

Chapter 2:

SERVANT OF THE KING

Jeremiah 38:1–13

Sitting at the window overlooking the courtyard of the garrison, Menelik¹ could feel the heat of the afternoon breeze as it moved past him into the King’s private chambers. The scent of smoke and dust tickled his throat, but he didn’t cover his mouth when he coughed. His fingers were busy dancing across the indigo² fabric in his hands, pulling a needle and gold thread, and leaving the outline of a winged sphinx³ in their path. Menelik had no need to watch his hands — they’d been doing this dance since he was ten. He didn’t even count the stitches in the creature’s wings; each would be identical without his keeping track. As the image took shape, Menelik’s eyes remained fixed on a figure in the courtyard.⁴

“Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon! Serve him and his people, and live!” Jeremiah the prophet paced across the yard below, stopping directly in front of the guards watching the gate. As he stretched out his arm, their hands went to their swords. “Why should

¹ I have given Ebed-melech the birth-name of Menelik. He is named after the legendary son of Israel’s King Solomon and the queen of Sheba, to whom an Ethiopian Jewish sect known as the Falashas trace their heritage. Wolf Leslau, *Falasha Anthology* (Yale Judaica Series 6; ed. Julian Obermann; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), xliii.

² Biblical royalty is often associated with clothing dyed purple by the fluid secretions of a shellfish found on the coast of Syria and Palestine. However, dye made from the indigo plant was also popular in the region. Cloth in hues from red to purple to blue were considered most desirable (cf. 2 Chron 2:7). Carol Bier, “Textile Arts in Ancient Western Asia,” *CANE* 3:1575; Kenneth E. Bailey, “Clothing,” *OCB*, 126.

³ An Egyptian motif depicting a creature with the body of a lion, head of a human, and wings of a bird. The winged sphinx is found in artistic works associated with royalty throughout western Asia and north-eastern Africa, and is thought by many to be the model for the biblical Cherubim. Jo Ann Hackett, “There Was No King in Israel,” *OHBW*, 210–11, color plate 18.

⁴ The Bible does not say what Ebed-melech’s occupation was in the palace. I have made him a tailor, because of his knowledge of the king’s wardrobe evidenced in 38:11.

you and your families die by the sword,” he half-whispered, “by hunger, and by disease? Adonai has already shown you what happens to those who won’t serve the king of Babylon.” Menelik could hardly hear him now, “Don’t listen to the words of the prophets who tell you to resist the king of Babylon.” And then he jumped back shouting, “They’re lying!” As the words echoed against the walls, the prophet growled and stumbled forward again, “I haven’t sent them. They’re lying in my name. I’ll drive you out and you’ll perish — you and the prophets, too.” He paused and drew in his breath, “Thus says Adonai!”

The prophet’s shoulders slumped as he became simply another prisoner again, shuffling over to the wall to sit in the shade. He sighed heavily. No one in the courtyard had really been listening. The guards at the gate went back to their game of lots, the tall one tossing his stones against the wall with a practiced wrist flick.

Menelik glanced down at the garment in his hands as he maneuvered the thread around a corner and into the sphinx’s back leg. Then he looked up at the outer walls of Jerusalem, rising beyond the garrison. Beyond those walls stood the siege walls of Nebuchadrezzar,⁵ to whom the prophet wanted them to surrender. Could the city really be saved by giving in?

Menelik knew what it meant to ride the currents of other people’s aggression. He’d become a slave when his father lost favor with the court of Cush⁶ and was forced into debt.⁷ Sold to a

⁵ In 588 B.C.E., Nebuchadrezzar built siege walls around Jerusalem to force the city into starvation. The walls stayed up for almost two years, before Jerusalem was finally defeated in 586 B.C.E.. Philip J. King, *Jeremiah: An Archeological Companion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 25.

⁶ Cush was an empire, probably located in the mountainous river-regions of what is now northern Ethiopia. It is often associated in biblical texts with Egypt and Sheba (cf. Ps 68:31; Isa 18:1; 20:3–5; Ezek 30:4–5). Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 22–36.

merchant by his father's master, Menelik later found himself in the service of a lowly Egyptian official assigned as diplomatic envoy to the backwater kingdom of Judah.⁸ The cruel official left him as a parting gift to King Jehoiakim of Judah,⁹ thinking it amusing that this slave from the mountains of Cush would have to live out his days in such a hot and dusty place. But Menelik saw God's hand in all of it. He would not have found himself in the court of Jerusalem listening to the prophet, if he had not bent to the will of YHWH channeled through the capriciousness of others.

His father would have been proud — his own son, tailoring clothes in the court once ruled by Solomon.

Menelik looked down at his hairless hands as they finished the last few stitches of the sphinx's leg. He had the long fingers of his father, small-boned, good for handling delicate embroidery threads. As he began to tie off the gold thread and cut it with a small knife, he heard his father's deep voice, "Two tight knots are stronger than twelve lazy ones. And they look better, too. Watch this." And his father would wind the needle through and back and through again, pulling and snipping it with one movement. Menelik's hands made the same motions, leaving two small knots on the back of the indigo hem. He looked down at the prophet, whose head was forward, beard pushed against his chest. Was he thinking or sleeping?

⁷ It was common in ancient western Asia for people to sell themselves and their families into slavery as security against debt (cf. Exod 21:2, 7, 11; Lev 25:39; Deut 15:12). Willard M. Swartley, "Slavery," *OCB*, 700.

⁸ There are many examples of political ties between Egypt and Israel and Judah (cf. 1 Kgs 3:1; 2 Kgs 7:6, 18:24; Ezek 17:15; Jer 2:15).

⁹ Jehoiakim was a vassal king to Pharaoh Neco (cf. 2 Kgs 23:34–35; 2 Chr 36:4).

In some ways, the prophet reminded him of his father. Though his father's beard was blacker and thinner, and his hair curly against his dark scalp, they both dressed and carried themselves as servants of the most high God.

Converted at fourteen by an elderly friend who'd once been a servant in the palace of Sheba,¹⁰ Menelik's father had not faltered once in his devotion to YHWH. There was a time when Menelik was eight that he'd asked his father why he didn't keep his whiskers trimmed, the way the other fathers did. "You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard,"¹¹ his father quoted from memory. That was all the explanation he thought necessary — it was a commandment.

Even when his father was forced into debtor's slavery, he never stopped believing the God of Solomon would see him through. "Joseph was a slave, son. But he didn't lose faith. He didn't stop chanting his prayers, even in Potiphar's house. He didn't forget his God, and his God didn't forget him." Then he would begin to chant as he'd been taught by his friend the servant of Sheba, his deep voice murmuring the words. Menelik would always pause for a few seconds, just to breathe the warmth of his father's presence, before joining in with his high child's voice, ". . . And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach

¹⁰ From the biblical text, we know Sheba was a strong trading empire with cultural ties to Cush (cf. Gen 10:7; 1 Kgs 10:1–10; Job 6:19; Ps 72:10, 15; Isa 60:6; Jer 6:20; Ezek 27:22–23). However, scholars continue to debate the exact location of this nation. I have imagined it at the base of the Red Sea, in what is today Yemen — a port country that continues to sustain trading power in the region. Randall C. Bailey, "Beyond Identification: Africans in Old Testament Poetry and Narratives," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Cain Hope Felder; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 171–2; M. C. A. MacDonald, "North Arabia in the First Millennium BCE," *CANE* 3:1356.

¹¹ Lev 19:27 NRSV.

them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.”¹²

Now, in the palace of the king of Jerusalem, Menelik rose from the window. Holding the indigo robe against his chest, he folded the sleeves across each other, then doubled the robe against itself twice before laying it in a stone alcove. He would put it in the king’s wardrobe later. Not that the king would ever wear it. More likely, it would be carried off by Nebuchadrezzar when he finally took the city, or perhaps even burned in the plunder. The thought of his work being burned caused his flesh to grow bumps.

“Let God rise up, let his enemies be scattered; let those who hate him flee before him,”¹³ he sang to himself. The chant still soothed, as if his father were next to him adding his manly voice to Menelik’s still childlike sounds. His voice had not changed in the years since he last saw his father, and in his mind his father’s voice had not aged either.

The thought of his own unchanged voice brought back the pain of that day. He was twelve when his father’s master sold him to a slave-merchant from Sheba. Menelik had known the boat ride to Sheba would probably end with being sold up the Red Sea to Babylon or Egypt. The first day in Sheba, he was thinking of Joseph as the slave-merchant led him through the streets to a small shop with no sign. Unlike Joseph, Menelik decided, he would blend in. No one would ever have to know that he was one of the circumcised followers of that Hebrew god.

¹² Deut 6:6–7 NASB.

¹³ Psalm 68:1 NRSV. All the Psalms Menelik sings are designated in the biblical text as songs of David.

The merchant didn't even speak to the shopkeeper, simply handed him a few coins and the end of Menelik's rope. Thankfully the shopkeeper, a surgeon, gave him a strong sedative before performing the operation. All Menelik could remember of that afternoon was the burning pain in his groin as he slowly came back to himself, the flaxen color of the bandage, and the smell of the medicinal herbs. He also remembered the sense of guilt. In his twelve year old heart, he'd believed he was emasculated because he was ashamed of his circumcision. In that surgeon's back room, groggy with the pain, he'd chanted, "Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment."¹⁴ And even now, though he was certain YHWH had brought him out of Egypt to this place for a purpose, he couldn't stop believing his inability to grow a beard was somehow evidence that he had lost his Covenant when he lost the physical proof of it.

"Cushite!" Shephatiah, one of the officials of Jerusalem, called from the doorway, bringing Menelik out of his pain. "I ripped my sleeve. Come fix it."

Menelik looked up at the man standing in the hallway. His name meant *YHWH will judge*, but he looked more like a worshipper of Horus.¹⁵ His hair was plaited, his beard well-trimmed and adorned with gold braiding after the fashion of the Egyptians. He had kohl around his eyes, as well, and he looked better-fed than anyone Menelik had seen in days.¹⁶ He must have a secret

¹⁴ Ps 51:4 NRSV.

¹⁵ Horus, son of Isis and Osiris, was one of the most popular Egyptian gods, with many centers of worship. Erik Hornung, "Ancient Egyptian Religious Iconography," *CANE* 3:1718; Herman Te Velde, "Theology, Priests, and Worship in ancient Egypt," *CANE* 3:1737.

¹⁶ Shephatiah's appearance is similar to that of a 7th century B.C.E. Egyptian official. In this retelling, Shephatiah's association with Egyptian dress and worship identifies him with those in the Jerusalem nobility who favored alliance with Egypt, believing Egypt would save them from Nebuchadnezzar (cf. 37:5–10). Dr. Joann

store of grain. Menelik picked up his small knife from the window and tucked it in his bag, then turned to walk toward the door.

“Cushite, I said ‘come!’”

Menelik wanted to say, “I’m not a dog. I have a name other than ‘Cushite.’” But, around here he was not much more important than a trained dog, and he didn’t have a real name. Menelik had been too exotic for King Jehoiakim to remember, so he’d called him Ebed-melech — slave of the king — and the name had stuck through two successive monarchies. Not even the servants called him Menelik any more.

Instead of speaking in defiance, Menelik walked slowly and gracefully to the door. He reached up to Shephatiah’s outstretched arm and inspected the small tear, then took his time selecting the right color thread from his bag, and choosing just the right sized needle. When he finished, he tied the stitches off with four knots.

As he let go of Shephatiah’s sleeve, the prophet’s voice returned from the window.

“Surrender to Babylon! Surrender and live! This is the word of Adonai.”

“The donkey still brays, even in prison,” Shephatiah growled. “Has he been doing this all day?”

“He stopped for a brief period, when the house slept this afternoon. But it’s not a bother. It gives us some entertainment, keeps our minds off our stomachs.”

“Entertainment!” he barked the word. “We put him in prison and he *entertains* the slaves by shouting treason. Who will he *entertain* next, the troops?” As Shephatiah stalked off like an Egyptian jackal, Menelik stepped back into the room. He crossed to the window, and looked down at the man of God.

In the courtyard, Jeremiah stroked his unruly beard, “By sword, by hunger, and by disease. Your families will die if you don’t give yourselves up to Nebuchadrezzar. Don’t think you can fight against Adonai, who has strengthened the armies of the Chaldeans.”

That evening, as the servants sat on the roof watching the cooking fires of the Babylonian army and listening to the women wailing in the streets,¹⁷ one of the young servant girls, an assistant of Menelik’s named Yiconami,¹⁸ sighed. “It sounds like there are more mourners than last night.”

“There will be more tomorrow,” the Chief Baker said. “There’s no grain left in the royal granary. Meat’s been absent for months — all the horses, dogs, and even the rats were eaten ages ago. None of the cisterns have anything but mud in them. We should do as the prophet says, and give ourselves up. At least the Chaldean slaves have food to eat — even the eunuchs.” He picked up a pebble from the floor and tossed it over the ledge. “Isn’t that right, Tailor?”

“I ate well enough in the house of that Egyptian official,” Menelik responded.

¹⁷ “Mourners frequently vented their grief publicly in piercing, tremulous shrieks, shrill cries, wails, chants, loud lamentations, breast-beating and tears.” Gerald F. Hawthorne, “Mourning,” *OCB*, 531 (cf. Gen 50:10; Isa 2:12; Jer 6:26; 9:10, 17–19; 31:15; 48:38; Amos 5:16–17).

¹⁸ Yiconami means “my people will be established.”

There was nowhere for the conversation to go from there, and none of them felt like talking anyway. So, the servants and slaves sat silent. Menelik heard the baker's stomach growl, and then amongst the voices of the wailers he thought he heard the prophet calling out, "By sword, by hunger, and by disease." Menelik was beginning to think the sword might be the best of the three options.

The next morning, Menelik was awakened by Yiconami, the female assistant. "They've killed the prophet," she said.

"Killed?" Menelik sat up in bed. "Who?"

"Killed the prophet, Jeremiah — the one who's been shouting in the courtyard of the garrison," she wrinkled a brow. "You've heard him, surely."

"I know who he is," Menelik glared at her. "Who killed him?"

"Shephethiah, Gedaliah,¹⁹ and the other officials."

"God will judge, indeed," Menelik muttered. "What did they do with the body?" He suddenly felt a need to be near the prophet. There was no point doing any more sewing in this God-forsaken palace. He would go to the body, tear his clothes, wail, rub ashes in his hair,²⁰ and stay there until the Chaldeans killed him.

"They threw him in the cistern, in the courtyard of the garrison."

"Was he alive when they threw him in?"

¹⁹ Gedaliah means "YHWH is great."

²⁰ Tearing clothes and wearing ashes were acts of intense mourning (cf. 2 Sam 3:31; Jer 6:26; Ezek 27:30–31).

“Yes, but he’s drowned by now.”

Menelik remembered the words of the Baker — the cisterns were all dry. “Go,” he told the girl. “Find something to do. I need to think.”

Menelik waited until the girl left before pulling back his blanket and stepping out of bed. Even in his hurry, he couldn’t let the girl see his eunuch nakedness. He slipped his tunic over his head, grabbed his sewing bag, and stepped toward the door. “I love you, O Adonai, my strength,” he began to chant and stepped into the hall. “Adonai is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge . . .” He was at the outer door when he came to the words he’d begun the song for, “I call upon Adonai, who is worthy to be praised, so shall I be saved from my enemies.”²¹

When Menelik rounded the corner and could see the gate of the garrison, he stopped. He could see the guards leaning against the gate, chatting casually with each other. Would they let him in? What should he say to them? His stomach tightened. He didn’t speak well when he was around men — real men. They didn’t like him, and he didn’t like the way they looked at him, as if contact with him might damage their manhood. “I call upon Adonai, who is worthy to be praised, so shall I be saved from my enemies.” YHWH would help him. He took a deep breath and walked toward the gate.

²¹ Ps 1:1–3 NRSV, substituting “Adonai” for “LORD.”

“Greetings from the house of the king,” he called when he was in earshot. Both men stood up straight and turned outward, in proper guarding stance. They weren’t going to let him in. They were duty-bound.

“What does the king need of us?” the taller one asked.

The king. He was a messenger of the king. “I’ve come to see the prophet Jeremiah. How is he?”

The tall one blushed. “We fed him a loaf of bread every day, just as the king commanded. But we ran out yesterday. There’s no grain left in the . . .”²²

The short one spoke up now, “But, he’s safe. He’s in the cistern. The officials put him in there this morning.”

“Show him to me.”

The shorter man gestured to follow him, and stepped into the courtyard. “He’s over here.” They walked several cubits to a door in the outside wall of the garrison. Inside the door, the small dark room smelled of fungus and mud. To the left were steps, which spiraled down to an opening in the floor.²³ “In there.” The guard pointed to the opening. “He’s still alive — he was shouting about hunger and disease just a little while ago.”

²² In 37:21 it says, “So King Zedekiah gave orders, and they committed Jeremiah to the court of the guard; and a loaf of bread was given him daily from the bakers’ street, until all the bread of the city was gone” (NRSV).

²³ Edward F. Campbell Jr., “A Land Divided,” in *OHBW*, 291.

Menelik circled down the steps and leaned over the opening. He couldn't see the bottom, but he could smell the mud and fungus. "Prophet, are you there?" His child's voice echoed in the hole.

"Yes," it was the prophet.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, the mud padded my fall. It's deep enough that I can't sit down."

"Adonai be praised." The prophet was alive and unharmed. Menelik turned to the guard.

"Will you help me pull him out?"

"I can't," the man grimaced. "Shephethiah."

"But I'm a messenger of the king," Menelik stood up straighter.

"You're a eunuch-slave, and Shephethiah's an official with an evil temper. I'd need direct word from the king before I'd go against him, and I've heard even the king won't say a word against that man."²⁴ The guard motioned toward the door. "Come, you've seen the prophet. You know he's alive. None of us can help him now. Besides, we'll all be dead soon and then it won't matter."

As they stepped from the doorway, squinting into the sunlight, Menelik heard a familiar voice. "What are you doing there?" In the courtyard stood Shephethiah, gold braids glinting.

"He wanted to see the prophet." The guard flushed as he pointed at Menelik.

²⁴ In 38:5, King Zedekiah himself says to Shephethiah and the other officials, "For the king can do nothing against your word" (au. trans.).

“We put him in there, so he’d stop spreading his poison,” Shephetiah growled. “No one is to see him. No one. Do you understand what that means? Not anyone. Do you hear?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“I find you’ve let *anyone* else in here, and I’ll gut you like a fish and throw you out for the birds.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Shephetiah spread his mouth and showed his teeth. “Good. You’re a smart, strong soldier. I’ll remember you when the Egyptians come, and this place is back to normal.” He began to stalk off, saying over his shoulder, “No one, not even me.” Then he turned, “This prophet has too many friends. Maybe you’d better triple the guard. Pull some of your lazy friends away from their lots. It’ll do them good.”

“As you command, my lord.”

“Well said,” Shephetiah purred. “You may make commander yet.” With that, the jackal was gone.

The guard turned to Menelik. He seemed taller now. “You heard him. Leave. If you want to see him again, bring the king with you.”

Menelik folded his hairless hands behind his back and walked through the gate. His brow furled, as he considered what to do next. The prophet was not dead, and YHWH was still King.

“Listen to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you I pray. O Adonai, in the

morning you hear my voice; in the morning I plead my case to you . . .”²⁵ The words of the song gave him an idea.

In the mornings, the king would often sit at one of the gates of the city and hear the cases of people who had disputes.²⁶ Even now, with Nebuchadrezzar’s army surrounding the city, he held to the practice as a way of keeping the appearance of normalcy. Menelik must go to the king and plead the prophet’s case.

King Zedekiah sat today at the Gate of Benjamin,²⁷ not far from the palace. But, by the time Menelik walked there, a crowd already surrounded the king. There was a unit of nearly fifty soldiers standing along the wall, watching the people as they jostled for a place in line. A woman in front of Menelik was stretching her neck to see over the person in front of her. “I don’t see any baskets,” she called to the man at her side. “Maybe they have them inside the gateroom, where they can keep them safe.”

Menelik sighed. He didn’t have time to wait in line, and even if he did, the king wouldn’t stay here much longer. He’d soon discover the crowd wanted bread, not advice — why he didn’t know that already was beyond Menelik. He needed to find a way to speak to him. But how?

²⁵ Ps 5:2–3 NRSV, substituting “Adonai” for “LORD.”

²⁶ Citizens came to city gates to have their disputes settled and for legal rulings. Councils of elders originally served as judges in such matters, and then, after the creation of the monarchy, kings seem to have become the supreme judges (cf. Deut 21:19; 22:15; Josh 20:4; Ruth 4:1–11; 2 Sam 15:2–3; 18:24; 1 Kgs 22:10; Prov 31:23; Isa 29:21; Jer 1:15–16; Amos 5:12, 15).

²⁷ The location of the Gate of Benjamin is unknown. I have imagined it at the northeast end (opening toward Benjamin) of the “Second Quarter” (*OCB*, Map 9).

Menelik remembered the guards at the garrison. Maybe he could convince the troops to help him get an audience—he did carry news from the palace. But, what if King Zedekiah became angry at the distraction? He was so unpredictable these days. “Adonai is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer.”²⁸ Menelik couldn’t leave the man of God in the cistern. Perhaps he had been brought to Judah for this very task. He had no choice. He would ask for the king’s ear, and if he perished, he perished.

Menelik took a breath deep into his belly and shouted, “Make way. I have news from the palace. You there, soldier, I have news for the king.” His high voice pierced through the crowd, and for the first time in his life Menelik was glad for it.

The woman in front of him moved aside. “Maybe it’s about the food,” she said to the man beside her.

The soldier pushed through to Menelik. “What is it?” he asked.

“I need to speak with the king,” Menelik’s voice was tight now. “I have a message of some urgency from the palace.” His heart beat inside his chest.

“Come,” the soldier said and grabbed his arm. Dragging Menelik, he made his way to the gate where the king sat. As the last few people parted, Menelik could see King Zedekiah was wearing the indigo robe he’d finished yesterday. The soldier pushed Menelik in front of him. “My lord, the king, this slave has a message from the palace.”

²⁸ Ps 18:2 NRSV, substituting “Adonai” for “LORD.”

Menelik stared at the winged sphinxes circling the king's hem and sleeves. The people closest to him had stopped talking, and he could feel their eyes on him. The blood was rushing in his ears. His face felt hot. He could smell the sweat and dirt of the people, myrrh wafting from the king's entourage.²⁹ Shephethiah and his cohorts were not among them, praise be to God. He knelt down and placed his forehead on the ground.³⁰ Under his breath he whispered, "Listen to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you I pray."³¹ He waited.

"Ebed-melech, lovely work on this robe," the king raised his arm showing his sleeve as he spoke. "Get up, boy. What news do you have?"

Menelik lifted his head. He was afraid he wouldn't be able to speak. But, he cleared his throat and his voice came out clear, "Gracious king, thank you for the compliment. I am always grateful to be of service to the king." The next sentence just tumbled out, "My lord, the message I bring is of a private nature." He knew he shouldn't speak publicly against the officials, so he'd have to pull the king aside. His legs felt too weak to hold him. His breathing was shallow. He put his hand out for balance as he rose up on his knees, and threw a sideways glance at the king's face.

The king was smiling, "Come over here." He gestured with his arm, and the winged sphinxes flew around his wrist. "And smile. You look as if the world has ended. We don't want the people

²⁹ Oil from the myrrh trees of southern Arabia and eastern Africa was used as a perfume (cf. Esth 2:12; Song 5:5). Joseph A. Greene, "Myrrh," *OCB*, 538.

³⁰ Falling prostrate before a ruler was a common way of showing deference (cf. Ruth 2:10; 1 Sam 25:23; 2 Sam 9:6; 1 Kgs 1:31; 18:7).

³¹ Ps 5:2 NRSV.

disheartened.” The king turned to the Captain of the Guard. “Send the people home; that’s all we have time for this morning.”

As Menelik stood up and walked toward the king, the troops circled forming a wall around the king and him. He could hear the crowd, “But what about the bread? We need bread. We’re starving!” And amongst the voices, “My son! She killed my son and ate him. I need to speak to the king! What about my son?”

King Zedekiah bent his head toward Menelik, “Go on. What is it?”

Listen to the sound of my cry, my King and my God. Menelik’s mind was blank, but he began to speak anyway. “My lord, it’s about the prophet Jeremiah. The officials have done a wicked thing to this man of God. They’ve thrown him in a cistern to die. But he would have died anyway — of hunger — there’s no grain left in the royal granary.”³²

The color drained from the king’s face. Had he not known about the granary? He put his hand to his mouth, and the winged sphinxes crumpled in a heap in the crook of his arm. “We’ve drowned the prophet of Adonai,” he whispered. “What will become of us? What will become of me?”³³

“He’s not dead. The cisterns are all dry.” This king knew so little about what was happening in his own house. “We can pull him out, but the officials have tripled the guard.”

³² The text literally says, “And he died [וַיָּמָת/wayyāmāt] there of the presence of hunger, because there is no bread in the city” (38:9, auth. trans.). I take this to represent a subtle argument on Menelik’s part — Jeremiah will die either way, but if King Zedekiah allows him to remain in the cistern, then the king will be responsible.

³³ Zedekiah is represented by the biblical narrator as an extremely malleable and fickle king (unstable, like a tragic Shakespearean character). Whatever the true nature of the argument, it works.

The king looked at him wide-eyed. “Do it then! Take thirty of my men. I’ll put them under your authority. Pull him out before he dies and the death is on my hands.” He grabbed the soldier standing next to him. “This is Ebed-melech, your new commander. Thirty of you go with him and do whatever he says.”³⁴

The soldier looked at Menelik and wrinkled his brow, but all he said was, “Yes, my lord.”

Menelik stood still for a moment. He couldn’t think what to do next. “Blessed be my lord, by the King of Heaven,” he heard himself say. “May I have leave to do as you bid?”

“Go,” the king snapped. “He’s in your hand.”

Menelik broke from the circle. “Follow me,” he said to the soldier. “We need to get some things from the palace.”

It wasn’t until the next morning that Menelik thought about Shephetiah and the other officials. He had been so busy, so drunk on the moment, that he’d failed to consider the consequences for himself. Before the sun had even risen, he woke and sat up in bed, his arms covered in bumps, his mind heaving like the Blue Nile.³⁵ What if the Egyptians came to rescue Judah, as Shephetiah hoped? Even if they didn’t, Shephetiah could certainly kill a slave without King Zedekiah’s permission — Menelik was no prophet under the protection of YHWH. He wouldn’t even be missed.

³⁴ Most modern translations read “three men.” I have followed the MT, which reads “thirty.”

³⁵ One of the source rivers for the Nile proper. It winds through northern Ethiopia in the area once occupied by the empire of Cush. William Y. Adams, “The Kingdom of Kush in Northeast Africa,” *CANE* 2:776.

Menelik stepped out of bed and reached for his robe. He was shaking as he put it on. “I love you, O Adonai, my strength.” His stomach hurt. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten. “Adonai is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”³⁶ The song didn’t help. He was still shaking. He felt around in the dark for his bag, and pulled it over his shoulder. Inside, his hand reached for the tiny knife. “I call upon Adonai, who is worthy to be praised, so shall I be saved from my enemies.”³⁷

The knife fit easily in his palm, no better than a hornet’s sting. What was the use? He sat back down on the bed and folded his hands in his lap. By sword, by hunger, and by disease. He would wait here for them to find him and at least he wouldn’t die of hunger or disease.

Gray light crept under the door, as he mouthed the words of every song he could remember, rocking on the edge of the bed. Menelik could hear the servants and slaves beginning to stir in the rooms around his. A child cried. The Baker’s wife sang a morning song. The child laughed. “That would be a good last sound to hear,” he thought. And someone knocked on the door.

“Is this the room of Ebed-melech?”

Menelik stiffened, “Who is it?”

“Jeremiah.” The door opened and Menelik saw the silhouette of the prophet, his hair and beard framing his face like a lion’s mane. “I have a word from Adonai for Ebed-melech, the

³⁶ Ps 18:1–2 NRSV, substituting “Adonai” for “LORD.”

³⁷ Ps 18:3, NRSV, substituting “Adonai” for “LORD.”

Chushite. Are you in here?” the prophet asked, shielding his eyes with one hand. “They said this was your room.”

“I’m here,” Menelik whispered.

The prophet stepped into the room. “Thus says Adonai of the armies, the God of Israel, to Ebed-melech the Cushite: ‘Look, I’m going to fulfill my word against this city for evil and not for good, and it will be accomplished in your presence. But I will save you on that day, says Adonai, and you’ll not be given into the hands of the men you dread. For I will save you — yes, save you — and you’ll not die by the sword; but you’ll have your life as a reward, because you trusted in me.’³⁸ Thus says Adonai.” Then he stepped in a little farther and put his hand on Menelik’s shoulder. Menelik could see the prophet’s dark eyes, searching his own beardless face. “Thank you,” the prophet said, before turning to leave. At the door he stopped. “I was beginning to think there were no more servants of Adonai the King left in the city.”

³⁸ This message from YHWH to Ebed-melech the Cushite appears as a footnote to his story in Jer 39:15–18.

ANALYSIS

The chapter containing Ebed-melech's story occurs within the biographical material of Jeremiah. Chapters 26–29, 32, and 34–44 are sometimes associated with the scribe Baruch (though the author is never mentioned), and provide narrative accounts of some of Jeremiah's exploits.³⁹ The stories are not placed in chronological order, but break roughly into two sections — those stories told before Chapter 39 look forward to the fall of Jerusalem, and those following 39 deal with the aftermath of the destruction. Despite its jumbled chronology, the literary device of looking forward/looking back gives this biographical material a sense of plot. The narrator builds tension before chapter 39 by repeatedly showing the prophet in conflict with the leaders of Jerusalem, as Jeremiah warns them again and again that the people must come under the yoke of the king of Babylon. With each successive scene, Jeremiah gains new enemies and keeps few friends. And with each chapter, he suffers greater and greater abuse. Chapter 36 finds the king of Jerusalem (this time Jehoiakim) methodically cutting up the scroll of Jeremiah and burning it in a fire. Chapter 37 jumps to the time of King Zedekiah and tells a story of Jeremiah thrown in prison and accused of treason.

Within this context, the story of Ebed-melech in chapter 38 serves as a literary last-straw. This time, the prophet is almost killed by the officials of Jerusalem in collusion with the king, and the only person willing to stand up for him is a eunuch and a foreigner. Like the story of the marrying of the sons of God with the daughters of men in Genesis 6, or the near gang-rape of the

³⁹ Robert Davidson, "The Book of Jeremiah," *OCB*, 346.

angels in Genesis 19, Jeremiah 38 serves to prove that the city has become completely corrupt and is fit only for God’s wrath. This story is the closing argument in the case against Judah. Shortly after its conclusion, YHWH makes a final ruling through the prophet Jeremiah (in Jer 38:17–28), and then swift punishment is meted out in the very next chapter as Jerusalem falls into the hand of Nebuchadrezzar.

Of Jeremiah’s sole ally, we are told very little. He has the name Ebed-melech (עֶבֶד-מֶלֶךְ / *‘ebed-melek*). He is an Ethiopian (כּוּשִׁי / *kûšî*). He is a eunuch (סָרִיס / *sārîs*). That is the extent of our knowledge. Yet, as we will see, each of these words gives us some measure of insight into who he is and what his role will be in this morality play. The three adjectives taken together, make him an unlikely protagonist, but the perfect foil for the officials and the king — representatives of corrupt Judah. Let us begin our analysis with his nationality.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible tells us Ebed-melech was “the Ethiopian,” with a footnote that reads, “Or *Nubian*; Heb *Cushite*.”⁴⁰ (The Hebrew word here translated is כּוּשִׁי / *hakkûšî*.) As evidenced by the footnote, the exact location of the Biblical land of Cush is difficult to ascertain and a subject of debate. The designation occurs 30 times in the Hebrew Bible, often listed alongside Egypt as a mighty nation.⁴¹ Generally, Cush is thought to have been located south of Egypt, reaching as far as what is today northern Ethiopia.⁴² It is axiomatic that a

⁴⁰ *OAB*, OT1020.

⁴¹ R. Bailey, 170.

⁴² Felder, 22–36; Adams, 775.

person identified as Cushite in the Hebrew Bible would be a dark-skinned African, and Cush was emblematic of a far-distant place.⁴³

The fact of Ebed-melech's identification with Cush serves to isolate him and distinguish him in the court of Jerusalem. The title Cushite identifies him not just as a foreigner, but as a foreigner from a far-distant land, who is immediately identifiable as such because of his skin color. His foreign label is always a part of him and can never be erased, no matter how well he assimilates.

We must be careful here, not to layer modern notions of race and our society's racism onto the story. In the world of the Hebrew Bible, *anyone* who did not belong to the ethnic "in group" was considered inferior.⁴⁴ This included Ammonites, Moabites, Hittites, and many other "ites" who were racially indistinguishable from the Judahites, Benjamites, and other tribes of Israel. Ebed-melech's skin color would not have been a sign of his inferiority, except in as much as it identified him as one who was outside the family-tribal group. In fact, since Cush was considered a mighty empire alongside Egypt, being from Cush could in certain circumstances be considered a sign of status.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, the fact of Ebed-melech's utter foreignness (his very skin identifies him with a far-distant land) serves to intensify the importance of his righteous actions. As Else K. Holt points out, Ebed-melech's status as a foreigner emphasizes the Deuteronomistic disfavor Judah

⁴³ In Esth 1:1, Ahasuerus' realm is said to have reached from India to Cush, indicating that he rules over the entire known world. Carey A. Moore, *Esther* (AB 7B; New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), 4.

⁴⁴ Felder, 43.

⁴⁵ R. Bailey, 179.

has brought on itself.⁴⁶ In the Deuteronomistic worldview, the people of God are those who are members of the nation of Israel by blood and race. These are the people who are required to keep the commandments, and these are the people of whom YHWH requires allegiance.⁴⁷ However, in Jer 38, the people of the Covenant have turned their backs on God and will be punished for their actions, while the *foreigner* honors God and receives a personal blessing from YHWH. In Jerusalem and surrounding Judah, things are exactly as they should *not* be, and Ebed-melech's nationality proves it.

There is one more curious fact about Ebed-melech's nationality — one which I utilize in my narrative retelling. There exists in northern Ethiopia today a sect of Judaism, which traces its origins to the son of King Solomon by the Queen of Sheba whose visit to Solomon's court is recorded in 1 Kings 10.⁴⁸ Sheba, an important trading empire, was most likely located on the Arabian peninsula in the area now called Yemen, directly across from Ethiopia at the entrance to the Red Sea.⁴⁹ And, while the story of the Queen's visit to Solomon's court may be a fancy created to emphasize Solomon's worldwide reputation, this connection between Sheba and Jerusalem makes it possible (within the context of the biblical story-world) that Ebed-melech

⁴⁶ Else K. Holt, "The Potent Word of God: Remarks on the Composition of Jeremiah 37–44," in *Troubling Jeremiah* (ed. A. R. Pete Diamond, Kathleen M. O'Connor, and Louis Stulman; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 161–70.

⁴⁷ Key texts in this Deuteronomistic notion of chosen-ness are Deut 7:6, 14:2, and 26:18–9. In his analysis, Weinfeld compares the Deuteronomist's (D) idea of a sacred people to the Priestly (P) emphases on sacred land. Where D applies sacral rules to the Israelites alone, P applies the sacral rules to all inhabitants of the land, foreign and Israelite alike. Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 226–9, 327–8.

⁴⁸ Leslau, xlili; Carole R. Fontaine, "Queen of Sheba," *WIS*, 270.

⁴⁹ Felder, 23–26; Carol Meyers, "Queen of Sheba," *OCB*, 692.

might know of YHWH and be faithful long before arriving in Jerusalem. By allowing Ebed-melech to be not only a God-fearing foreigner, but a member of the Covenant called from a distant land to perform a task the residents of Judah refused to do, my retelling plays with the notion of chosen-ness. For, while he does not have the racial lineage of someone the Deuteronomist might choose, in my retelling he is nevertheless one of the Chosen.

Another way Ebed-melech goes against expectations of chosen-ness is in his status as a eunuch. As mentioned in Chapter 1 of this thesis, eunuchs were excluded from the assembly of YHWH in Deuteronomy 23, and in this regard were associated with people born of illicit unions. Isaiah offers to the eunuchs who keep God's commandments "a monument and a name better than sons and daughters" (56:5 NRSV), but that promise had not yet been written.⁵⁰ Within his chapter of the biblical story, Ebed-melech belongs to a despised class of sexual minorities. However, there is another way Ebed-melech's eunuchism overturns expectations.

In my narrative retelling, in which Ebed-melech is a circumcised and observant member of the Covenant, his eunuchism also serves to hide the fact of his ritual observance. His emasculation at the age of twelve robs him of the proof of his Covenant (his circumcision), but it also makes him unable to grow a beard (the most obvious signifier of a man's observance). As Ebed-melech's father points out, a follower of YHWH shall not round off the hair on his temples or mar the edges of his beard.⁵¹ This is why Jeremiah and Ebed-melech's father are both

⁵⁰ The section of Isaiah in which this promise falls (chapters 56–66) deals mainly with issues of the return of exiles to Jerusalem. Since Jer 38 occurs before the exile, Ebed-melech would clearly not have been aware of the promise. John F. A. Sawyer, "The Book of Isaiah," *OCB*, 327.

⁵¹ Lev 19:27.

full-bearded. And, these men stand in stark contrast to Shephetiah, who unlike Ebed-melech is able to grow a beard but chooses to trim and plait it as a sign of his allegiance to Egypt.

Having looked at the two words used to describe Ebed-melech (the Cushite, a eunuch), let us now turn to the matter of his name. Almost all translations of Jeremiah 38, going as far back as the Septuagint of the 3rd to 2nd centuries B.C.E., have translated the phrase *'ebed-melech* as a proper noun, transliterating the Hebrew, with or without the dash.⁵² The modern NRSV uses Ebed-melech. However, while the phrase may indeed be correctly translated as a proper noun, what most translations obscure is the fact that Ebed-melech's name is little more than a job-description. He is literally "servant of the king" or "slave of the king," a title that strips him of his own identity, denying him his humanity.

In the tradition of modern feminist midrash, I have tried to return some of Ebed-melech's humanity to him by retelling his story from his point of view. And part of that retelling includes restoring to him a name. That done, it is still necessary to look at his name as it is presented in Scripture to see what meaning we can glean from it.

It is not uncommon in Biblical stories for characters to have descriptive names. Think of Nabal, the "fool" of 1 Sam 25, or Mahlon and Chilion, the "sickly" and "weak" sons who die in the first few verses of Ruth. Descriptive names serve as cues to the reader, often foreshadowing what is to come. And in such cases, it is important for the reader to ask how the descriptive name adds meaning to the story — how does the character live up to (or down to) his or her name? In

⁵² William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* (2 vols; Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1996), 2:951.

this case there is little in the name for the character to live up to. Like a good waiter at a five-star restaurant, he is present as a servant but not really seen.

The name cues the reader to expect Ebed-melech to act in the role of a servant in the king's palace. From his name, the reader expects Ebed-melech to be a resident of the king's house. As evidenced in verse 11, he is familiar with the inner workings of the palace — he knows the lay of the land. His name offers the possibility that he will have access to the king (he is the king's servant after all, not someone else's). From his name, then, we expect Ebed-melech may be able to help Jeremiah out of the cistern, just as a nameless cupbearer once helped Joseph out of prison.

There is also the strange fact that Ebed-melech's name is Hebrew, though he himself is a foreigner. The reader might expect him to have a transliterated foreign name with no identifiable Hebrew meaning, as with Nebuchadrezzar the king who sacks Jerusalem in chapter 39, or Sanballat the Horonite and Geshem the Arab in Nehemiah 2:19. But, instead he has a Hebrew name that doubles as a job title. The implication of this is that his real (non-Hebrew) name is unimportant. And the apparent unimportance of his real name offers a clue to Ebed-melech's status in the palace. If he were a foreign dignitary living in Jerusalem, or if he were an official of King Zedekiah he would have a name. Such a person of authority would certainly be granted this nicety.⁵³ Ebed-melech is not.

⁵³ See, for example, the list of Solomon's officials in 1 Kgs 4, or even the named officials at the beginning of Jer 38.

This leads to the conclusion that Ebed-melech's story is similar to that of Mary Macreaghan in the movie *Gosford Park*. Mary, a maid, has a Scottish family name that is impossible to pronounce. So rather than calling her "Miss Macreaghan" as custom demands, her employer uses the less formal "Mary." After all, she's only a maid, and what's in a name? Even more to the point, Ebed-melech is like one of the millions of African slaves who had their names taken from them by American slave-owners. Though we may try to restore some of his dignity by giving him a name in our fictions, his real name is as unknowable as Alex Haley's ancestor's. But there is another aspect to Ebed-melech's name. Like the metaphorical "fool," Nabal, mentioned earlier, Ebed-melech's name has a metaphorical meaning.

One of the striking ironies of Jeremiah 38 is the yawhistic names of the men who throw Jeremiah in the cistern. Shephethiah means "YHWH will judge." Gedaliah means "YHWH is great." Jucal and Pashhur do not have yawhistic names, but are the sons of Shelemiah (YHWH will bring peace) and Malchiah (YHWH is king) respectively. These are men who should be counted on to listen to and protect the prophet of YHWH, not try to kill him. However, it is Ebed-melech alone who truly knows that YHWH is great and YHWH will judge. He is introduced as merely a servant of the king of Jerusalem, but we discover in the course of the story that he is actually the servant of the *divine* king. And, though Ebed-melech is a foreigner and a eunuch (not the sort of person one would expect to serve YHWH), he is the only person in the story, outside of the prophet, who acknowledges YHWH's sovereignty through his actions. The officials speak and act in defiance of YHWH. Zedekiah pays lip-service to YHWH, but acts

in his own self-interest. In this story there is only one who deserves the name Ebed-melech, servant of YHWH the King.