

THE
CURSE 
OF GOD'S
TREASURE



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The Curse of God's Treasure

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ISBN **9781483508009**

**To my wife Ilana the driving force behind this novel,
and my two beautiful granddaughters Gillian and Hannah.**

Yossi Melman, journalist, commentator and author of many books about the shadowy world of Israeli Intelligence, thank you very much for your help.

Jackie Ernst, thank you for helping with the editing and for your valuable ideas .

Last but not least my co-writer, lovely Einat, without whom this book would have never seen light of day .

..We were the very first that revolted, and we are the last to fight against them; and I cannot but esteem it as a favor that God has granted us that it is still in our power to die bravely, and in a state of freedom.

Elazar Ben Yair's speech

Masada Fortress, April 16th, 73 AD

Chapter One

Evening of Passover

The Holy Temple of Jerusalem

Roman Province of Judea

April 11th, 70AD

Midnight

Guarding the Temple of Solomon was the most important of jobs. The men posted to each of the thirteen gates understood that this was more than a monument, more than a symbol. It was the holiest place on earth; the place where God spoke to man.

Yet on that moonless night, as they paced in the harsh glow of torches, their minds wandered to other things. They thought of what any man would think of when the tedium of his job crept over him: his family, his woman, his next meal, and perhaps that small sound from the deep darkness beyond the torchlight across the court...

Elazar Ben Yair stood hidden by the night. Fifty yards from him, by the southwest gate to the Holy Temple, named the Upper Gate, stood two guards under the flickering torches, leaning against their spears. Behind him lay the city of Jerusalem under a veil of almost complete darkness. Only a few lights dotted the blackness. Kneeling in silence beside him waited one hundred of his Sicarii warriors. The giant 6'6" bear-like man checked his weapons. He carried only two: a Roman Gladius, a short sword, and a short, curved, and very sharp dagger, the Sicae.

Elazar Ben Yair started his run towards the guards. He immediately noticed that the sound of his sandals smacking the cobblestones startled the men. Bodies braced, they both closed ranks, raising shields and tilting spears in his direction.

As he erupted out of the darkness and into the pool of light produced by the two torches hanging above the gate, he heard one of the soldiers scream in horror, "Suriel." A grim smile flashed on his face. It was the Aramaic name for the Angel of Death. Elazar Ben Yair leaped into the air in a perfect somersault a few feet from the guards' spears, landing behind them with the grace of a panther on the prowl, legs bent, body leaning slightly forward and palms resting on the ground. A tense and eerie silence followed.

Rising, his back to the guards and his Gladius in hand, the attacker plunged it rearward, with a forceful thrust, into the back of the right guard. An anguished scream tore the silence of the night.

The attacker brought the left guard to his knees with a vicious kick. He drew the Sicae and grabbed the kneeling soldier's helmet, pulled it up to expose his throat. A violent spasm followed the quick slit, and the body fell with a thump. With a sharp inhalation, he turned his gaze to the open gate of the holy temple. He whistled and a long line of Sicarii warriors began pouring in.

The Second Temple of Jerusalem had taken 10,000 masons eight years to renovate. Ten of the thirteen giant gates, adorned with gold and silver, studded the thick, high walls. Inside, 160 marble pillars, each 36 feet high, held up a roof of polished cedar trees. Both Jews and Gentiles could enter the Outer Court, but only the former were allowed into the inner court. It was from there that Elazar Ben Yair directed the carnage and plunder.

A seemingly endless line of beasts of burden shortened gradually as one by one they were loaded with crates from the temple's vaults. The operation continued for seven days and nights. Left behind were only a few tons of precious metals and a huge Menorah, a ceremonial seven-branched candelabrum. After the last of the animals had been

used, the giant warrior called on one of his men to release the high priest. The priest entered the inner court, squinting and shielding his face from the bright morning sun. The holy man cringed and looked away from the sight of animal excrement and filth that covered the marble floor of the holy place. He cowered for a moment when he noticed the raiders with their black Galabiyas drenched in blood. Elazar watched the holy man's reactions with a grim smile. The high priest took a deep breath and marched defiantly over to the Sicarii leader.

“Elazar Ben Yair, you are a filthy murderer. May the wrath of God bring death and destruction upon you, your household, your men, and anyone who had or shall ever have a hand in this sacrilege. May your seed be vanquished from the face of the earth. Amen.”

The harsh words did not faze Elazar Ben Yair but what did catch his attention was the gleam of the Hoshen Stones upon the priest's chest. *What an oversight!* The priest was wearing the Breastplate of Judgment. The stones represented the twelve tribes of Israel and had been worn by each high priest for the last 1500 years since Aaron, the brother of Moses, the first high priest. It was the symbol of unchallenged religious authority.

Elazar stared into the priest's eyes. “Where is the Ark of the Covenant?” he coolly asked.

“I would rather die than tell you,” the priest replied, his body calm but his eyes seething with animosity.

“Then die.” The Sicarii's huge hand drew the dagger from his belt and with a swift move slashed the priest's throat. The priest clutched at his neck in a pathetic attempt to stop the bleeding. He opened his mouth to speak, then dropped dead on the ground. Elazar bent over and wiped his blade on the priest's robe.

He brought his face close to the priest's face and said in a low voice, "I was the one to bestow this post upon you and you repaid me by calling on the Romans to aid you against me. Phennias, this is the fate of all who deceive God, the land of Israel, and me."

Elazar yanked the breastplate, tearing the golden chain from the priest's neck. With a quick step, he jumped onto his horse and prodded it into a gallop. His stallion's hooves pounded on the marble floor, echoes bouncing off the temple's walls.

It was only when Elazar reached the top of Mount Scopus that he halted and looked back. A menacing cloud of dust rose out of the southwest, sunrays bouncing off the shields of the Legions of Rome. Titus, the son of Caesar Vespasian, was advancing from Egypt to lay siege to the holy city of Jerusalem. Elazar was comforted by the thought that the treasure would someday fund a third temple at the site that King David himself had once chosen - the location of the First and Second Temples, the holiest place on earth. One day, when the people of Israel reaffirmed their faith in the one true God, the temple would rise again. Purity would grow from destruction. It was better this way. Turning his back on the city, Elazar Ben Yair rode into the Judean desert.

Chapter Two

East Jerusalem

Six-Day War

June, 1967

The deafening explosion tore the 10x10 foot Iron Gate off its hinges. For a short moment, the two wide iron sheets flapped in the air like the wings of a monstrous prehistoric pterosaur, but then they came crashing down, kicking up a huge cloud of dust and debris.

Menachem Ben Yair had strategically placed the four satchel charges responsible for the remarkable blast at the huge Iron Gate before running like hell for cover toward Elazar Ben Yair, who was backing up.

“Nice job, Menachem.” Elazar affectionately slapped his short but stout second cousin on the back as he was catching his breath, almost toppling him down.

Elazar Ben Yair knew from the aerial photos there was a trench that had been dug by the Jordanian Legionnaires halfway between the gate and the Government House up ahead. Known in Hebrew as 'Armon Hanatziv,' the massive, upside down U-shaped structure had been constructed of Jerusalem stone and built to house the British High Commissioner in 1931. It was situated on top of Jabal Mukhabar, loosely translated to ‘mountain of bad advice.’

From the way events had shaped up it seemed like someone on Elazar’s side had advised quite badly. His recon unit had been ordered to occupy the Government House but apparently had gotten lost on its way to the mountain. Now he was left with a mere five soldiers to complete the mission.

“Follow me!”

Elazar Ben Yair could barely hear his own voice as he ran right into the dense dust cloud and through the now wide-open entrance. His five men followed, their Uzi submachine guns held tight to their shoulders, spewing deadly fire at the trench. His ears had yet to stop ringing so the bullets whizzed by him on mute. He ran unafraid through the dust cloud as fast as he could toward the trench. *It should be close now. God is my shield.*

The crescent-like trench appeared ten yards ahead just as he broke out of the dust like a demon, covered in black, firing his Uzi. A head wrapped in the red and white Kafiya of the Jordanian Legionnaires popped up directly across from him above the trench, lingering for a second too long. A barrage of bullets exploded face and brain into blood and bone.

Elazar jumped into the trench, landing on top of the headless Legionnaire. He quickly regained his balance and walked purposefully into the curve of the trench. His focus was so intense that his field of vision became one and the same with his Uzi's wide forward sight.

"Grenade!" he heard one of his soldiers shout. He was thankful for the timing of his restored hearing. Instinctively he pivoted and threw his body down, bracing for the explosion and consequent shrapnel due to penetrate his boots. But neither came. *God is my shield.*

"Hold your fire! Hold your fire!" Menacham called out. The men realized they had cleared the trench. Now, to the House.

The entire first floor was empty. The remaining Legionnaires had apparently fled. Elazar entered a large office on the second floor with a small and shiny copper sign on the door that read 'Odd Bull,' the name of the UN's commanding officer. He scanned the room and his eyes landed on a familiar object. Surprised for a second, a wide, white grin slowly appeared through the muck on his face.

It is God's plan. Time to bring back His glory and the glory of Judea.

On the counter behind the desk under the wide window was a small glass case. Inside, displayed on green velvet cloth was what to the typical eye looked to be a rusty dagger. But Elazar knew very well its significance — the dagger had been the weapon of choice of his ancestors, the Sicarii. He walked slowly toward it until the inscription on the wooden base of the case became legible.

To my friend, General Odd Bull, for the great help you offered during my endeavor into "The Treasures of the Copper Scrolls." Prof. John Marco Allegro.

Standing before the rusty dagger, with the glistening dome of the Al Aqsa mosque shining through the wide window behind him, filled Elazar with an uncountable wave of emotions. The hated mosque desecrated the grounds where the sacred Temple on Mount Moriah had once stood. The tough, fearless warrior fell to his knees reciting ancient words, "May it be thy will that the temple be rebuilt in our days."

The sounds of war around him silenced. As his mind cleared, Elazar's heart filled with yearning for a place lost two millennia ago. In his mind's eye, he could see his father. He remembered a day, many years ago, when the two of them stood at the foot of a hill. The Arabs called it Khirbet Mird. They got off their horses by the man-sized entrance carved into the rock. It was then that Elazar realized he was standing at the entrance to the tunnel his father had told him so much about. He was standing at the epicenter of Sicarii history. The place where the man from Masada had buried God's treasure. A short tremble moved through his body.

"Elazar Ben Yair," his father had said, "today you are thirteen, and you have reached manhood. From now on you will carry the responsibility of keeping the secret of this place in your heart."

His father reached into his belt, withdrew their ancestral weapon, the Sicae, and handed it to him. It was early morning, and a ray snuck into the narrow canyon, reflecting off the dagger and into his eyes. Elazar raised his hand as a shield from the bright light.

He brought it close and read the ancient words engraved on the blade, "Vale Achor, the door of hope."

"This, son, is our door of hope. From now on and until the end of days, God is your shield. You shall fear nothing but God. When that time comes, you will know. God will send you a sign. When that time comes Elazar, nothing, but nothing may stand in the way of raising the state of Judea and the rebuilding of the third temple. Anyone who will hinder our goal will perish by our hands. The way it was then, before the traitors brought destruction upon us and upon the sacred temple."

"Are you fine Elazar?" he heard the voice of Menachem behind him. "What are you doing on your knees?"

"Come Menachem, kneel beside me, and join me in a prayer. God sent us the sign we have waited for so long. The eternal city is back in Israel's hands. It is time to prepare for raising the state of Judea. Oh God, you are the God of our armies," he roared in his deep voice.

"Oh God, you are the god of our armies," he heard Menachem repeating after him.

Two days later, when Elazar's brigade had been given the order to attack the ancient city of Hebron, he became sure that God was trying to tell him something. He ignored the orders to reconnoiter the road to the city. Instead, he headed directly to where he knew God's Treasure had been buried, Khirbert Mird, a two-and-a-half hour ride southeast of Jerusalem. He wanted to see what his ancestors had kept secret for two thousand years. He wanted to be the one to bring back the glory of God.

As the two recon Jeeps circled the base of the 600 foot cone-shaped hill, they came upon a partially hidden, extremely narrow canyon. A sudden breeze lifted the early morning fog that hung over the Judean desert, revealing the entry to the canyon. For a moment, he felt his father's presence. Thirty-four years had passed since they had ridden into the canyon together.

Beginning with the seven survivors of the mass suicide at Masada in 73 AD, the secret location of God's Treasure had been passed down from father to son in the Ben Yair lineage and had continued henceforth for two thousand years. Elazar Ben Yair's father had passed it down to him and he would do the same with his son. He and his wife were expecting their first child any day now. The boy's name had already been chosen: Yehoshafat. It meant God's Judgment.

The two Jeeps rolled slowly into the narrow canyon bordered on each side by tall cliffs. Minutes later, Elazar noticed a small ramp on the right leading to the rectangular hole carved into the cliff's face. He raised his fist to signal a stop. He held the transmitter's mouthpiece and clicked it twice. "This is hamesh aleph, hamesh aleph." *Five A, Five A.* "This is Elazar. Do you hear?"

"Hamesh-hamesh," was the immediate response. *Five over five.*

"This is Elazar...I found it."

The American spy ship Liberty was floating on the calm waters of the Mediterranean Sea about one hundred and fifty miles to the southwest of Hyrcania. Lieutenant Commanders James Young and Herbert Gross, lifelong friends, were busy calibrating the listening equipment. The ship's sensitive devices had picked the transmission and the response to Elazar's message.

"Can you translate, Herb?"

"Five A is the code name for a Brigade recon unit. The man, Elazar, indicated he found something."

Lt. Commander Young adjusted his headphones. "Any significance to the area?"

Lt. Commander Gross checked the coordinates and made a note of the name 'Khirbet Mird' in the logbook. "Some ancient ruins."

"Okay then, let's relay the location of transmission to the flagship."

In the Upper Galilee, about 95 miles north of Elazar Ben Yair's location, stood one of Israel's tallest mountains, Mount Meron. Intelligence Officer Asael Bar Giora monitored a listening station situated on top of the mountain. He had received Elazar's transmission. He picked up the Liberty's message to the sixth fleet and became alarmed.

"Five A, Five A. Elazar, do you hear?"

"Five over five."

"Wait for a transmission in code."

"Listening."

Elazar's radioman pulled a paper scroll from his pouch and searched.

"Yoram, what is it?" Elazar asked impatiently.

"I need to decode it." He scribbled down a few words. "An American spy ship off the El Arish coast picked up our transmission."

Elazar frowned. "Transmit as follows: Destroy."

"Elazar, is that really necessary?" asked Menachem. "The spy ship already sent a message to the fleet."

"At sixth fleet, it will be buried as another piece of useless intelligence but on that spy ship, the staff in the communications room could pose a major problem. Maybe in the future an incident triggers a memory of the transmission. They decide to investigate. We can't take that chance. Yoram," he ordered, "transmit, now!"

Up on Mount Meron, Bar Giora picked up the red phone after having received his orders from Elazar. A voice on the other side demanded, "Report!"

"Sir, our station has picked up an Egyptian destroyer, the El Quseir, on station to the northwest of El Arish. They're getting ready to shell our forces in that area," Bar Giora blatantly misinformed the operation's officer.

"Nice work," commented the officer. "Send the coordinates. I'll notify the Air Force."

At Khirbet Mird, Elazar and Menachem left four men to stand guard at the entrance to the tunnel and began descending stairs that had been carved into the stone two thousand years before. It quickly became difficult to breathe. At about 350 feet below ground they reached a small cavern. The beams of their flashlights illuminated a small mound in the center.

Elazar walked around the cavern. He came to a faded red painting on one side of the wall depicting a partial circle and a drawing of two men riding a horse.

"I know that symbol," Menachem said. "It's a Templar Seal. Not a good sign. If those grave robbers have already been here..." He turned to Elazar, who had already started furiously digging through the mound.

Suddenly, a burst of light washed over the men in a rainbow of colors. They stood in silent awe as one of the most sacred items of the Jewish people became visible. The Hoshen Stones. Through these stones God had communicated his wishes to the people of Israel. The breastplate lay on a Templar shield and beneath it was a skeleton dressed in what appeared to be the remnants of a Sicarii Galabiya.

When he found his voice, Menachem said, "Let's find the iron door. I would like see what we have kept secret for so long."

"Come quickly!" shouted one of Elazar's soldiers from the entrance, his voice echoing off the cavern walls. "The brigade is making its way to Wadi Dragot! The Commander is looking for our team on the radio. We need to move out now!"

"Quickly, Menachem, take the breastplate and cover the grave," ordered Elazar in a rushed voice. "We need to move as fast as we can. We'll come back when the time is right. If there's an investigation, I will handle it with the brigade commander. We were in Unit 101 together. You and the others must claim you acted on my orders."

On the Liberty, Lt. Commander Gross turned to Lt. Commander Young. "I'm going out for a quick stretch. Want something? Coffee? Bagel?"

"What is it with you and bagels?" teased Young with a tired smile.

Gross stepped out from the communications room into the morning light, blinking as his eyes adjusted. He looked up at a jet flying overhead. An Israeli Air Force Ouragan, a French-made attack aircraft, was screeching above, flying very low and waving its wings. Gross raised his hands and waved back. The jet turned and dove towards the ship. Before he could try to make sense of it, a rocket hit the communications room, throwing him backwards violently.

He landed hard on the deck, realized he was still alive and pulled himself up, shaking his head. Aerial canon fire erupted around him as he ran into the blazing communications room. Young was slumped over the console coughing up blood. Gross grabbed him and pulled him out to the deck. He gently placed his comrade's head on his lap.

"Hold on, James. Please..."

Young opened his mouth to speak. Gross moved his ear closer to hear what he immediately realized would be his friend's last words. "My wife and son, take..."

"Corpsman, Corpsman..." Gross felt helpless. He looked around. Only then did he fully realize the carnage surrounding him. Men lay wounded or dead, others desperately trying to put the fires out. He looked back at Young, at his burned and bloody face, and in his beloved friend's lifeless eyes he saw the reflection of the Israeli jets above.

