

King Solomon and the City of Luz

by Ahimaaz, Court Historian



Translated and Annotated by
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Illustrated by Steve Solomon



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Professor Solomon is the author of *How to Find Lost Objects*, *Coney Island*, *Japan in a Nutshell*, etc.

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WITH A MURMUR OF ANNOYANCE, KING SOLOMON lowered the scroll he was reading and spoke into the communication tube. “Yes, what is it?” he said.

“A priest to see you,” said Joseph, the royal librarian. “His name is Elihoreph, and he says it’s urgent.”

“I’ll be right down.”

Laying aside the scroll, Solomon climbed out of the window seat. He donned his crown and descended the spiral stairs.

On the ground floor of the Tower of Learning waited Elihoreph. A bald, corpulent man, he was pacing about and wringing his hands. Clearly distressed, he neglected to bow as Solomon came down the stairs.

“O King Solomon,” said the priest, “I beg your help.”

“I’ll do what I can. What ails you?”

“*Take me to Luz!*” cried Elihoreph. “They say you know its location. Please, I must go there. This very evening. Now!”

Solomon was silent for a moment. Then he turned to Joseph. “What is known of Luz?” he asked.

“Luz?” said Joseph, who was seated at his desk. “It is the so-called City of Immortality. The sole place on earth where the Angel of Death has no sway—where he is forbidden to enter. Thus, its inhabitants age but do not die, so long as they remain within the city. The Luzites grow old—become bent and feeble—yet live on. Eventually, however, they grow weary of such an existence. Whereupon, they go outside the walls of Luz and die.

“It is unclear why GOD created such a city. Some say that Luz is located on the hill where Jacob saw the stairway of angels, and commemorates that bridge between heaven and earth. But others say that Luz is the city where Jacob sought refuge, when fleeing Esau. Its inhabitants refused to take

him in; and as punishment, GOD cursed the Luzites with prolonged life.

“Whatever the case, Luz is notable for its dubious brand of immortality—and for a commodity. For it is our source of *tekhelet*, the blue dye used on the fringes of prayer shawls. The Luzites manufacture the dye from a rare species of snail. Reportedly, it takes 12,000 snails to produce a small bottle of tekhelet.

“The location of the city remains unknown. The word *luz* means ‘almond tree’; so perhaps it’s located amidst the almond groves of the north. But *luz* can also denote the nut-shaped bone at the base of the spine—a bone thought to be imperishable. So the name of the city may allude to the immortality—or longevity, I should say—of its inhabitants.

“And that’s about all that’s known,” concluded Joseph.

Solomon nodded and sat down on a stool. “The city is indeed named after the tree,” he said. “But not because of any groves. Rather, an almond tree—with a tunnel cut through it—serves as the city gate. As for its location, Luz is hidden away in the wilderness. But birds have flown over it; and I have chatted with those birds. So yes, Elihoreph, I know where Luz is. But why do you need to go there? What exactly is the problem?”

“My need is—”

Just then a knock sounded. Elihoreph froze and turned pale. The door to the Tower opened; and a servant entered with refreshments.

When the servant had gone, Elihoreph gave a sigh of relief. “My need is dire, Your Highness,” he said. “An hour ago I was lounging in my room, when I heard a cry of terror. ‘No, no!’ someone cried. Rushing into the corridor, I saw the Angel of Death, emerging from a room. He was bearing a soul—that of my fellow priest Jehiah. Like a sack of flour, he had it draped over his shoulder. I moved aside to let him pass. But the Angel of Death came to a halt and glared at me. He gave me the *awfulest* look—the most *menacing* look. And he said: ‘Are you not Elihoreph the priest?’

“I am,” I stammered.

“Elihoreph, son of Benjamin?”

“The same. But why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because you too are on my list for tonight. I am to collect your soul, like that of Jehiah here. But you’re supposed to be—”

“I shrieked and ran. I fled from the Angel of Death! Through the corridors of the priestly residence I plunged like a madman—like a hunted beast! I was desperate to escape. But where was I to go? Where could I hide from the Angel of Death? How was I to dodge him? Yet to dodge him I was determined. For he had come to collect a debt. A debt that I, like all men, owed unto GOD—but whose payment I wished to defer for as long as possible!

“As I ran, I was sure he was close behind. Bursting from the residence, I raced across the courtyard and into the Temple. Might not its sacred confines serve as a sanctuary? Zadok was there, lighting the candles. Breathless and terrified, I explained to him my plight. He listened with that grave expression of his. Then he pointed to the door and insisted that I leave. I would draw the Angel of Death into the Temple, he said, and bring ill fortune upon Israel.

“I turned and ran from the Temple. My heart was pounding! Racing through the courtyard gate, I headed for the upper city. In its labyrinth of lanes I would shake my pursuer—find shelter—disguise myself! Yet I knew it was hopeless. The Angel of Death was relentless. He would track me down in the most obscure corner of the city; laugh at my attempt to elude him; and take my soul. There would be no giving him the slip. I was scheduled to die, and that was that.

“But then it came to me. Luz! The one place where the Angel of Death may not enter. Luz! I could seek refuge within its charmed walls. I could ask King Solomon to take me there. So here I am—begging you, O merciful King. Save me from the Angel of Death. Take me to Luz!”

Elihoreph sank to his knees and began to sob.

Solomon walked to a window, looked out at the night sky, and pondered. The priest’s sobbing echoed in the narrow confines of the Tower.

“All right,” said Solomon at last. “I will take you to Luz. Joseph, have Benaiah provision the flying carpet. We leave at once. Elihoreph, follow me.”

Donning his cape, Solomon left the Tower and strode

through the hallways of the palace. Elihoreph stumbled along behind him. They passed through the throne room, climbed a stairway, and emerged onto the roof.

A full moon hung over the city. A gentle breeze was blowing. Flapping in the breeze was the carpet. Tethered with ropes, it hovered a foot above the roof.

“Good weather for flying,” said Solomon, trying to lighten the mood. But the priest remained grim-faced.

Joseph and Benaiah arrived, with food and water. They loaded the provisions onto the carpet. Benaiah unhitched the ropes. And everyone climbed aboard.

Solomon raised his ring and summoned the Wind. Immediately the breeze quickened—and the Wind was swirling about them.

“What can I do for you?” it asked.

“Fly us to Luz, in the Mountains of Bashan.”

“I am at your beck.”

Borne aloft like a kite, the carpet circled once over Jerusalem and headed east.

The Judean hills passed beneath them, pale in the moonlight. The four men traveled in silence. Elihoreph kept looking anxiously over his shoulder. But they were alone in the sky.

The landscape grew stark and barren. They were flying over a vast stretch of desert. The waters of the Salt Sea glimmered and were gone.

Then the Mountains of Bashan, jagged and forbidding, appeared in the distance. In their foothills was the faint glow of a city.

“Luz,” murmured Solomon.

Slouched on the portable throne, he seemed to be brooding. Beside him, Benaiah was singing softly. Joseph was sketching a map. Elihoreph was praying.

The Mountains of Bashan loomed larger. Luz could be seen distinctly now: a walled city gleaming in the night. The carpet was flying directly towards it.

And finally they were there, gliding over rooftops.

They peered down at the City of Immortality. From the air Luz seemed an ordinary place—a warren of stone houses and narrow lanes. Lamps glowed in windows. Smoke rose

from household altars. A woman waved to them from a rooftop.

The carpet passed over Luz, then circled back and landed outside the city gate. The four men disembarked and stood gazing at the gate.

Before them rose an ancient tree. It had been cut through with a tunnel and incorporated into the city wall. Via this tunnel one entered or departed Luz.

“The almond tree,” said Joseph. “What a unique entrance-way.”

“No guard, no portcullis,” said Benaiah. “Does one simply stroll right in?”

“Apparently so,” said Solomon.

“Then I shall do so!” said Elihoreph.

And he was about to rush forward, when a horse and rider emerged from the darkness.

The horse was huge, sleek, and black. Upon her sat the Angel of Death. Both seemed to glow with a spectral energy.

The Angel of Death approached them. He halted his horse in front of Elihoreph and peered down at the priest.

“You really had me puzzled, back in that corridor,” said Death. “That’s why I stared at you in such surprise. For you too were on my list for the night—*but scheduled to be picked up at the gate of Luz*. As you scampered off, I asked myself: How can this be? What’s the man doing here, in the priestly residence, when he’s due to be collected *hundreds of miles away*? It made no sense. I was puzzled, too, by the address I had been given. The gate of Luz? Apart from Luzites weary of life, no one gets collected there. What was going on? Could the listing be incorrect? Such were my thoughts, as I carried off your fellow priest and continued on my rounds.

“At the appointed time I made my way here, wondering if the matter would sort itself out. And so it has. Our premature encounter—the terror I inspired—your determination to dodge me—the pity Solomon took upon you—the swiftness of his carpet: *all conspired to your being here as scheduled*. Elihoreph, I cannot be dodged. Our rendezvous is now. Come.”

At the start of this speech, Elihoreph had stood frozen in fear. But as he listened, a look of weariness came over him.

And as the Angel of Death reached out, the priest bowed his head in submission.

The Angel of Death grasped his shoulder. Elihoreph appeared to double, like a misregistered image. Then his body slipped to the ground, as Death hoisted his soul onto the horse. And with a cry of triumph, Death galloped off into the night.

Solomon, Benaiah, and Joseph stood in stunned silence. The only sounds were the drone of crickets, and—from within the city—the faint strains of a flute.

Then Solomon spoke:

“Our lives are lent us for a space
By GOD’s benevolence and grace.
But etched indelibly in stone:
The date we must repay that loan.

“Not tearful pleas nor frantic flight
Can save us debtors from our plight.
Not even prayer avail us shall
When that moment rings its knell.

“And should we seek to outfox fate,
Avoid its reckoning on that date,
Impose our will upon events
(O most colossal impudence!)—

“Any maneuvering that we do,
All-knowing GOD *above foreknew*
And did include it in the script
That leads us duly to the crypt.

“Accept thy tenure on this earth.
Thy death was scheduled ere thy birth.”

They prayed over Elihoreph’s body. Then Benaiah fetched a shovel from the carpet and buried him.

The three men gazed at the almond tree, with its passageway into the city. It seemed to beckon them to enter.

“Shall we visit Luz?” said Benaiah. “As long as we’re here?”
“It would be interesting,” said Joseph. “And we *are* here.”

“Yes, we’re here,” said Solomon. “But we shouldn’t be. What was I thinking? Help someone to avoid the Angel of Death? It can’t be done.”

“Hey, you tried,” said Benaiah.

“I sought to prevent his death; and instead, furthered its unfolding. And who knows? Without me to fly him to Luz—without my willingness to do so—perhaps he wouldn’t have been on that list in the first place.”

“Don’t blame yourself,” said Joseph. “You felt sorry for the man and gave him a lift. That’s the whole of it.”

“In any event,” said Solomon, “we have played our role in this affair. An end to it. Come.”

He led his companions back to the carpet. Dust swirled as it lifted into the air. And they headed home from the Mountains of Bashan.*

* Death, then, cannot be dodged—not even with the aid of King Solomon. It is possible, though, to have a “near-miss.” Consider the case of Yankel:

A poor man named Yankel was trudging along the highway, a load of firewood on his back. Daily he carried such a load, eking out a living by delivering wood to peasants. But on this day he grew weary—of the heavy burden on his back and of life itself. What were his days but a treadmill of toil and want? Enough! Yankel dropped his load of wood to the ground. And in a bitter voice he cried out: “Death, come!”

Immediately, hoofbeats sounded. Around a bend in the road came a horse and rider. The Angel of Death was galloping towards him.

“You called for me?” said Death, coming to a halt beside Yankel and peering down at him coldly.

Yankel looked up at the hooded figure and began to quake. Terror overcame him—and *he changed his mind.*

“As a matter of fact, I did,” said Yankel. “You’re a strong fellow. Could you help me get this load of wood onto my back?”

The Angel of Death eyed Yankel suspiciously. He got off his horse and hoisted the wood onto Yankel’s back.

“Thanks much,” said Yankel. And with a burst of energy, he hastened off on his deliveries.