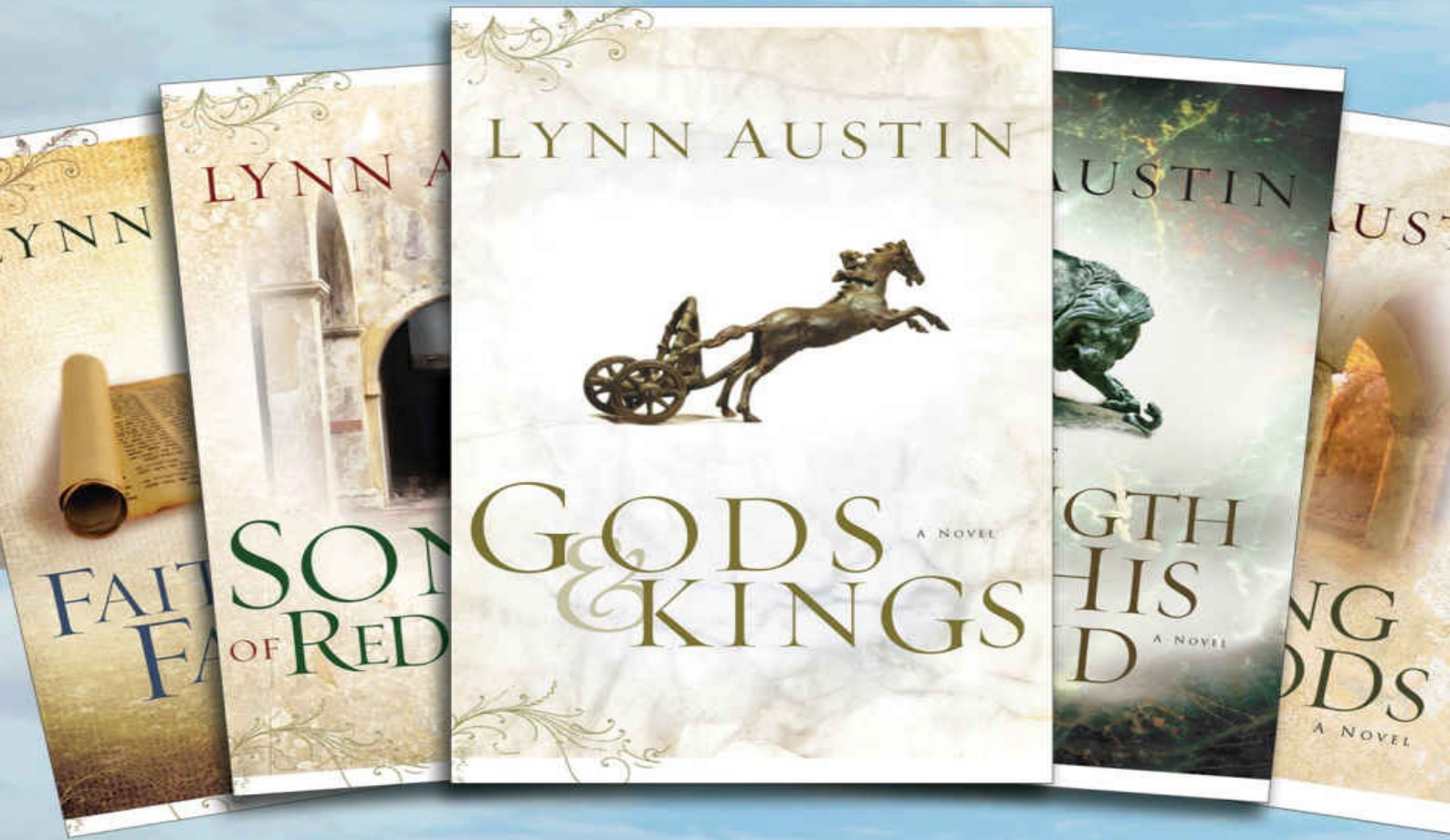


FIVE NOVELS IN ONE



THE
CHRONICLES
OF THE KINGS
COLLECTION

LYNN AUSTIN

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CHRONICLES
OF THE KINGS,
BOOK ONE

GODS AND KINGS

Dedicated to my husband,
Ken,
who never doubted

*The Lord is my strength
and my song;
he has become my salvation.*

Exodus 15:2

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A Note to the Reader

Shortly after King Solomon's death in 931 BC, the Promised Land split into two separate kingdoms. Israel, the larger nation to the north, set up its capital in Samaria and was no longer governed by a descendant of King David. In the southern nation of Judah, where this story takes place, David's royal line continued to rule from Jerusalem. The narrative centers around events in the lives of two kings of Judah: Ahaz, who ruled from 732 to 716 BC, and his son Hezekiah, who ruled from 716 to 687 BC.

Careful study of Scripture and commentaries support the fictionalization of this story. To create authentic speech, the author has paraphrased the words of these biblical figures. However, the New International Version has been directly quoted when characters are reading or reciting Scripture passages, and when prophets are speaking the words of the Lord. The only allowance the author has made is to change the words "the Lord" to "Yahweh."

Interested readers are encouraged to research the full accounts of these events in the Bible as they enjoy this first book in the five-book CHRONICLES OF THE KINGS series.

Scripture references for *Gods and Kings*:

2 Kings 16

2 Kings 18:1–3

2 Chronicles 28:1–8, 16–27

2 Chronicles 29:1–14

See also:

2 Chronicles 26:3–5, 16–23

Jeremiah 26:18–19

The prophecies of Isaiah and of Micah

Part One

Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king. . . . Unlike David his father, he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord.

2 Chronicles 28:1 NIV

I

The rumble of voices and tramping feet awakened him. Hezekiah sat up in bed, his heart pounding, and for the first time in his short life he was terrified. Overnight his safe, quiet world in the king's palace had vanished, and he listened with mounting panic as the commotion in the hallway outside his room grew louder, closer. Men's voices shouted orders. Doors opened and closed. Children cried out in fear.

He turned to his older brother, Eliab, in the bed next to his and saw that he was also awake. Hezekiah scrambled off his bed and climbed in beside him. "Eliab," he whispered, "What's going on? Who's out there?"

Eliab shook his head, clutching the bedcovers. "I-I don't know." They huddled in the darkness, staring at the door, waiting.

In the distance, the mournful cry of a shofar trumpeted an alarm over the sleeping city of Jerusalem as the sound of footsteps thundered up the hallway, approaching Hezekiah's room.

"I'm scared," he said, swallowing back tears. "I want Mama."

Suddenly the door opened, and soldiers, armed with swords and spears, poured into the room, pulling Hezekiah and Eliab off the bed. Hezekiah was powerless to stop them. His body went stiff with fear as they stripped off his nightclothes and forced a white linen garment over his head. The soldiers' hands felt cold and rough as they dressed him and tied on his sandals. The palace servants always treated him gently, smiling and making up little games as they helped him get dressed. But none of the soldiers spoke, and their cold silence terrified him. They dressed Eliab the same way, then hustled them out of the room.

More soldiers and a dozen priests in flowing robes crowded the hallway. In the flickering torchlight Hezekiah saw his half-brothers dressed in the same white garments, huddled together, whimpering softly. His uncle Maaseiah stood over them, armed with a sword.

"These are all of the king's sons," he told the priests. "Let's get on with it. My troops have a long march ahead."

"Everything is prepared, my lord," a priest replied.

But before any of them had a chance to move, Hezekiah heard his mother shouting as she ran up the hall from the king's harem. "No, wait! Stop!" She was in her bare feet and was wrapping her outer garment around her as she ran. Her dark hair flowed uncombed down her back. Hezekiah tried to squirm free to go to her, but one of the soldiers held him back.

"What are you doing?" she cried. "Where are you taking my sons?"

"King Ahaz is holding a special sacrifice before the army marches," Uncle Maaseiah said. "Our northern border is under attack."

"What does that have to do with my children? They're only babies." She hugged her robes tightly around herself and shivered.

"Ahaz wants all of his sons to take part." Uncle Maaseiah signaled to his soldiers, and they quickly moved across the hallway to block her path. But not before Hezekiah saw all the color drain from her face.

"No! Wait!" she cried. "What kind of sacrifice?"

Uncle Maaseiah turned his back on her and motioned to his men. "Let's get on with it."

~~Hezekiah's mother began to scream, and the sound filled him with terror. He could hear her fighting desperately to get past the wall of men, to reach him and Eliab, but the soldiers held her back.~~

"Mama!" Hezekiah cried out. "I want Mama!" He struggled to go to her but one of the men picked him up as if he weighed nothing at all. Hezekiah wanted to fight but he felt limp with terror, and the soldier who held him was much too strong. His mother's screams faded in the distance behind them and the soldier carried Hezekiah through the maze of corridors and down the palace stairs to the courtyard.

Outside, the sky had begun to lighten as the sun rose behind the Judean hills. A huge crowd of people stood waiting in the palace courtyard, spilling over into the street outside the gate. A brisk wind whipped Hezekiah's tunic against his legs as the soldier lowered him to the ground. The thin fabric offered no warmth against the morning chill, and Hezekiah shivered with cold and fear. He had never seen so many soldiers before, lined up in even rows, their swords gleaming as they stood at attention before his father, the king.

King Ahaz wore the crown of Judah on his head and the royal robes embroidered with the symbol of the house of David. He was a large, round-bellied man, whose voice always sounded loud and angry. Everyone in the palace cowered before him, and Hezekiah had learned to fear him, too. He couldn't imagine why his father would order him and his brothers from their beds at dawn to stand with all these soldiers. As Hezekiah stood shivering in the windy courtyard, the tension in the air, the solemn look on every face, filled him with dread.

The assembly began to march, led by King Ahaz and Uncle Maaseiah. The city elders and nobles followed close behind, then the escort of soldiers and priests began to move. One of the soldiers gripped Hezekiah's shoulder and pushed him forward with all the other young princes of Judah. But instead of climbing the steep hill behind the palace to the Temple of Yahweh where the king usually offered his sacrifices, the procession wound down the hill through the narrow city streets.

They passed the spacious, dressed-stone mansions of the nobility, then marched through the marketplace area, now quiet and deserted, the booths shuttered, the colorful awnings rolled up for the night. Hezekiah saw people watching the procession from their rooftops and peering from behind latticed windows. As the street narrowed, the soldiers squeezed closer and their swords pressed against Hezekiah's side. Where were they taking him? What was going to happen to him? Twice he stumbled as he missed a stair in the street, but the soldiers quickly gripped his arms and pulled him to his feet.

They finally reached the massive gate on the southern wall of Jerusalem and passed down the ramp out of the city. Now the silent dawn began to echo with the beat of drums pounding in the distance. Hezekiah saw a craggy wall of cliffs, dark and foreboding, guarding the entrance to the Valley of Hinnom. As the procession turned into the narrow valley, he glimpsed a column of smoke billowing high into the air ahead of him, carried aloft by the wind.

The priests who marched beside Hezekiah began to chant, "Molech . . . Molech . . . Molech." The men in the procession joined in, chanting louder and louder to the throbbing beat of the drums. **"MOLECH . . . MOLECH . . . MOLECH!"**

Suddenly the wall of soldiers parted, and Hezekiah caught his first glimpse of Molech. He knew he wasn't dreaming. He knew the monster was real because he never could have imagined anything so horrible. Molech stared down at him from a throne of brass as the fire in the pit beneath the hollow statue blazed with a loud roar. Tongues of flame licked around the edges of his open mouth. His arms reached out as if waiting to be filled, forming a steep incline that ended in his open, waiting mouth.

Hezekiah's instincts screamed at him to run, but his legs buckled beneath him as if made of water. He couldn't move. One of the soldiers picked him up and carried him up the steps of the platform that stood in front of the monster's outstretched arms.

"MOLECH . . . MOLECH . . . MOLECH . . ." the crowd chanted to the pounding rhythm of drums.

Hezekiah's heart throbbed in his ears as he huddled beside his brother Eliab. The billowing smoke made his eyes water. The heat burned his face.

The chief priest faced Molech with his arms raised, pleading with the god in a frenzied cry, but the chanting crowd and the noise of the flames drowned out his words. When his prayer ended, the priest lowered his arms and turned around. Hezekiah saw the cold, intent look on the man's face and he tried to back away, but one of Molech's priests gripped his arms. He couldn't escape.

"Which one is the king's firstborn?" the chief priest asked.

Uncle Maaseiah's signet ring flashed in the firelight as he laid his hand on Eliab's head. "This one

The priest grabbed Eliab and lifted him high in the air. Hezekiah watched in horror as the man tossed his brother into the monster's waiting arms. Eliab rolled down the incline toward the open mouth, clawing at the brazen arms to try to stop his fall, but the metal was hot and polished smooth. He couldn't hold on. Eliab's pitiful screams wailed above the roar of the flames and the pounding drums, even after he had fallen over the rim and Molech had devoured him. His cries, coming from the depths of the flames, lasted only an instant though it felt like a lifetime.

Then a terrible stench, unlike any Hezekiah had smelled before, filled his nostrils and throat until he gagged. His stomach turned inside out, and he retched, as if trying to vomit out the memory, as well.

But the nightmare didn't end with Eliab's death. Other noblemen and city officials offered their sons to the priest and he tossed them, one after the other, into Molech's arms. They rolled helplessly down into the flames as Eliab had. Hezekiah cowered in a heap on the platform and covered his face to escape the sight. But the horror of this day was engraved on his soul. He began to scream . . . and he didn't think he would ever be able to stop.

Abijah's son finally fell asleep, his small body warm and slack in her arms. For the first time all day, his grip on her loosened. But Abijah's clasp on Hezekiah didn't relax as she sat by the window and gazed into the evening sky.

Eliab was dead. Her son, her firstborn, gone forever. Her mind refused to comprehend it, even though her heart felt as if it had been torn out of her, leaving her body cold and hollow. Abijah's grief so overwhelmed her that she knew the pain would never fade as long as she lived. Her son never should have died. His life had been cruelly taken much too soon. And his own father had murdered him.

Her arms tightened protectively around Hezekiah. She wouldn't let him die the way Eliab had. She would protect him from Ahaz no matter what it took—but how? She had neither weapons nor the skill to use them.

Abijah had guessed where the soldiers were taking her children and what would happen to Eliab, but she had been powerless to save him. The guards had ignored her screams and pleas, restraining her long after the procession disappeared from the palace courtyard. She had heard Molech's drums in the distance, but she couldn't break free to help her child. When the sacrifice was over, Eliab was dead, and Hezekiah continued to scream, too young to comprehend the reason for the horror he had witnessed. Nor could Abijah comprehend it herself. All she could do was cling to her remaining son and weep, promising him that he was safe, that she would protect him. But she didn't know how she would keep that promise.

"Why don't you lay him down now, my lady?" her servant Deborah said. "You've been holding him all day." Deborah reached to lift Hezekiah from Abijah's arms, but she hugged him close.

"No—not yet. I need to hold him." Abijah longed for someone to hold and comfort her, to feel someone's loving arms surrounding her. But the only things that surrounded her were stone walls.

They were warmed by fires in the brazier and on the hearth, decorated with tapestries and carpets that gave the appearance of comfort and warmth, but Abijah knew it was all a facade. Beneath their elegant surfaces, the walls, like her life, were as cold and hard as stone.

“Please, Lady Abijah—you need to eat something,” Deborah begged. “There’s some fruit here and some bread.”

Abijah glanced at the tray, then shook her head. “I don’t want food.” She bit her lip and tasted salty tears. How could she eat when her life had been shattered like a bowl hurled to the floor? She would never be whole again.

“Starving yourself won’t bring Eliab back, my lady.”

Abijah’s grief overflowed once again when she heard her son’s name. “Oh, Eliab,” she wept. “My beautiful child . . .”

Everything about her firstborn had been unforgettable: the first time she’d felt life moving inside her; the first time she’d given birth and held him in her arms; his first steps; his first words. Her son Eliab. He had been King Ahaz’s firstborn as well, the future king of Judah. His young life had been so full of hope and promise.

“I never even kissed him good-bye. . . .” She bent to kiss Hezekiah, and her tears fell into his curly auburn hair.

“My lady, you should put him in his own bed now,” the servant said. “You need to change your robe and comb your hair.”

Abijah looked down at the front of her robe, which she had torn in her grief. She wouldn’t comb her hair, wouldn’t bathe or put on perfumes. How could she when Eliab was dead?

“No,” she said quietly. “Let me mourn for my son.”

“But you know you aren’t allowed to mourn. It’s not as if Eliab got sick and died, or—”

“I will mourn for my son!” she repeated. But there would be no mourners to wail with her, no funeral procession or prayers for the dead, no grave to mark the place where her child lay.

“His death was honorable, my lady—a glorious sacrifice to be celebrated,” Deborah insisted. Abijah stared at her in disbelief.

“What kind of mother could celebrate her child’s death? And what kind of father would kill his own child to save himself? Only a monster could do such a thing.” She could see that her words had shocked the servant, but she didn’t care. She looked down at her sleeping son again. “And only a monster would force his other children to watch.”

“You’d better be careful what you say,” Deborah said, her voice a near-whisper. “Your husband is the king.”

“Oh, I know that well enough,” Abijah said bitterly. “I was promised to the royal house of King David on the day I was born. All my life my father told me I would marry a king someday—as if that was a great honor. I would carry kings in my womb. I was blessed among women.” She paused and fingered her torn garment. “But look at the price I’ve paid for that honor. My son is dead. And I’m married to a man I will hate until the day I die.”

“Don’t say such a thing. Someone might overhear and—”

“I don’t care! I hate him! Nothing can change that.”

“You don’t mean it, Lady Abijah. It’s only your grief speaking. You live a privileged life here in the palace.”

“I live like a royal prisoner.” Her rooms in the harem were among the best in the palace, with tall windows that overlooked the courtyard on one side, and a balcony with a magnificent view of the city on the other. Every furnishing in the room was beautiful: the tables and lampstands overlaid with ivory and gold, the couches beautifully carved and cushioned. Magnificent tapestries decorated all the walls, and her bed was perfumed and draped in silk. But the harem’s splendor and luxury were for the

king's sake, not hers. And like gilding over rotten wood, the decorations couldn't alter Abijah's unhappiness.

She had never questioned her destiny, never had any hopes or dreams of her own. Why should she dream when her life had been clearly laid out from birth and there was never a possibility that it could be different? Her father, Zechariah, had promised her to the house of David, and her life had proceeded in its orderly course toward that goal, like stars moving across the sky through their appointed seasons. Her wedding to Ahaz led to the purpose for which she'd been born; Eliab's birth fulfilled it.

Abijah remembered being glad to leave home. She had longed to flee from her father's melancholy to escape the sight of him drinking himself into a stupor every night while her mother struggled to hide his secret. During the day, he had somehow managed to carry out his tasks—serving in the Temple, teaching students his vast knowledge of the Torah, debating the complexities of Yahweh's Law. He had hidden his drunkenness so well that few people ever guessed that his life had crumbled when King Uzziah died. Abijah had been relieved to leave home and move to the palace. But she'd had no idea that she had married an idolater. Or that one day he would sacrifice her son.

"I wish I had never married Ahaz," Abijah murmured. "I wish—"

She stopped, afraid to voice her wish out loud. But she knew that her life would have taken a different course if she had married Uriah. The high priest of Yahweh's Temple never would have sacrificed his firstborn son to Molech. Uriah had been a fixture in her household as she was growing up, her father's brightest pupil, studying for a future as high priest. When she remembered him now, she realized that Uriah had always loved her, had always treated her with tenderness. She had taken that love for granted, imagining that Ahaz would look at her the same way. But King Ahaz had never looked at her with anything but lust. Not long after she'd spoken her wedding vows, she'd given up hope for any love or companionship. She was Ahaz's property, to be used for his pleasure and to produce his heir—nothing more. Her sons had become her very life.

"My children came from my body, Deborah—my pain and blood and tears. When they took Eliab, they took part of me. And I couldn't stop them. My husband decided to kill my son, and there was nothing I could do about it. But I won't let him take Hezekiah," she said, gripping him tightly. "I promised him I would protect him, and I'll die before I break that promise."

The servant knelt on the floor in front of her, pleading with her. "Please don't do something you'll be sorry for, my lady."

"I'm already sorry that I've let other people tell me what to do and think and feel all my life. It's time I decided for myself."

She turned to gaze through the window again but night had fallen and with it, darkness and fear. This night would never end for Abijah, even when the sun rose in the morning, unless she found a way to protect her child.

Deborah touched her hand. "You need to change your clothes, my lady," she said gently. "You can't let the king see you in mourning. What if he comes to your chambers tonight?"

Abijah would kill him. She hated him enough to do it. If Ahaz came tonight she would take a knife and plunge it straight through his heart. Let him suffer some of the pain she felt. But even though she wished it, Abijah knew it would be a foolish thing to do. She would forfeit her own life if she murdered the king, and then what would become of Hezekiah?

"Maybe I can make Ahaz hate me as much as I hate him," she murmured aloud. "Maybe then he'll banish my son and me."

"No," Deborah said. "The king would punish you by taking your son away from you. You would never see him again."

Abijah knew that Deborah was right. And if Ahaz took Hezekiah away from her, Abijah would have

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