

Excerpts from the *Chronicles of Zarek*

The lands are in chaos. City-states ruled by merciless men war as much with one another as with those in neighboring countries. Soon we must settle our differences and stand united as word reaches us that the vast armies of Pharaoh Merneptah gather on our southern borders. I travel the dusty roads and barren wastes gathering what information I am able for my master. My father is a well respected merchant in the town of Casiphia and was able to secure me a position as a scribe in our lord's court. Years of scratching away on clay tablets gave me a greater appreciation for the messengers coming and going between the cities. I soon found maps and old descriptions of the land all around us and came to understand more of how the earth was tilled and the animals brought together to feed an ever growing population of tribesmen.

Years ago, other travelers brought news of the outside world and one nation in particular grew in power as did our fledgling nation. The land of Egypt is mostly an arid wasteland except for the lands surrounding the great river that runs north to the sea. The Babylonians and the Egyptians, destined to be rivals, both struggled to tame the wilderness around them. The people started to gather together in both of these nations as they found themselves more likely to survive if they stayed together. The Egyptians settled down first into small communities raising their herds of goats to provide meat, milk and skins to keep them from going back to their nomadic ways. Populations grew as time moved forward and soon the first of the Egyptian villages became large enough to be called a "city." Tahpanhes was more than just a few buildings placed around one of the larger watering-holes, it was also one of the first cities to store food for hard times to come. Grain was not always plentiful and with Tahpanhes came the ability to feed a larger population.

It was chronicled in secret that Babylon struck first, though the Egyptians had no proof. Vast stores of food were carried off or destroyed. Thousands of villagers or "followers" as they are referenced to because of their beliefs in the false gods died that year as did many more the following year due to a strange spoiling of several of their wells. Eventually they recovered, but it took several years.

I remember my first trip away from my home. My lord wanted me to see firsthand this new tower in a distant city of Babel. Truly the gods Merodach and Nebo are impressed that their followers built such a grand tower that the upper levels became lost to view as they

disappeared into the clouds. Many learned men from across the land came to Babel to see this wondrous tower and seek to learn more about the divine ones. The people were inspired to work longer and harder than ever before so the cities prospered. I also learned that the Egyptians started collecting vast herds of cattle and moved them from the plains down to the river's edge when the feed became scarce. I have heard that most of the cattle goes into feeding their armies and that both the cattle and the soldiers stretch as far as the eyes can see across the landscape. I shudder to think what would happen if the pharaoh turns his eyes to us thinking us easy prey.

Pharaoh Merneptah sent several advisors to some of the Babylonian border city-states protesting the capture and enslavement of hundreds of their followers. The local lords responded by claiming the villagers had settled on their land and refused to move back into the south. Some of the lords tried to convert the Egyptian followers into seeing how Anubis and the rest of their false gods paled in comparison to Merodach, but after much distress, the lords found it simply easier to work them twice as long and as hard as their own people. Then the Egyptian War Chariots were invented. I saw some of them myself during one of my visits to the border regions following some brief skirmishes over land disputes. The chariots were large, capable of carrying several warriors and some even had four horses. They were an amazing sight to behold. Soon the Egyptians had taken some of our own people as slaves. It seems as if war is inevitable.

Several months ago, the Egyptians finally crossed into our lands in force. Their cavalry and war chariots thundered across the plains to where some of their own slaves and some Babylonian followers were building a temple to Nebo. The overseers were trapped and would surely die unless drastic measures were taken. They force marched the Egyptian slaves directly into the path of the advancing armies to much success. The Egyptians chariots were stopped, but only after they slaughtered their own people and several hundred Babylonian workers as well. The raids continued, but luckily, the people of Ahava were able to get enough fortifications erected to offer some defense to those working the land around the city. Word has reached us that even with our success in Ahava, the Egyptians expanded the village of Zoan into another center for learning. We must increase our efforts if we are to keep pace with the industrious pharaoh and his people.

The death toll was brutal. Hundreds of people died as they unknowingly drank from the poisoned oasis near the Egyptian border. Only an enemy of the utmost cruelty and malice in their heart would taint the only water supply for fifty leagues in any direction. It would take a long time before the people of the Babylonian nation would feel safe enough to travel through that desolate stretch of desert again. Time, as it always does, moved forward and those who

were forced to scratch out a meager living in the desert moved closer to the larger cities and eventually lent their strength in building fortresses strong enough to push back the Egyptians. I hope they can be completed in time.

Pharaoh Merneptah was not idle. Word reached us that with the aid of thousands of slaves and as many of his own craftsmen he raised a great fortress from the desert sands. Alexandria turned out to be another place those seeking knowledge of the world and the deities of the heavens gathered. The city was rumored to be made in such a way that even a lowly villager could throw stones down upon the heads of an attacking army and have no fear of retaliation. With the Egyptian's growth remaining unchecked, they would soon own all of the lands north and east of the Nile. My lord fears the worst as the other Babylonian city-states refuse to fight together and look only for the protection of their precious patch of earth.

Food has become scarce as the Egyptian raids continue. We barely have enough to feed the villagers much less a standing army large enough to beat back the enemy. More of our people die as the enemy destroys our crops and slaughters what livestock we have. My lord has sent scouts into the mountains and the lower valleys looking for herds of cattle or goats, but there are none to be found. His personal bodyguard was disbanded and sent to find sustenance. The days grow darker with fear and apprehension as news continues to come to us that Merneptah continues his conquest. Scouts have returned with news that the priests of Anubis have taken to the field of battle. They wear the masks of the jackal in adoration of their god of the underworld. Men say they can bring a wounded soldier back from the brink of death only to be thrown again into the battle only days later. Let them keep their secrets. Any man will fall with enough arrows put into him and no amount of medicine or trickery will make him stand again.

Rebellion has struck the Babylonian kings. News came to us yesterday that King Nebuchadnezzar was dragged from his throne room and slaughtered in the streets by angry followers. I fear there will be more dissention before the end of the season. I pray our people can still come together, but my prayers seem to fall on deaf ears. As our people struggle to keep from being slaughtered, Merneptah's wealth and power seem to have no end. He has moved the bodies of his ancestors and placed them in a secret valley to prevent our spies from making off with their buried wealth. This Valley of the Kings will be impossible to find in time to make a difference to funding our defenses. As long as the valley is protected, I doubt any of the Egyptians will discredit their gods and see the true path offered by ours.

Our priests have started to leave in droves. Those who chose to serve Merodach and Succoth Benoth have left the cities and taken to the wilderness. It is rumored they have secret hiding places among the mountains. They go to protect the knowledge and ways of our gods,

but they seek only to save their own lives at the expense of the rest of their followers. Even though more of our people gather together, our spirit seems to be at the breaking point and unless by some miracle we can gather enough strength to resist, I fear we will become but a vassal state to Egypt. I will surely fight until I have taken my last breath. Pharaoh Merneptah is emboldened by our inability to stop him on any front and has destroyed more herds and orchards across the land. There will be little left to eat for winter.

Dawn breaks with good news. A new temple to Marduk was finally completed without further mishap. Already we have begun sending our finest officers to train within its walls to better learn the ways of war. Even as I rejoice our small victory, I curse the vile Egyptians as more followers die from tainted water near Babylon. Never have our enemies come this far into our lands to wreak such havoc. A newly formed unit of composite bowmen had to be dispersed as there was not enough food to send them afield. We shall keep their weapons close in the event we can gather enough food for an offensive strike into the enemy's homeland.

Finally the news came. Our worst fears have come to fruition as undeniable reports place Pharaoh Merneptah at the head of a large army heading into our heartland. It is said that no matter how distraught his followers may become, they will never leave him. By the power of his voice alone he is able to bring them back from the edge of despair and make them whole once again. He has brought spies with him as well. We caught one of them trying to steal one of our holy artifacts, but he managed to escape before we could get any information from him. We have put fortifications up along the banks of the Tigris, but trying to stop a lone spy from entering our lands will be an all but impossible task. We have doubled the guard here in the city and have sent word to the other city-states to do the same. Hopefully we can prevent Merneptah from crushing our spirit any further.

Our spies report that the Egyptians have found several large expanses of grasslands away from the main path of the Nile. These meadows will surely give the pharaoh yet another advantage in supplying his vast armies with enough food to continue his campaign. If only we could find a way to burn the fields and force the enemy into a retreat. We were able to appropriate enough grain this month to raise an army of sickle swordsmen. These warriors are especially adept at disarming their opponents. Officer Nebushasban has been tasked with training the new unit and keeping these raw recruits alive long enough to make a difference against the every growing Egyptian horde.

The people rejoice as they have not done in years. The walls of Babylon have finally been raised. The capital will surely draw people in from across the nation. The celebration was short lived as they carried his body through the gates upon his own battered shield. Nebushasban fell prey to the blade of an assassin only two days after his new training assignment. Luckily, our swordsmen did not scatter to the winds upon learning of their new commander's death. Death is an intimate part of war as any good general knows. Hopefully, more masons and artisans will come and assist in rebuilding that which has been destroyed and raise new fortifications for the war.

Our scouts have discovered new grazing lands on the plains of Dura. Several flocks of animals have been captured and should provide food for several armies. We just need to protect our water sources as another major well was tainted near our eastern border. City leaders are calling for cisterns to be built to keep the people safe, but they take time to build and our resources are running thin. We managed to capture some of the Egyptian war chariots as a new group of them were being brought from Alexandria. We were able to use their design and make chariots of our own. Though ours are not as durable, they are faster and should give us the advantage on the field of battle.

Every time we seem to gather our strength and gain advantage over the Egyptians, Merneptah gains the upper hand. News of his discovery of yet another hidden oasis was bad enough, but now he has sent his favorite commander into the field. Necho will surely be pharaoh some day as the people love him almost as much as Merneptah and his uncanny ability to know how to best disrupt our followers from building and planting is most disturbing. We must find a way to remove him from the field if we are to have a chance of surviving. More of our people die from famine even as our blacksmiths finally developed a new type of scale mail to help protect our chariots from the continuous onslaught of Egyptian bows and spears. Several of our most talented physicians have been brought down from the northern cities and now lend their skills to keeping our armies in the field alive.

We thought we had seen the last of their war chariots, but Merneptah somehow managed to bring the battered remains of the unit back together again with fresh recruits. We moved our cattle in from the plains as the Egyptians moved north in one huge mass of men and machines. Pharaoh Merneptah was pushing toward Babylon with most of his army in an effort to crush all resistance in one battle. Defenses were prepared in our great city, but even with our chariots, swordsmen and priests defending the walls, defeat loomed on the horizon. The morning of the attack was calm. Merneptah had moved his troops to the shadows of the walls during the night and awaited first light. No terms were offered by either side as there was nothing left of which to speak. All seemed to come to a standstill as a single horn

sounded a long wailing note which echoed across the landscape and could be heard in every corner of the fortress. The time of reckoning was upon us.

Pharaoh Merneptah led the attack with Necho close by his side. His spies were among his chariots as they looked for any weakness in our defenses. The chariots would have little effect on our walls, but with enough of them circling the fortress, our gates would eventually fall. The battle waged throughout the day. I will give credit to the brave men of the garrison as they repelled the attackers time and time again. We lost count of how many brave and selfless acts were performed by our besieged countrymen, but if Babylon was to fall, it would be paid for a hundred times over in the blood of our enemies. I was watching from the most eastern tower when he fell. An impossible spear throw by one of the men guarding the gate struck Merneptah, knocking him from his chariot. A great cheer went up from the men along the walls as we all thought the battle would end with the death of their pharaoh, but victory eluded us yet again as several of the priests of Anubis swept down upon the stricken Merneptah and carried him from the battlefield alive, but badly wounded. Babylon took heavy losses in the battle. The huge gates were weakened and several points along the walls had been damaged. We would not last another day under such duress.

The Egyptians' assault started again at first light. By midday, the main gates to the fortress buckled under the assault and were finally ripped from their massive hinges and thrown to the side as the invaders pushed forward into the fray. Our one small victory of the day came when Necho fell to our swords on the initial push beyond the walls. We were expecting more priests of Anubis to suddenly appear to save the beloved captain, but it seems they had more pressing business elsewhere. More Egyptian cavalry appeared on the horizon from what appeared the same unit we thought destroyed last month. It will not matter as the battle will be won or lost before they can get to us. We have walls behind which to hide, so we await our impending doom in the courtyard. I am not surprised when I see Pharaoh Merneptah join the fray once more. He appears to be unharmed, but I know there are herbs in the desert that can make you feel strong for a time, but will eventually wear off. If only our luck were such that he would fall again in front of his men. Too bad the jackal priests stay out of range of our swords and spears. Our chariots could reach them, but trying to send them through the bulk of Merneptah's army would be suicide.

Babylon perished in the fading light. There were a few pockets of resistance who made the long night miserable for the Egyptians as we destroyed more of the war chariots, but once again, the priests of Anubis save most of the warrior's lives and carry them from the battle. We are confident they will return to destroy more of the pharaoh's enemies. Our own physicians, who swore an oath not to willingly take the life of another, were forced to kill

several spies who had infiltrated deep into what was left of Babylon and found where they were tending to our wounded. I managed to retreat through a back gate as the armies swept through the streets. I saw a young shepherd boy leading a small herd of cattle my way apparently unaware the fortress was lost. This would have brought a smile to my face if not for the horror I had just left behind me.

Pharaoh Merneptah's followers stand in awe, gazing up at the noon sky the following day. Ever so slowly, a black disk began to block out the sun, leaving the lands below in shadow just as Merneptah had told them it would happen on the day Babylon fell. Any left who did not believe Merneptah followed the will of their gods, were cleansed of all doubt and doubled their prayers to Anubis and the other deities. Our physician and sickle swordsmen finally succumb to overwhelming attackers and are slaughtered to a man. Even as the last of us die or flee this battle, more Egyptian cavalry were sent to the smaller city of Ahava, leveling it to the ground. The reformed war chariots went back to the temple of Marduk and finished what they had started last month and left nothing save a plain of rubble. Merneptah is gifted by some of his followers with finely crafted scarabs as further testament to their belief in his abilities.

The war chariots run down more followers in the days following the fall of Babylon. The people tried to put their herds of cattle in front of the enemy as they had done in past times, but there were too many of the Egyptians this time and none of the Babylonians survived. Finally, at the bitter end of days, war chariots tore down the tower at Babel. This once significant center of learning now lay upon the sands and with its destruction, all hope for the nation of Babylon are lost. The remaining city leaders across the land bow to Merneptah and accept him as their new leader. Perhaps Babylon can rise from the ashes of this devastating defeat, but I doubt I will ever bear witness to its rebirth.