

The Lost Gospel of Barabbas

Book Two: Exodus

Introduction

The doorbell rang for the second time. A sharp knock followed. Professor Hershel D. Moussaieff rose from his chair. He stretched and stumbled toward the door. He had not slept well in a week. All of his time had been consumed by those scrolls, those damn scrolls.

Four years ago, he and his team of archaeologists from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem had uncovered the greatest archaeological find in 70 years. In a cave near Khirbet Qumran by the Dead Sea, they found several clay pots filled with the scrolls. Professor Moussaieff had worked diligently, non-stop translating the Aramaic and Greek text. He found the personal memoirs of a man claiming to be the notorious insurrectionist, Barabbas. He also found a story beyond belief. It had consumed him, devouring everything in his life. Engrossed by the translation, Moussaieff became obsessed. He fully immersed himself in his work. The scrolls occupied all of his time to the point of neglect.

Another sharp knock rang out, this time louder. The door wouldn't move. He cursed in frustration. Fumbling with the deadbolt, the Professor managed to get the door unlocked. It squeaked loudly on rusted hinges as he pulled it open. The smiling face greeted him. His brother Ben stood patiently waiting on the front porch. Opening the door wider he welcomed his brother inside.

Ben entered, insisting that Hershel follow. As he shut the front door, he noticed that Ben was already down the hall. He turned and motioned, "Follow me. I have something that I need to show you," he said.

Hershel followed his brother as they walked down the hallway of his house. The walls were lined with pictures. Dozens of portraits cluttered the walls. There were pictures of Hershel's wife and children. Pictures of his most beloved grandson, the love of his life. There were pictures of family members from years long past. Their parents hung side by side. A picture of their Grandmother before the Nazi concentration camps, as there were

none afterwards. Pictures of uncles armed and dressed in their military uniforms from May 14, 1948. They stood before Premier Ben-Gurion in Tel Aviv on the day he proclaimed the establishment of the Jewish State of Israel, establishing the first Jewish state in 2000 years. Each of them had been lost in the war for Israel's freedom. Ben turned and motioned for his brother to continue to follow him. More family portraits hung scattered down the hall. A faded black and white of Great Grandfather Theodore Moussaieff hung slightly crooked. He had been part of the Zionist volunteers who assisted in the British conquest of Palestine in 1918. This hallway, these pictures represented their family, their blood. A great heritage hung here.

Ben turned toward his brother. An intense and frightful expression marked his face; his eyes burned with fear. Concern engulfed the Professor. Instantly Hershel was transported back to his childhood. He was the protector. It was his job to take care of his little brother. What nuisance plagued Ben at the moment?

Ben's hand reached outward, trembling. He pointed toward something on the wall that Hershel had never noticed before. Something that was not there before. Drawn to it, the Professor noticed a picture hanging in the midst of all the others. It was a picture of an owl. Feathered tufted horns protruded from its head. Huge yellow eyes were centered on a wicked black beak.

“Hershel, it's not supposed to be here.”

The Professor examined the picture. He leaned closer for a better look. He was just inches away. Something wasn't right. A strange feeling fell over him. Studying the details of this odd sight, he was mesmerized. Suddenly, the yellow eyes turned to meet the Professor's. Startled, he jumped back. Instantly his heart was filled with a terrible fear. An anxiety rushed through him. Turning toward his little brother, he found that he was gone. Hershel Moussaieff now stood alone, facing the staring eyes of the great owl. The wicked eyes locked with his and stared. Immediately he knew of the owl's deceit. All this time, he had been hiding in plain sight. The owl – the symbol of knowledge – represented an evil that wished to remain undiscovered.

Immediately, Professor Hershel Moussaieff awoke. His heart was pounding and he gasped for breath. He found himself sitting at his desk at the University. He must have drifted off. "What a terrible dream," he thought. The meaning of the dream was so blatantly obvious and yet so much was still hidden. What did it mean? What was the owl? And who was Ben? Could he have been an angel warning of a danger lurking in the darkness? After all, he hadn't seen his little brother Ben since he drowned in that terrible childhood accident so many years ago. The burden of guilt returned with a vengeance. A crushing sense of tragedy fell over the Professor. It consumed him.

"It must be those scrolls, those damn scrolls," he said as he turned on the light at his worktable and resumed his work of translating the ancient text.

Chapter 1

I had glimpsed the face of God...and he had turned from me. And he hated me.

Year 15 C.E.

After escaping the murderous Romans, I moved very swiftly up the river. The way was as rocky and rough as I recalled. Although it had been quite some time since I had last made this trip. I remembered every step along the way. I remembered each and every stone. Each tree was an old friend. Each step was a pool of spilled memories, dark sad memories. Memories formed a black river that enveloped my very soul.

Without hesitation, I pressed on, wading through the black current of hatred. It was desperately close to pulling me under, drowning me in sorrow and despair. Struggling against the current, I fought to push onward. As I came to the marshy land along the Jordan, my mind briefly wandered to the lessons I had learned from Samuel so many years before. His voice whispered in my ear. The lessons were now precious stones locked away inside my heart. Not only the lessons of the wilderness and survival, but the haunting ghosts of history's past. I saw it before me. It was the place where Joshua and Israel's army had defeated Jabin, the king of Hazor and the kings of the North that joined with him. As it is written, *"They came out, they and all their armies with them, as many people as the sand that is on the seashore, with very many horses and chariots. So all of the kings agreed to meet, and they came and encamped together at the waters of Merom, to fight against Israel."*

The tall marsh grass swayed gently in the breeze as a low buzzing filled my ears. Black clouds of mosquitoes hung low in the sky. They swirled in smoky clouds. In my mind's eye, I could see the ghostly armies encamped before me. The word of the Torah again filled my mind.

Then the Lord said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid because of them, for tomorrow at this time I will deliver all of them slain before Israel; you shall hamstring their horses and burn their chariots with fire." So Joshua and all the people of war with him came upon them suddenly by the waters of

Merom, and attacked them. The Lord delivered them into the hand of Israel, so that they defeated them, and pursued them as far as Great Sidon and Misrephoth-maim and the valley of Mizpeh to the east; and they struck them until no survivor was left to them. Joshua did to them as the Lord had told him, utterly destroying them all.

I could see the ghostly images of an ancient and bloody battle as Israel laid their enemies to the sword. “Why, Lord?” I cried out. I shouted in anger. “Why have you not destroyed Rome?”

The Lord did not answer.

“Why have you not laid Rome to the sword? If you had, my Melessa would still be alive.”

Again, the Lord was silent. I cursed at the heavens as the ghostly battle raged on before me.

These images shattered from my mind as mosquitoes swarmed about my face, sucking blood at every opportunity. In a cloud, they bit and stung any uncovered flesh. The roar of a million tiny wings intensified. My ears swelled with each bite. They got in my eyes and flew up my nostrils. It is said that these creatures can drive a man insane. At that moment, I could believe it. I screamed out in frustration.

Tortured, I struggled onward toward the lake through muddy shallow waters. Sticky black mud sucked at my feet with each step. A thick coldness oozed between my toes. A strong pungent odor filled my nostrils, the unmistakable smell of a swampy marsh. Suddenly, a harsh breeze blew hard from out of the south. The grasses and cattails danced violently before me. Gusts of warm air pelted my face. The winds stilled just as quickly. Surprisingly this brought me some respite from my bloodsucking attackers.

As I approached the Waters of Merom, also called Lake Semechonitis, I noticed the waters were covered with ducks, coots and other birds, as usual. But more than anything else, there were cranes. In the shallows, these huge gray birds stood on long spindly legs, and their long black necks reached skyward displaying the distinct white markings on their heads. They were there by the thousands. Their strange deep whooping calls carried through the cloudless sky and haunted me. It became so loud, a mighty roar,

washing out any other sounds. These magnificent birds filled the entire lake as well as the blue heavens above me, an impressive sight to see. The cranes formed huge flying V's that circled and landed in the shallow marsh in front of me. Remembering the wise words of Samuel, he had always said, "The Lord speaks in many ways, if you will just listen." I questioned those words on that day. Then momentarily abandoning my black heart, I reluctantly thanked God for the experience and wondered to myself if it was a sign. And if so, then what could it mean?

Continuing onward I could still hear the haunting sounds of the cranes' ancient calls echoing from behind me until they faded to a whisper. I continued onward into the hills for several more days until I finally managed to find my way back to the small village nestled in the hills of Naphtali. My dark cloud continued to follow me. Terrible emotions tore at my heart. Hatred, fear, and misery bound me like chains. I was a prisoner. Then a strange sense of homecoming washed over me.

As I approached the village, I could see wisps of smoke. It climbed from the small houses as they broke through the trees. In the distance I could see the white synagogue, where I had studied and worked all those years as a scribe. For the very first time, I noticed and appreciated how pretty our little synagogue was.

Several women were outside tending to their gardens and watching over the few small children. I approached the house that belonged to my adopted parents. The house where I had spent so many of my formidable years. Bent over the small garden in front of our house, Ruth was planting seeds in the freshly turned earth. She dropped several seeds into the rich black soil before lightly covering them. The scent of tilled earth filled the air. The old mule stood by and watched over her, chewing at his bit. He looked haggard and worn, still hitched to the plow.

Ruth did not notice my approach. She continued to work diligently, stooped over her seedbed. I watched her for several minutes. She looked gray and older than I had ever seen her before. Her hands were covered with the black soil. They were bony and rough. The hands of a peasant woman, the hands of a country rabbi's wife. So much had happened. So much time had escaped. A leaf cascading down a rushing stream so much was lost, each of us unable to stop its spiraling progression.

Suddenly, a loud shriek cut through the air ending the quiet moment. It was a shriek of joy let out by several of the other women as they recognized me. That is when Ruth looked up and saw me approaching. Dropping everything, she ran to me with her arms open wide. We embraced and she covered me with kisses. Almost immediately, Samuel came running from the monastery. He too hugged me and kissed me. They were both laughing and filled with joy over my return, a bittersweet joy. But blackness surrounded me. A dark cloud, it covered me like the night. A dark river of emotions ran through my fractured soul. It was all I could do to fight back a flood of tears as a huge lump rose in my throat. I wanted to vomit.

“Where is your beautiful Melessa, Barabbas? Did you bring her?” Ruth asked. I gritted my teeth to fight back the nausea churning within me. The thick coppery taste formed in my throat and flooded my mouth. I wanted to spit. No words would escape. My throat was an open grave. It was my silence or the terrible grief on my face that gave it away. Instantly, both appeared terrified of the unknown revelation. Samuel’s strength was unquestionable as he grasped my shoulders.

“The baby?”

Regretfully, I twisted from his grasp, I stumbled. Then I lost it. I had fought it back as long as I could. My dammed up emotions overtook me and I fell to my knees. The wave of darkness was unleashed. My heart was a dam fighting to hold back a swollen and raging river, a river of sorrow, a river of misery, a river of hatred. The dam finally broke. I broke down and wept uncontrollably. My deep bitter sobs and wails lifted upward toward Heaven. Samuel and Ruth both managed to escort me into the house.

After some time, I was able to regain some composure and I shared with them the dreadful and horrific details of the death of their precious daughter-in-law and their unborn grandchild. Grief overwhelmed us all. Tears were shared as we all wept. Ruth’s lamentations were the cries of a wild animal. Ruth wept the tears of the angels. A red-hot anger flared up and returned to me, as I told them of the grisly revenge that I had bestowed upon the Romans. Fire burned in my eyes and my heart turned to stone.

“I killed them, Father. I killed them all. I sent them straight to Hell.”

Ruth's face shone with shock, but Samuel's immediately turned to terrified concern.

"What have you done, Barabbas?"

"I killed every one of the bastards responsible. I killed them all."

"Oh, my Lord!" He began to pray, his lips moved in a silent petition to God. He gripped his prayer shawl tightly. Blue tzizit fringes danced as he brought it to his mouth. It was quiet for several moments as Samuel stared at the floor with somber eyes. Finally, he broke the stillness with a whisper.

"They will come for you!"

"We will hide you and protect you," Ruth cried out as she turned toward her husband, "Won't we, Samuel?"

She grasped, desperately to his cloak. Her ashen hands clutched to her husband.

"Of course, we will." He immediately snapped.

His confident and steadfast attitude fractured.

"No, I cannot stay. As long as I stay here, I endanger you all, both of you and the whole village. The Romans will come. They will bring destruction and death. No I cannot stay."

"Oh my son, please. We will hide you." Ruth pleaded. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Hopelessness filled the room.

"I can't. I am so sorry. I have brought so much sorrow and misery to you already."

"That is not true, my son. Never speak that again. We love you. You have brought us nothing but joy," Ruth answered.

"I am sorry, Father; but you know it's true. I must flee this place."

Samuel sat back and slowly closed his eyes as he bowed his head into his prayer shawl still clung in his hands. He wept. Ruth was crying hysterically as Samuel nodded in agreement. Ruth's cries carried across the mountains and reached Heaven that night.

Casting a lot with fate, I stayed with them for one night before leaving and heading north. That night we shared a meal together prepared by all of the neighbors. They brought food and wine but I could hardly eat for the sickening feeling that churned in my bowels. We did not discuss Melessa's murder any further but rather planned my escape and the direction I should go. Samuel instructed that I should stick to the mountains and the thickest wooded areas. The thicker, the better. He believed that I would have the best chance of survival there; first, because of the skills that he had instilled in me and the second because the Romans would search the towns found on the main roadways. He believed that they would rarely leave the roads and venture far into the wilderness areas. He did, however, caution that my greatest threat would be from other people seeking reward money.

"Trust no one," he instructed, "not a soul."

I assured them both that I would be careful.

The next morning we arose early and prepared for my journey northward. Before I departed, Samuel loaded me down with several dozen new arrows that he had recently made. Each was perfectly balanced and tipped with a razor sharp iron broadhead. He filled my quiver until not another single arrow would fit. He also gave me a small bronze knife and a whetstone to take with me. He unsheathed it and slowly drew it across his arm pushing the blade away from himself. Tiny hairs rolled across the blade as it shaved his arm as smooth as a baby's.

Ruth brought me a heavy woolen cloak that would be warmer for the mountains along with two rolled sheepskins. Each was unshorn and still held its winter coat. She also prepared dried fruit, dried meat, and a couple of small loaves of bread for my journey.

Samuel insisted on giving me something else. He disappeared into the other room for a moment and returned carrying a large wrapped package. It was the dirty linen garment that I had discovered all those years ago under their mattress. As he unwrapped the cloth, leather darkened by age was revealed.

Protruding from the long scabbard, a masterfully carved golden handle could be seen. This was the sword that had belonged to Samuel in his days of serving as a Roman officer, in his days as the weapons master.

“This sword was a gift when I was in Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia. We were there under the orders of Caesar Augustus to oversee and maintain the peace during the merger and reorganization of the province of Syria-Cilicia Phoenice. And we were there to defend the coastline from the marauding pirates. The sword had been brought from Toletum in the Province of Hispania Tarraconensis during the Cantabrian Wars. The metal-smiths guilds of Toletum are the finest in the entire world. Their weapons are second to none. This sword is one of the finest weapons in the world. You will find none better.”

Reaching out ever so cautiously, I took the sword by the hilt and slowly unsheathed its blade. It had been years since my last encounter with the sword. It came alive in my hands. Although it was longer than most swords and more ornate, the balance was perfect. It felt good in my hands. It was perfect.

“Barabbas, I want you to have this. Once it served the Empire, now it serves the Lord. Take it with His blessing.”

“Thank you Samuel,” I said, a little choked up. Samuel quoted from the psalms of the great King David, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear”

He paused briefly before I joined with him in unison, “The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid” I squeezed the hilt of the sword until my knuckles turned white. A feeling of strength and power surged over me.

Samuel placed his strong hands on my shoulders and squeezed. Then he grasped my face and stared directly into my eyes. Strength abounded in this older man. “Barabbas, my son, they will stop at nothing to find you. Rome will pursue you to the ends of the earth. The Romans will hunt for you day and night, and they will post notices in every town. Therefore, tell no one your true God given name Jeshua. From this point on, you shall be nameless...or Barabbas...and Barabbas alone.”

