

Chapter 1

Dark rain clouds were gathering in the sky above the Judean hills. The month was Adar, the last of the Jewish sacred year, and the time of the latter rains. As the first drops began to fall, two young men were hurrying down the Mount of Olives toward Jerusalem, drawing their billowing cloaks more tightly about them.

Eli, the younger of the two, turned to his companion with a wry smile and began chanting a passage from the Torah. “‘But the land, whither ye go to possess it, is a land of hills and valleys, and drinketh water of the rain of heaven.’”

Hesitantly at first, then more confidently as the passage came back to him, Jacob joined in: “‘A land which the Lord thy God careth for: the eyes of the Lord thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year. And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, That I will give you the rain of your land in his due season, the first rain and the

latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil.’”

Jacob drew a corner of his cloak over his thick, dark hair as the rain became heavier. “For one who hates studying as much as you seem to, you quote Scripture well.”

“I remember that passage because it’s about things I really care for,” Eli explained. “It’s about the land, and farming, and harvest.” He sighed. “But studying the Law, with all those 613 statutes, and the endless commentary—what a heavy burden that is when I would rather be out in Joel’s vineyard!”

Jacob shook his head. “I will never understand you. Your father makes great sacrifices so that you can go to the rabbinical school. After a few more years of study, you could be a learned and honored rabbi. Yet you’d rather work in the rain on a muddy hillside, building terraces so that a rich Sadducee can grow richer by producing more grapes!”

Eli shrugged sadly. “And you, who don’t have to go to rabbinical school, but may work on the land every day, consider me a privileged man. What an upside-down world!”

“I feel sorry for your father,” Jacob said seriously. “His whole heart is set on seeing you succeed where he failed because of his illness. He doesn’t want you to be an unskilled laborer. He looks at you, his only child, and dreams of seeing you a second Hillel, a prince of the Sanhedrin, a teacher of thousands!”

“I can never fulfill his dreams!” Eli said in anguish. “I’m no longer a child. I’m nineteen years old. When will Father realize? When will he understand that I

grow weary of endless lessons, the endless studying of the Law and the prophets? My hands were meant to hold a shovel or a scythe, not fragile parchment scrolls in gloomy schoolrooms.” He held up one hand, dirty from the afternoon of terrace-building.

Jacob shook his head. “If only I had the chance you have! I would grasp the opportunity to live a life of ease among books, away from backbreaking toil in other men’s vineyards and olive groves.”

Eli turned his face away as tears mingled with the rain on his face.

Sensitive to his friend’s feelings, Jacob’s voice softened. “Look, Eli, Zion! I never reach this spot where Jerusalem comes into view without being filled with awe.”

Eli drew a hand across his cheeks and turned his gaze to the panorama below. Even though no setting sun transformed Jerusalem into a “city of gold” this evening, the vast spread of limestone buildings was an impressive sight. High on Mount Zion, with its array of marble and gold, the magnificent temple gleamed even without the sunlight.

“I see this every day,” Jacob mused, “yet it never fails to take my breath away. How must it be for the Passover pilgrims who come only once a year, or even once in a lifetime?”

Eli nodded. “Today, the city seems asleep, but soon she will awaken as the thousands of pilgrims come here next month for Passover.” They descended into the dark shadows of the valley just beneath the city wall to cross the Kidron brook.

“Better hurry,” said Jacob. “The gates will soon be closing.”

They shouldered their way among a knot of people crowding through the massive gate and hurried along the winding streets to the poor section, called the Lower City. Here the streets were so narrow that Eli could easily touch the walls on both sides at once. Lights were winking on in the windows of the flat-roofed limestone houses crowded one against the other.

A shout rang through the shadowy street. A small figure hurtled out of a doorway, shouting, "Jacob! You're home at last! Why are you so late?" In a flurry of arms and legs, the boy flung himself upon his older brother.

Eli watched with a twinge of envy as the two disappeared, hand in hand, into the House Ben Josiah. Though his parents would be glad to see him, there would not be an enthusiastic welcome. He strode on, quickly covering the short distance to his own home, the House Ben Amos.

About to duck through the low doorway, he pulled back, startled. From the courtyard came a man's voice.

"Well, Amos," the voice said, "I hope this has not been too upsetting for you. The other rabbis and I agreed it was time you knew of the situation. Let us know if there is something we can do. Shalom."

Eli sucked in his breath sharply. He knew that voice! It was the Rabbi Jedekiah, his teacher! What could he want here, at his father's house, this time of day?

The rabbi almost brushed against the young man shrinking against the wall without noticing him. "Oh, shalom," he said apologetically. This Jewish greeting, meaning "Peace be to you," passed for both hello and good-bye. "You are back from your work on the terraces, I see."

“Yes,” said Eli respectfully, not knowing what else to say.

The rabbi nodded curtly and swept on down the street.

Eli’s knees trembled as he entered the courtyard. Everything seemed as usual. Mother stood near the brazier just inside the house, stirring a pot of lentil soup while the smoke curled out the doorway. She turned quickly upon hearing Eli’s step in the stone courtyard.

“You are late, Eli,” she said.

“We were busy till the last minute, finishing a terrace,” Eli explained. He held his hands over the brazier, soaking up the warmth and breathing in the aroma of cooking lentils.

“And enjoying every minute of it, I’m sure,” she said with a hint of reproach.

Eli knew why. His parents had not really wanted him to take the afternoon job with Joel. They would rather have had him studying at home each day, thus hastening the time when he would be a teacher. But, because Eli had begged—and because they were hard-pressed for money—they had given in.

“Yes, Mother, you are right. I enjoyed it,” he admitted humbly.

She shook her head. “Working in the cold and wet and dirt, when you could be indoors learning more about the great Law of God!”

Her words troubled him more than Jacob’s had. *What is the matter with you?*² she seemed to be asking. It was a question Eli often asked himself. Why didn’t he share his father’s great reverence for the