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PART I

*Roots of Evil, Threads of Promise
From the Beginning–1962*



A Land and Its Mysteries

2000 B.C. – A.D. 69

It had always been called the Land of Promise, that prehistoric patrimony on each side of the Jordan pledged to Abraham.

He, known to men of old as almighty God, Yahweh, the LORD, had said to faithful Abram of Ur, *Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your descendants more numerous than the stars in the heavens. I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur to give you this land and to take possession of it.*

Six hundred years later, on the mount of Sinai, God made the promise to Moses: *I will deliver my people from the hand of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.*

It must have seemed to Abraham's numerous offspring that the Lord's optimism had failed to take into account the singularly persistent efforts on the part of the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and the Romans to prevent them from occupying that land between the eastern desert of Arabia and the Great Sea. If he intended to give them such an inheritance, the less faithful among them must have wondered why did he not raise his divine hand a little more aggressively against those so bent on wresting it from them.

In Eden had the Creator established the perfect garden for men to dwell. But with their expulsion had begun six millennia of wandering, ever seeking but never permanently coming to rest in that new Eden, that land of milk and honey that had been covenanted to Abraham's offspring as a homeland forever.

He had cast them from the first garden with the words "Cursed is the land because of you." It must have seemed that

the covenant with Abraham for the second garden was infused with the same curse as well. Occupying that divine endowment for brief interludes between defeats at the hands of conquering giants appeared their only lot.

The gloomy words of the Almighty to Abraham following the promise—*Know that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated*—of a certainty spoke not merely of the relatively brief sojourn in Egypt, but set the course for Israel's entire future on earth.

The land itself, however, had never been as important to the ancient Hebrew God as those offspring of his loving covenant themselves. That the Hebrew children were of the Creator's family was a truth that rose preeminent in the heavenly equation above their nationhood. That they were a *people* was a deeper truth than the possession of secure borders. That they had been chosen to carry news of the Almighty into all the world came before having a place of their own to lay their heads.

He they called Yahweh was in the process of building a different kind of nation than could be contained by boundaries crisscrossing the earth's surface. Even the perimeters of that ancient land laid claim to by Joshua's invasion, held by the might of that great warrior-king David ben Jesse, lamented over by Isaiah and Jeremiah, were borders merely lining the earth, without necessary correlation in the regions *above* the earth where higher Principalities ruled.

At length, when the time was fulfilled and the season for his kingdom was at hand, God sent his Son, the awaited Messiah, to his people. The Messiah told them that the temple he would build and the race he would fashion were not to be built by hands, fortified with weapons, nor held by armies. Rather it would be a temple made by the living stones of men and women, and a nation built by the knitting together of men's hearts.

Alas, the children of Abraham received neither Jesus the Anointed One nor his message, and thus their pilgrimage to rediscover the meaning of the ancient covenant had only begun.



A Holy Theft

A.D. 70

A black-clad, bearded priest of the ancient order of the Levites stole quietly under the darkened covered cloister through the South Gate into that most sacred edifice in all the Jewish world, the temple of Herod.

What he was about to do, if discovered by his peers, especially by the High Priest or by Herod Agrippa himself, would cost him his priestly vestments . . . and probably his life as well.

He made his way through the Court of the Gentiles, through the Beautiful Gate, across the Women's Court, into the Court of Israel, past the altar, and finally into the Holy Place itself. Slowing his step now, he stole nearer his destination, that innermost sanctum where God himself was said to dwell.

Would he be struck dead for tampering with the holy articles of their faith? If such was the case, so be it. He prayed Yahweh would be merciful to his soul in the next life.

A premonition of evil had been growing upon him for days.

There had been reports for some time that the emperor Vespasian was sending his son Titus to Judea. But Roman legions and governors and centurions had come and gone through this region for a century. None of his fellows in the Sanhedrin seemed to think anything of it.

But never had there been an ambitious emperor's son leading the legions of soldiers. And Jehoiachin ben Azor, faithful priest and rabbi of the stock of Aaron, knew that this time was destined to be different. Frightfully and woefully different.

Among the temple priests Jehoiachin was considered atypical at best, downright astonishing, some would have said. Some of his views were clearly too broad, especially his tolerance of the Christian sect. In his favor, his friends maintained, at least he kept his unorthodox notions of brotherhood mostly to himself.

He had such a peculiar predilection as well for divining the future. In another age and another time, he might have been considered a prophet. In this, his own age, however, he was

merely looked upon with mingled annoyance and scorn, while his words—both warnings about things to come and strange teachings about Yahweh's desire to become familiar and close to his people—went largely unheeded, which perhaps was the strongest indication of all that the prophetic spirit did indeed live within him.

Jehoiachin had been poring over the Scriptures for days, ever since the terrifying vision that had awakened him six days ago.

Daniel had spoken of evil things that would befall the temple of God—*this* very temple, Jehoiachin was now convinced. With threefold emphasis, the prophet had warned of the abomination that causes desolation that would one day be set up in the very temple itself. His warnings had been written, the Scriptures said, so that the wise would understand.

"O God," he had cried out, "*help me to understand the mystery sealed away in the book, and show me what you would have me to do.*"

Again he had sought the words of the prophet.

The king of the North will return to his own country with great wealth, but his heart will be set against the holy covenant.

He stopped. Most of his colleagues and rabbinical scholars took Daniel's words to refer to that tyrant Antiochus of Syria. But Jehoiachin had never agreed with such an interpretation. Rome was farther north than Syria. But Jehoiachin was alone in viewing the dreadful prophecy as yet awaiting fulfillment, and as coming from that great power of the northern Mediterranean.

At the appointed time he will invade the South again. He will vent his wrath against the holy covenant. His army will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation. . . . He will invade many countries and sweep through them like a flood. He will invade the Beautiful Land.

What else, thought Jehoiachin, could the prophet refer to than the might of Rome? He was more convinced than ever, especially since his vision, that just such an invasion was imminent. The results, he was sure, were unmistakable—the temple, the very holy place itself, would be destroyed.

The king of the North, that emperor who sat on the imperial throne of Rome, would plunder all its wealth for himself. For

did not Daniel say, *He will honor a god unknown to his fathers with gold and silver, with precious stones and costly treasures.*

He had even consulted the words of the crucified Jesus. Jehoiachin was student enough of the new sect to remember that he too had quoted Daniel's words concerning the abomination of desolation. A new collection of his teachings by a tax collector called Matthew had been circulating for a year or two. He had himself sought out this Matthew secretly, by night, and interviewed him at length. Jehoiachin was a Jew, not a Christian. But Jesus had been a Jew, and a faithful one he personally believed. Most of his followers were Jews too, and Jehoiachin was broad enough in his outlook to desire the truth from whatever quarter it came. Their claim that Jesus was the Messiah was difficult to comprehend, he had to admit. Yet if it were true—as the Christians maintained but his fellow priests denied—that he had actually appeared alive following his crucifixion, it certainly lent an authenticity to their claim.

In any case, he would worry about who the Christ was later. His mission right now concerned his vision, Rome, and what he might do to save at least a few items from falling into its conquering clutches.

Now as he made his way, he thought back to his conversation with the fellow Matthew. He was one who had heard the startling words with his own ears. He had then written them down in what he referred to as his Gospel. Jehoiachin was therefore confident that Jesus' words were just as Matthew had recited to him that night:

When you see the abomination that causes desolation standing in the holy place, spoken of by the prophet Daniel, then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. For there will be great distress.

Whether Jesus was a prophet or not was another thing he couldn't resolve right now. But his words were clear—"Don't wait . . . flee to the mountains." They confirmed Daniel's warnings, and his own vision. Jehoiachin, therefore, intended to follow his advice.

He would have warned his fellow priests, warned the whole city of Jerusalem, if he thought it would have done any good.

But he knew what they did in this city to prophets of all kinds, especially ones deemed false. He had not been in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion of the Nazarene, but he was scholar enough to know that he was not the only Jewish rabbi or holy man to be put to death by his own countrymen. This was no friendly place to prophetic types.

No, it would do no good to issue warnings. They would only kill or discredit him, and then he would be prevented from doing what he felt he had been shown he must do. Grieve him as it might, this was one task he must undertake, and one journey he must embark upon . . . alone.

With stealthy step, Jehoiachin crept through the Holy Place, and now at last stood before the curtain into the Holy of Holies itself.

A lump rose in his throat. He could feel the sweat breaking out over his back and chest. A lifetime's teaching and training rose up to argue one last time against the foolhardy thing he had come here to do.

Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies. Jehoiachin was about to commit sacrilege against the essence of the Jewish faith, against the very character and holiness of Yahweh. Yet he felt compelled to do so, as if Yahweh himself were urging him on.

One final time he paused to pray.

Stay my hand, Lord God of Israel, if what I am about to do is grievous in your eyes. Do not let me sin against your Law nor your temple nor the dwelling place of your Glory.

He waited a moment.

The only impulse he felt was that which had been with him so persistently since his vision—the impulse to continue forward.

Taking in a deep breath, he parted the curtain and entered the Holy of Holies.

His heart beat wildly, and he half expected any moment to hear a roar of thunder and have a bolt of lightning explode from the sky to strike him down where he stood.

With effort he sought to quiet himself. He took quick stock of the sacred surroundings he had never before laid eyes upon.

There it was—the pouch worn on the High Priest's chest that

contained the stones from Aaron's breastplate that possessed divine power.

Slowly he reached forward and laid hold of the pouch.

His hand trembled as he opened it, reached inside, removed the two large diamonds known as the Urim—which signified the answer of *no* when the High Priest removed it to render some thorny decision—and the Thummim, which, if selected, signified *yes*.

He paused only briefly to glance at the exquisite gems, then placed them carefully in a piece of cloth, which he deposited in a pocket in his robe. From another pocket he took two small common stones he had brought for just this purpose, and put them in the pouch. He would not have the Urim and Thummim discovered missing any sooner than was necessary.

Jehoiachin set the pouch back in its resting place exactly as he had found it, then hastily left the place, still breathing hard, heart beating rapidly. He strode back across the white stones of the temple courtyards as noiselessly yet as quickly as he could, and in a few minutes was again safely alone in the streets of Jerusalem.

He was only one man. He could not save the temple. But perhaps he could save a few of those priceless treasures of their heritage for another time when yet again God would raise a temple of worship upon this place, atop the rubble which he was sure Rome was about to create.

He paused to look back one last time at the magnificent temple of Herod.

A tear rose in his eye. He knew that he would never lay eyes on it again.

His gaze swept back around the city through which he made his way. Neither would he set foot inside its walls again, he was sure, for as long as he lived.

"O Jerusalem . . . Jerusalem—sacred city of old," he sighed. "I will miss you. . . ."

A pause came to his inner spirit. The next thoughts to cross his lips were whispered words of prayer.

"Raise this city again, O Lord, even out of the rubble the legions of Rome are about to cause. Bring back your people to this holy mount. Go with them to wherever in the world they are scattered. Protect

your people . . . and protect these stones, that they too may find their way again to this temple of your presence, at the time when you appoint for their return."

A multitude of feelings and prayers he was unable to utter swept through him.

Finally he turned again and continued swiftly on his way. There were yet preparations to be made. And he must be on his way, through the Essene Gate and out of the city, before dawn.



Wanderers without a Home

A.D. 70–1382

God offered to make of Abraham's children a holy nation indeed by bringing them into the divine family through the sacrifice of his firstborn Son. His people chose instead to continue placing their hopes on a passing earthly kingdom—a dream brought to a sudden and cruel end, thirty-seven years after that Son's death, at the hand of the Roman emperor's son Titus.

With Jerusalem in flames, the heights of Masada finally scaled, and the first-century nation of Israel in ruins, thus began the greatest Diaspora of all. Indeed were the children of Abraham now cast to the winds and spread abroad to the four corners of the earth. Truly did they become peregrinators and pilgrims, roaming not merely the deserts of Sinai, Shur, Paran, and Zin, but the continents and byways of the whole earth. With vaster scope were the words of God to Abraham now fulfilled, not for a mere four hundred years, but for nearly five times that many: *Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated.*

In every country did they encamp, but nowhere did they find a home. Nowhere did the family of man open its arms or its heart to Abraham's seed, to this historic people with no soil in which to send down the roots of its venerable and ancestral culture. Hence they wandered without a homeland—mistreated,

slandered, vilified, in some eras even slaughtered, yet miraculously remaining a *nation* in the purest sense, bound together by threads of common heritage and belief—for no mere Mosaic two, but for ninety-five score of years. Persecute it as the world might, the divinely imbued Hebrew blood could never be eradicated from the face of the earth, nor could the remarkable tenacity and verve it gave its people be diluted.

Truly did Yahweh honor the ancient prayers of his faithful servant: *Go with them wherever in the world they are scattered. Protect your people.*

They wandered—taking with them whatever treasures, relics, and memories of their historic and ancestral heritage they had managed to preserve—making a temporary home of every community where men gathered, learning the tongues and the ways of the Gentiles around them, until at length the Lord seemed to say, as he had on Sinai: *I have seen the misery of my people. I know their afflictions and sorrows. I have come to deliver them, and to bring them to that ancient land I promised their forebears, a land flowing with milk and honey.*

From Abraham through the ages, from father to son to son to son in an unbroken link through time, the treasures of Jewry passed in generational succession, giving vivid and substantial reality to the truth that all those who came after actually *touched* the ancient patriarch by being numbered among his seed.

Numbered among the most prized of all Jewish artifacts, which had somehow been preserved through the years, were these two—the ancient Urim and Thummim of Aaron's breastplate, the former a great clear diamond of fifteen carats, the latter also a diamond, but of an exquisite pale blue and smaller, of some twelve carats.

By any standard, both were of inestimable value, added to immensely by their historic connection to the period of the Exodus. Whether the two surviving diamonds were in fact the mysterious Urim and Thummim could not be known with certainty. But the legends and traditions surrounding the precious stones gave them tremendous historical and religious significance for all of Jewry. What hands had kept them safe all those years was a secret that would never be known.