

PASSOVER: 3139

Nicholas Gordon

Copyright © 2008 by Nicholas Gordon

This story may be used free for any personal or non-commercial purpose. For commercial use of this story, please contact the author at webmaster@poemsforfree.com.

PASSOVER: 3139

"Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands," the priests sang from the top of the temple wall. "They that make them are like unto them; so is everyone who trusteth in them."

"Fanatics!" David muttered angrily to anyone who cared to hear. "Only my god is real!"

The crowd outside the temple was jammed so tightly around him he could barely hold the lamb as it struggled against his chest.

"You come here to make trouble?" a burly old man jammed up against his thigh snarled.

"I came here for the same reason you did," David snarled back, lifting the lamb slightly off his chest. "At least we get one square meal out of it."

"Then be grateful for what you're getting and shut your trap!" the old man said.

"You believe they just happened to find this old scroll in the temple wall?" David went on. "You believe that crap? So because a thousand years ago some Jews were supposedly led out of Egypt, we all have to come to the temple and sacrifice a lamb to Yahweh in memory of what we've forgotten for hundreds of years?"

"I believe in the Lord!" the old man said.

"Well, I believe King Josiah wants to invade the Kingdom of Israel. So he writes a scroll that will make us gung-ho to fight for him."

"Some of us would like to hear what the priests are singing," a deep voice behind him intoned.

David, pugnacious as ever, turned around as far as the crowd would permit and glared behind him. But he couldn't find anyone to challenge in the sea of faces, so he turned back to the old man beside him.

"Kings don't give out lambs for nothing," he said.

"King Josiah is a pious and generous man," the old man answered.

"He's a bloodthirsty murderer!" David shot back. "I can tell you. My wife gave birth to our son Ephraim at forty-three. Forty-three! And you know how?"

"You lay with her," the old man said.

"I went to the priest at the shrine of Asherah in Beth-el, and I sacrificed my prize pigeon to the goddess."

"Pigeon!" the old man scoffed.

"You laugh, but I'm a poor man, and that was the most valuable thing I owned. So I came back from the shrine and diddled my wife then and there, and nine months later, guess what?"

"May the Lord strike you down!" the old man shouted, and as far as he was able turned his body away.

David made a show of looking up in all directions at the sky. "Guess he's asleep," he said. "Or busy with the big shots. Like King Josiah. The bastard! You know what he did to the priest who helped get me my boy?"

"Shhh!" a man in front of David hissed, turning partially around. "You committing suicide, or what?"

David laughed. "He executed him, and all the other priests like him, and burned their bones! And then he dug up the bones of all the priests of Baal and Asherah who had already died and burned their bones, too! The maniac!"

"Keep it to yourself, won't you?" the man in front complained.

"Go blow it out your rear end!" David answered, staring at the man until he turned away.

"I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving," the priests sang, "and will call upon the name of the Lord."

"I'm with you!" a short, bald-headed little man whispered as he pressed as close to David as he could, which was still three people away. "This feast of Passover is all to make it look like the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel were once one, so King Josiah will have an excuse to unite them."

"Nice excuse for an invasion, if you ask me!" David answered loudly.

Suddenly a roar went up as the temple doors opened and the crowd began to surge through. They were the third and last group to be let in, and everyone was anxious not to be left behind.

The lamb pressed to David's chest gave a desperate little wriggle, forcing David to snuggle it more tightly.

"There, there," he crooned to it as the crowd around him moved slowly forward. "You're going to taste just fine."

David could never have afforded a lamb or he would have offered it to Asherah two years earlier. But King Josiah had given each worshiper a year-old lamb, 30,000 in all, each one supposedly the first-born male of its ewe.

The bastard! was all David could think. Here in his whole life he could never have afforded even one lamb, and the king could just give away 30,000 of the best of them. And who paid taxes to whom?

The priests were still singing, but no one could hear them. Instead there was a roar of curses and shouts and some serious pushing and shoving.

A few lambs escaped their owners and began running through the thick forest of legs, butting their heads and squeezing their little bodies through the thick, swaying thickets of hairy flesh.

David and his lamb were borne towards the massive gate and through the doors, across the Courtyard of the People and through another set of doors into the enormous Courtyard of the Jews.

There in front of him was a large altar, about thirty feet long and fifteen feet high, with a fire burning within it and thick smoke ascending to the sky.

Behind the altar was the entrance to the Sacred Chamber, where only priests could go, and on either side of the courtyard were rows of priests ready to assist the worshipers in slaughtering their lambs,

holding vessels in which to catch the blood and bear it to the altar in the Sacred Chamber.

David waited his turn as the priest recited, "Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God! The Lord is One!" repeatedly as each worshiper slit the throat of his lamb with the knife provided and angled the writhing body so that the blood poured neatly into the golden vessel.

The Lord is One, David thought. He had heard it before, of course, recited by worshipers of Yahweh, but, hearing it now again and again from all sides of the courtyard, like the sound of blood in his ears, he began to wonder what it meant.

Asherah was not one. Asherah was one of many. Some said she was Yahweh's wife, but that was impossible if Yahweh was one. Or, rather, One. The One. But why did there have to be just One?

Then it was David's turn. The priest handed him the knife and held the lamb with its throat extended.

"Hear, O Israel!" he said, waiting for David to repeat after him.

"Hear, O Israel!" David repeated.

"The Lord, our God! The Lord is One!"

"The Lord our God!" David repeated. "The Lord is One!"

The priest nodded, and David slit the lamb's throat with the sharp knife, twisting the lamb over and holding its spasmodic body as the blood flowed like a red waterfall into the waiting vessel.

As the lamb slowly drained, David also drained, as though merely repeating the words had filled him to overflowing.

The Lord is One. The truth of it struck him like a sunrise. There might or might not be other gods, but there had to be only one One. And if that were so, then that One was the one to be worshiped.

That was the only way existence could make sense. Before one there had to be One, after one there had to be One, within one there had to be One. That much, at least, of all the mysteries of life, was clear.

Numbly, he gave up his carcass to be skinned at the center of the courtyard, the entrails and fat to be cut out and thrown into the gigantic fire shooting up from the altar, the lamb, wrapped once again in its own skin, then handed back to him to be roasted for the evening meal.

Numbly, he flowed into the river that was exiting through a side gate, barely aware of where he was going, barely aware of the bloody, woolly weight in his arms.

The Lord is One. It was so simple, like a single note struck in silence. And David vibrated to that note like a sympathetic string, feeling all of its profound beauty as he staggered down from the Temple Mount towards the tent pitched among thousands of others in an open field, where his wife and son awaited him.