

Chapter 1

“Wake up, Saul. The sun’s almost risen, and you’ll be late.” Saul’s wife shook him by the shoulder until he awakened. It was not easy for he was a tired brick-maker who got little rest, and he was advancing in years. Old men do not recover easily from their labors.

“M’mmmf. What time is it?” Opening his eyes further, Saul reentered this world. “Sunrise. My God. I’ve got to hurry.”

“Indeed, you do. Foreman’s whip is always ready to sting slow workers.”

Swinging his feet over the side of his narrow bunk, Saul looked for his sandals, put them on, took the bread held out by his wife, Devorah, and started for the door. Saul, the brickmaker was headed for work.

Saul was a Hebrew. His family migrated to Egypt during a famine long ago. Coming as free people, they were driven into slavery by an ancient pharaoh. The lot of Saul’s family was to make bricks. He had made bricks since he was old enough to work at his father’s side. His hands were tattooed a dull brown from the mud that he stirred. Dirt, water, and straw were always there for the boxes he filled with the goo that he kneaded. From dawn to sunset, bricks were his life. Everyday brought more bricks.

Saul knew only bricks. He could neither read nor write. Doing sums were beyond him. Things were big or small, heavy, or light, bright, or dark. Life was stark reality. If he couldn’t see it, touch it, or smell it, it really didn’t matter to him. For all he knew, it didn’t exist. He accepted the existence of his HaShem along with any other gods that happened to be in the area because he had been told such. But, other than that, he paid little attention to them. What was the use? They weren’t relevant to his life, which centered around bricks during the days and his family at nights.

But, bricks, he knew them. He knew exactly what the color of a proper mud should be to make a high-quality brick. How much dirt; how much water; and how much straw. His bricks were consistently excellent. Even Foreman, whose whip spoke for him when needed, acknowledged that Saul made good bricks.

Being a brick-maker was a physical job. It involved a lot of scooping of earth with spades, stirring water into buckets of slurry and pouring the mess out into the wooden frames. The frames had then to be moved to either a bright place in the sun or to a kiln. Either way, the hours had honed Saul’s body into a lean machine. No fat could be seen anywhere to cover his sinews. Working without shade had turned his skin to a deep walnut brown that was relieved only by the blackness of his hair. Perhaps a bit of gray could be seen to relieve this monotony of color. It showed his age that was otherwise hiding an aching back that never gave relief.

The days now were a blessing for his back. The sun rose late and dropped early. Workdays, as a result, were short, and the days were cooler. Summers were another question. Hot, my God, the days were hot, and water was not for cooling. A sip for thirst, but nothing else. Just the bricks. Perhaps Saul would wear a wet rag over his head, but otherwise, a waistcloth and sandals comprised his work uniform.

As Saul trudged to work, he thought little about what the day would bring to him. He knew already. He had only to walk a couple hundred yards to the brick yard and his station. The water would flow, and he would make bricks until the sun was well overhead. At that time, Foreman would call a halt for lunch of gruel. A short rest while eating was all that was allowed before work would ensue until sunset. Foreman would then crack his whip to signal the end of his day.

Foreman had a good team. Led by Saul, the gang invariably showed up on time. They did their work without murmur until told to eat lunch or go pee off to the side. Occasionally, a young boy would join the crew, and Saul would work with him until he learned his craft. The basics were easily taught. What was hard was consistency. How a good brick’s mud should be made was the only issue, and here Saul was the master. Even Foreman bowed to him on this matter.

But Saul was getting on in years. By his reckoning, he was about 40 winters old. He knew he was at least that old because he had been married for about 25 years. His Devorah had given five children to him, but two had died early. They had been buried by the side of the Nile River. He couldn’t exactly remember where, but he clearly remembered the sadness he felt when he dug their holes (after his day’s work).

His children were all a blessing for him, but also a reminder of how time had passed. He awoke with aches each day. His tough, wiry body was less willing to do its day's work. Night times were increasingly spent in his bunk away from his beloved Devorah. Their young days of fire and lust were for him now just vague dreams of a time long past.

The same was true for Devorah. Whereas she had once been a beauty of fire and charm, birthing five children, attending to them, and seeing to the health of her husband had taken their toll. Now, she was graying. Her hands were gnarled, and her joints were becoming stiff. The time of hot flashes were fully upon her. Perhaps that was a blessing as she no longer had to worry about babies. They were for daughter her, Efrat. So far, God had blessed her with easy births. They were so dangerous. Sarah Rivka's turns were yet to come. Devorah had lost her sister to a bloody delivery and raised her son, Jacob, until he married Sarah.

But, overall, Devorah had no complaints. Because Saul worked at the brickworks, he did not have to farm. Pharaoh's people brought food to them on a regular basis. It was simple fare, but they didn't starve. Her husband was a good man. Sadly, he was so tired now he couldn't give love as he once did. But his voice was soft and his gestures kind. She had been blessed with three healthy children. Altogether, her days came and went with a regular rhythm of life from birth to death and she was content.

When Saul arrived on the work site, he became an automaton. Spade the dirt into the tub, add the water, mix in the straw, and stir until done. Then pour the slurry into molds. Over and over. But Saul was not one to worry about this monotony. His work took his concentration. There wasn't time for reflection about who he was or what he was in life. Of course, he knew he was a Hebrew and not an Egyptian. Being a slave was a constant reminder of that fact. But it wasn't a concern as long as the bargain of support for work remained intact between him and Pharaoh.

Vaguely, when he did think about it, he remembered stories of when Hebrews held positions of importance in Egypt. Names such as Abraham, Sarah, and others leading down to Joseph were known to him. But they were heard as faint echoes of another time that had no connection to the lives of his family and the generations before him and the children would come after him. For as long as he knew, his family was a slave labor force for Pharaoh, and nothing would ever change. Life would ebb and flow as constantly as the Nile's floods.

Chapter 2

Saul arrived quickly to the worksite. It was only several hundred yards from where he lived. This was because the site was a self-enclosed community. Everyone lived and worked together. Of course, Foreman and his supervisors lived in bigger houses and had better food, enjoyed holidays, and time for religious services such as sacrificing to the pharaoh. As Hebrews, they weren't required to devote time or energy to Pharaoh so long as they did their work and stayed quiet. Such was life as Saul was born into it and it was what he brought to his own children.

Foreman was already there, whip in hand. He rarely used it. Rather it was a symbol of his authority that could be painfully applied. Saul knew Foreman from when he was born. His father had been foreman before as was his grandfather exactly as Saul's father and grandfather had been slaves to Foreman. Saul regarded him as a good supervisor. He had his job to do, as did the slaves. Do your work and no trouble will arise. Occasionally, a young man, perhaps new to slavery, would complain. A few lashes took care of things. But, otherwise, no problems.

"Good morning, Foreman."

"Good morning, Saul. You made it just in time. Have a hard night last night?"

Saul nodded obediently. He knew how to act when Foreman was teasing. Yes, teasing, but it had a bite. Don't be late was the silent message. "Oh, yes sir. When I came home, my Devorah was in heat, and we lusted. You know how it is with women." Grinning, Foreman replied, "Yes, I do. But you're here and ready for work." His bite was understood.

"Yes sir. That I am."

Work immediately started. Shovels, buckets, straw, water, and dirt lay exactly where they had been left the night before. Some men scooped dirt, others dipped their buckets and poured. Saul, as a recognized master, stood back to watch the operation. He would periodically stir the slurry to test its consistency. When he was satisfied, a nod was given, and the mix was poured into brick molds. The molds were then taken away to dry. How much they would dry would depend on their ultimate use. Sundried bricks were used for simple houses. Others that were needed for bigger buildings were taken to kilns for baking into harder, more durable bricks. Other men tended those duties with their specialized knowledge of baking.

Similar teams lined the Nile. Each team was required to produce a specified number of bricks, seven days a week. No more, no less. Injuries and illnesses did not slow the process. If someone couldn't work, another took over. When a slave became too old to work, he was retired. Saul looked forward to that day. His back ached now from years of work, but it was a long time before it would be given relief. Even though he didn't lift much as a master, his work was still demanding. Stirring and testing slurry was still hard, and he was tired.

This work was done in silence. Saul did any needed talking by giving directions to the others. Otherwise, there was no reason for wasting energy on talking. Lunch was another matter. The slaves were given 30 minutes to lay down their tools, gather their bowls, line up for the serving line of gruel and water, and then sit while eating. Here is when the day's gossip was passed.

"Saul, did you hear what happened in Memphis?"

Saul was not the least interested in what happened there. He wasn't even sure where it was. But to be courteous, he replied that he hadn't.

"A man by the way of Moses came in and stirred up things there. He says we Hebrews should be freed to return to Canaan."

"Who?"

Saul's friend was a bit older, and he remembered something of this Moses. "Yep, I remember my grandfather talking about him. He was a Hebrew who lived in Pharaoh's court until he got run out of town for killing an Egyptian."

"So what? I hope...ah, what? What's so important about all that? He's just another rabble rouser. Pharaoh's soldiers will take care of him." "Yeah, that's right. Coming in from nowhere and talking trash. At best, it'll just upset Pharaoh and then it'll come down on us." "You got that right. Me and you don't

need no other problems. Foreman don't need to lay a lash on us, but he'll do it if he's told." "Yep, let's just hope he don't hear nothing."

The day's work then resumed. Water, dirt, straw, and mud. Stir a pot. Pour a pot. Move the bricks to the sunlight. Next batch.

"Lay 'em down, boys. We're done." With those words from Foreman, a loud groan rose from the site. Backs ached. Arms were tired. The men were hungry and thirsty. It was time to go home.

Saul strolled on home. Sometimes he would stop at a nearby taverna for a beer with his friends, but not tonight. There was beer at home, and he didn't want to hear any talk about a crazy man called Moses. All he could see from it was trouble, and that he didn't want. He had tasted Foreman's lash, and once was enough. He was young then and didn't accept directives as easily as he did now.

When he got to his apartment building, he went to the building's side and climbed a ladder to the roof. From there, he could see ladders poking up everywhere. Each was an entry to someone's apartment. Walking around them, he came to his own home. Mounting the ladder through his roof, he descended inside. These quarters were built for slaves, and borrowing an idea from Turkish builders, no expensive doors were provided. Rather, a single rooftop exit was provided for the inhabitants and the cooking smoke that came up from an open fire. Inside, he looked around a room of about 400 square feet. One wall was lined with bunks for himself and wife and children. Since his children were grown, those extra beds were piled with other stuff. A shelf lined another side for cooking utensils. High along the opposite wall was a wooden slab to which were bored pegs that held anything that could be bagged. The interior was dark, and Saul needed a minute for his eyes to open. Oil wicks and the cooking fire in the apartment's center cast feeble lights, and no windows afforded sunlight.

Of course, Foreman and other higher officials had bigger homes, but Saul was not dissatisfied. To be free and have more was the natural setting of Foreman's life. As a slave his home was pinched, but it was a home. Pharaoh provided them like army barracks to his slaves, and consequently, Saul's home was no different from those of his neighbors. They were all passed down through the generations. Saul got his from his father who, in turn, got it from his father. That was the way things were.

When he descended, he could smell the evening meal. As a lentil and bean soup, it wasn't much different from others Devorah cooked. Meat wasn't a part of their diet. Pharaoh's rations were what the surrounding farms produced, and cattle weren't raised for food. Oxen were for labor, pulling plows and such. Sheep were good for milk and wool. So, slave food came from the harvests of farmers and sold to Pharaoh's supply officers. But, when prepared well as Devorah had been doing for years, it was still satisfying after a hard day's work.

Saul was not a loud man. In fact, he generally spoke little. But, over the years, Devorah had learned to recognize when something was on her husband's mind. Tonight, was one of those occasions. She also knew a direct approach was needed to coax troublesome thoughts out of Saul.

"What's on your mind, Saul?"

Saul was slow to respond, but finally, after mulling his thoughts he replied, "It ain't nothing much, but maybe it could be."

"Well, don't waste time. What could be?"

"Hopefully, it's just a rumor, but the boys was talking about a guy named Moses."

"Who? I don't believe I know that name."

"I didn't neither, but the gist of it all is that he's come to Pharaoh and demanding we be freed."

Laughing, Devorah snorted, "Who's we?" The idea of being free was the funniest joke she had heard in some time.

"Us, You, me. Anyone who's a Hebrew slave. He says we shouldn't be worked the way we are with no choice in anything."

Seeing Saul's seriousness, she said hopefully, "It's just a rumor though."

"I hope. But, if it ain't, then we're in trouble. It ain't for nothing that Foreman's got his whip, and he'll use it if need be."

Now, Devorah was beginning to become troubled, but still, she offered more hope.

“Saul, you’ve known Foreman since his paw was in charge, and he ain’t never had no problems with you. You always produce good bricks. The best he says.”

“I know what you’re thinking, but that ain’t the point. He’s just the final messenger delivering what his bosses says, and you know, they don’t know me from Adam. We’re all just slaves, and if one gets out of line, we’re all out of line far as they’re concerned. So, if one gets whipped, we all get whipped.”

“Has Foreman said anything?”

“Nope, not yet. He won’t say nothing anyway until he’s told to. So, hopefully, he don’t know nothing ‘cause if he don’t, then no one does.”

“Let’s hope.”

Saul then smiled and said, “My dear, enough. I’ve said my piece, and let’s let it be. What we got for dinner?”

Devorah smiled in turn and replied, “My dear, enough indeed. About dinner, same’s as yesterday.”