

LYNN AUSTIN



*T H E*  
STRENGTH  
*of* HIS  
HAND A NOVEL

LYNN AUSTIN



THE  
STRENGTH  
*of* HIS  
HAND A NOVEL

---

*THE*  
STRENGTH  
*of* HIS HAND

# Books by Lynn Austin

---

FROM BETHANY HOUSE PUBLISHERS

---

*All She Ever Wanted*

*Eve's Daughters*

*Hidden Places*

*A Proper Pursuit*

*Though Waters Roar*

*Until We Reach Home*

*Wings of Refuge*

*A Woman's Place*

REFINER'S FIRE

*Candle in the Darkness*

*Fire by Night*

*A Light to My Path*

CHRONICLES OF THE KINGS

*Gods and Kings*

*Song of Redemption*

*The Strength of His Hand*

*Faith of My Fathers*

*Among the Gods*

[www.lynnaustin.org](http://www.lynnaustin.org)

CHRONICLES  
*of the*  
KINGS

---

*T H E*  
STRENGTH A NOVEL  
*of* HIS HAND  
LYNN AUSTIN



BETHANY HOUSE PUBLISHERS  

---

*Minneapolis, Minnesota*

Cover design by The DesignWorks Group

Scripture quotations identified NIV are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION<sup>®</sup>. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Published by Bethany House Publishers  
11400 Hampshire Avenue South  
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438

Bethany House Publishers is a division of  
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0-7642-2991-6

---

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Austin, Lynn N.

The strength of His hand / Lynn Austin.

p. cm. — (Chronicles of the Kings ; bk. 3)

Rev. ed. of: *The Lord is my salvation*. c1996.

Summary: "God has rewarded Hezekiah's faithfulness with great wealth and power, but the king has much more to overcome. Will his faith sustain him against the ultimate enemy?"—Provided by publisher.

ISBN 0-7642-2991-5 (pbk.)

1. Hezekiah, King of Judah—Fiction. 2. Bible. O.T.—History of Biblical events—Fiction. 3. Israel—Kings and rulers—Fiction. I. Austin, Lynn N. *Lord is my salvation*. II. Title III. Series: Austin, Lynn N. *Chronicles of the Kings ; bk. 3*.

PS3551.U839S77 2005

813'.54—dc22

2005018201

---

---

Dedicated to my mother,  
Jinny Davis,  
who taught me to love books

*The Lord is my strength and my song;  
he has become my salvation.*

EXODUS 15:2

---

LYNN AUSTIN is a three-time Christy Award winner for her historical novels *Hidden Places*, *Candle in the Darkness*, and *Fire by Night*. In addition to writing, Lynn is a popular speaker at conferences, retreats, and various church and school events. She and her husband have three children and make their home in Illinois.



## ***A Note to the Reader***

---

Shortly after King Solomon's death in 931 BC, the Promised Land split into two separate kingdoms. Israel, the larger nation to the north, set up its capital in Samaria and was no longer governed by a descendant of King David. In the southern nation of Judah, David's royal line continued to rule from Jerusalem. The narrative of this book centers on events in the life of Hezekiah, who ruled Judah from 716 to 687 BC.

Careful study of Scripture and commentaries support the fictionalization of this story. To create authentic speech, the author has paraphrased the words of these biblical figures. However, the New International Version has been directly quoted when characters are reading or reciting Scripture passages and when prophets are speaking the words of the Lord. The only allowance the author has made is to change the words "the Lord" to "Yahweh" in some cases.

Interested readers are encouraged to research the full accounts of these events in the Bible as they enjoy this third book in the CHRONICLES OF THE KINGS series.

Scripture references for *The Strength of His Hand*:

2 Kings 18:13–37

2 Kings 19–20

2 Chronicles 32

Isaiah 36–39

See also:

1 Samuel 4–6

Isaiah 22:15–25

Isaiah 30:12–18

Isaiah 31:1–3

Isaiah 53

Isaiah 54:1

# Contents

---

## [Prologue](#)

## [Part One](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

## [Part Two](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[15](#)

[16](#)

[17](#)

[18](#)

## [Part Three](#)

[19](#)

[20](#)

[21](#)

[22](#)

[23](#)

[24](#)

[25](#)

[26](#)

[27](#)

[28](#)

[29](#)

[Epilogue](#)

ELIAKIM KISSED HIS FINGERTIPS, then touched the mezuzah on the doorpost of his house. He usually performed the ritual without thinking, but not today. After his meeting with King Hezekiah, Eliakim paid homage to the little box of sacred laws as a tender act of thanksgiving.

When he finally pushed open the heavy front door, he saw his little son peeking around the corner at him. The boy's dark curly hair was as unruly as his own.

"It's Abba! Abba's home!" the boy shouted.

Eliakim squatted down, and his son hurled himself into his arms, planting a warm, sticky kiss on his cheek.

"Abba, look what I've got!" He opened his fist, revealing two squashed figs stuck to his palm. "Want one?"

Eliakim feigned surprise. "You'd really share your treasures with me?"

"Uh-huh. Here, Abba. They're good."

He gently tousled his son's curly hair. "The Proverbs of Solomon say, 'A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor.' But you may eat them, Jerimoth—I'm not hungry." The boy quickly devoured the figs, then licked the sticky juice off his fingers.

Eliakim had named his son Jerimoth after Jerusha's father, but with his round face and mischievous brown eyes, he resembled his other grandfather, Hilkiah, more than his namesake. Little Jerimoth had been born to Eliakim and Jerusha four years ago, yet Eliakim still found himself studying his son in fascination, amazed that God had not only given him Jerusha for his wife but had blessed their love with this beautiful child.

"Where's your mama?" he asked.

"Out in the garden with Grandpa."

Eliakim stood, lifted Jerimoth in his arms, and carried him out to their tiny courtyard. He delighted in the familiar warmth of his son's arms wrapped around his neck.

"Well, look who's home early," Hilkiah said. "What's the occasion?" Hilkiah sat on a stone bench bouncing Eliakim's baby daughter, Tirza, on his knee. "More, more," she begged whenever he stopped.

"That's the only word this child knows," Hilkiah said.

"That's not true," Eliakim laughed. "She can say 'Abba.' Can't you, sweetheart?"

Eliakim set Jerimoth down and swung the baby off Hilkiah's knee and high into the air.

"Careful!" Jerusha gasped. Eliakim laughed along with his giggling baby. He pushed the dark curls away from her forehead and kissed her. "Ugh—you're sticky, too." He set her down again and wiped his lips as she toddled back to Hilkiah's knee.

"The early figs are ripe," Jerusha said. "We've been eating our fill of them all morning."

"Do I dare risk a kiss from you, then?" Eliakim asked as he bent to kiss Jerusha. "Mmm ... sweeter than figs."

Little Jerimoth tugged at his robe. “How come you came home, Abba? It’s not dinnertime yet.”

“Yes, what’s up, son?” Hilkiyah asked as the baby resumed her horsey ride on his knee. “Let’s see. It’s not a new moon... We just celebrated Shavuot, so I don’t think it’s a holiday... It isn’t the king’s birthday, is it?”

Eliakim spread his hands. “Can’t a man come home early to see his family? Do I need to have a reason?”

Jerusha and Hilkiyah exchanged glances and laughed. “Son, the day you leave work early for no reason is the day we’ll have snow in the summertime.”

“Will you listen to him? My own father doesn’t believe a word I say.”

“Neither do I, love.” Jerusha pulled him down beside her and tugged playfully on his beard. “Why are you home early?”

“To tell you my good news.”

“See? Didn’t I say there would be a reason?” Hilkiyah asked, chuckling.

Eliakim grew serious. “I’ve been offered a promotion.”

“A promotion?” Hilkiyah stopped bouncing the baby. “How can you be promoted? You’re already the chief engineer. Can you get any higher than that?”

“The king has asked me to serve as his secretary of state.”

“Secretary of state!” Hilkiyah nearly dropped the baby onto the floor.

Jerusha gripped Eliakim’s hand. “Oh, Eliakim! What will that mean?”

“It means ... well, King Hezekiah is the sovereign ruler, of course. Then Shebna ranks second as prime minister. The third ranking official is the secretary of state—me.”

Hilkiyah closed his eyes and tilted his face toward heaven. “God of Abraham! Holy One of Israel! Who am I that you should bless my house and my family like this?”

“I asked Him the same question, Abba.”

“My son? The third most important man in the nation? Seated at the king’s left hand? Eliakim! It’s the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy!”

“I know, Abba. I thought of that, too.” Eliakim had been a boy the night he’d gone to the prophet’s house to deliver a message to him. When Isaiah had rested his hand on Eliakim and told him that one day God would place the key to the house of David on his shoulder, it had seemed an impossible fantasy. Yet this morning those words had come true.

“It’s funny—I used to dream about being somebody important,” Eliakim said as he slipped his arm around Jerusha and pulled her close.

“But when you agreed to marry me, all that ended. I honestly don’t care about power anymore.”

Hilkiyah’s eyes widened in horror. “Son! You didn’t refuse the job?”

Eliakim slowly broke into a grin and held out his right hand. The golden signet ring of the secretary of state gleamed on his finger.

“No, Abba, I didn’t refuse it. How could I refuse it? As the psalmist has written, ‘It is God who judges; He brings one down, He exalts another.’ ” Little Jerimoth tugged curiously at his hand to examine the shiny ring. “You got a new job, Abba?”

“Yes, son.” He looked at the boy in surprise, proud that little Jerimoth had been able to follow the adult conversation.

“Then you can come home early tomorrow, too?”

Everyone laughed, and Eliakim ruffled his son’s hair. “I’m afraid not. King Hezekiah had to send me home today because I nearly fainted when he offered me the position. But from now on, I’ll have to put in some very long hours at my new office in the palace.”

“Are you still gonna build things, Abba?” Jerimoth asked.

“Well, in a way I’ll be building our country.”

“Oh.”

Eliakim knew by Jerimoth’s expression that he had lost interest.

He turned to his wife, who had scarcely spoken a word. “And you’ll be needing some fancy gowns to accompany the new secretary to formal state dinners.”

“You mean I’ll be dining at the palace? With the king?”

“Absolutely.”

“Eliakim, I can’t! I’m not royalty!”

“That doesn’t matter; neither am I.”

“But I’m just a poor farmer’s daughter. I used to sleep in a loft above the oxen, for heaven’s sake!”

He sniffed her neck and hair mischievously. “Hmm ... you smell pretty good *now*. Besides, that will make very interesting dinner conversation with the king’s wife, don’t you think? I’m sure she’d love to hear all about your bed above the barn.”

She gave him a playful shove. “Will you be serious?”

“I’m very serious. You’ll be the most beautiful woman there, Jerusha. I’ll be proud to have you accompany me anywhere in the kingdom.”

“Mama, did you really sleep with cows?” little Jerimoth asked.

They all laughed again.

A shiver of joy rushed through Eliakim until he could scarcely stay seated. He wanted to dance and leap with happiness. He gazed at his wife and children, then down at the signet ring that still felt strange on his finger.

“I think I know how King David must have felt,” he said. “‘My cup overflows.’ ”



*Part One*

Hezekiah ... succeeded in everything he  
undertook. But ... God left him to test him  
and to know everything that was in his heart.

---

*2 CHRONICLES 32 : 30 – 31*

YOU MAY AS WELL RETURN to your rooms, Your Majesty. Lady Hephzibah says it is her time.”

“Oh no.” The feeling of deep contentment that had filled King Hezekiah a moment ago suddenly vanished along with his hopes for an heir. He had walked the short distance to the harem, looking forward to his beautiful wife’s company and love this balmy spring evening; he hadn’t anticipated being turned away at her door with bad news.

“How is she taking it, Merab?”

“Like she always does, my lord.”

Hezekiah looked past Merab into the room and saw Hephzibah sitting before the open window, staring into the darkness. He knew from experience how deeply his wife grieved every month when she learned that she hadn’t conceived. He seldom succeeded in consoling her or soothing her bitter tears, but he remembered all the times she had cheered him with her love, her laughter, her beautiful singing, and he wanted to soothe her in return.

“Give us a few minutes alone, Merab.”

He pulled up a small footstool beside Hephzibah, but she wouldn’t look at him.

“It’s a gorgeous evening,” he said. “Would you like to come up to the rooftop with me?”

Hephzibah shook her head, still staring into the darkness.

“Hephzibah, I’m sorry you’re still not pregnant. I know how disappointed you must be.”

“Do you know how many years it has been?” she asked. Pain edged her voice.

“I know. It’s been a long time.”

“Then why do you still refuse to accept the truth?” She finally turned to him, her beautiful face slick with tears, her eyes swollen with grief. “I’m barren, Hezekiah. I’ll never give you an heir.”

“But you know that Yahweh has promised—”

“He hasn’t promised *you* an heir.”

He tried to keep his voice gentle, but he needed to convince her of his firm belief in God’s word. “Yes, Hephzibah. Yahweh promised that there would always be an heir of King David to reign on the throne of—”

“Oh, why can’t you see the truth? I’m never going to have a baby. Never!”

“Because it’s not the truth. ‘The Lord swore an oath to David,’ ” Hezekiah quoted, “ ‘a sure oath that he will not revoke—’ ”

“Please,” she moaned. “You’re clinging to a promise that your God never made to you.”

“But Yahweh *did* promise me.”

“No! He promised *King David!*”

“Hephzibah, it’s the same thing. God told David, ‘One of your own descendants ... will sit on your throne for ever and ever.’ ”



She covered her ears, “Stop quoting that to me and listen! Your brother Gedaliah is King David’s descendant, isn’t he?”

---

The mention of his brother’s name made Hezekiah uneasy. “Well, yes—of course.”

“And Gedaliah has four sons, doesn’t he?”

Hezekiah’s uneasiness grew as she led him down a path he didn’t want to explore. He couldn’t remain seated. “Yes, but what difference does that—”

“Hezekiah, they’re all heirs of King David.”

“Yes! So what?”

“Don’t you see? If you never have a son, Gedaliah or one of his sons can take your place—and Yahweh has still kept His promise to King David.”

Hezekiah saw instantly that she was right. He felt like a fool for failing to recognize the truth all these years. The answer to her barrenness was so simple—and so unfair. He sank down onto the window seat beside her and groped for something to say.

“But ... how can that be?” he mumbled.

“Do you want a son of your own to inherit your throne, Hezekiah? Or will you be content to let your brother or your nephew inherit it?”

The question stunned him. Of course he wanted his own son to reign after him. His brother tolerated idol worship; so might his nephews. How could he be content with that?

“If you want your own son to inherit your kingdom,” she continued, “then you’d better renounce me as your wife, because I’m barren.” She covered her face and wept, shaking with the force of her sobs.

For the first time Hezekiah understood her suffering and shared her disappointment. He, too, wanted a son. It wasn’t fair. But in spite of his inner turmoil, he knew that right now Hephzibah’s suffering exceeded his own. She needed him.

“I can’t divorce you, Hephzibah,” he said quietly.

“Why? Because Yahweh forbids it?”

“No. Because I love you.” Hezekiah gathered her in his arms, ignoring for the first time the law that forbade him to touch her. He stroked her soft hair and whispered again, “I love you, Hephzibah. You mean more to me than having an heir.”

She lifted her head, and the desolation in her eyes as she pleaded with him wrenched his heart. “But I want you to have an heir. I want the next king of Judah to be *your* son, not Gedaliah’s. I love you so much that I’m willing to give you up in order to make that possible.”

“No, Hephzibah. I won’t divorce you.”

“Then can’t you find another way? Isn’t there an exception somewhere that allows you to have a second wife if I’m barren?”

“I don’t know—I really don’t know.” He had come to Hephzibah’s room tonight filled with faith for the future. But now he felt as though God had snatched the future from his grasp and handed it to Gedaliah.

“It’s not fair that you should have to choose between staying faithful to me or having a son,” she continued. “How could a loving God demand such a choice from you?”

“There’s a lot I don’t understand ...” he began, but once Hephzibah had unleashed her bitterness, she couldn’t seem to stop.

“Why would Yahweh forbid you to worship Him tomorrow simply because you felt sorry for me and held me in your arms tonight?”

Why is your God so unfair, Hezekiah? After everything you’ve done for Him, is this the way He repays you? By making you choose between divorcing me or giving your kingdom to Gedaliah?”

Hezekiah pressed her tightly to himself. “Shh, Hephzibah ... stop.”

Her bitterness fed his own, and the force of it frightened him. He knew that God wasn’t unfair. But he didn’t know how to reconcile his confusion and disappointment with his belief in God’s goodness. He needed time alone to think everything through. He couldn’t afford to listen as Hephzibah angrily voiced her resentment and doubt.

“Hephzibah, listen to me now. A few years ago Shebna tried to talk me into forming a marriage alliance with a foreign king. He was convinced that the Law didn’t prohibit more than one wife, and I insisted that my grandfather’s interpretation of the Law was wrong. He tried to show me what the Torah said, but I wouldn’t listen to him.”

“You mean you might not have to divorce me? Maybe you can have a son, too?”

“I’m not sure. I need to find out the truth. I’ve put you through a lot of heartache over this, haven’t I? I’m sorry.”

Her arms tightened around him. “It doesn’t matter—as long as you have a son.”

“The priests and Levites are experts in the Law, and if there’s a solution to this dilemma, they’ll know what it is. I can’t believe that God would be unfair to us.”

But in spite of his words of assurance, Hezekiah’s gnawing uneasiness refused to go away. Why hadn’t he realized long ago that God had promised David an heir, not him? All these years he had comforted Hephzibah through her disappointment, never doubting God’s promise. He had condemned her lack of faith, but she had been right all along. She would never give him the son he wanted.

He had believed God’s promise to provide an heir, just as Abraham had believed, but God had betrayed Hezekiah’s trust. After everything he had done for Yahweh—all the reforms, all the years of faithfulness to His Law—God could give Hezekiah’s throne to Gedaliah, an idolater. The injustice of it infuriated him.

“Don’t cry anymore; everything will work out,” he soothed. “I’ll talk to the priests and Levites tomorrow morning, and by the time I come back tomorrow night I’ll have their answer.” He held her tightly. “I could never give you up, Hephzibah. Never.”

Hephzibah remained seated before the window after Hezekiah left, unable to stop her tears. When her handmaiden returned, she rushed to Hephzibah’s side. “Ah, my poor lady. I tried to tell the king not to come here. I knew he would upset you.”

Hephzibah shook her head, smiling as she wiped her eyes. “No, Merab. I’m weeping for joy. He held me in his arms tonight. He really held me.”

“But the Law says—”

“I know! Tonight he finally realized how unfair Yahweh’s rules are. He told me that he would find a way to break the Law so he could have a son without divorcing me.”

“The king said that?”

“Yes! Merab, do you know how long I’ve prayed for this? How long I’ve been asking the goddess to change his heart?”

“A long time, my lady.”

“Well, tonight it happened. I owe Asherah everything!”

Hephzibah stood and hurried over to the wooden chest she kept beside her bed. She lifted out the golden statue of Asherah and cradled it for a moment, as a mother would a beloved child, before setting it on a small table. Then she lit the oil lamps and incense burners for the nightly ritual to the goddess. But tonight it didn't seem like enough.

“Merab, where is the incense King Hezekiah gave me?”

“Do you think you should burn that, my lady? He wanted you to take it to Yahweh's Temple.”

“I don't care. Bring it to me. The goddess deserves the best I have.”

As Merab bustled off to fetch the incense, Hephzibah picked up the small funeral urn she had prepared a few years ago. The words of the vow she had made, pledging her firstborn child, were still clearly written on it in charcoal. Maybe now the goddess would answer all her other prayers, too, and finally open her womb so she could fulfill her vow.

When she finished lighting all the oil lamps and incense burners, Hephzibah bowed down with her forehead pressed to the floor and began her prayer of praise and thanksgiving to Asherah.

---

Hezekiah dug through the collection of scrolls he kept in his chambers until he found his copy of “The Instructions to the Kings.” Then he drew a lampstand close and sat down to read it carefully.

“*He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray.*” He read the words over and over. *Many wives.* Shebna was right—the Torah didn't say “only one.” Would two be considered *many*? And what about concubines? Legally, they weren't wives at all. Hezekiah hadn't called for his concubines since he had become king, and they no longer lived in the palace harem. He had moved them to a villa he had built inside Eliakim's new city walls.

When Hezekiah had studied these instructions years ago, his grandfather had said that if he obeyed these laws, he would never succumb to a king's three greatest temptations: power, pride, and pleasure. But Hezekiah knew that he wouldn't be taking a second wife for selfish pleasure. He simply wanted a heir.

He laid the scroll down and stared into space while his servants moved silently around the room lighting all the remaining lamps. Taking a second wife made sense to his rational mind, yet the thought made him uneasy. Knowing he wouldn't rest until he resolved this dilemma, he called his valet.

“Go see if Joah the Levite is still in the palace, or else Eliakim ben Hilkiyah. Ask one of them to come here.”

While Hezekiah waited, Hephzibah's question continued to nibble at the edges of his faith: “*Do you know how many years it has been?*”

For more than ten years he had waited, trusting for an heir. Ten long years. He could understand Hephzibah's bitter accusations toward God.

He looked at the scroll again. “*He must not take many wives.*” Why had he stubbornly interpreted the Law to mean something God never intended? Why hadn't he listened when Shebna showed him this passage several years ago? He could have saved Hephzibah years of frustration and sorrow. He could have had several sons by now.

A few minutes later his valet returned, followed by Joah and Eliakim. “I found them both, Your Majesty.”

“Good. Have a seat, gentlemen.” He motioned to his couch, then took a seat opposite them and passed the scroll to Joah. “I need an interpretation of this law. Read the section about kings’ wives—here.”

Hezekiah pointed to the place, then leaned forward anxiously, his elbows on his knees, watching Joah’s face as he read. When the Levite finished, he passed the scroll to Eliakim, who squinted at the tiny letters and tilted the scroll toward the light to read it.

“Now, according to that Law, is the king allowed to marry only one wife?” Hezekiah asked when Eliakim finished reading. “Is that how you interpret this passage?”

Joah pondered a moment. “No—it doesn’t say only one. But I think it’s important to examine the reason Yahweh gave us this law.”

“And what would you say that reason is?”

“I think this particular passage warns Israel’s kings that a lack of self-control in their personal affairs can lead to a lack of self-control in other areas of their lives. And this can threaten their relationship with Yahweh.”

“I see. And is that how you interpret it, Eliakim?”

“Yes, I think King Solomon’s troubles with his many wives and the idolatry that resulted is a good example of the dangers this warns against.”

Hezekiah stroked his beard thoughtfully, then leaned forward with his elbows on his knees again, his fingers laced together in front of him. “Then if I married a second wife, one who worshiped only Yahweh, would I be in violation of the Torah?”

“No, Your Majesty,” Joah said after a pause. “I don’t think you would be. But again, obeying the purpose of the Law is just as important as obeying the letter.”

“Then I want to make my reasons for taking a second wife very clear. I love Hephzibah, but after a these years she is still barren. If the Law allows it, I would marry again to provide an heir to the throne.”

“That’s a valid reason,” Joah said. “But there’s another law I should warn you about. It’s found in the fifth book of Moses, I believe. It says that if an unloved wife bears a son first, the rights of the firstborn belong to him, even if the favored wife has a son later on.”

“You mean once my new wife gives me a son, Hephzibah’s son cannot inherit the throne of Judah, even if God miraculously opens her womb?”

“That’s right, Your Majesty.”

This law seemed unfair, and again Hezekiah recalled Hephzibah’s accusations that Yahweh’s laws were unfair. But the alternative might be no heir at all.

“I see,” he said at last. “Anything else, Joah?”

“Only a word of advice. For the sake of domestic harmony, you’ll need to give both wives equal time and attention.”

“I understand.” But Hezekiah wondered if Hephzibah would. She had offered to share him so he could have a son, but did she realize that she would have to continue sharing him for the rest of her life?

“Eliakim, would you like to add anything?” Hezekiah asked.

“No, Your Majesty. Joah knows more about the Law than I do.”

“Then I won’t keep you. Thank you for coming.”

Hezekiah pondered Joah's interpretation for a long time after the two men left. Although it seemed as though the Torah would permit a second marriage, he found it difficult to accept the idea after believing differently for so many years. He knew he could never love a second wife as much as Hephzibah, and it would be hard to treat them equally—even harder to share his time with another woman. And deep inside, he still longed for a son of Hephzibah's to inherit his throne.

As he struggled with these thoughts, he wondered how Hephzibah would react to what the Levite had told him. Would this news cheer her and offer her hope or enflame her bitterness and jealousy? She would have a lot to think about, and Hezekiah would need to talk everything over with her carefully before he made his final decision.

But why wait until tomorrow night? He would go back to Hephzibah's room and tell her tonight.

He quickly walked the short distance to the harem and saw a beam of light shining under her door. He knocked softly. Then, not waiting for the maid to answer, he opened the door and stepped inside.

“Hephzibah, I—”

But Hezekiah never finished what he had come to say. Hephzibah was kneeling in worship before a golden statue of Asherah.

THE FLOOR SWAYED BENEATH Hezekiah's feet as he slowly walked toward his wife. He stared at the shrine, then at Hephzibah, unwilling to believe what he was seeing. He had stepped into a nightmare. This wasn't his wife kneeling before an idol. It couldn't be. He tried to speak, but nothing came out. He fought the urge to be sick.

*Please let this be a dream.*

But it wasn't a dream. It was real. And an agonized cry rose from deep inside him.

"No! Oh, Yahweh ... please ... no!"

He grabbed the front of his tunic with shaking hands and tore it down the middle. Then he ripped the fabric to shreds, crying out in anguish as he pulled it again and again, "How could you do this to me? How could you?"

All the blood drained from Hephzibah's face as she cowered before him. Hezekiah seized her by the shoulders, but his hands shook uncontrollably as rage pounded through him, and he quickly let go, afraid he would kill her.

"How long have you had this in my house?" he shouted. "How long have you worshiped an idol?"

"I-I'm sorry," she stammered. "I-I can explain—" Hezekiah couldn't look at her. He turned away in revulsion, and his eyes fell on the shrine she had made. Fine olive oil from his storehouses filled the silver lamps. The royal incense intended for Yahweh's sanctuary burned in the incense stands. The smiling goddess with her swollen belly and heavy breasts gazed up at him with contempt.

Then he saw the urn bearing his own seal. He picked it up and read the damning symbols of Hephzibah's vow. *Oh, Yahweh, no—not this.* Horror rocked through him. She had pledged to murder his child.

"Hephzibah, you would sacrifice our son?"

"But I made the vow for you—so the enemy wouldn't invade your nation."

"No," he moaned, fighting tears. "No!"

His father had sacrificed his sons to Molech for the same reason. Hezekiah remembered his brother's terrified screams as he had rolled into the monster's flaming mouth. He shuddered in horror at the thought of Hephzibah throwing their son into the flames.

He stood paralyzed. Time had frozen, and it seemed as though he would be trapped in this chilling moment forever. But gradually his blood began to flow through his veins once again, transforming his shock into uncontrollable rage.

Hezekiah slammed the urn against the far wall with all his strength, shattering it into dust. He saw the obscene goddess smiling at him, mocking him, and he lost all control. He picked up the table as if it weighed nothing and hurled it across the room with a savage cry. The golden idol crashed to the floor, breaking open, spilling sand from its hollow center. What had appeared to be a solid gold statue had been a fake, molded from clay and thinly coated with gold.

The table and lamps and incense burners he'd overturned flew in every direction, knocking over or

of the blazing lampstands. Before Hezekiah could react, the puddles of splattered oil quickly ignited and burst into flames. The fire licked across the carpet, engulfed a pile of reed mats, then spread to the silken floor cushions.

He heard a *whoosh* as dried palm branches in an earthenware jar caught fire, then the angry crackle of flames as they jumped to a tapestry banner hanging above the jar. Beside him the woven lattice screen that shielded Hephzibah's bath erupted in flames, and from there the fire quickly leaped up through gauzy curtains that enclosed her bed. It was spreading out of control. He had to do something.

Hezekiah tore off his outer robe and used it to fight the rapidly spreading fire. Hot smoke choked him as he swung the robe into the middle of the flames, over and over again, beating with desperate strength.

But the fire spread faster than he could fight it. A wall of flames surrounded Hezekiah, following the arc of spilled oil. Heat seared his chest where he had torn his tunic; flying sparks singed his arms and face. He ignored the pain as he battled on.

Suddenly he heard Hephzibah scream. She had backed into a corner beside the flaming bed with no way to escape. He tore the blazing curtains from the canopy to clear a path for her, shouting, "Run, Hephzibah! Get out of there!" She didn't move.

Before he could grab her and pull her out, a piece of flaming debris suddenly fell onto his clothing, igniting the hem and tassels of his tunic. He wrestled to extinguish his burning clothes, crying out in agony as the oily flames burned off a large patch of skin on his leg.

Dizzy with shock and pain, Hezekiah fought for his life and for Hephzibah's, desperate to bring the fire under control. When he could no longer use his robe to beat the flames, he bailed water from the bath to soak the carpet. He scooped handfuls of sand from the toppled idol to douse burning puddles of oil. He grabbed the flaming tapestry banner and tore it down so the fire wouldn't spread to the ceiling beams. Choking on acrid smoke, he yanked the curtains off the windows before the fire reached them and used the heavy cloth to smother the flames. After what seemed like many hours, the fire was finally out.

Hezekiah sagged with exhaustion. His lungs ached from breathing smoke. His blistered hands burned as if still immersed in the flames, and the shin of his right leg where his clothes had caught fire was a throbbing, open wound. But it was better that he suffered, better that he burned in the flames than his firstborn child.

The smell of burnt flesh and hair lingered in Hezekiah's nostrils, and it seemed appropriate to him. It was the smell of idolatry.

Hephzibah's shattered Asherah lay among the ashes where it had fallen, its severed head smiling as if nothing had happened. Hezekiah bent down and painfully scooped up a fistful of sand, then walked over to where Hephzibah still cowered beside the bed. He grabbed her hand and forced it open, pouring sand into it.

"Here's your goddess," he said. "Pray to this."

Then, stepping over the smoldering wreckage, he left her.

Servants rushed into Hephzibah's room from all directions, but she didn't move from where she sat slumped in her gutted bedroom.

"What have I done? What have I done?" she sobbed.

Hezekiah was gone. The moment he walked out her door, Hephzibah knew she had lost him forever.

The anguish and bewilderment she'd seen on his face would haunt her for the rest of her life. She wished she had died in the fire.

---

She knew how much Hezekiah's God meant to him, how hard he had worked for religious reform. Why had she deceived him and betrayed him by worshiping an idol? Her reasons seemed trivial to her now, beside the enormity of Hezekiah's anger and hatred. He would never forgive her. She wanted to die.

She stared at the handful of sand she clutched and watched it slowly slip away between her fingers. She had lost Hezekiah, her only reason for living, over a handful of worthless sand.

---

Hezekiah limped down the hall toward his chambers in a daze, coughing smoke from his lungs. The searing pain from his burns was slowly penetrating his shock, but the pain of what Hephzibah had done to him was far greater.

Before he reached his door, he saw Eliakim running up the hall toward him. "What happened, Your Majesty? We smelled smoke. Are you—God of Abraham, help us! Look at you!"

Hezekiah glanced down at his torn, burnt clothes. "There was a fire in the harem... ." he said dazedly. "Some oil lamps spilled. It's ... out now... ."

"Your Majesty, you're badly burned! Here—let me help you."

With Eliakim's aid, Hezekiah stumbled inside his chambers and sank onto his couch. He heard Eliakim calling for servants and issuing orders, but his voice sounded as if he were shouting from the end of a long tunnel.

"Fill a basin with cold water. Hurry! You—run to the harem. There was a fire there. Make sure it's out. And you—fetch the royal physicians quickly."

Hezekiah's valet stood over him, wringing his hands.

"Get some strong wine," Eliakim told the man. "Now!" The servant dashed off, leaving them alone.

Hezekiah felt the pain surging and expanding like a powerful tide, strengthening every minute. His hands and his chest burned as if still immersed in the flames, but the greatest agony came from the burn on his leg. He forced himself to talk between labored breaths, struggling to stay conscious.

"I guess I was foolish ... to try to fight the fire ... myself. But I couldn't call for help... . I didn't want ... anyone ... to see ..."

Sweat poured down Hezekiah's face into his eyes. He tried to wipe it away with his forearm, his swollen hands as useless as if they belonged to someone else. Eliakim grabbed a linen cloth and mopped his face and neck.

"Hold on, Your Majesty. Help is coming."

"My leg," Hezekiah groaned.

"Yes, I know. God of Abraham—it's very bad."

Hezekiah had to keep talking. He didn't want to pass out. "Eliakim, you're married, aren't you?"

"Yes, don't you remember, Your Majesty? I married the Israelite woman who escaped from the Assyrians."

"I remember her ... astounding courage ... " He leaned his head against the cushions and stifled a moan. "Do you ... do you love her?"

"Yes. I love her as I love my own life. She is a precious gift to me, from God."



- [\*Representaciones del intelectual: Ensayos sobre literatura clásica pdf, azw \(kindle\)\*](#)
- [download online Cat's Eye](#)
- [download online Professional Portrait Photography](#)
- [The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film for free](#)
- [download The Sweetest Dream](#)
  
- <http://redbuffalodesign.com/ebooks/Neverfall.pdf>
- <http://creativebeard.ru/freebooks/Cat-s-Eye.pdf>
- <http://metromekanik.com/ebooks/The-American-Diabetes-Association-Diabetes-Comfort-Food-Cookbook.pdf>
- <http://nautickim.es/books/The-Concise-Routledge-Encyclopedia-of-the-Documentary-Film.pdf>
- <http://interactmg.com/ebooks/The-Sweetest-Dream.pdf>