

Fall of Jerusalem



CHAPTER ONE

Fallen

JOSEPH looked on as the High Priest, Annanias stood solemnly next to a large urn that contained two lots. The great crowd of worshippers extended well out of the Court of Priests, into the Court of Woman and even beyond that to outside and around Solomon's porch. Tens of thousands were present to watch the Day of Atonement rituals performed by their High Priest, who stood alone before God on behalf of Israel. After the morning sacrifices, Annanias took his second of five ritual baths, donned his simple white robe, white turban and white belt, then exited accompanied by several priests to include Joseph's father, Mattias.

Joseph though much lower down in the hierarchy of priests, was poised to escort the goat to be sacrificed to the demon god,

Azazel. He would be the youngest to ever do so, but the prominence of his father, secured him the honor. So he stood by nervously holding the two goats by leashes, until it was determined which goat would go to Jehovah, and which goat would go to the demon of the wilderness. The two black goats were identical and would only be distinguished by the lots. Joseph looked at his father who was standing close by Annanias and felt the gap between them more than he could bear. He gave the leashes a light whip causing the two goats to move forward; both began to bleat and scuttle across the polished marble floor. Their hoof steps clacking loudly and echoing off the inner chamber walls made of solid and polished blocks of white limestone. The clacking was painful in the ears of Joseph who felt it somehow his responsibility to muffle the sound. He slowed his pace, spoke calming words at the animals and finally arrived at the dais of the High Priest. The crowd murmured with expectation.

With the animals now before him, Annanias plunged both hands together inside the urn then brought them out together, each hand holding a lot. Joseph said to him loudly, "My master, the High Priest! Raise up your right hand!"

The audience hushed as Joseph and several of the leading men of the Sanhedrin read quickly the Hebrew inscription on the flat stone. Many of the men groaned, then Annanias looked at what was written then shouted, "The lot for Azazel!"

The crowd of spectators booed and hissed as Annanias tied a skein of scarlet wool around the goat designated for the demon. Other priests were busy trying to quiet the crowd who were upset the right hand did not contain the lot for Jehovah. "That breaks a streak of eight years," One woman said authoritatively to those around her. Joseph thought the crowd typically mercurial since

they had not eaten, nor would they eat the whole day. Several people were beating their breasts and some of the women pulled out their hair at the bad sign.

Annaias, attempting to enthuse the crowd now cried out, "The lot for Jehovah!" All the faces of the spectators switched instantaneously from disappointment to cheers and lifting of praise to God. Annaias tied another skein of scarlet wool around Jehovah's goat after which that goat was lead away beyond the Nicanor gate, and to the temple. As for the goat to be sent into the wilderness, Annaias took the leash from Joseph, then turned the animal toward the people so as to confront them with the awful agent tasked to bear their sins away from the sanctuary, away from Jerusalem and away from Israel.

He paused for several moments as the people looked menacingly at the goat. The goat blinked and seemed to be chewing some invisible food then the High Priest gave the leash back to Joseph and turned toward the majestic red heifer held between the large bronze gate. This gate was purchased by a rich Jew living in Alexandria, so the gate was named after him, the Nicanor Gate. This gate took twenty men to close each night and each door stood thirty feet high.

Now Annaias moved up the steps toward the red heifer with another attendant priest who carried a golden vessel and a ceremonial knife. Annaias place both hands on the top of the heifer's head and began to pray, "Ah, Jehovah! The seed of Aaron, I myself have committed iniquity; I have transgressed; I have sinned- I and my house."

There was a measured pause that was practiced earlier throughout the week. Joseph checked his father's face who looked stern at him, he quickly focused his eyes back to the High Priest. He wondered if Annanias would remember the prayer from here and was in great trepidation lest the High Priest make a mistake at this moment. He thought happily of his own peerless memory that had opened so many doors for him.

The High Priest continued loudly, "Oh, then, Jehovah, I entreat you, cover over the iniquities, the transgressions, and the sins which I have committed, transgressed and sinned before you. I and my house- even as it is written in the law of Moses, your servant, 'For, on that day will He cover over for you to make you clean; from all your transgressions before Jehovah you will be clean.'"

Annanias was given the ceremonial knife and golden vessel, he then slit the throat of the animal which opened its mouth but could make no noise, two attendants rushed to stabilize the cow lest it fall over. Annanias placed the golden vessel beneath the stream of blood, holding it until half the vessel was filled. Several more priests appeared as Annanias stepped away and another priest held a less costly vessel beneath the wound. The animal fell down on its hind legs now, and they gently rolled it over on its side, continuing to capture the streaming blood. The crowd watched as Annanias disappeared through the gates to the Court of Priest, where he would gather the special blend of incense and coals, then offer them and the blood inside the Holy of Holies.

At the alter, Annanias filled a large censor with hot coals from the fire that never was extinguished since the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, nearly five hundred years. Through fierce storms and deluges of rain, the fire always stayed lit. Even during Herod's con-

struction and magnification of the temple, the flames burned and the sacrifices continued. Now sixty years after major construction had ended, the fires burned on a magnificent alter, made of uncut stones, fitted together and binded with molten led and mortar. Annanias stood atop the alter looking down through the Nicanor gate at the lucky few of the audience who could still see him.

“The shovel,” He said according to script. At which another young priest handed him the golden shovel so that he could fill the censor. After Annanias filled his censor with the coals he ensured the attending priests had the frankincense, and another pan containing portions of the heifers blood. One priest’s sole job was to continually stir the blood so that it would not congeal and thus be worthless for sprinkling on the rock once inside the Holy of Holies.

The High Priest, carrying the censor, walked now with only two attending priests, one holding the vessel containing the heifer’s blood, and the other who carried the special blend of incense and who would pull back the first veil in front of the Holy of Holies. Their steps were slow, measured and full of solemnity. Annanias reflected on his long rise to the position of High Priest, and the great dignity that he felt he brought to the office. Under his leadership, many initiatives for the improvement of the temple, Jerusalem and the nation were successfully accomplished because of his good relations with the Roman proconsuls who governed Israel.

They entered underneath the immense columns that stood in the porch of the Holy Place. Entwined thirty feet up and over the large cedar beam connecting the columns was a golden vine. This was beautified by clusters of golden grapes the size of a man. Golden sprigs and leaves adorned the vine at other places. Annanias and his attendants passed under these and through the porch in

the Holy Place. Once inside, the great blue veil that extended both the height and the width of the temple, thirty by sixty feet, met them and Annanias paused and took a breath.

He closed his eyes and the two priests stopped with him, wondering at his piety, and fearful of the presence of God just behind the veil. To the left of them was the large, golden candlestick that was blazing with seven wicks soaked in olive oil on seven separate stems. Three branches sprung to the right and three to the left. To their right was the table for shewbread, twelve loaves presented on the table to represent the twelve tribes of Israel. Directly before them was the table of incense on which burned continually day and night a secret blend of wood chips and herbs. Annanias, opened his eyes then moved toward the veil on the right side of the Holy Place. It was terribly quiet inside the temple and there was no drone of the great crowd outside who were quiet in prayer for their high priest to survive the ordeal.

Once arrived at the curtain, the attendant priest handed Annanias the box containing the incense and then pulled back the first curtain. Once the curtain was let go, Annanias was in complete darkness except for the burning red of the embers in his censor. With box stowed underneath his armpit, he pulled back the second curtain and passed into a vast room that daunted him each time over the past ten years he had entered it. It was proscribed by law that only one man, and that man being the High Priest, could enter this space once a year to offer the sacrifice on behalf of the sins of Israel.

The room was cold today and he could feel wind moving in many directions that caused his skin to prick and the hairs of his neck to

rise. Two palpable choices came to his mind quickly- either to run away, or perform his duties.

“Why run away?” a voice asked from within a dark recess. The recess lighted up with a faint glow and Annanias saw a familiar, though unwelcome face.

“Go away.” Annanias whispered, “This is the house of Jehovah.” Annanias wondered why this time the man was dressed in black, and not in white as at previous offerings. He moved to the foundation stone and set his censor down at the place where the Ark of God once stood. He then opened the box of incense and scattered them over the coals until a thick white smoke was billowing above him. The smell overcame him and he forgot for a moment the curious figure that accompanied him.

“God has been absent from this place for some time.”

Annanias cringed at the crude way the unspeakable name was spoken but from experience answered the man not a word. Once he was satisfied the smoke was filling up the space he went back through the veil to obtain the vessel with the blood. Once back inside he began to sprinkle the blood over the large rock that was nearly the height of two men and the width of forty to fifty feet, it was here, according to the rabbis, where Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Isaac.

Annanias began to sprinkle the blood on the censor and all around it, some of the blood hissing as it contacted the burning coals. He flicked the blood upward seven times, then threw it side to side. The presence sniggered and stepped closer to Annanias. “I’m wearing black to mourn your passing.” Annanias trembled. With much effort he continued to ignore the presence and dipped his

finger back into the heifer's blood, then flicked more over the rock. A chill wind shocked him then the voice whispered into Annanias' ear, "And this temple will fall not long after you do."

At this, Annanias was furious and flicked blood at the direction of the voice, but both voice and the presence was gone. He needed several moments to compose himself. If he stayed inside too long, the crowd would become worried then restless. He took the vessel with the blood of the heifer and moving toward the veil he exited, once beyond the veil, he handed the attendant the vessel with the heifer blood. They both exited the temple and immediately at their left was a Levite holding the goat for Jehovah near the holding pens. Annanias was quickly passed the ceremonial knife to which he slit the goats neck and held another golden bowl beneath the wound to capture the blood. This is took him immediately back into the temple and the Holy of Holies where he sprinkled the alter with that blood to.

Annanias gathered up the censor and retreated from the Holy of Holies back behind the veil. Once again outside the veil, he handed the censor and the vessel to the attendants, then he turned around and approached the veil at the middle, raised his arms and prayed, "May it please you, O Lord our God, and the God of our fathers, that neither this day nor during this year any captivity come upon us." At his words Annanias heard from behind the veil malevolent laughter. He turned around to his attendants but knew they could hear nothing. He continued, "As to your people Israel, may no enemy exalt himself against them or against this temple." His enemy behind the veil chortled at this also so Annanias decided to cut the rest of his prayer short.

He turned then motioned for his attendants to follow him. Beneath the golden vines he paused as many of the crowd caught site of him. The rumor of his life shot through the multitudes who sang praises to the Lord and the loud murmuring grew to a roar of approval when Annanias, flanked by his attendants stood between the Nicanor Gates. Joseph perceived the strain on his face though the high priest smiled broadly and lifted his hands and face to heaven.

As Annanias walked toward Joseph, the crowd was now reminded that the goat for the demon Azazel still faced east, and was not gone from their presence. The rapture of the crowd died as Annanias poised himself above the goat. He knelt down before the animal and placed his two hands on the top of its head. Joseph held so tightly to the leash that his knuckles were white; the intensity of the silence after such an uproar didn't seem possible to him.

Annanias prayed again, and loudly, "Ah, Jehovah! They have committed iniquity; they have transgressed; they have sinned- your people, the House of Israel. Oh, then, Jehovah! Cover over, I entreat you, upon their iniquities, their transgressions, and their sins, which they have wickedly committed, transgressed and sinned before you- your people, the house of Israel. As it is written in the law of Moses, your servant, saying: 'For on that day shall it be covered over for you, to make you clean from all your sins before Jehovah you will be cleansed.'"

At this prayer Annanias arose and then moved eastward toward Solomon's Porch. Once through this temple gate, and down the steps, the High Priest and his entourage came to the east gate of the temple, the Shushan gate, that looked directly out to the Mount of Olives. An arched bridge spanned over the Kidron Valley, and rose by degrees to a spot on the west side of that mount where Joseph

would transfer the goat into the hands of a trusted gentile. This gentile would then conduct the goat through ten stations, until he arrived at the desert to throw the goat over a cliff.

Annanias signaled to Joseph, and the two led the procession across the bridge. It was solemn and without words but from the train of pilgrims and local Jerusalemites, there were ruckus imprecations called out after the goat. One man surged forward and reaching the goat, violently twisted out some of the goats hair. The goat let out a cry and several of the temple guards drew the man away but the crowd was delighted at the violence done to the goat.

The day was warming, and Annanias was looking forward to the end of this tortuous week. Because they would not let him sleep at all last night, he was now stumbling and Joseph needed to act as a staiv for him lest he pitch forward and another terrible sign be added to the day. Once across the bridge there was a crowd who would accompany the gentile man along they way. They booed and hissed and threw dust up at the approach of the goat bearing their sins away. "Go to the hell you belong to!" a woman yelled. They pressed in around the goat intending to tear more clumps of hair out, but Joseph pushed them back and told them to clear the path.

Their feet touched the dirt of the Mount of Olives, so Joseph passed the leash to the gentile who gripped it tightly then turned to begin his solemn procession leading the goat to the desert. The crowd was thickly massed along the span of the bridge back to the east gate. As the gentile started along the path going east, cries and jeers were flung from all directions at the animal. Some people began to throw rocks at the animal and the gentile man needed to duck and dodge on several occasions and then was hit in the side. At this the temple guards began to push people back over

the bridge, and so after awhile they were able to clear the bridge of all the spectators and move them back into the temple grounds.

Joseph watched in amazement since he had not had such a vantage point during previous atonement days. The great east wall was an impossible reality jutting up some six hundred feet from the Kidron Valley at the south east corner to the very top corner of the Royal Porch. The Royal Porch itself being a vast building running the length of the south wall of the temple complex. Beyond the south wall, just outside the two gates called Huldah's Gates, dedicated for the prophetess Huldah who was distinguished to have a tomb inside the temple walls, was the city of David, not visible from where Joseph stood. But looking about in line with the upper city where he could see the fabulous palace of King Agrippa, and right of this three imposing towers higher than any siege tower could hope to rise.

Joseph looked to the north west of the city where cauldrons of fire burned at four corners of the large Antonius Tower. He could see the Roman guards, or were they Samaritans today he wondered, keeping watch over the temple and its precincts. Anger burned in his heart, not for the first time, at seeing how the citadel of the Romans loomed over his city on such an auspicious day. What power did Rome have to rule so completely over his people? He let this question go undebated since he needed to keep his mind attendant on the High Priest and his own father was not far off. The two, father and son, locked eyes in that moment and Mattias walked over then said, "You let much too great a length of leash out during the ceremony. In practise you were taught to wound the leather more times around your arm."

“Ah, father, you are right. The clattering of the hooves may have been prevented.” Joseph said in embarrassment.

“Far too much slack, but overall you did well. The crowd is mightily irritated today. Look how they dawdle and argue with the guards.”

Joseph turned to see the many people still watching the goat be lead to the otherside of the Mount of Olives. The guards trying to get them to stand and move back into the temple. Joseph noticed how the High Priest had drifted away and was speaking with some of the pilgrims beneath the shade of a gnarled and giant fig tree in full leaf. There was a slight breeze and the High Priest was in the shade, but Joseph was mindful of Annanias’ age and thought it best to get him back to the temple and his own apartment for refreshment. Mattias understood the situation as well then said, “To your duties son. We will celebrate tonight with your mother and brother.”

Joseph liked the idea of a party, so bolted away happily toward the High Priest who was being congenial with his time and listening to the harrowing story of some Babylonian Jews who had made the pilgrimage from the east. “Master,” Joseph said politely. He nodded at the pilgrims noting the filth of their garments and wanting to extract Annanias away from them. Annanias blessed as many as he could touch, and started to move with Joseph’ help back over the bridge that was much reduced of traffic. Halfway back over the bridge, a great cry rang out from the Mount of Olives. Several shrieks of women then followed until it seemed the whole mountain was a cacophony of grief and despair.

Joseph and Annanias turned to face the mountain squinting their eyes because of the bright sunshine. “I cannot see what is

happening,” Joseph said. Annanias could only continue to listen to the air that was continually punctuated with cries and shrieking since his eyesight was so poor. Joseph looked all along the contours of the mountain, the many graves dotting the hillside, but could not see anything. Then he saw a plume of dust kick up on the south side of the mountain from whence the gentile had lead the goat away. “It appears there is some commotion over there,” He pointed knowing the High Priest could not see that far. “There appears a cloud of dust has gone up and a man is rolling down the side of that path...”

The word stuck in Joseph’ throat. His eyes bulged outward and his mouth dropped in horror. He could only make a choking sound and Annanias looked at him. Then the weight shifted between them so that Annanias was holding Joseph up, who was nearly about to collapse to the ground. “By heaven’s throne Joseph, what is the matter with you?”

Joseph collected himself, then looked at the path again to ensure he was not seeing a mirage. Closer now to him, and running fast for the head of the bridge was the goat, dragging the leash behind it, with the scarlet wool skein bobbing up and down on its horn. It passed many people who were too appalled at the site to do anything more than stay frozen as the demon’s goat passed them by. A few people made a jump at the animal but were not quick enough and Joseph thought the animal moving faster than any goat he could imagine ever seeing.

“What is wrong child?!” Annanias said, now turning to look down the bridge. Before he understood what he was seeing, the goat bounded past them both, then past several other people who

could not process quick enough what was passing them by. When they did, they cried in despair and sorrow, then raced back into the temple to see where the animal would go.

Annanias was struck completely dumb and just stood gaping at the east gate through which the goat had just raced through. Joseph too, was appalled beyond any words so suggested they should hurry to the temple and alert the guards. Whatever was happening in Annanias' head, he still could not speak, so Joseph lead him as fast as the High Priest would move back to the east gate. Once inside Joseph saw that the crowds were in a tumult and the temple guards were pushing them away from any of the temple gates opening. When they saw the High Priest, a great wail erupted from the pilgrims who cried out to know the truth of the matter.

Annanias was still speechless though in his mind he argued that it couldn't possibly be the same goat. Not in the history of Israel has Azazel's goat run back to the west, certainly not to the temple. "Where is it now?" He asked full of trepidation and anxiety. "Joseph, I order the Court of Priests cleared and guards posted at every entrance. Surely this is some trick played by the Samaritans!"

"Should we allow them to stay in the Court of Women?" Joseph asked, hoping so many people, from so large a court would not need to be expelled.

No, shut the Nicanor Gate, and guard the passages to the inner court of the priest. Several priests ran up to them so Joseph entrusted the care of the High Priest to them and then ran off to execute his command. Annanias was shuttled through the despondent crowd, where rumors and commentaries joined exaggerations and lies so

that soon it was imagined that the temple was under attack by the forces of Azazel himself.

Once inside the Court of Priests, Annanias watched as the last few pilgrims were escorted out, then he walked over to a large gathering of his peers, many of who were arguing in a similar vein to those outside.

“Unbelievable. I cannot believe it. An apparition. The crowd should eat something.” Jonathan, Annanias’ son, was saying this in disgust. “Father!” he said with relief. “A terrible rumor is spreading throughout the masses.” The gates of the temple were just starting to close. Then a great many of the priests joined in to close the Nicanor Gate. “Why are they closing the gates?!” Jonathan asked angrily.

“That order came from myself.” Annanias said coolly. He was still trying desperately to understand what exactly he saw on the bridge, but composed himself sufficiently to say, “It is no rumor Jonathan, the animal passed us on the bridge running toward the temple.”

At that moment Joseph returned to the side of Annanias and also confirmed the truth to Jonathan. The blood drained from Jonathan’s face and several others who argued on his side. A few moments went by and nobody could say anything, until Jonathan slammed his fist into this hands and said wildly, “That cursed gentile! The Samaritans are behind this.”

The charge was not so outrageous to many of them who remembered another Day of Atonement where their Samaritan enemies had somehow penetrated the temple grounds the night before and strewn corpses throughout so as to defile the buildings. One of the esteemed members of the Sanhedrin, Levi, who was a prosperous businessman and father of John, a friend of Joseph’ spoke out

saying, "I will personally vouch for the gentile Anitpater. He has rendered the service for five years now with no incident. We need to hear from him before such an accusation is made."

At that moment the man himself appeared alongside two guards out of breath. Heaving for air, he stood for several moments as all looked at him pitifully hoping there was a reason the goat was now loose back in the temple. "Do we know where the animal is?" Annanais asked as the gentile stood up and looked ready to give his story.

"We have people searching everywhere both the temple and the city."

"Ah!" One of the more astute members of the Sanhedrin cried out. "This gentile is in the court of priests!" Many of the priests and Levite assistants began to get angry and hurled insults and death threats at the man.

Ananias raised his hands to calm them, then reproached the guards for admitting the man. "We can make atonement for this defilement later. But for now, let us be quick to hear your story and then you must get out." He said to the gentile with no feelings of pity.

The gentile began, "I walked with the goat around the Mount of Olives and we began our descent toward the Hebron mountains. The animal gave no hints of trouble or offered any resistance while in my custody, so I needed to tie my sandals more securely for the upcoming journey, and so placed the leash underneath my foot and pressed it down with all my weight."

At this many of the leaders and priests groaned at the poor decision the gentile had made. “Could you not have given the leash to another person to hold,” they asked angrily.

“Yes,” the gentile said, “Certainly I could have, but it was only a very fast operation to tie the sandal better, and the moment I secured the leash under my foot, the animal yanked with a force I could not expect and ran away from me back toward the city. At one of the bends along the path, just as it comes in view of the bridge, I was so close at the heels of the animal, and running with all of my might, that the only way to catch it was to make a dive and tackle it to the ground. I missed it and went spiraling over the side of the path and into the Kidron.”

More groans and several of them slapping their foreheads. “That must have been the plume of dust I saw get kicked up.” Joseph offered as witness that the man tried everything he could to secure the goat but failed. “I have never witnessed a goat to run as fast.”

“True!” The gentile man said excitedly, “I swear the demon was urging it on.”

At this several of the men, foremost among them Jonathan, cursed at the gentile man and ordered the guards to take him outside and throw him into the Court of Gentiles where he belonged.

Joseph thought this treatment undignified and unwarranted but held his tongue. His father Mattias, registered Joseph’s emotions and helped his silence with an arched brow. Two priests who had entered the Holy place, to prepare for the later evening offerings, came running up to Annanias then whispered something into his ear, that made his body tremble from top to bottom. He looked to

the sky for comfort then cried, then sobbed then fell to the ground clutching his chest, then he was still, and all were terrified to know the words that were just whispered into the former High Priest's ear.

Jonathan dropped down to his father and stayed by his side weeping. The priest who had whispered in Annanias' ear, was standing off from them, beating his breast, and crying. Joseph and his father, along with several other men, went to him and calmed him down. Then they asked him what he had told Annanais. The priest could not recover, so the other priest motioned them all to follow him into the Holy Place. They passed back through the Corinthian columns and under the golden dangling vine, into the Holy place where they saw the shewbread and the large candlestick still alight and blazing.

They came to just before the veil and Mattias and the others were looking questionably at the priest who lead them in here. Mattias said, "Why are we in here? I see nothing."

The priest motioned for silence, then, after several moments, to the final awe and dread of all who stood before that veil, from behind it, faintly muffled but distinct and undeniable, came the bleating and hoof clattering of a goat now gotten into the Holy of Holies.