

THE MACCABEE QUEEN

(aka Alexandra of Judea)

a play in three acts

by

Lauri Donahue

Copyright © 2003 by Lauri Donahue

editor@yeladim.org

published by Baker's Plays

http://www.bakersplays.com/store/product_info.php/products_id/245?osCsid=713e9ebc4bdf8da7ac48fa2c90651e8

CHARACTERS

Chorus

JOSEPHUS	a historian; mid-late 30's or older; a former general of Judea later in service to Rome
SERAKH BAT ASHER	a historian; any age; a woman ancient but ageless

The Hasmoneans:

JOHANAN HYRCANUS	ethnarch, general, and high priest of Judea; about 60; imperious and impatient
MARIAMNE	wife to Johanan; mid 50's-early 60's; regal, dutiful and stubborn
ARISTOBULUS	their eldest son; late 30's- early 40's; ambitious and paranoid
SALOME ALEXANDRA	wife to Aristobulus (and later to Alexander); mid-30's to early 40's; attractive, well-educated and eloquent
ANTIGONUS	the second son; early-mid-30's; a soldier
ALEXANDER JANNAI	the third son; early-mid-20's; handsome and elegant in the Greek manner
MATTATHIAS	the fourth son; early 20's; hot-headed and vengeful
ABSALOM	the fifth son; late teens to early-20's; pious and timid

Others in Judea:

ELEAZAR	a priest and leader of the Sadducees; late 40's-50's; an aristocrat and follower of the Greek styles
SIMEON	a teacher and leader of the Pharisees; brother to Alexandra; mid-30's-early 40's
LUTETIUS	a mercenary of Gaul, in service to Judea; mid-late 30's; rugged and dependable
LAVINIA	a Roman courtesan; any age; seductive and cruel

RACHEL a woman servant; any age; a professional gossip

BOY mid-late teens; a camp servant; impudent

Egyptians:

CLEOPATRA III Pharaoh of Egypt; 60's; strong and confident

ANANIAS Cleopatra's general; late 30's or older

SECOND GENERAL another general in service to Cleopatra; any age; haughty

Cast breakdown

Speaking roles: 13 male, 6 female = 19 total

Most actors may be double-cast, so the play may be performed with 8 men and 4 women = 12 total.

Musicians, dancers, acrobats, jugglers, and other entertainers may be included in banquet scenes (II:9, III:9). Musicians and singers may be included in the Temple ceremony scene (III:5).

Possible Doubling

Male 1	Johanan	Eleazar
Male 2	Aristobulus	Ananias
Male 3	Antigonus	2d General
Male 4	Alexander	
Male 5	Mattathias	
Male 6	Absalom	Boy
Male 7	Lutetius	
Male 8	Simeon	Josephus
Female 1	Serakh	Rachel
Female 2	Alexandra	
Female 3	Mariamne	Cleopatra
Female 4	Lavinia	

SETTING

The palaces, fortresses, battlefields and caves of Judea.

TIME

When the play opens, 104 B.C.E.

SCENES

ACT I

Prologue

Scene 1 The palace in Jerusalem. Johanan's bedchamber.

Scene 2 Elsewhere in the palace.

Scene 3 The throne room of the palace.

Scene 4 Alexandra's chamber.

Scene 5 A cell in Baris Fortress.

Scene 6 Aristobulus's bedchamber.

Scene 7 Near the Great Temple.

Scene 8 Aristobulus's bedchamber.

ACT II

Scene 1 The family tomb of the Hasmoneans.

Scene 2 The palace.

Scene 3 The throne room.

Scene 4 Alexandra's chamber.

Scene 5 Outside Alexandra's chamber.

Scene 6 The throne room.

Scene 7 Elsewhere in the palace.

Scene 8 A street in Jerusalem.

Scene 9 The palace banquet hall.

ACT III

Prologue

Scene 1 Alexander's camp near the Jordan River.

Scene 2 A cave, and Alexandra's chamber.

Scene 3 Near Ptolemais.

Scene 4 The city of Scythopolis.

Scene 5 The Great Temple.

Scene 6 Alexandra's chamber.

Scene 7 Outside the walls of Jerusalem.

Scene 8 A battlefield near Sichem.

Scene 9 The palace. A large balcony overlooking a courtyard.

Scene 10 The same balcony.

Scene 11 Alexandra's chamber.

Scene 12 Alexander's camp below the walls of Ragaba.

Scene 13 The palace.

Epilogue

ACT I

(Upstage center is a platform, one step high and large enough to accommodate a bed, a throne, or an altar and several actors. In general, interior scenes are set upstage and exteriors are downstage. These alternate, together with the Chorus (who usually appear downstage), to provide opportunity for the upstage props to be changed without interrupting the flow of the action, which should be continuous from scene to scene.)

PROLOGUE

(Josephus and Serakh enter and bow to each other and to the audience. He's dressed in Roman attire. She wears traditional Judean garments, as do the Hasmoneans and their servants.)

JOSEPHUS

For thirty years and more, through peace and war,
In fair Judea, where we lay our scene,
Johanah -- son of Simon Maccabee --
Has ably led, and kept his land secure.
By grace of God --

SERAKH

And labors of his wife!

JOSEPHUS

Five sons has he who now are grown to men.

SERAKH

(Gesturing upstage to set the scene)

Ha ir ha atika – Yerushalayim --
This ancient city of Jerusalem,
Mother of faith, and bride of history,
City of gold, adorned with ruby light,
Now hushing with the setting of the sun,
At peace – the sound of weeping yet to come.

(They nod to each other and exit separately. The light becomes rosy to indicate sunset, then fades out.)

SCENE 1

(The palace in Jerusalem. Johanan's bedchamber. Johanan lies in bed attended by his wife and sons Antigonus, Mattathias, and Absalom. By the bed is a low table holding parchment, a quill pen, a small container of sealing clay, and an ink pot. Downstage is another table with a jug of wine and goblets. Mariamne sits on a low stool next to the bed, crying.)

JOHANAN

(To Mariamne)

Weep not, my lady; all men come to this,
I only go the way of all the earth.

(Aristobulus enters, upstage of the bed, with Alexandra following, and crosses downstage so Johanan can see him. Rachel follows Alexandra and waits by the entrance. Lutetius enters, wearing Roman-style armor and a sword, and stands guard by the entrance. Rachel eyes him, flirtatiously.)

Here is our first-born.
Come, Aristobulus -- give me your hand.

(Aristobulus approaches the bed and offers his hand. Johanan grips it and raises himself to a sitting position. Mariamne props him with cushions and arranges his blankets.)

Alexandra -- come here and help my wife.

ALEXANDRA

(She crosses downstage to the bed and tries to help Mariamne rise.)

Gladly, my lord. Please, mother -- rest a while.

MARIAMNE

(Resisting her and fussing with the cushions and covers)

I need no rest, if I may ease my lord.

JOHANAN

I thank you for your pains, but now leave off.
My time is at an end, and I must speak.
Come, Absalom, and you shall serve as scribe.

(Alexandra helps Mariamne stand and leads her aside. Absalom moves the stool next to the table and prepares to write. Alexander enters upstage. He's dressed with extreme elegance, in the Greek style, and moves with an athlete's grace. Lutetius stops him and they exchange a few unheard words. Lutetius searches him for weapons and then lets him pass, but keeps an eye on him. Alexander stays out of Johanan's view. Some of the others notice him, but do not interrupt Johanan.)

See that my testament is truly writ.
Be careful that you neither add nor cut
One word from that which I declare tonight.

ALEXANDER

And do you have a word to spare for me?

JOHANAN

Who is it speaks and dares address me so?

ALEXANDER

(Crossing downstage so that Johanan can see him)

Jannai, your lost and least-regarded son.
In the Greek, I am called Alexander.
(He bows.)

JOHANAN

And who did call you here, since I did not?

ALEXANDER

All of Judea knows Johanan dies.
So I, from exile in the Galilee
Have come to meet my father at his end
And beg his pardon for what grave offense
He sent me from his house while still a babe.

JOHANAN

Be grateful that, unlike your friends the Greeks,
I chose not to expose you on a rock.

ALEXANDER

I thank you, then, for your kind gift of life.
But might I know what curse hangs o'er my head?

JOHANAN

Content you that I suffer you to stay
And with your brothers hear my final will.

(Alexander bows and retreats to an upstage corner.
Johanen gestures to Absalom to start writing.)

I never sought the title of a king,
Nor would accept, though many did entreat.
I only hoped to serve the people's good,
To judge well, and to keep my nation safe.
Judea is at peace; long be it so.
And to that end I now declare my will.

(Pause)

It is no easy burden I lay down.
The one who takes it up must bear its heft
Yet not be crushed, nor ever shrug it off.
Prudence, justice, temperance, and courage:
These loyal bearers will support the weight.
The one that I have chosen to succeed
Is thus attended, and most richly so.
And as my tenure ends, and, too, my life,
I pass my worldly powers to my wife.

(General consternation. Mariamne looks stricken
and bows her head.)

Be silent!

(He takes off his signet ring and hands it to
Absalom.)

Take my ring and seal my words.

(Absalom takes a lump of sealing clay out of the jar
and uses it to stamp the seal at the end of the
document. He then hands the ring back to
Johanen.)

ARISTOBULUS

Why her, when you have sons to follow you?

JOHANAN

Our custom does confer on you that right –
 And never think you lack your father's love.
 But love compels the choice that I have made.
 I had a vision many years ago
 That chilled a proud and doting parent's heart.
 I saw that if you ever took my place
 Within the year your own soul would depart.

ARISTOBULUS

I have no fear of dreams. I'll take the risk.

JOHANAN

It is not yours to take, but mine to give.
 Your mother shall rule here, and you shall live.

ARISTOBULUS

The nations will mock us and judge us weak!

JOHANAN

A woman, come alive through birth's travail,
 Is like a soldier hardened in a war
 And can bear more than many warrior could.
 (He pauses; the memory is painful.)
 That beast who took my sister as his wife
 And slew my father – and my brothers, too! --
 As hostage brought my mother to his fort,
 Displayed her there atop his ramparts high
 As I laid siege beneath his mighty walls.
 And when it seemed that I would win the day
 He flailed the tender flesh from off her bones.
 So I left off, to spare her further pain.
 But she cried out, "Fight on, fight on, fight on!
 Oh, let me die, not live thus unavenged."
 I could not bear her pain. I lacked the strength.
 So I withdrew my troops and raised the siege
 And to my shame she died a captive still.
 Such as my mother *was*, *your* mother *is*.
 What kind of fool would call such women *weak*?

ARISTOBULUS

But father --

JOHANAN

Save your voice and take your leave.
 My final words are for her ears alone.

(Everyone except Johanan and Mariamne moves downstage. The lights fade out on Johanan and Mariamne. A curtain may be drawn by the actors or a scrim lowered over the upstage area. If the actor playing Johanan is doubling Eleazar, he may now be replaced by a dummy in the bed so that he may prepare for the next scene. Lights come up on Antigonus and Aristobulus.)

ANTIGONUS

Brother -- what think you of our father's will?

ARISTOBULUS

An ill will, and so ill will I bear it.

ANTIGONUS

But *will* you bear it?

ARISTOBULUS

That is to be seen.
And if I would oppose it, would you stand
Beside me, serving as my strong right hand,
As we in battle have so often stood?

ANTIGONUS

You honor me, my brother, but I pause --
Would not defiance breach our people's laws?

ARISTOBULUS

When I decide, no *law* will hold me back.
But we have more to speak of. Walk with me.

(They exit. Lights up on Alexandra and Rachel.)

ALEXANDRA

Oh, Rachel -- did you see my husband's face?
It's clear he takes offense at this decree.

RACHEL

If he would seek to take his father's place
His rise would bring great honor to yourself.

ALEXANDRA

My husband, in his fury, may forget
His duty to his mother, and his sire.
Let me alone a while that I might think
Upon the safest way to quell this fire.

(Rachel nods, then exits. Alexandra thinks aloud.)

His “rights” arise by accident of birth,
Not by the merit that his father earned.
Honor is cheap when won by cast of lots –
A glit’ring prize, but brittle like fool’s gold.

(Lights come up on Mattathias, talking with
Alexander and Absalom, as Alexandra observes
him with concern.)

Yet there are those who value such trifles.
Envy is the nursemaid of enemies.

(She exits. Alexander goes to pour himself a goblet
of wine.)

ALEXANDER

(To Mattathias)

I see our elder brothers do conspire --
Would that be good or bad for us, you think?

MATTATHIAS

Can you not see what stands before your eyes?
He who aspires to take our father’s place
Is like a hound who smells a bitch in heat
And strains against the rope that holds him back.

ABSALOM

Two ropes: our father's life, our mother's love.

(Mattathias snorts.)

MATTATHIAS

(To Alexander)

He'd vault our mother's back to mount his horse.
He thinks the world conspires against his due.
Falsely he paints his friends as false to him
And spares not those whose blood – and bed -- he shares.

ALEXANDER

Is he...unhappy with his pretty wife?

MATTATHIAS

His wife could never give my brother sons.
He takes it as a personal affront
And beats her like an ass who will not bear,
As though she suffers from a stubborn womb.

ALEXANDER

Why does our brother not divorce her, then?

MATTATHIAS

She is the heiress to a great estate.
By spurning her, he'd lose her property.

ABSALOM

And she is like the one the proverbs praise:
Far more than rubies is her worth to him.
Her prudence brings his house prosperity.
She oversees his servants and his fields,
Her hands are never idle, dawn to night,
And always open to a needy cause --
Her charity earns praises in the gates.

ALEXANDER

(Lifting his goblet in a toast)

To the lady's beauty and her virtue!

(He drains the goblet and then gazes into it.)

I see I've found the bottom of my cup.

Excuse me while I go and fill it up.

(He exits, as Aristobulus and Antigonus enter together. Alexander salutes them with his goblet as he passes. Aristobulus looks him up and down, suspiciously. Mattathias sees Aristobulus enter, whispers to Absalom, and they exit opposite, which Aristobulus finds even more suspicious. Alexandra enters and approaches Aristobulus, humbly.)

ALEXANDRA

Husband -- may I have leave to speak a word?
I know your father's will displeases you,
But, for the sake of peace, I beg -- forbear
To move against your mother. She is old,
And nature will, in time, give you the place

ALEXANDRA (cont'd)

That you believe should now be yours by right.

(Aristobulus stares at her for a long moment, then speaks coldly.)

ARISTOBULUS

I will not hear you speak of this again.

(He brushes past her and exits. Antigonus gives her a sympathetic look, then follows his brother out. Alexandra stands, frozen and hopeless as the lights fade on her and come up on the bed upstage. Mariamne raises the sheet and covers Johanan's face with it.)

MARIAMNE

(Quietly)

Good night, my lord and love, until we meet.
Swift be your passage to the world to come.
I will attempt to carry out your will
And dutifully report, when we are one.

(Loudly)

Now let his body be buried in peace,
His name live throughout the generations.

(Mariamne tears her garment. The others rush back in. Rachel starts wailing, with enthusiasm. Alexander enters last, casually, with a jug in one hand and a goblet in the other.)

ALEXANDRA

Barukh dayan ha'emet --
Blesse'd be God, the true judge.

(The others also tear their garments, except for Alexander, who has his hands full.)

MARIAMNE

Please, Alexandra, fetch your brother here.
I wish the counsel of the Pharisees.

(Alexandra nods and exits, passing Alexander, who catches her eye and smiles, unnerving her.)

ARISTOBULUS

(Signaling to his brothers)

Come -- take him up and bear him to his tomb.

(Mattathias gives Aristobulus a look – who are you to be giving us orders? Absalom puts his hand on Mattathias's arm and shakes his head. Mattathias shakes off the hand. Absalom murmurs to him. Mattathias considers for a moment, then reaches for the corner of the bed. Alexander drains his goblet, then hands it and the jug to Rachel. The four younger brothers hoist the bed to their shoulders and carry it out, following Aristobulus. The women follow the bed in solemn procession as the lights fade.)

SCENE 2

(Elsewhere in the palace. Eleazar enters, dressed in the Greek fashion. Rachel enters separately, carrying the goblet and jug. She approaches him and speaks conspiratorially.)

RACHEL

Lord Eleazar – I have news for you!
Johanah's dead. They take him to his tomb.

ELEAZAR

And will Aristobulus be his heir?

RACHEL

No! Mariamne takes her husband's place.
She's sent for Simeon, the *Pharisee*.

(Eleazar's surprised and displeased. He takes out a coin. Since Rachel's hands are full, he drops it into the goblet.)

ELEAZAR

Come to me first if you have further news.

(Rachel bobs her head and exits. He thinks aloud.)

We Sadducees have struggled to attain
The favor of Johanah and the court.
And now we risk its loss – his pious wife
Will likely give the *Pharisees* support.

(Alexandra enters with Simeon, who's in traditional Judean dress. Eleazar speaks to Alexandra, formally.)

The nation mourns your noble family's loss.

ALEXANDRA

Our family thanks you for your kind concern.

(Simeon and Eleazar exchange looks of mutual loathing before Simeon and Alexandra cross and exit.)

ELEAZAR

Too many risks accompany defiance...
I'll go and make a suitable ... alliance.

(He exits. Blackout.)

SCENE 3

(The throne room of the palace. Mariamne sits on a chair on the dais. Alexandra stands behind her, to one side. Four of Mariamne's sons are there, but Aristobulus is absent. Simeon is also present.)

MARIAMNE

Our days of deepest mourning now have passed --
 Too few, too few, to mark too great a loss.
 My heart still weeps; I gladly would retire
 Unto my chamber, there to think on him
 Who was the fixe'd center of my life.
 But I may not. Duty compels me here.
 Let us attend to business of the day.

(Pause.)

In recent years my husband sometimes put
 The interests of the state above the law,
 As often happens in a time of war.
 He was encouraged by the Sadducees,
 Who have more faith in arms than in our God.
 My aim is to restore our former ways,
 And to that end have asked the Pharisees
 To list the needed changes to be made.

(She beckons to Simeon, who presents her with a sheaf of parchment. Offstage there's the sound of men in boots and armor approaching. Aristobulus enters, armed, with Lutetius and Eleazar. Mariamne rises.)

How dare you come to me in such array!
 What mean you by this insult to the peace?

ARISTOBULUS

My father was enfeebled at his end,
 His judgment clearly not what it had been.
 So to preserve our people, and our state,
 I now assume the mantle he laid down.

MARIAMNE

My son -- would you defy your father's will?

ARISTOBULUS

His *will* was that our country should be strong,
 Our borders well-defended 'gainst our foes.
 Syria has been restive as of late
 And Egypt seeks again her ancient fief.
 What do you know of soldiers, or of war?
 Your place is at the hearth, not in the field.
 Wield you the spindle, and leave me the sword.

MARIAMNE

Though I may be too weak to bear a sword
 Your father thought me fit to guard the land.
 Borders are not preserved with arms alone
 But with diplomacy, and with fair trade.
 Your father's councils I did much attend;
 Our pillow talk was of affairs of state.
 For my own sake, most gladly would I give
 This task to you, and hap'ly would retire
 To spindle and to hearth, as you suggest.
 But that was not your father's wish, and I
 Believe in this his judgment was the best.

ARISTOBULUS

If Judea is by a woman led,
 Shall not the nations scoff and bear us scorn?

MARIAMNE

But Laodice, over Jordan, reigns,
 Queen of the Gileadites and their domains.
 In Ptolemais, there is Queen Selene,
 Most able keeper of her city's walls.
 In Egypt, which you deem a worthy foe,
 Queen Cleopatra rules, third of that name.

ARISTOBULUS

And she deposed the rightful heir, her son.
 I will not suffer you to do the same.
 Now say that you will yield to me my place,
 Else force me to compel by right of arms.
 (To the others)
 Who here will stand with me, and who against?

ANTIGONUS

I stand with you, my brother, 'gainst the world!

ARISTOBULUS

Such ready service earns a rich reward.
Antigonus – dear brother and dear friend --
You will be second only to the king.

SIMEON

Your family is not of David's house,
Yet you presume to wear King David's crown?

ARISTOBULUS

Nor are we Aaron's seed, yet father took
The high priest's place in all the temple rites.

SIMEON

That was a grave offense against the law –

ARISTOBULUS

You, *Pharisee*, may spare your wasted breath.
I care not for your quaint and dusty ways.
A king should make the laws, not laws the king.

SIMEON

(Quietly but intensely)

Now you have earned the fate your father saw.

(Aristobulus puts his hand on his sword hilt and
approaches Simeon menacingly.)

ARISTOBULUS

Do not assume my feelings for my wife
Will be enough to spare her brother's life.

(Alexandra rushes in front of her husband. She
prattles, pleadingly, to distract his anger from
Simeon.)

ALEXANDRA

Once did a woman lead our people well.
Deborah was a judge, and general too.
She brought an army 'gainst the Canaanites
And with Barak they swept down Mount Tabor
And put the Canaan soldiers to the sword –

ELEAZAR

(Interrupting)

Those were primitive, unsettled times
 Before we lived in cities ruled by kings.
 My precedent is nearer to the point:
 A daughter born of brazen Jezebel
 Took for herself great David's royal throne
 And set out to destroy his noble line.
 The Temple priests had this usurper slain.
 Never has woman ruled our nation since.

MARIAMNE

(Sarcastically)

Is this the logic of the learn'ed Greeks?
 One woman disinherits all her sex?

(Aristobulus shoves Alexandra aside.)

ARISTOBULUS

Enough of this. I have no time for tales.
 (To Lutetius)
 To Baris Fortress take her, and them, too.

(Lutetius goes to arrest Mariamne and the three
 younger brothers.)

ALEXANDER

What have *we* done to earn our prison cells?

ARISTOBULUS

Too slow to pledge support, and now too late.

(Lutetius starts to remove the three younger
 brothers and Mariamne, but Aristobulus raises his
 hand to stop him and speaks to her.)

But you, my mother, still may make amends.
 Declare to all it was my father's wish
 That I should take his place and wear the crown,
 And sleep tonight at peace in your own bed.

MARIAMNE

At peace? Your father's shade would haunt my dreams.
 No, I will not swear false to suit your schemes.

ARISTOBULUS

To prison, then, until you change your mind.

(Lutetius exits with Mariamne and the others.)

ALEXANDRA

My husband, stone walls are poor advocates!
If free, then she may witness how you rule
And find you worthy as your father's heir.

ELEAZAR

Hunger is a most able orator.
It moves those who cannot be swayed by words,
Opens the gates of cities under siege
And bends the backs of the stubbornly straight.

ANTIGONUS

Our mother has not earned so cruel a fate.

ALEXANDRA

(To Aristobulus)

A show of mercy much becomes a king....

ARISTOBULUS

I have decided. No more challenge me,
Lest *you* desire to lodge in Baris Fort.
It seems you have forgotten once again
The duty of a wife to *mind her tongue*.

(He leads her off, roughly. Simeon follows, giving
Eleazar a look of contempt which Eleazar responds
to with a triumphant smile. Eleazar starts to exit but
Antigonus calls after him.)

ANTIGONUS

Wait, Sadducee. I'll have a word with you.

ELEAZAR

(Bowing)

At your disposal.

ANTIGONUS

If I *could* dispose
You would no more be seen within these walls.
You, Eleazar, have a serpent's tongue.
You wormed your way into my father's trust
And now you hiss into my brother's ear
And drip your venom down my mother's throat.
Watch where you slither, snake. Beware my boot.

(He exits. Eleazar looks after him with scorn.)

ELEAZAR

Soldiers should never play at politics.
They lack the necessary...subtlety.

(He exits. Blackout.)

SCENE 4

(Alexandra's chamber. This scene is played downstage, with no props, allowing the upstage props to be changed in the interval. Alexandra sits on the floor, her hair and clothes in disarray.)

ALEXANDRA

(Philosophically, but with a touch of bitterness)

When I was young, I thought the fault was mine.
If I could only learn what *not* to say,
The time of day, the softness, or the tone
I would not spark his anger. (Pause.) I was wrong.
There is no time, no season, and no year
That I may dare to speak, and not know fear.
And so I've learned to measure out my words --
To weigh each one against the price in pain.
Silence is cheap -- but what cost to my soul!
Can I afford to act? The price is dear --
Dear as the object of my soul's concern.

(She gets to her feet, painfully, and rubs her arm.)

I'll pray that what is broken can be mended
And do all that I can ... ere hope has ended.

(She exits. Blackout.)

SCENE 5

(A dark cell in Baris Fortress. Mariamne lies on the bed. There is the sound of a heavy door opening. Alexandra enters in a traveling cloak, her hair covered, carrying a small clay oil lamp. She goes to embrace Mariamne and sets down the lamp by the bed as the lights come up. Lutetius enters and takes his post by the “door.”)

ALEXANDRA

Forgive me, but I could not come before.

MARIAMNE

There is nothing to forgive, my daughter.

(Alexandra takes Mariamne’s hand and kisses it, helps her sit up, then looks furtively at Lutetius.)

ALEXANDRA

(Softly)

They told me that I could not bring you food.
But they would not presume to search me here.

(She puts her hand between her breasts, then reaches around her neck to pull out a small bag on a drawstring. She opens it and takes out some food.)

I have a little bread, and olives, too,
A few figs, and some cheese -- all that would fit.

MARIAMNE

Bless you, my child, but it’s too late for me.

ALEXANDRA

Never too late! One bite will give you strength.
Quickly, before *he* rips it from my hands.

(She looks to Lutetius. He gives her a look to show that he heard her, then pointedly ignores her. She registers this, gratefully, then turns back to Mariamne, who has started to pick at the food.)

MARIAMNE

How fare my sons?

ALEXANDRA

Antigonus is well.
 We hear he has won vict'ries in the north
 And stretched our borders to a great extent.
 Rich cities has he taken, and much gold.
 A festival is planned for his return.

MARIAMNE

And is the "king" not also on campaign?

ALEXANDRA

He was, but came home early from the war.

MARIAMNE

Wounded, was he?

ALEXANDRA

No, but most deathly ill.
 He coughs up blood; no doctor knows the cause.
 He tells them -- though it shames me to report --
 That you have cast a spell against his life.
 He let me come only to bid you cease.

MARIAMNE

So now he calls me *witch*? It is too much!
 How could a son, his face his father's glass,
 Like a mirror reverse his father's good?
 (She nibbles at a fig.)
 What of my younger sons? Still in prison?

ALEXANDRA

Yes. But the king allows them to be fed.

MARIAMNE

I wish...I could have known Alexander.
 Do you know why the boy was sent from home?

ALEXANDRA

When he was born, his father had a dream...

MARIAMNE

That he'd usurp his elder brothers' place?
 Convenient prophecy –
 Based on some ancient drama of the Greeks.
 Johanan could not stand to look on him...

MARIAMNE (cont'd)

Now I have tired myself with too much talk.
Stay, if you can, but I must close my eyes.

ALEXANDRA

Certainly, mother. I will stand a while.

(She rises, and crosses to Lutetius, as the lights go down on Mariamne and up on Alexandra and Lutetius. She takes out a small pouch of coins and offers it to him.)

Will this be enough to buy your silence?

LUTETIUS

You may have it, my lady, free of charge.

ALEXANDRA

(Kindly)

A mercenary who will not take gold?
You surely are unique among your breed!
What is your name?

LUTETIUS

Lutetius, madam.

ALEXANDRA

A Roman name, yet not a Roman born?

LUTETIUS

No, madam. I was born and raised in Gaul.
I fought beside my father as a boy.
The Romans took me as a prize of war.
I earned my freedom, and now serve your king.

ALEXANDRA

What of your homeland do you remember?

LUTETIUS

An island in a river full of fish...
And on the banks lie marshes, rich with birds.
The Romans call my tribe "Parisii."

ALEXANDRA

(Looking at Mariamne)

Tell me -- do you recall your mother's face?

LUTETIUS

Just faintly now, but clearly when I sleep.
It's been a score of years since I left home.

ALEXANDRA

My mother died ere I could speak her name
And left to me no image of her face
Save that which I wear graven on my own.
(She moves toward Mariamne.)

LUTETIUS

(Aside)

In Rome, such beauty is engraved in stone.
(To Alexandra)
You risk your life for this old woman here.

ALEXANDRA

I was a child when I was brought to wed.
She kissed away my hurts and dried my tears.
Her love has been a refuge ... all these years.

(Offstage there's a sound of men in boots
approaching. Lutetius exits to investigate.
Alexandra kneels to stroke Mariamne's hair.
Lutetius returns.)

LUTETIUS

The king is worse. He commands your presence.

(Alexandra kisses Mariamne's forehead and places
her hands on her head as a benediction.)

ALEXANDRA

(Softly)

May the face of God shine on you, mother,
And may God smile on you and grant you peace.

LUTETIUS

Lady -- it is past time that we were gone.

ALEXANDRA

(To Mariamne, who is still asleep, softly)

I will come again, as soon as I can.

(Alexandra tears herself away and exits, followed by Lutetius. Blackout.)

SCENE 6

(Aristobulus's bedchamber. He lies propped up in bed. His white bedclothes are spotted with blood and he coughs and spits into a basin which Alexandra holds. Eleazar enters.)

ARISTOBULUS

What news of my brother? When does he come?

ELEAZAR

Quite soon he shall be near the city gates,
Resplendent in his captured panoply.
His bravery has brought him great renown –
The people cheer him on from town to town.

ARISTOBULUS

Head of an army, and I am sick in bed....
Is he a danger to me, do you think?

ELEAZAR

Your brother...*may* have grown too popular....
Perhaps he now aspires above his place.
It might be wise to test his loyalty.

ARISTOBULUS

Alert my guards to wait 'neath Strato's Tower
For there's a dusky passage he'll traverse.
And say to them, this is the king's command:
If he's in common dress, then let him pass.
But if he's armed, then slay him on the spot.

ELEAZAR

As you command, by me it shall be done.

(He bows and starts to exits, as Rachel enters with a bowl. She speaks to him in a low voice, but loud enough for the others to hear.)

RACHEL

Now I have come to bring you heavy news.
My lordship's mother from this life has passed.

ALEXANDRA

Barukh dayan ha'emet --
 May she find peace in the world to come.

(She tears her garment. Eleazar smirks and exits. Aristobulus is wracked by coughing. He gestures impatiently for Alexandra to hold the bowl. When he has finished coughing into it, she beckons to Rachel, who exchanges the soiled bowl for her clean one and exits.)

ARISTOBULUS

If she is dead, then why am I still cursed?

(He spits up more blood.)

It seems I'm to be bled out, drop by drop --
 A new-slaughtered calf in a butcher's stall.

(Pause)

I will not spill more fam'ly blood today.

(Eleazar re-enters.)

Eleazar -- go to warn my brother.
 Tell him when he comes to bear no arms
 That he may walk in safety past my men.
 If he instead comes in a warlike state,
 His death is in his hands, and not on mine.

ELEAZAR

I will go swiftly, as the king commands.

(He bows to Aristobulus and exits. Aristobulus is wracked with another coughing spasm as lights fade.)

SCENE 7

(Near the Great Temple. Antigonus and Eleazar enter separately. Antigonus wears armor and a sword.)

ELEAZAR

Hail Antigonus, victor of the north!

ANTIGONUS

Spare me your praises. How fares my brother?

ELEAZAR

No change. But I have other news for you.
I'm sorry to report your mother's dead.

ANTIGONUS

And spare me your hypocrisy as well.
You caused that lady's death. Why claim regrets?

(He looks at Eleazar, who shrugs slightly.)

From the Temple precincts I have come
Where I have offered up my fervent prayers
For my dear brother's swift recovery.
Now I return unto that holy place
To pray for my departed mother's soul.

(He starts to exit.)

ELEAZAR

Your brother wishes you to come to him.

ANTIGONUS

You can explain the cause for my delay.

ELEAZAR

He was ... insistent that you come at once.

ANTIGONUS

Then I will go and ask his leave myself.

(He starts to exit.)

ELEAZAR

Is that armor you got in Galilee?

ANTIGONUS

I took it from a dead Iturean
Why is my armor a concern of yours?

ELEAZAR

I know the king would be glad to see it.
Be sure to wear it when you go to him.

ANTIGONUS

I go there straightaway.

(He exits.)

ELEAZAR

And so, fare ill.

(Pause. He savors the moment.)

The king has handed me a subtle knife.
With words unsaid, I end his brother's life.

(He exits. Blackout.)

SCENE 8

(Aristobulus's bedchamber. Eleazar enters with Lutetius.)

ARISTOBULUS

Where's my brother? He should have come by now.

LUTETIUS

My king, your brother's life has been cut short.
Your men attacked as he approached with arms.

ARISTOBULUS

(To Eleazar)

Did you not warn him?

ELEAZAR

Forgive me, my king.
I could not find him, so I came too late.

(Aristobulus has a coughing fit, and doubles over in pain. Again, he coughs up blood.)

ARISTOBULUS

(Gasping for breath.)

Then have I murdered my most loyal friend?

(There's a commotion off-stage, with screams and wailing. Aristobulus speaks to Lutetius.)

Go and learn the reason for this outcry.

(Lutetius salutes him and exits. Aristobulus falls back exhausted against the cushions.)

The beast suspicion weighs upon my chest
And will not let me have a moment's rest.

(Lutetius enters with a grip on Rachel, without her bowl, who looks terrified.)

LUTETIUS

It seems this woman, carrying her bowl,
Slipped at the very spot your brother died --

RACHEL

And as your blood splashed out and onto his
 A shriek rang out as if from Sheol's depths.
 Then all the folk nearby who heard this cry
 Gave it a lusty echo with their tongues.

(She waits expectantly for a tip, sees that she isn't
 going to get one, and retreats to a corner, avoiding
 notice so she won't be sent out.)

ARISTOBULUS

I cannot hide from God's all-seeing eye.
 The hound of retribution's at my throat
 And compels from me a blood libation.

(More coughing. He grips Alexandra's arm for
 support and speaks to her.)

My shameless body will not long contain
 The soul that has been judged my mortal debt.
 When I am gone, I have a task for you:
 To free my brothers from their prison cells
 And choose whichever one of them you think
 Will be the best to rule...or do least harm.

(He takes off his ring and hands it to her.)

Here, you shall be the keeper of my seal.
 Eleazar – be witness to my will.
 Lutetius -- you men have sworn an oath.
 Be loyal in your duty to the queen.

LUTETIUS

Gladly will I serve this noble lady.

(He gives Alexandra an admiring look, which she
 does not notice. Aristobulus registers this, but he is
 too weak to speak. Eleazar sees the look, too, and
 files it away for future reference. Aristobulus
 suffers one last coughing spasm, then falls back
 against the cushions, eyes closed. After a moment,
 Eleazar checks the pulse in his neck, then stoops to
 listen for his breath. He turns to Alexandra and
 shakes his head. Rachel starts to wail loudly and
 beat her breast. Alexandra silences her with a look
 and makes a small tear in her garment.)

ALEXANDRA

(Quietly)

May God, who is the truest Judge of all,
See that he has a suitable reward.

(Loudly)

Put him in his armor, like his brother.
Lay them together in the family tomb.
And with them there shall too their mother lie,
To let her bones be mingled with her lord's.

(All bow their heads. Alexandra beats her breast in
a show of formal mourning while Rachel resumes
wailing. Lights fade.)

Full copies of the play are available for purchase from Baker's Plays (under the title "Alexandra of Judea.")

http://www.bakersplays.com/store/product_info.php/products_id/245?osCsid=713e9ebc4bdf8da7ac48fa2c90651e8

Theaters may request review copies from the author at editor@yeladim.org.