

Chapter Twenty-Four

In This Place I will give Peace

The Persians conquered the Babylonian empire and rule most of the Middle East, including Judea. However in 539 B.C. Cyrus the king decreed that the Jews could return from exile to their land and their homes, and rebuild the temple. Many Jews returned.

Now, in a field outside Jerusalem:

‘Good morning, dearie,’ said the donkey cheerfully, to a fine black horse that had just been led into the field.

The horse grunted. ‘What are you doing in my field?’

The donkey nudged a nose at the outline of Jerusalem. ‘Been sold to a man who lives in that city. I used to live up north.’

‘A Samaritan donkey!’ The horse snorted. How low could you get? He tossed his mane. ‘I am descended from two horses that came back with the exiles. They returned with seven hundred and thirty-two of us. There were two hundred and forty-five mules, four hundred and thirty-five camels and,’ said the horse reluctantly, ‘six thousand seven hundred and twenty donkeys. Oh, and forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty people.’

‘Hmm,’ murmured the donkey ‘a detail monger.’

‘Attention to detail, that’s the way it’s going now.’

‘What’s going?’

‘The Jewish religion, of course. What else? The Jews are becoming sticklers for keeping the law. They think that will prevent them going back into captivity again. Not that they are actually free. This place is just a province of the Persian Empire. But the people have been allowed to rebuild the temple, you know.’

‘Ah,’ said the donkey, not sure whether she was supposed to nod because everyone knew that, or say oh really, because it was secret information. However, it didn’t matter. The horse was ready for a verbal gallop:

‘You’ve got to go back in history to understand...’

‘I have?’ The donkey thought that forward locomotion was bad enough, but backwards? ‘How far have we got to go?’

‘Oh, ages ago,’ replied the horse vaguely, ‘right after Cyrus and the Persians conquered the Babylonians. God stirred up Cyrus to send out a decree that the temple should be rebuilt. Thousands of Jews answered Cyrus’ call and set

out for Jerusalem. They took with them all the gold and silver vessels and things that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple. As soon as they arrived, they got to work. They rebuilt the altar first and the next year they rebuilt the foundations. When they finished them, that's when it started,' stated the horse darkly.

'What started?'

'Opposition,' said the horse through tight lips. 'From the people who lived round about. Mainly non-Israelites - Samaritans -who had been brought here by the Assyrians when the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered and the people away sent into captivity. Their religion is....' The horse was searching for the right word.

'Dodgy?' suggested the donkey, in the momentary lull.

'Impure. Decidedly. It's not right, you know, to mix God's truth with pagan worship. Anyway, these people wanted to join in building the temple, but they were turned down. Flat. They didn't like it. From then on they did everything they could to stop it. Hired lawyers. Complained to the authorities. Over time they've written to several of the kings of Persia.'

'What did they say?'

'Oh, things like - "once the temple and walls are finished these Jews will refuse to pay any tax. They'll be just like they were in the past, a right royal nuisance. They rebelled in the past and they'll do it again. This whole area will be lost". The Persians agreed. Work on the temple came to a standstill for sixteen years.'

'How did they get it done? You can't stop God's work, dearie.'

The horse gave the donkey a sharp look. Just what did this donkey from Samaria know? 'Prophets,' said the horse. 'That's how. God sent prophets to get the people working, regardless of what anyone said or did. An example, donkey, God sent Haggia the prophet to tell the people that they were doing things the wrong way round. They were struggling to make a living, yet it seemed as if they had pockets with holes in - there was nothing to show for all the work they did. Again and again, drought and disease were ruining their crops. Put God first, Haggia said, and things would change. It did too. As soon as they rolled up their sleeves and restarted building the temple, they had bumper harvests, just as God said they would.'

'No one tried to stop them this time?'

'Oh, yes. But when the local officials turned up demanding to know who gave them authority to build, this time the Jews told them it was king Cyrus. So another letter was sent off to the king at the time, Darius. It backfired on the opposition, I tell you. On Darius' order a search was made in the records. Very thorough they were too. They scoured all the record stores and eventually they found that Cyrus had indeed decreed that the temple should be rebuilt. So a letter came back from the Persians, ordering that the Jews be left alone to do their work. What's more, they should be given government assistance for any funds they needed.' The horse bent down close to the donkey and whispered in his ear. 'Haggai said this temple would be greater than the first. Between you and me, I don't get that one. It's a miserable building compared with Solomon's. The older people wept when they saw it. They could remember the glory of Solomon's.'

'So they got a tatty temple...'

'Nonsense. Tatty is what you are. It was only a comparison. They got a nice

temple. And they got Ezra too.'

'What happened to Ezra One?'

'You have two long ears and nothing in between them except that silly hat. Ezra was a priest working at the court of the Persian kings. He was given leave to return here and put things straight. He wasn't just a priest, he was a scribe. You won't know what that is of course,' said the horse with a superior sniff. 'Ezra studied the scriptures. He taught the people the law and showed them what it all meant, and how they were to be kept in their daily lives. He struggled to keep the people obedient. The nation owes him a lot. They owe a lot to Nehemiah too, I mean as well,' said the horse, hurriedly, lest he was asked what happened to Nehemiah One.

'What did he do?'

'Rebuilt those walls and city gates you can see over there. When Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple, he flattened the walls and destroyed the gates. Walls safeguard a city. Without them, the people are defenceless. Enemies can just walk in, and believe me, there's no shortage of them around here. Nehemiah had heard about their ruined state and the distress the people were in....'

'He didn't live here?'

'Oh no, like Ezra, he was an exile at the Persian court. In fact he was the king's cupbearer...'

'He had someone to carry his cup?' asked the astonished donkey.

'He was the wine steward. It's a very important position I'll have you know. That's how he got to come back here. Like I said, he'd been told of the state Jerusalem was in. It was his home, the heart of Israel. He was really upset, and he knew what he wanted to do. He fasted and prayed and asked God that his plan might be successful. Then he went to work. As he served the wine, the king caught sight of his sad face and wanted to know what was wrong. Nehemiah told him why he was upset. The king asked him what his request was....'

'So he grabbed his chance....'

'Ah, no. I don't think you realise the risk he was taking. Looking unhappy around the king was bad enough - that could be taken as the start of plotting against the king. Wanting to build walls could look a bit like the start of rebellion and revolution, and all that stuff. No, first he prayed quickly. Then he asked the king for time off to return here to rebuild the city. And would you know it, the king said yes.'

'Good old king.'

'Well, that's one way of putting it. He was also saying yes to Nehemiah becoming governor of Jerusalem. Now then, the first thing Nehemiah did when he arrived here was to inspect the city walls. He set out at night, without telling anyone, to take a look at the rubble and broken stones and burnt out gates....'

'Good man. That's what I do before going on a journey.'

'You what?'

'Take a look at the job. Assess the damage. Usually mountains of baggage.'

'Oh. Anyway, next day he gathered the priests and leaders of the city together and told them why he was here and how God had granted him favour with the king. Not only was he free to come and do the work, but also the king had given him letters of authority for the supply of timbers for the gates and walls. Let's

start, he said to them. Let's build, they replied! That's what they did. Everybody did a bit. The high priest and his brothers rebuilt the Sheep gate and the walls as far as the Tower of Hananel. The men of Jericho carried on from there, Zaccur's family worked next to them, then the sons of Hassenaah built the Fish gate and then - well, you get the idea -there were forty-two different sections, each built by different families or groups - rulers, officials, priests, Levites, women, merchants, shopkeepers - whoever they were, they all joined in. And it was work, donkey! When Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, his men did a good job of knocking the walls flat and burning all the gates. Now these volunteers had backbreaking, muscle-aching work to do, sawing wood, dragging charred stones out of mountains of rubble, heaving them up slopes and rebuilding them into a wall. But....' The horse stopped again with what he hoped was dramatic effect.

In the silence the donkey replied: 'there was opposition.'

'Yes' said the surprised horse. 'How did you know?' As he didn't really want to know why the donkey knew, he continued quickly: 'Ridicule and sneers to start with.'

'Who was busy ridiculing and sneering?'

'A man called Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, Tobiah who governed to the east of Jerusalem, and their friends. Samaria used to govern Judea - that's the southern kingdom of Judah,' explained the horse. 'But the Persians made Judea an independent state with Nehemiah the governor. Sanballat and his friends didn't like it one bit. When they saw the walls were half way up, and the gaps nearly closed, they were furious. They never dreamt that Nehemiah would actually succeed. They planned to attack before the city could be defended again. Our people were tired out from the heavy work, and they were very discouraged when they heard about it, but Nehemiah wasn't going to be stopped by anyone. He armed the people and posted them in families all round the walls. Don't be afraid, he told them, keep your minds on God who is great. He is the one to be feared. Fight for your families and your home.'

'Big battle with lot's of blood then?'

'No, not all. Time and again the enemy was about to attack, and each time the Jews who lived out in the country areas got to wind of it, and sent warnings ahead to Nehemiah. Sanballat was simply unable to surprise them. Eventaully he gave up.'

'Hooray!'

'Yes,' agreed the horse, ' and also no. It did make the work more difficult. From that day onward, Nehemiah had every builder wear a sword and always had half the men working on the walls and the other half standing armed, behind them. The stone carriers worked with one hand, and held their swords in the other. As the people were spread out at great distances around the wall, Nehemiah had a trumpeter by his side. He could sound out the alarm and bring the men running to the site of any attack. Rally round, Nehemiah told the workers, and our God will fight for us. No one left Jerusalem. They worked from sun up until the stars appeared. They didn't wash. They didn't even change their clothes. And...'

'The enemies weren't through yet,' shouted the donkey.

'Right. As usual,' muttered the horse under his breath. 'The new plan was to get Nehemiah away on his own and murder him. They suggested a meeting at a village miles away from the city. Nehemiah realised it was a trap. He said he was

too busy to come. They tried that one four times and then they turned to threats. You're going to rebel, that's why you've rebuilt the walls, they said. You've told the prophets to proclaim you king. We're going to write to the Persians, so you'd better talk things over with us.'

'What did Nehemiah say to that?'

'Rubbish, he said. And got on with his work.'

'Well, that's telling them.'

'But the enemies of God weren't through yet. They had their spies in the city. They'd got some of the Jewish officials on their books and a prophet or two. One of these prophets came to Nehemiah pretending to have a message from God. He said that he must run to the temple sanctuary and lock himself otherwise he would be killed that night.'

'They were going to kill him in the temple?'

'No, probably not, the idea was to make him look like a coward, so the people despise him and not listen to him and the priests would turn against him for hiding in the holy of holies. That's against the law.'

'He didn't go, did he?'

'No, Nehemiah considered it a sin to run away.'

'He went back to work?'

'Yes. Through all of this - enemies within, enemies without - the work went on, hard, hard work day and night. In just fifty-two days the walls and gates were up. Even our enemies had to admit that the work had been done by the power of God.'

The donkey scratched his nose on his hoof, and then looked up at the horse. 'So the city's safe now behind nice walls and gates. The nation's got their temple and men to teach God's way of life. But they're still ruled by the Persians. These people are not free. What now?'

'I think they have to wait. For quite a while, maybe,' said a small voice from above them. On a branch of a tree sat a small white dove.

'Who are you?' snorted the horse in surprise

'A small white dove,' replied the bird politely. 'A few minutes ago you told this donkey how God sent prophets to stir up the Jews to start rebuilding the temple again. You mentioned Haggai but not Zechariah.'

'Can't include everything,' said the horse huffily.

'Zechariah had some encouraging things to say, especially about the future. Let me remind you of one of them. Rejoice and shout for joy, he said. Look - your King is coming, victorious, bringing salvation, humbly, riding on a donkey.'

'The king's coming!' exclaimed the donkey

'Not any old king, but The King. God's King.'

'Yes, but on a donkey!' snorted the horse. 'That doesn't seem much of a grand way for a King to come. Look at you - a short legged, long eared, pot bellied scruffy animal if ever you saw one. And this one comes with a tatty hat. Why do you wear that thing by the way?'

'All my family wear hats in honour of our Ancestor who, we think, always wore a hat.'

'Who's that?' demanded the horse.

'Why, Balaam's donkey, dearie. The only talking animal in existence, apart from the snake in Eden. You should know about that. The words are recorded in

the Scriptures you were talking about. And now one of us is going to carry the King into Jerusalem one day. God is very kind to scruffy things.'

There was not much to say back to that, so the horse bent his head and pretended to graze, snorting quietly. 'What's this King on third class transport coming to do, that's what I want to know,' he muttered to himself.

'Coming to the rescue again I think,' replied the dove, who had good hearing. 'That's what he'd been doing from the beginning. My ancestors were on the ark when God rescued Noah and his family from the flood.'

'He had some work to do, looking after Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,' added the donkey.

'And Joseph, and then he rescued the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt,' continued the dove.

'And from evil plots of Balaam, my Ancestor's master.'

'And when the people reached the Promised Land, God rescued them umpteen times from the people of Canaan.'

'And David from Goliath the giant.'

'And Israel from idolatry. Remember Elijah?'

'Yes,' replied the donkey. 'And he saved Hezekiah and the nation from the Assyrians.'

'And Daniel from the lions,' added the bird.

'There was Esther. The entire nation was to be destroyed by what's- his-name...'

'Haman...'

'Enough,' interrupted the horse. 'I've got the point.'

'Oh, we could go, there's much more,' said the dove.

'Maybe,' replied the horse. 'But you still haven't answered the question. What's the King coming to save them all from this time?'

'Well,' said the dove, after a little consideration, 'there's death. It's ruled this earth from the day Adam and Eve turned their backs on God. It's got the whole human race in its clutches. No one escapes death. That's why the King is coming. He'll rescue them. You'll see.'

