartfelt appreciation. Deep gratitude goes to Marcus Alphin, David Williams and Youla Overbey. Also, to my daughter Jennifer, who read, reread, discussed and read yet again. To my son Blake, who read, added insight and is spiritually sharp and intuitive. To my sister-in-law Trish Barbera, whose valuable input on editing added clarity and flow. To Jessica West for her inspired cover art. To Jan Magiera, who brought cultural truths to light. And especially, when it comes to Jonah, to Pierrette Duriez—who was there from day one, encouraging, reminding, pushing and reproving me; certainly, most of all, she inspired me. Most importantly, great appreciation goes to my wife Cynthia, who continually supports me and keeps me mindful of the simple and the true at just the right moment. She is the one who never doubted my vision for Jonah.

I thank you all from the bottom of my heart!

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Glen Ellen, California



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Inspired By and Based Upon Actual Biblical and Historical Events

Jonah-In the Time of the Kings is set in the year 762 B.C. This is many years after the United Kingdom of Israel under King David and his son Solomon. The country of Israel is divided. In the north, called Israel, ten tribes reside under King Jeroboam II. In the south, called Judah, the two remaining tribes reside. The country northeast of Israel, called Syria, whose capital is Damascus, is at constant odds with Israel.

Additionally, the Assyrians (not to be confused with the Syrians) control a large area of land including much of Mesopotamia. Nineveh is the largest city in Assyria and the residence of the current King Asshur-dan III. The Assyrian army, headquartered in Nineveh, is also referred to as the Ninevite army.

Bible texts are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.

Main Characters

ISRAEL

- Jeroboam 1 – The 1st king of divided Israel
- Jeroboam II – The 13th king of divided Israel
- Jonah – A Prophet of Lord
- Naomi – Jonah's betrothed
- Bashe – Naomi's mother
- Amos – A Prophet of the Lord

NINEVEH, ASSYRIA

- King Asshur-dan III – King of Assyria, residing in Nineveh
- Belkan – Head of security for the King of Assyria
- General Shamshi-ilu – General of the Ninevite Army of Assyria

SYRIA

- King Ben-Hadad III – King of Damascus, Syria
- General Lysias – General of the Army



When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice:
but when the wicked bare rule, the people mourn. Pro 29:2

Chapter One

THE NORTH SEA—762 B.C.

Off the coast of Norsland, on a swelling, cobalt ocean inlet the wind hurls fog through lofty boughs of ancient pine and spruce. Colossal rock formations, as if forced by the hand of God, stand towering above the chilled waters.

As the wind sweeps down through the trees, rippling the surface across the inlet, an immense dark grey form lifts itself from beneath the sea. A hissing spray streams high into the air from the box-like head of the giant male and then, as the mammoth creature crashes onto its side it disappears, its powerful tail slipping below the surface.

Piercing, clicking sounds ratchet off the rocks of the inlet—the female calls and everything living comes to attention. Breaking the surface, she erupts toward the stars. Falling straight back, lighter grey, her smaller body flattens as she, too, smashes against the surface and releases a blow, submerging and dipping her head as her enormous tail quietly slides below the surface.

The two dive through clear midnight blue waters.

Joining the pod of eighteen other whales, they angle for the deep trench where their favorite meal lives, their swishing tails disappearing into twilight, leaving a trailing stream of bubbles rising and floating to the surface.

Chapter Two

BEKA'S VALLEY, SYRIA

Now it began in this way. The prophet Jonah lay flat on his belly upon a ridgetop, overlooking Beka's Valley, his eyes fastened on a canyon through which the road descended from Syria, south, onto the valley floor.

Soon, through the northern canyon, the Aramean tribes of King Ben-Hadad of Syria would descend in full force, searching for the Israelites. As the sun dropped in the sky, the last rays of golden light illuminated the road, filtering up into the shadows of the northern canyon.

Jonah stood and gazed back toward the southern opening where he could make out an Israelite soldier standing, but not his face. The Valley of Beka was as long as one man's shout heard, contained by two ridges running the entire length. From atop the eastern ridge, Jonah spotted his people gathered in the south where the Syrians would never catch sight of them. Disappearing from view, the valley twisted at the southern end and funneled into a small passageway, and that was where the Israelites lay hidden. The battle of Beka's Valley would take place here, between Israel and Syria—as it had so many times before.

As shadows descended the valley walls, King Jeroboam II thumped down beside Jonah. He was such an enormous, lumbering target of a man, Jonah wondered how he hadn't been struck down already in some previous battle. The two rested, waiting for King Ben-Hadad and his Syrian army to appear at the canyon entrance.

As the king turned his ample face toward Jonah, smiling, discord greeted his thoughts like hot sand. He never liked this handsome prophet from Zebulun, the possessor of gleaming grey eyes never

ruled by what they saw. *Careful*, he thought. *Jonah is a prophet of the Lord; he speaks intimately with the Almighty—and I, the king, do not.*

The two heard the grinding and squealing of the chariots well before they saw them. Emerging from the entrance of the canyon, banners streamed, colored in Phoenician blues and evergreen. Two white war horses pulled the lone chariot. Then another chariot appeared. Two abreast, they emerged into full view upon the valley floor, axles squealing in the light breeze of dusk.

Each chariot held two warriors. One was a chariot driver and the other an archer. Looking fiercely about, the archer rode with his bow held half taut, an arrow at the ready. On the exterior of each chariot was a full quiver of arrows within easy grasp. Their spear tips gleamed in the settling sun, also anchored securely on the right side of each chariot. As the two chariots circled, rattling and screeching, the sound reverberated off the canyon walls.

Within moments, one chariot swung back around, now the sentinel of the northern entrance to the valley. Simultaneously, the driver of the second chariot snapped his whip with a stinging crack. The battle horses reared onto their back legs. Harnesses hidebound, they charged down the center of the valley. Reining in, the chariot slid to an uncertain stop, spying out the boulder-strewn sides of the middle valley, peering farther south. The driver shook his head. The Israelites had not arrived; the valley was empty. This battle wouldn't begin for days. The archer dropped his bow smiling. Good to rest after such a long journey. Men needed to drink and to eat hearty bread and stew before a battle.

Around the southern opening, where the gulch narrowed and angled off, the Israelites lay hidden. Again, Jeroboam looked anxiously back to the tight granite corners of the northern opening. Syrian cavalry appeared. Riding upon brightly arrayed horses, they trotted out in rows of eight behind the lead chariot. They were prancing nervous horses, with riders looking intently down the valley. As the horses rushed onto the valley floor, the second chariot rolled forward and the riders followed him in order.

Still lying in the grass, King Jeroboam put his hands to his helmet and groaned. Jonah laughed quietly to himself.

Jonah turned to Jeroboam with a wide grin, face to face, “I’ve already told you what the Lord has said. If you don’t believe the words of his prophet, perhaps you should take your men home, Jeroboam.”

“We don’t fight this way—hidden like women, Jonah.” Jonah stood to leave. With one gigantic hand King Jeroboam tugged on Jonah’s leggings. “Get down, Jonah.”

“They can’t see us up here, King.”

Jeroboam yanked him back to the ground. “If they do we’ll have no surprise.”

Face to face again, Jonah shook his head and pointed west toward the ocean. “The wisdom of the Lord outmaneuvers the ways of men, Jeroboam. From the entering of Hamah, to the sea of the plain—that is what you will take back from the Syrians. That is what the Lord has said—and that’s what he means!”

The two heard the chanting of men coming to battle well before they saw them. Swiftly, out of the dust of the canyon opening ran the Syrian infantry, thousands of them, each man gripping a spear and a shield of bronze. Suddenly, at the sound of a loud horn, the entire army stopped at attention—silent. King Ben-Hadad, atop his black Arabian stallion, rode forward and reined his horse in. Grimacing in disgust and shaking his head he spit onto the ground. There were no Israelites in the valley. Tapping their spears against the ground three times and crying out, the infantry broke rank.

Soon the rest of the chariots rolled out of the canyon, grinding and shrieking in the dust, rolling up along each side of the infantry and making their way to the front. The valley was deserted. The Syrians would pitch their army here tonight and set themselves in array to do battle with the Hebrews—if the tribes of Israel ever showed up.

Jeroboam laid his chin on his hands and complained, “I wasn’t expecting so many chariots.”

Jonah, with his hands cupped over his eyes said, “Have you forgotten what the Lord did for King David? He will fight for you as well. Prepare to do the work that you were called to do, King! And I will pray to the Lord of Armies on your behalf.”

Jeroboam smiled and slapped Jonah on the back as he crawled backwards. “All right—you’re the prophet of the Lord; I do not deny that.”

Jonah nodded his head, “Yes. Yes, I am.”

Chapter Three

GATH-HEPHER, ISRAEL

As Friday evening's orange sun flattened against the line of the desert, the horn's shrill wail sounded across the valley from the priest's rooftop. It was the Sabbath.

Bashe and Naomi held hands as they left the dirt path and hiked up the cobbled road toward the house of prayer in the center of Gath-hepher. As they passed those hiking down from the town center, Bashe spotted some turning back to glower at them. Wondering eyes questioned why Bashe and her daughter were not going to the high place to worship Baal and Ashtoreth with the rest of them.

Approaching them from the street above, Naomi caught sight of Ana. She was very tall and lissome, especially for a girl. She was walking with her mother who had also lost her husband. Watching Ana approach, Naomi felt disappointment. She had been close friends with Ana's older sister, Hadar. However, Hadar had recently married, so Ana and her mother were alone now, without husband, father or sister. The girls' eyes met briefly and Naomi smiled at her, but Ana passed, turning away shamefully.

When the final horn blast sounded for the Sabbath, Naomi looked over at her mother and gently pulled her hand free. "Stop Mother, let's rest a moment."

Bashe was breathing hard, struggling as she climbed the steep hill. The blast of the horn made Naomi think of Jonah and war, wondering if the war was over and if Israel had been victorious. She would pray again today that Jonah didn't pick up a weapon and enter the battle. He was a prophet, true, but he was also easily riled and seemed unafraid of standing square up before any man.

For a moment they stopped with their backs pressed against the wall, allowing a small wagon to squeak past them and down the hill, pulled by a single mule and filled to the top with pungent purple grapes. Bashe lifted her hand to the old man, “Shalom,” she gasped, catching her breath.

The old man smiled, his slit eyes hidden. He knew Bashe and her daughter and remembered Bashe’s husband Aden well: a good man and thrifty. Everyone in Gath-hepher had known Aden. He was well respected, but not everyone liked him. Aden would buy grapes from the old man about this time of year. *Aden the bargainer*, the old man thought. Right to the very end of an agreement, he’d haggle, fortunately he had enough sense to know when to stop. That was before he had died and slept with his fathers. Bashe looked more wrinkled and tired since her husband had died. As he waved to them in passing, he noticed his hand shaking, and wondered how long his own body would stand up to the toil of its own labor.

Bashe’s thighs hurt as she struggled up the steepest part of the hill. She wasn’t so old to be having such a difficult time. Wiping the perspiration from her forehead, she remembered the old man coming to their home. There was hardly a day that passed that something or someone didn’t remind her of her husband. Aden had provided for them well, preparing their daughter to be the kind of wife a faithful man would desire. He’d directed Naomi’s learning of the scriptures from the time she was a child. What a good and kind husband Aden had been. Nevertheless, through the years Bashe had sensed his great disappointment. Still, he had not complained: she bore him only one child, and that child wasn’t a male. Sons were the pride of their fathers and the measure of his wife.

In these times, to be a widow was very near a curse in Israel. In any case, she would not seek a kinsman redeemer (a brother of her husband), to wed her after Naomi was married to Jonah. Aden’s brother Heber was every bit as mean-spirited as he was stingy. Her prayer to God was that she would live with Jonah and Naomi throughout the remainder of her days. She would not give up her

home and savings to a relative, and above all not to Aden's small-minded brother. *Those worries are for another day*, she thought. *I will let nothing spoil Naomi's engagement to Jonah. That is most important.*

Bashe watched her daughter effortlessly climb before her. It wasn't that long ago that she too was sixteen and able to easily stride up these steep roads with loads of fruit and vegetables. Not anymore, she was putting on too much weight and getting old. "As life goes," she whispered.

Climbing toward the plaza and looking about, clearly Gath-hepher was no longer as prosperous as the village of Sepphoris. The buildings had aged, many vacant, and the streets were rutted with holes needing repair. Good work was difficult for men to find in Gath-hepher. Still, here, close to the border of Zebulun and Naphtali, the fruit and grapes grew heartily, clustering and filling with sugar more evenly than anywhere in the countryside.

Bashe's old friend Hada and her husband Joel passed quickly, bowing, ill at ease, saying "Shalom," but only out of courtesy as they headed down the hill and out along the desert path toward Little Mount Tabor to worship in the high place.

Naomi pulled her cinnamon-colored shawl over her head. Glancing back, she watched them as they hiked down the cobbled road keeping to the shade. The tunic she'd chosen for today was Jonah's favorite, light beige, which she preferred to wear to the house of prayer. Her grandmother had made it especially for her, embroidering it with a square woven pattern across the front. Its intricate yellow stitching accented the outer lines, reminding Naomi of her.

From the street above, finally striding downhill to the house of prayer, mother and daughter smiled at one another as they entered the cobblestone plaza surrounded by closing shops and withdrawn awnings. This time of day, more often than not, became annoyingly windy. For a time the wind would buffet from the west, billowing and lifting sand into the plaza. Mysteriously, all of a sudden it would

end, leaving everything in a shroud of chalky dust. Directly ahead, upon the lowest part of the hill and overlooking the desert was the house of prayer. Below, the rooftops sat scattered down the hillside amidst grape vines woven in anywhere they would fit.

The people of Gath-hepher had built the house of prayer a generation before, constructing it of granite stone transported from Mount Sepphoris during the reign of King Jeroboam I, the son of Nebat. Growing up, Bashe was accustomed to her grandfather's endless ranting against that first King Jeroboam, even though it had been almost on 150 years since he had died. Only the faithful of Israel had not forgotten how Jeroboam, the king who originally divided the country, had moved quickly to initiate idol worship in the north. The same calf worship the Almighty abhorred. The same calf worship Moses found the people partaking in when he smashed the Ten Commandments and scrambled back up Mount Horeb to plead with the Lord for their very lives.

Upon consolidating power in the north, King Jeroboam I, son of Nebat, straightaway set up golden calves at Bethel, the southern entrance to Israel, and in the north at Dan. Jeroboam I, they said, couldn't stand the idea that the people would bring all their tithes and offerings south to the temple in Jerusalem. With malice and avarice, he set up his own temples in the north and filled them with the evil idols of the pagans, encouraging all manner of licentious behavior. The once great country of Israel split in two: Israel in the North and Judah in the south.

It rattled the ancestors. Father and grandfather would shake with anger, especially on holy days, reminding the family and any neighbor who would listen, that they were all fortunate the Lord of Heaven hadn't already wiped the North, as a man wipes a dish, cleaning it, and turning it upside down. Now, Jeroboam II was continuing down the same foul malignant pathway of his namesake.

The women entered the house of worship and made their way to the northern part of the room. So few were coming to the house of prayer any more. Bashe knew why. *This lustful King Jeroboam II is*

breathing rebellion straight into the very face of God. The temple is God's home.

The children of Israel were to tithe unto the Almighty, so that his holy words could be maintained throughout the generations, protected and made plain for the people of Israel. Instead, they were encouraged to worship at the king's temples or upon the hilltops, where even the wives joined in their unspeakable behavior.

Bashe apprehended that in their daily business, the idolaters favored each other more and more. If you were one of them and you took part in their abominable ceremonies, giving to their idols as they did—you were favored. From every corner of the country it was taking its toll. The women didn't speak openly, but they knew that more and more the men were going to the temples in Dan or Bethel, where Jeroboam was providing everything they desired. The men gave liberally to those "other" temples, and not to the houses of prayer. They were all growing increasingly dishonest in their drunken selfishness. She had to be careful in any dealing she made now. The men would think nothing of cheating her since she had no husband. And beyond that, each neighborhood was assigned a "gatekeeper," one who was provided by the king to supposedly protect the citizens, but who was in actuality, a busybody and a spy. Ultimately, the king wanted complete control of Israel and everything dwelling within it. At the rate things were going, soon the worship of the True God of Israel would be outlawed in Israel.

Slabs of white limestone formed the floor of the prayer house. The walls were thick, rough on the exterior but smooth on the inside. A number of colonnades formed the body and structure of the room. Streams of light illuminated areas of the prayer house from small openings cut in the roof, the light shifting throughout the day. The women bowed as they walked around to the raised women's gallery to sit upon the stone benches.

At the south end of the temple, facing north stood a replica of the Ark of the Covenant. Carved of gold, it contained the house's sacred scrolls of the Law and the Psalms. Steps led up to the ark. Before the

ark, hung the veil, fashioned from material of fine-combed linen. Below the ark and facing Bashe and Naomi were the seats of honor for the priests of the temple and the honorable, where Bashe's father and grandfather had sat. The holy lamp standing alongside the ark was never to stop burning, signifying the truth of the light of Jehovah living in his house.

It occurred to Bashe that only a few years before, on the Sabbath, this room would have been filled and overflowing, some only able to stand in the small doorway, people lined out into the courtyard. Now in this town of well over 3,000 souls, she could count only seventy-five to eighty people gathered today to begin the weekly Sabbath. Those gathered were mostly parents with children, devout men and women of Israel, who refused to be turned, who brought their families to worship the God of Israel and to keep the covenants of their Lord.

Staring around the room, Bashe could taste the bitterness in her soul. Only a year before, a small gathering of respected men from this house of prayer had turned. They turned to Baal and the gods of the land, gods who they were convinced would bring moisture and richness to the crops. These were the gods of fertility.

Thankfully, once a year a remnant of the prosperous men of the town would together take the long journey to Jerusalem to worship during the Feast of Weeks at the great temple built by King Solomon. Even so, Bashe, instead of expecting this house of prayer to one day be full again, feared that the Lord, his patience having grown thin, would bring his wrath down upon this town and every other town of the North. That's exactly what her future son-in-law had warned.

She looked down at her folded hands and shook her head with dread. Maybe it was not that Jehovah was going to bring wrath, but that he was saddened and had gone away. For years, the people had said that they didn't want him in Israel, that other gods were more important, and for him—to get out of their lives. As they bent,

prostrating themselves in subjection to the other gods, perhaps the Lord had done as they had requested. Possibly, he had vanished. For that reason, if the Ninevites from the city of blood and violence came to ravage the land of Israel, there would be no protection as there once had been.

The priest, wearing a white cap and a fresh brilliant white tunic, walked up and lit the Sabbath candle. “Forget your troubles woman,” she whispered to herself. “This is the time to worship the Lord.” A short elbow length ocean-blue garment covered the priest’s tunic and an apron of multi-colored fine linen lay over both.

He bowed his head and spoke clearly, “Blessed be thou, O Lord, King of the world, who forms the light and allows the darkness. Who makes peace and creates everything, who in mercy gives light to the earth and to all those who dwell upon it. In your goodness, day by day, and every day, you renew your works of creation. Blessed be the Lord our God, who has formed the lights.”

Both Bashe and Naomi responded, “Selah, most gracious blessed God of ours.”

Naomi folded her two hands together, her head lowered. She bit her lip to keep from shuddering, because as much as she wanted to think about the Lord, she was thinking about her yearning. Every day it became more difficult to rule over her desire. She would be sweeping or kneading dough, and into her mind and before her eyes she would see Jonah, naked and strong.

Sometimes she would walk into the small room that they had set aside for him, just large enough for a table for him to study and to pray. She’d accidentally seen him once from the back naked, without his tunic, washing himself. He was fit and muscular, probably from his extended walks throughout the North. Other times he would be gone, but she would sit alone, smelling and imagining him. It was still four months before their marriage could be consummated, the espousal complete. *What if he doesn’t return home from war with*

the Syrians? she considered. He'd assured her that prophets did not fight; he was only there to speak on behalf of the Lord. Of course in war, arrows and spears fly freely.

She could hardly wait. They would be married here, in the house of prayer, in this town where he was the most celebrated of prophets: Jonah, the Prophet of Israel from Gath-hepher. Then they would be together in each other's embrace as lovers for weeks on end.

"Naomi," Bashe startled her. "Concentrate on your prayers."

Naomi looked at her mother, wondering how she knew.

Bashe smiled at her, "I know the thoughts of a young woman." She leaned over and whispered into her ear. "Keep the Lord first in your heart, your husband second—and you will do right by both."

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