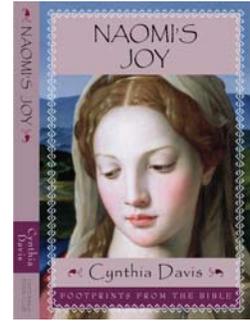


Naomi's Joy by Cynthia Davis

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Chapter 1

Every year we celebrated Passover at the foot of Sinai. The covenant with the One God was renewed by the sacred foods and ceremonies. We were exhorted to be unswerving in our obedience to the ways of *I AM*.

“By the blood of the lamb on our doors, the angel of death passed over the homes of the faithful children. You must never forget that God brought you out with a strong hand.” Moses always reminded us that the death of every firstborn son in Egypt was our ransom. “The Holy One will fulfill the promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We will have a homeland.”

Despite the yearly promise, we remained nomads in the desert. Abital, my mother, tended to our food and clothing, when she was not bearing children. My brother Isaac was two years younger than me. Leah was born when I was six and Hephzibah three years later. Mattan, our father, worked among the sheep. All of Israel herded their flocks together. The fleece was marked with a sign of ownership. Each man took a turn tending the animals. It was my duty to watch my siblings when we moved from camp to camp.

“Will we ever stop traveling and live in a house?” I was twelve when I approached my father. “It would be easier to keep Hephzibah and Leah out of trouble if we were not always traveling.”

“God will fulfill the promise,” gruffly the man responded.

“But,” my impending argument was cut short.

“Do not question the ways of the Lord. The God of Israel punishes those who rebel. The graves at Kibroth-hattaavah are proof.” My father was stern. “Remember how the fierce anger of Moses and his God sent plague along with the quail. You have seen the forbidden place at the foot of the holy mountain where the ground swallowed the rebels who built a golden calf.”

I lowered my head and hurried away to help Mother. The reminder of the chasm near the Sinai terrified me. I dared not ask any more questions. However, not many

weeks later I overheard my father in discussion with other men. They voiced the same question I was scolded for asking.

“When will we stop wandering?”

“My wife wants a home.”

“We have been promised a homeland.”

“I do not think we will ever get there.”

“Let us confront Moses and demand answers.”

The coalition defied Moses in the Wilderness of Shur. The Prophet of God stood just outside the camp. His antagonists faced him. My father was with them. They lined the higher ground.

“What do you ask of God?” Our white haired leader did not appear intimidated even with the mob facing him.

From the camp, everyone watched the drama. Mother stood beside me. Her face was white.

“Fools,” nearby one of the youngest of the priests snorted his contempt at the display.

“What do you mean?” Several voices asked at once.

I inched closer to hear the answer.

“Have you still not learned that Moses is chosen of God? This confrontation can only lead to death.” The reply was unmixed with any compassion.

My intake of breath was lost amid the collective gasp of fear. Voices erupted in denial and rage.

“No!”

“How can you say such things?”

“What will happen?”

“It cannot be.”

Terrified I rushed back to my family.

“Mattan,” Mother spoke my father’s name. The whisper was full of terror for her husband.

“What do you ask of God?” Again the steady voice of the Deliverer was heard.

All eyes turned to the hillside. Everyone strained to see what was happening. Abital stretched on tiptoe. She was trying to see past our milling neighbors. After some shuffling and what appeared to be arguing one man stepped forward.

“Why have you brought us to wander and die in this wilderness?” Loudly the spokesman snarled. He leaned forward a vicious look making him look almost inhuman. “We are no closer to the Promised Land than twenty years ago.”

“The God of Israel is forming the chosen people into a great nation. At the appointed time we will enter the land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” with great patience the leader repeated what we had heard over and over again.

“It is not enough,” from somewhere in the mob another voice spoke. “We had houses in Egypt and recognizable gods. There was meat and fruit instead of this endless manna.”

The last word almost sounded like a curse.

“My brothers,” the leader tried to reason with his opponents.

“You do not know the way to bring us to this Promised Land,” another shouted challenge interrupted him.

“Give us a sign that your God is real!”

“Yes, a sign!”

“Where is the God of Moses?”

Shouting and stamping, the men appeared ready to attack.

“Mother, look,” I tugged the woman’s arm and pointed to the pillar outside of the camp.

From the corner of my eye I was aware that the object seemed to be increasing in height. To my eyes it appeared to loom angrily over the camp.

Mattan,” I heard Mother whisper in despair. Although he could not hear her she moaned softly, “Come away.”

Almost simultaneously Moses cried out, “Living God, have mercy.”

His words were drowned by sudden screams from the mass of men on the hill.

“Snakes!”

“Nehushtan is among us!”

“*I AM* will have vengeance!”

“I am bitten!”

“Run!”

Men began to race up the hill as well as toward the camp. In their panic they ran into one another. With curses and fists each man sought to escape from the death that crawled at their feet. Those on the edges of the rabble charged into camp. Some of the vipers had fastened onto clothing and now slithered among the tents.

“My baby is bitten!” Our first warning of the invasion was a young mother’s scream.

Panic ensued as everyone in the camp began to race hysterically in all directions. Mother stood frozen. Her eyes searched for my father in the crowd dispersing on the hillside.

“What can we do?” I tugged the woman’s arm. “Snakes are in the camp.”

“Your father will know,” in a dazed voice came an ineffective answer. “Mattan will tell us what to do.”

“We have to get way from the danger,” I tugged her limp hand.

Amid the shouts and screams I heard someone say, “Snakes cannot swim. We will be safe across the water.”

With all my desperate twelve year old strength I tried to pull my mother toward the stream that meandered past the camp. When she stubbornly refused to budge, I snatched Leah from her arms. Isaac and Hephzibah stood frozen beside our mother.

“Come on! Hurry!” I shouted.

By shoving my siblings with my shoulder and free hand I made them move. We dodged between the adults who did not seem to know where to turn. After splashing through the shallow stream we joined a small group already there.

“Wait here,” I handed the baby to my brother. “I will get Mother.”

Back through the chilly water I rushed. More of the men had reached the camp. Most wore an expression of anguished hopelessness. They stumbled and staggered blindly. Blood dripped from ankles or arms where a serpent had left venom. Keening started when one man and then another dropped to the ground. The poison acted rapidly, especially among the older men.

“Mother!” I scanned the area for the woman.

Then I saw my parents. My father sat beside our fire. At first I thought he was unharmed. Then I saw the bite on his forearm.

“I fell,” the man was explaining in a dazed mumble. “If I had not fallen...”

He seemed fascinated by the twin puncture wounds, staring at them even as he continued to speak.

“We should not have doubted,” it sounded like a confession.

“Father,” I rushed forward to grab the man’s uninjured arm. It hung unresponsive at his side.

“Naomi, let me look at you,” my father tried to focus on my face.

I realized that the poison was stealing my father.

“No!” My scream rang in my ears when a convulsion rocked the man.

He struggled for breath. Then all was silent. Too late I heard the voice of Moses cut across the cries in the camp.

“The Lord has provided healing. Let all who are bitten look upon the bronze serpent and live.”

I swung around to see the leader flanked as always, by Aaron and Joshua, holding up the staff of God. On the top was a snake hastily formed of beaten and twisted bronze.

“Father, you will be well!” Excitedly I turned back to the man.

“He cannot look,” in a numb tone Abital informed me.

“Father, see the serpent Moses holds,” vainly I lifted my father’s head.

There was no longer life in the man. He could not hear my pleas or feel my hands.

“My husband is gone,” the monotone from my mother frightened me more than the realization that I held a dead body.

Rage and grief welled up inside me.

“You are too late,” whether I spoke to God or Moses I was never sure.

The Prophet heard my accusation. The old man stopped in his traverse of the camp. He turned to face me.

“I am sorry,” such grief was etched on the deeply lined face that I was slightly comforted. “Mattan was a good man. You will be cared for.”

With that promise the Deliverer moved on.

“We have lost many good men today,” I heard the low mournful words from our leader.

Aaron took up the chant, “Look toward the snake. Those bitten may live if they look upon the serpent.”

Some were saved by that bronze image. Still, for many more, like my father, it was too late. We left their graves behind when we moved on. Care of my siblings fell to me. My mother was too broken by her grief to tend us. Even though I never dared tell anyone my secret, I knew that the hand of God was against me.