

THE SILENT YEARS

JUDAH'S WIFE

A NOVEL OF THE MACCABEES

ANGELA HUNT



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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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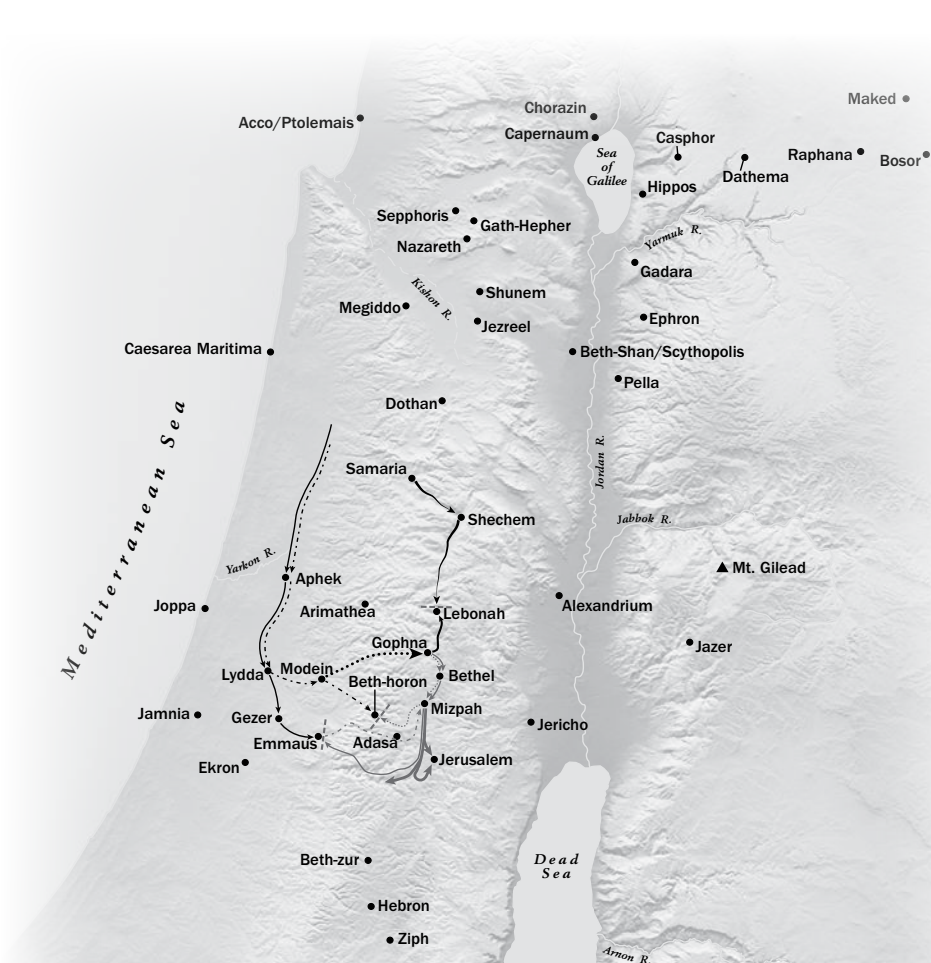
In the Christian Bible, one turns the page after Malachi and finds Matthew as if only a few days fell between the activities of the prophet and the arrival of Jesus Christ. In reality, however, four hundred so-called “silent years” lie between the Old Testament and New, a time when God did not speak to Israel through His prophets. Yet despite the prophets’ silence, God continued to work in His people, other nations, and the supernatural realm.

He led Israel through a time of testing that developed a sense of hope and a yearning for the promised Messiah.

He brought the four nations prophesied in Daniel’s vision to international prominence: the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. These powerful kingdoms spread their cultures throughout civilization and united the world by means of paved highways and international sailing routes.

God also prepared to fulfill His promise to the serpent in Eden: “I will put animosity between you and the woman, and between your descendant and her descendant; he will bruise your head, and you will bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15).

For God never sleeps, and though He may not communicate as we expect Him to, He can always speak to a receptive heart.



The Maccabean Revolt

- Battle
-▶ Mattathias slays Modein's emissary under Antiochus and then flees to the mountains near Gophna
- Commander Apollonius of Samaria sets out to quell the Maccabean uprising but fails in the attempt
- Judah Maccabeus, along with the insurgents, leads an attack against Apollonius and kills him, taking the dead warrior's sword
-▶ Commander Seron of Syria, a Seleucid, organizes his army to beat down the Maccabees and their uprising
-▶ Judah Maccabeus takes Seron's army by surprise at Upper Beth-horon
- Syrian Proconsul Lysias, under the command of Nicanor, Ptolemy, and Gorgias, leads an army to Emmaus in yet another attempt to crush the uprising
-▶ Gorgias takes 5,000 soldiers and 1,000 cavalry and moves inland with orders to capture Judah
- With the Syrian army divided, Judah and his men march to Emmaus's main camp
- Judah and men lay siege to Jerusalem until 165 BC; the Jews recover possession of the Temple

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PART I

In those days Mattathias . . . had five sons, Johanan surnamed Gaddi, Simon called Thassi, Judas called Maccabaeus, Eleazar called Avaran, and Jonathan called Apphus.

He saw the blasphemies being committed in Judah and Jerusalem, and said, “Alas! Why was I born to see this, the ruin of my people, the ruin of the holy city, and to dwell there when it was given over to the enemy, the sanctuary given over to aliens?

Her temple has become like a man without honor; her glorious vessels have been carried into captivity. Her babes have been killed in her streets, her youths by the sword of the foe.

What nation has not inherited her palaces and has not seized her spoils? All her adornment has been taken away; no longer free, she has become a slave.

And behold, our holy place, our beauty, and our glory have been laid waste; the Gentiles have profaned it. Why should we live any longer?”

And Mattathias and his sons rent their clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned greatly.

1 Maccabees 2:1–14

CHAPTER ONE

Leah

168 YEARS BEFORE THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

Of the many lessons I learned in childhood, one made a permanent impression on my soul: God should be feared, and so should my father.

Experience reinforced the lesson every seventh day, when with trembling fingers my mother lit the Shabbat candles and recited the blessing. Then she sat very still while Father broke the bread and ate the meat, a luxury we enjoyed only on Shabbat. When Father had eaten his fill of the meat, vegetables, fruit, and bread, he stood and walked away, allowing me and Mother to share whatever remained.

Then we would go to the synagogue, or Father and I would go, since Mother never left the house when a bruise marked her face. I would walk behind Father through the winding alleys of Jerusalem, careful to avoid the potholes and mounds of manure in the street. I made a game of remaining in Father's shadow, for I'd be in trouble if he turned and found me missing.

When we arrived at the synagogue, I would sit with the women while Father took his place with the men. He usually

sat down front, and when the men prayed I could hear his voice above the others. I would lower my head and put my fingers in my ears because I frequently heard that same voice cursing my mother, or declaring her fat, lazy, and stupid. Sometimes that voice demanded to know why he had agreed to marry such a sow, and at other times it declared her the ugliest woman in all Judea.

My mother was not fat, ugly, or lazy, so she did not cry when she heard such insults. But she seemed to draw inward, shriveling like a worm in the salt jar, until little remained of her but a pair of hands and feet destined to do Father's bidding.

While sitting in the synagogue, I would lift my gaze to the ceiling and wonder how HaShem and my father became connected. They must have been close, for Father prayed every morning with great gusto and never missed an opportunity to speak to the Torah teacher.

I would listen intently as the teacher spoke of how HaShem parted the Red Sea and massacred the pursuing Egyptians to set our ancestors free. I learned about how the Master of the universe consulted Abraham before destroying everyone in the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and how He strengthened Joshua to rid the land of Canaanites so that we, the children of Isra'el, could live in the Promised Land. The Creator of the universe, the teacher said, had a plan and purpose for everyone.

HaShem sounded as if He were as strong as my father, and every bit as angry.

I resolved never to do anything to displease my father or HaShem. I obeyed every command and answered every call. In Father's presence my thoughts spun like a dancer as I tried to guess what he would want next, find ways to keep him calm, and think about how to prevent him from beating my mother.

I did not always succeed. When I brought him figs instead

of bread, or when I put his slippers by the window instead of the door, Father would notice my mistake. “How could you have borne such a worthless child?” he would say, turning to Mother. He would strike her, and Mother would gasp and slide down the wall as I took a deep breath and stepped into the trembling space between them. If all went well, Father would go out, leaving us alone to ponder our offenses.

Later, when Mother found her voice and the marks faded from red to purple, I would curl up next to her on the pallet and whisper, “I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry.”

She would murmur that I had nothing to be sorry for, but her voice carried no weight and her words no meaning. If I had been quicker, smarter, or more pleasant, I could have made him happy.

And a happy man had no reason to fight.



Like fronds from a palm tree, the years of my childhood fell away, one after the other. Mother and I knew our places and clung to them—she belonged at home, while I belonged in the market stall Father rented. There I sold my mother’s cheeses and helped keep starvation from our door.

Father, of course, belonged everywhere, for he was a man, and men, Mother told me, were prone to wander.

One morning my friend Miriam and I were walking to the market when a young man stepped into our path. With one glance I knew he was dangerous. He wore a short linen tunic and the silly hat favored by so many Hellenes, the Jewish youths who followed the practices of the Seleucids who ruled this region. Though this young man was old enough to sprout a beard, his cheeks were bare, like those of the Gentiles who had infiltrated Jerusalem. His mouth curved in a smirk when he saw us, and his eyes snapped like a man with mischief on his mind.

“Look here,” he called to a group of similarly dressed youths who loitered outside the gymnasium. “Two pretty young things out for a stroll. Where do you think they are going?”

My stomach tightened as I glanced around. Wagons and people crowded the street, but no one seemed likely to be interested in an unfolding drama involving mere girls. Miriam and I were quite alone, and if this young man convinced his friends to join him, we could easily be dragged into an alley and—

My mind slammed the door on the awful possibilities.

“Going somewhere, love?” His baritone dissolved into a breathy whisper. “Can I come along?”

Somehow I found a sliver of courage. “Leave us alone,” I said, my voice thin and weak against the tumult of the street. “We want nothing to do with you.”

“Really? Nothing at all?” The youth leaned closer, and on his foul breath I detected the odor of strong drink. “I promise you, girls—I am quite fascinating. Like Zeus, I’m a lover, and I’ve come from the Temple where I paid my vows all night. Furthermore, I am a man who appreciates a pretty face . . . even if that face is still round with youth.”

He smiled, and his gaze raked my tunic in a look that felt like a violation of several commandments. I recoiled as several of his companions approached, their faces alight with expectation.

I had heard my father speak of the despicable acts now routinely occurring at the Temple—indecent rituals dedicated to pagan gods and practiced in the sacred courts. If this young man had just come from the Temple . . .

Somehow I found my voice again. “Leave us. My father will not like this.”

The young man pointedly looked around. “Is he here? Shall I call out his name?”

This drunken fool would not be dissuaded.

I grabbed Miriam's hand and squeezed it. "If he comes any closer," I whispered, "turn and *run*."

"Sharing secrets?" The youth lifted a manicured brow. "Care to share your confidences with me?"

I retreated another step as he leaned toward us, but before I could flee, a large hand clutched the youth's shoulder and spun him around. A man stood in the street, a broad-shouldered, bearded fellow in a rough wool tunic. Clearly, he was no Hellene.

"Have you nothing better to do," the newcomer growled, "than to bother girls on the street?"

I gripped Miriam's arm as the men eyed each other. The other young men shifted, forming a semicircle around the two whose upper lips had curled like snarling dogs'. The second man had friends, too, and they formed a half circle behind him, their eyes alive with challenge.

"What sort of behemoth are you?" the Hellene asked, his voice dripping with scorn. "And what gives you the right to interrupt my conversation with those girls?"

"Those *young women*," another young man answered, stepping up beside his bearded companion, "did not appear to be enjoying your attention. They are daughters of Abraham and deserve your respect."

The insolent youth snorted. "They are daughters of the old order," he said, flexing his fists. "Probably the whelps of farmers. Take a good look and you'll see that they have never been introduced to the wonders of the public baths."

Without warning, the big man charged the youth, and for several moments the two figures struggled against each other. In a dance of defiance they careened through the street, smashing into walls, upsetting baskets, scattering chickens, and stopping traffic. The circle of onlookers widened as the brawl continued, and Miriam teetered on the edge of full-blown panic. "Let's go," she urged, grabbing my sleeve, but I could not tear myself away.

Never in all my fourteen years had any man risen to my defense.

The atmosphere thickened with grunts and curses as the onlookers fought, bearded men pushing clean-shaven youths, the lot of them shouting and stumbling over the uneven paving stones. Miriam kept trying to drag me away, but I would not leave. Something more than our honor seemed to be at stake.

Of all the men involved in the altercation, the big one caught and held my attention. "Do you know him?" I asked Miriam, pointing.

"How would *I* know him?" Miriam shrieked, wringing her hands.

Mindful of her frayed nerves, I dragged her into a sheltered doorway. "Calm yourself. Those youths are no longer interested in us. But since your family knows nearly everyone in Jerusalem, perhaps you know one of those men."

Miriam swallowed hard, then peeked out to study the group who had come to our aid. "The big one is Judah Maccabaeus," she said, nodding. "His family is well known in this part of the city."

I frowned. The word *maccabaeus* meant *hammerhead*, so how had he come by that name?

"Is he a carpenter?"

"No." A dimple appeared in her cheek. "My mother told me that when Judah was a child, he was so much taller than the other children that they called him *Goliath*. He didn't like the name, so he pounded on the other kids."

"He's a bully, then."

"Would a bully have stopped to help us?"

I stepped out of the doorway and peered through the crowd of onlookers to study the brawling men. Judah was the tallest of the pack, with shoulder-length hair and skin the color of raw honey. The young men who fought alongside him varied in height and build, but they shared one particular feature:

each of them had remarkably large, dark eyes. They had to be brothers.

The big man and his brothers would not escape this fight without suffering some damage. A trickle of blood ran from a gouge on Judah's forehead, and a purplish bruise marked another brother's eye. Another had been pinned by one of the arrogant youths, but Judah walked over, pulled the assailant away, and then punched the Hellene in the belly.

I caught my breath as Judah lunged for the youth who had stopped us, catching the young man by the waist. The Hellene pounded on Judah's back, but Judah merely tightened his grip, straightened his legs, and lifted the other boy from the ground. The silly Greek hat flew off as Judah twirled with the boy on his shoulder, displaying his prize before an appreciative audience. Then, in one move, he dropped the arrogant youth onto the street and knelt to pin him in place. The Hellene lay limp and groaning on the stones, belligerent no more.

"It's over," I whispered, simultaneously awed and terrified by the violence that had been instigated on my behalf.

Miriam saw the look on my face and frowned. "Don't his actions please you?"

"Yes," I said. "They do. But they're so—rough."

"Violence frightens me," Miriam confessed. "Men like that are so unpredictable. My father says men should be peaceable and dignified."

"Would your brothers agree? I've seen them fight."

"True. But still . . ."

I tugged on my braid and watched the wounded warriors pick themselves up and inspect each other's cuts and bruises. None of them looked as though they would be permanently scarred.

I had seen far worse violence in my own home, but Miriam didn't need to know my secrets.

I took another look at the triumphant young man in the

road, then surrendered to Miriam's insistence and let her lead me away. But I couldn't resist a glance over my shoulder. The youths from the gymnasium limped down the street while Judah and his four brothers clapped each other's shoulders and lifted their hands in victory.

I had no idea that I would soon come to know them all.