

*Admettant ces Déniers, en faveur
Pour le mariage à 100 foudres par an
50 50 2 2
15 100 2 2*

The Journal of Meshach

*Quantité totale de foudres par an
Cinq foudres par an, en faveur de la forêt
Chaque foudre peut se vendre ailleurs à Carl pour
10 foudres, pour le mariage, en fait le mariage en fait
aller et retour, de la même manière, une femme valant
10 foudres par an, la femme peut-être d'une femme
Celle valeur de 10 foudres, en fait, en fait
et reste 0,5 foudres par an, en fait, en fait
pour la forêt, en fait, en fait, en fait
en foudres, qui peuvent être en fait, en fait, en fait
produit 10 foudres, en fait, en fait, en fait
Capitales de foudres, en fait, en fait, en fait
Nous concluons, en fait, en fait, en fait
constituer un profit, en fait, en fait, en fait
facilement, en fait, en fait, en fait*

When God and Life Disappoint

JEFFREY S. CRAWFORD

The
Journal
of Meshach
When God and Life Disappoint

Jeffrey S. Crawford



HILLSIDE HOUSE
PUBLISHING

The Journal of Meshach: When God and Life Disappoint

Jeffrey S. Crawford

Hillside House Publishing

Published by Hillside House Publishing, Springdale, AR

Copyright © 2021 Jeffrey S. Crawford

All rights reserved.

Cover Design by Mille Cooper

Unless otherwise indicated, Bible quotations are taken from the English Standard Version of the Bible. Copyright © 2002 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021931076

Jeffrey S. Crawford

The Journal of Meshach

ISBN: 978-1-7327596-4-0

All of the characters and events in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means – electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other – except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America.

A Word Before We Begin...

I am not a king and I am not a god. I am like most men on earth. Simple. Ordinary. Forgettable.

My name is Meshach.

I have known both kings and gods, and kings who thought they were gods. I have had the honor of friending men who were far from simple, anything but ordinary, and certainly impossible to forget.

My occupation: Court recorder for the king. Or kings, I should say, at this point in my life. I have a gift with words, I am told, and so I was commissioned at a young age to employ said gift in service to the king. So I wrote for the king but also wrote, unofficially, of course, for myself.

Now I am old. My life is approaching its end and the time of my last breath draws nigh. I can feel it in my bones. I too easily lose my balance when I rise. A new pain seems

to reveal itself each morning. I am cold even when the weather is warm. I thank God for my blanket and for the stewards who keep my fire stoked. But my fingers are still nimble and my eyes sharp. I have spent my life writing and in recent days I have been reading much of what I have written, going back years. So many years now, that the words I read seem to describe the life of another man – certainly not me. Yet, there it is – ink on parchment – a testimony to a life that is perhaps more remarkable than I would give it credit.

And so now I feel compelled to write again. Maybe compile is a better term, or organize and edit. I would certainly not equate my written words with those of Holy Scripture, but I do feel there is something there...in the stories of my life that testify to the extraordinary nature of an ordinary life lived in the shadow of both gods and kings.

Consider this an invitation, dear reader. An invitation to peer through the looking glass of my life. Perhaps we will find common ground, you and me. For though the events offered heretofore occurred long ago – so, so long ago now – I have come to believe that we all walk on level ground before the one true and living God, whose fingerprints smudge the margins of each page you are about to read. Because no matter what generation one lives in, no matter

The Journal of Meshach

what continent one calls home, no matter what language one may speak (oh, I could go on because there is no end to the ways in which we draw lines to separate ourselves from one another), in the end we are all human. We are all the same at the core of it. Of this I am convinced. Maybe I did not believe so in my past, but now, yes...we are all much more alike than we are different. I have lived too much life to believe otherwise.

But I get ahead of myself. I will be quiet now and let the story speak for itself. If you are ready to turn the page, then you have my permission to do so now....

The Babylonians have arrived in the land of Judah with brutal efficiency. I overheard my father reporting the news to King Jehoiakim.

“The Egyptians have been defeated at Carchemish.” His hands slammed down onto the battle table covered by the map of Israel and the surrounding region. “Pharaoh Neco is no more. Now the Black Wind blows toward Jerusalem.” He placed his thick index finger on the map and drew a line with it all the way to the Holy City.

It is not for me to be privy to such news, but my friend Azariah and I often find ourselves roaming the secret passageways of the royal palace. We are old enough now, having reached fifteen years of age, that no one questions us. Being members of the royal family helps as well. Most assume we are skipping our lessons for good reason, or feel

The Journal of Meshach

it is just not worth the pains it might cause them to question us. Nevertheless, we use our station to our advantage.

The city has been buzzing with rumors and talk. I knew my father was meeting with the king's military advisors this morning, and as soon as he broke counsel with them he headed straight for the palace war room. Azariah and I took the shortcut through an old and little-used passageway. The tunnel ended in an opening behind a great tapestry in the war room. We were able to slip around it and stand behind a large stone pillar to observe the meeting between my father, the king, and his other most trusted advisors.

Rumors have persisted that the Babylonians are coming and there is fear in the city. It has been over one hundred years since the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians – that's long enough that some forget that defeat is possible, but not so long that others don't point to it as a warning.

Yes, the Southern Kingdom - Judah herself - along with the Holy City of Jerusalem is vulnerable. Both my mother and father believe so. I've heard them talking as well. I have good ears and I've learned to pay attention to details.

"We needn't fear this Black Wind, Magnus." King Jehoiakim sat at the table, leaned back with his arms crossed in front of him. He wore a stubborn look on his face,

dismissive of my father. “They are *only* Babylonians. From the land of Shinar of all places. Theirs is a cursed land, by Yahweh himself. The book of Moses declares it. You label them the Black Wind as if they are some unstoppable force. Have you forgotten who our God is? Yahweh will go before us and protect us,” he flippantly declared.

I almost laughed out loud hearing King Jehoiakim’s declaration of devotion. But I restrained myself so as to remain undetected. It is common knowledge throughout Judah that Jehoiakim pays no heed to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He does not offer sacrifices in the Temple and he observes none of the holy feasts or special days. My father says he worships the pagan gods of Egypt, although to say so publicly would be treason, even for a cousin of the king as he is.

“Egypt has fallen! Did you not hear?” My father declared with more force. The veins on his neck bulged, his face red. “We have no one to protect us now. The Babylonians are coming. Our scouts report that they are marching on us even now. Our borders have been breached. It is only a matter of time.”

“Let them come, then!” Jehoiakim came to his feet. He had obviously been pushed too far. “Neco was a weak ruler

The Journal of Meshach

of Egypt. It was time for him to fall. We have always survived, Magnus. Have you forgotten? We are God's chosen people. That is why we thrived under Neco, and if Neco is now gone we will thrive under this new Babylonian king. What is his name again?"

"Nebuchadnezzar."

"Yes, Nebuchadnezzar. We will thrive under him as well. Let him come. Let them all come. We will talk and we will dine. The tribute we sent to Neco of Egypt we can now send to Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. All will be well, my cousin. Trust me." King Jehoiakim offered a stern smile and left the room. The meeting was over.

I could see my father's face as he looked at the other men left standing around the table. No one had said a word during the whole exchange and no one said a word now. The looks on their faces communicated clearly - the Black Wind was coming and the king's only response was, "Trust me."

But what does one do when one doesn't trust the king?

A private entry in the Journal of Misbael

Third day of Tammuz, the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah

Jeffrey S. Crawford

*The first year of the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon
605 B.C.*

The Babylonians have laid siege to the Holy City.

Jerusalem is under the thumb of Nebuchadnezzar and all is not well. As my father warned, the Black Wind has swept into our land with an unholy vengeance. Several families escaped the city two weeks ago, choosing to flee to the green country of the north where the trees and smaller villages provide safety and protection. There are many places to hide in the north, my father says. His desire was for me, my mother, and my sister to join a local leatherworker who works just inside the Lion Gate, along with his family, and to make our own escape with them to Galilee. Father would stay, of course.

Sensing the exodus, King Jehoiakim declared that all members of the royal family must stay in Jerusalem. He even went as far as to place guards around the palace and family

dwelling to ensure our compliance. The declaration came on the eve of our leaving and I doubt I will ever forget the look of disappointment on Father's face. It's as if he knows something I don't know. But I do know. I know what the Babylonians do when they take a land for their own. They rape. They burn. They pillage. And they take people – young people like myself – and they export them to the far reaches of their realm.

I don't believe my father will allow such a thing to happen to us, though. He is much too smart and cunning. Had King Jehoiakim listened to his counsel weeks ago, we would not be facing the sting of the Black Wind now. Instead, Jehoiakim declared his own siege on the royal family – making us prisoners in our own home. And now we are all under the siege of Nebuchadnezzar and his black army.

"I'm not afraid," I declared to Azariah earlier this afternoon. We had gone to the top of the city wall to observe the Babylonian army. "Jerusalem will not fall. The city is impenetrable. No one in history has breached its walls, and the Babylonians will not be the first," I declared.

Azariah didn't respond, he only stared at the sea of troops spread out in front of us. They carried on as far as the eye could see. Dotted pillars of campfire smoke numbered

The Journal of Meshach

in the hundreds, maybe the thousands. Tents of various sizes have been erected, stables for horses have been constructed, a siege ramp is in its initial stages. The Babylonians are clearly here to stay.

In that moment, I doubted my own words. Yes, I am afraid. Very afraid. Azariah is too, as are all our friends and family. My mother cries every night. I can hear her sobs drifting from her bedchamber to mine. My sister is too young to understand, I think, but even she seems nervous.

How long this siege will last is anyone's guess, but I fear it will not end well.

A private entry in the Journal of Mishaël

Twenty-first day of Tammuz, the third year of the reign of King Jeboiakim of Judah

*The first year of the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon
605 B.C.*

It has not taken long for Nebuchadnezzar to sit on the throne in Jerusalem.

The Black Wind, indeed, is here to stay.

The siege ramp the Babylonians were building was unnecessary. King Jehoiakim, ever the politician whose concern is only himself and his own standing, sent a delegation to Nebuchadnezzar. An agreement was reached without an arrow being fired or fire being dropped. Judah is now a vassal state of the Babylonian Empire. True to his word, Jehoiakim has redirected the royal tribute once paid to Neco of Egypt and has now cast it into the Black Wind. In exchange, Jehoiakim remains in power, but as I wrote, it is Nebuchadnezzar who truly sits on the throne that oversees God's people.

I heard a man prophesying today outside the Temple. Someone I had not seen before.

“The judgement of God has arrived!” he cried. “The sins of the land have risen to the nostrils of God and he tolerates it no more. Jehoiakim has done evil in the sight of the Lord and now the Lord has delivered his answer. The Babylonians are the instrument of God’s wrath against a people who have whored themselves with other gods!”

It was shocking to hear language like that being spoken on the Temple steps. Pashur, the priest, did not look happy. I asked Azariah who this man was, who dared to call out the sin of the people and the sin of King Jehoiakim in such public fashion.

“That is Jeremiah,” he said. “King Jehoiakim hates that man.”

So that was the great prophet Jeremiah, I thought. I had heard much about him, of his ravings and accusations against Jehoiakim and the Temple priests. “The man is mysterious and has few friends in the city,” my own father had told me one night. Yet, he seems to draw a crowd when he prophesies, as was evidenced by the gathering today.

I found myself enthralled by his message. It was new and different. There was something about it that rang true to my

ears. Jehoiakim is not a good king, that much is accepted by all. He remains in power because he allows everyone to do what is right in his own eyes. He challenges nothing with the Law of God. Surely Jeremiah is correct. God will not – cannot – tolerate the wickedness of his own people and the king forever.

So, now the Black Wind engulfs us. Jehoiakim has assured the city that nothing has changed. All will carry on as before - “Only now we will flourish under Nebuchadnezzar as opposed to Neco,” he declared.

But it does not feel like we are flourishing. In fact, nothing about the Black Wind feels like rule under Neco of Egypt. As Azariah and I left the Temple area, we passed through the eastern market district of the city. Babylonian soldiers were having their way with the shop owners – taking food, leather goods, whatever they wanted, without paying.

I stared in horror from across the street of a bread shop owned by Benjamin, son of Obed. He is a gentle soul who bakes the most sumptuous challah and raisin-walnut babka. I’ve eaten from his counter my whole life. His daughter, Mary, is not much older than me, and I have always been partial to her. But being as I am a member of the royal family, it would not be proper for me to entertain thoughts of a

courtship with her, although she is both sweet and beautiful.

A burly Babylonian man was pushing old Benjamin and throwing his breads into the street. The pushing intensified into a mild beating. The brute's friends stood and laughed as if it was nothing but sport. Benjamin's wife, Leah, came to his aid, also joined by Mary. Leah rushed to protect Benjamin from the blows of the soldier, while Mary – fearless Mary – walked up to the beast and slapped him across the face. He stopped his pounding on the old man and stared back at her. His eyes communicated, not anger at the slap, but hunger. And it was not a hunger for bread. The paw of his meaty hand took Mary by the mane of her hair and yanked her head back. She screamed as he ripped the top of her dress down, exposing her naked torso. He dragged Mary into the back of the shop. The only sound that followed were her screams for help. Benjamin and Leah cried out in agony as the group that had once served as spectators now held the couple back, helpless to do anything but listen and weep.

It appeared a line of soldiers was forming at the shop's entrance. My blood boiled. I wanted to do something, use my status as a royal to save Mary.

It would have been my death had I tried.

Jeffrey S. Crawford

Sensing my foolishness, Azariah grabbed my arm and pulled me away. We ran back to the palace and to my house. I felt sick and my stomach relieved itself of its contents.

Azariah is worried about me. He has offered to stay the night with me and is sleeping across the room even now as I write this. He is a good friend.

A private entry in the Journal of Mishael

Tenth day of Av, the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah

*The first year of the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon
605 B.C.*

I spent today with Azariah and Hananiah. We gathered in the king's flower garden behind the garrison building. No one goes there, especially the Babylonians.

Father is busy in negotiations regarding the Babylonian occupation, and Mother is trying to distract my sister from our new reality.

All members of the royal family have been confined to the palace complex. "For your own safety," we are told by our new masters. But I've never felt unsafe walking the streets of Jerusalem...ever. Not until now, at least. Something is being planned. We all know it.

"There are fires burning throughout the city," Hananiah said. He sat on the ground wide-eyed as he shared the report. He'd snuck out of our shared "prison" the day before. He's

only a year younger than me and Azariah, but he's small and skinny. He has a way of not being noticed.

"I can smell the smoke," I said. "I heard they are ordering the citizens to turn over any sort of weapons they might have and are burning them in the streets."

"That much is true, but they're burning homes and businesses too!"

"Please tell me that's not true, Hananiah." Azariah put his head in his hands.

"I wish it were not so, but it is. There's no rhyme or reason to the burning. I saw a group of soldiers gathered in the street. They were talking and numbering off the homes and shops. Then they spread out and began lighting fires. Totally random. They didn't give the owners any warning at all. They just lit torches and began throwing them on the roofs and inside the doorways. It was horrible. I saw one old woman throw a torch back at the soldier who had tossed it into her home. He just laughed and then began to beat her until she didn't move anymore."

We sat in silence for a moment. I was trying to ignore the smell of the smoke in the air with the reality of what was actually happening to our beloved city. The City of God. But where was God in all of this? Had he abandoned us? Was that crazy

old prophet, Jeremiah, right? Was this the judgement of God? But not all people in Jerusalem follow the ways of King Jehoiakim. Many of us still worship and offer sacrifices to Yahweh. My family keeps Passover every year. We pray the Shema every morning and every night. We keep the Sabbath. My father says that God's protective hand may have left Judah, but Yahweh still watches over His people, always looking for those who are faithful to Him. He sees and knows and He will protect His own. "Like a shepherd taking care of his sheep," he says.

But I don't know if I agree with that anymore. It doesn't feel like God is watching over any of us anymore.

"There are stories that the women of the city are being raped by the Babylonians as well, and I think that's true," Hananiah said, breaking the silence.

I thought of Mary and felt ashamed. I think Azariah sensed my unspoken shame because he gave my shoulder a squeeze.

"And the Temple treasure is being looted."

"What?!" Azariah shouted a little too loudly. "That's a sacrilege. Surely, they know that."

"That's exactly why they're doing it," I said, finally finding my tongue. "They are hitting us in every place that

hurts. Burning the shops and the homes of the people. Not all of them, just enough to send a message. Taking our women for themselves. The Temple treasure is just another symbol of their power. Mighty Babylon is greater than Yahweh.”

“You shouldn’t say such things, Mishael.”

“I’m not saying I believe it, or that it’s even true. I’m just saying that’s the message the Black Wind carries with it.” I understood Hananiah’s scolding of me. It could seem blasphemous to utter such things, even if one was only relaying the sentiment of another.

“I’ve also heard talk of an exile,” I said.

The mouth of Azariah gaped open, about to respond, but Hananiah beat him to it. “Surely not! King Jehoiakim has come to an agreement with them. He’s agreed to pay the tribute and has pledged himself to Nebuchadnezzar. There’s no need for an exile.”

“I heard them talking about it,” I continued. “My father, King Jehoiakim, and there was a Babylonian eunuch present. His name is Ashpenaz and he apparently is very close to Nebuchadnezzar and has been granted authority by him. It’s all about securing power. Making sure that we won’t rebel once the army returns to Babylon.”

The Journal of Meshach

“An exile,” Azariah repeated. “I wonder who they will select.”

I didn’t say anything more in the moment. But I already knew. I’d overheard them talking about that as well.

“Has anyone spoken with Daniel?” Hananiah asked. “We should find Daniel and see what he thinks about all of this.”

It was a good idea. Daniel is only a couple of years older than us, but he is wise beyond his years. I think tomorrow I will try to find Daniel.

A private entry in the Journal of Misbael

Fifteenth day of Av, the third year of the reign of King Jeboiakim of Judah

*The first year of the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon
605 B.C.*

I found Daniel early this morning on the royal porch just outside the court of the Gentiles. I could not sleep at all last night so I rose early to take a walk, intending to offer a sacrifice at the Temple. I had thought to purchase a turtle dove as an offering to Yahweh, but knowing it was too early for the markets of the royal porch to be open, I had decided to simply walk, and pray, and wait. That's when I saw Daniel. He seemed to be walking and praying and waiting as well.

When he saw me approaching, his face brightened. "Good morning, Mishael. Yahweh Shalom."

The Lord is peace. I shook my head. "Good morning to you as well, Daniel. If only it were still true." I said in response to his greeting.

Daniel furrowed his brow. "What troubles you, my

friend? You look like you're carrying the weight of a millstone around your neck."

My lack of sleep must have been showing. And perhaps more. "The same thing that troubles us all. The Babylonians. Perhaps the Lord is peace, but if so, then He has departed Jerusalem, for there is no peace any longer in this city."

"And yet I sense you are here this morning to obtain a sacrifice to offer Him in His Holy Temple. Am I right?" He nodded toward Solomon's Temple where the priests were now awake and beginning preparations for the day. "I'm not so sure you actually believe your own words."

"I don't know what to believe anymore." I looked down, ashamed of my doubt.

"Yahweh does not change, Mishael. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

"You sound like a prophet, Daniel."

He laughed out loud at the suggestion. "I'm only two years older than you. And my family are of the royal class, the same as yours. The prophets come from the countryside. You know that."

He was dodging me with his words. "Have you had any new dreams lately?"

Everyone knew that Daniel had dreams. Strange dreams that seemed to have no meaning at all. He'd stopped talking about them some time ago because most of our peers just made fun of them. Even his parents did not think them to be of consequence. But a few of us believed there was more to the dreams – *visions* as Daniel, at times, referred to them. Daniel was the same as the rest of us, but he was also different. He was more introspective than most people whose years were numbered in the teens. It didn't bother him to be alone. In fact, he seemed to prefer it. Yet, one never felt he was bothering Daniel if he approached him. Because of this, Daniel was always the go-to for advice among his peers. I'd even heard rumors that some older men sought his counsel, or at least his perspective.

At the mention of dreams, Daniel became forlorn in his appearance. His shoulders sagged a bit and we walked in silence.

"Now you look like the one who has a millstone tied around his neck," I finally said.

"If you must know, yes, I have had a dream. The same dream, in fact, for several nights now. I wake up and cannot get the images out of my head. So, rather than lay in bed, I

get up and take a walk. Many times, walking can help me sort out the meaning.”

“That is why you are here so early this morning, isn’t it? You had this dream again last night and so you’ve come for a walk.”

He laughed again, his mood lightening. “Now you sound like a prophet, Mishael.”

“But you did have the dream last night, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did,” he admitted.

“Tell me about it. What do you think it means?”

“What it means I am still trying to sort out. But the dream itself: It is the season of harvest. The wheat crop is full and ready, but a great fire is sweeping the land from the East. There is a cry from the people to save the crops and so everyone joins in the harvest. The people toil day and night. Men, women, children. Widows and orphans. Young and old. Rich and poor. All people of all classes take part in the great harvest, for everyone knows that if the wheat is burned then no one will eat. And it is a success. The wheat is brought in and the people are secure. Yet the fire still comes. So, the master of the harvest, the one who planted the seed, he orders that stalks of harvested wheat be selected. And not just any stalks. He orders the best of the best be collected

and the set out in front of the fire to be consumed. 'The fire comes and rages and consumes the stalks of wheat set out as a sacrifice. And once the wheat is consumed, the fire ceases.'

We had stopped walking as he narrated the tale of his vision. I was transfixed by the imagery. I knew with certainty this was no ordinary dream. It meant something. Something important. And it felt close to home, personal even.

"What do you think it means, Daniel? What is the interpretation of the dream?"

"I don't know, Mishael. What do you think it means?"

"You want me to play the prophet, Daniel? You want me to be the interpreter of dreams?"

"I'm just asking you what you think it means, is all." He eyed me with a knowing stare.

"I've heard talk of an exile," I made myself say.

"As have I."

"The Babylonians have gathered all of us of the noble class into the royal district. We are limited in where we can go in the city now."

"Yes we are."

"And I don't think they are done."

"Neither do I."

An overwhelming sense of exhaustion overcame me.

The Journal of Meshach

Maybe it was the lack of sleep catching up to me. Maybe it was what I knew was coming next. “You and I are the stalks of fine wheat, aren’t we?” Daniel only offered a gentle smile. “The exile is happening soon and you and I – and some others as well – will soon be headed to Babylon.” There it was. I had finally said it. Out loud. An act of admission.

Daniel put his arm around my shoulder. “Come on, Mishael. Let’s go offer our sacrifices to Yahweh.”

A private entry in the Journal of Mishael

Sixteenth day of Av, the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah

*The first year of the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon
605 B.C.*

Today the waiting finally ended.

A Babylonian eunuch accompanied by two guards arrived on the doorstep of our home at dawn. He'd been sent by Ashpenaz, chief of the eunuchs, with the following order:

All young men of nobility, ages thirteen to eighteen, are required to gather two hours before the sun is at its highest in the courtyard of the royal palace. Bring nothing with you except one bag. By order of the Great King – King Nebuchadnezzar of the Babylonian Empire as executed by Ashpenaz of the eunuchs.

My mother broke down into sobs. My father asked to see the order himself – as if seeing the words in ink on parchment would change the contents of the order. I merely returned to my room to pack my bag: a few clothes, a copy

The Journal of Meshach

of the Law of God, a dagger my father gave me when I turned fourteen, and, of course, my journal. And then I sat and waited.

At the appointed hour, I left my room to find my parents and sister gathered in the main room of our home. They'd chosen to leave me to myself and my preparations, but with my emergence my mother's tears began to roll down her cheeks again. I was determined to remain strong.

My father embraced me and then, pulling away, he placed his large hand on the side of my face. A look of sadness like I'd never seen before shown in his dark brown eyes. I will never forget that look.

My mother came to me next. She carried a linen cloth wrapped around a small object. She pressed it into my hand and enveloped me into a smothering hug. She whispered in my ear, "This is a Mezuzah. I have saved it for the day you married and had your own home. But you must take it now," her voice broke, "to your new home. Remember the words of the Shema that are written on the parchment inside it. No matter where the road leads, always, always remember: The Lord our God is one God. Love the Lord, Mishael. Love Him with your whole heart, and soul, and strength. Never forget these words."

And with that she pulled back. My sister, Ruth, gave me a hug as well. She is clearly too young to understand what is happening. I kept myself from saying goodbye to her – a feeble attempt on my part – allowing her to remain as long as possible in her world of innocence.

Father put his arm around me and together we left for the courtyard.

There were no less than one hundred of us gathered. We were summarily placed in lines of twenty-five, four rows deep. I was on the third row.

My father, along with the other fathers, stood clumped to the side. A regiment of Babylonian soldiers formed a ring around the courtyard.

No one spoke.

A lone man in a flowing black robe and an ornate headwrap walked toward the first row of us.

It was Ashpenaz.

I had heard him speak of this day to King Jehoiakim while hiding in the recesses of the royal court. I had read his order earlier in the morning, commanding the presence of all the young men of Judah's nobility. And now he was this close. Only feet from me. The Black Wind incarnate.

The Journal of Meshach

“Today is a day of selection,” he shouted. His voice echoed around the boundaries where we were gathered. “I have been ordered by the Great King Nebuchadnezzar to select the best of you. The Great King demands nothing but the finest of every land he conquers!”

The boy standing next to me let out a whimper. I felt sorry for him as he appeared to have only recently come of age. I didn’t even know his name.

“Only the most fortunate among you will be chosen to go with me to Babylon. You will be given the finest education in the empire. The finest food. The finest of the arts. The finest that the Great King has to offer. You will want for nothing. The rest of you, those found unworthy of the Great King’s benevolence, will remain in this most cursed of lands. You will be allowed to carry on with your pitiful existence. And let today be a message to all the people of this horrid place: The Great King takes what he wants. All the world is his and there is nothing in it that does not belong to him. Today we take only your young men. Should you rebel, we will return and take the rest!”

Ashpenaz’s speech ended with a thunderous shout and stomp from the Babylonian army surrounding the whole scene. It was enough to make us all flinch.

The selection process began. A glimmer of hope had risen inside of me as Ashpenaz had rattled on. Perhaps I would be blessed by Yahweh and be passed over – allowed to return to my family.

Ashpenaz did not take long in making his choices. He moved quickly down each row with a guard behind him. He would pass three or four boys and then he would pause in front of another. A jerk of his head was the indication that a selection had been made and the guard would yank the chosen one out of line and push him across the courtyard toward the far side.

No one resisted.

The fourth selection caught my attention. It was Azariah. He hung his head as he made the long walk to join the other three. On the second row, Hananiah was chosen. He had always been good at not being seen, but that skill failed him today. And then came the third row. Ashpenaz walked more quickly this time, as if he was tired of the whole process. He simply pointed arbitrarily at individuals as he moved. They were summarily yanked out of line.

My heart beat fast as he moved closer to me. I prayed he would walk on past, but my prayers failed to reach Yahweh.

He stopped in front of me and looked me fully up and down. He was a towering figure. His beady eyes were black as the wind that carried him to the Holy City. His moist lips, ringed by a dark goatee, curled into a wicked smile.

A jerk of his head and I found myself being jerked out of line.

I made the long walk to join the others as Ashpenaz was finishing the final row. He'd stopped and was spending an unusually long amount of time standing in front of a young man we could not see. It appeared a conversation was taking place. Next came the signature jerk of his head and then Ashpenaz walked away from the group. The selection process was finished. It appeared there were thirty of us in all. The last one chosen was still walking toward us...Daniel.

"We leave immediately!" Ashpenaz finished the way he started - with a shout.

And so we did. We were summarily escorted to a waiting caravan and marched out of the city. The last thing I saw as we left the courtyard was the face of my father. He looked as if life itself had been stripped from him.

A great multitude of the Babylonian army are leaving with us, returning to the capital of the empire. It will take many months to make the journey, we have been told.

Jeffrey S. Crawford

Today is the worst day of my life. I can't imagine there could be any worse in the days ahead. My only console is that my two best friends are with me. I feel sorry for Azariah and Hananiah, but at least we are together.

And thank Yahweh that Daniel is with us too.

We will see what tomorrow brings.

A private entry in the Journal of Mishael

Twenty-first day of Av, the third year of the reign of King Jeboiakim of Judah

*The first year of the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon
605 B.C.*