

GOD KING



*A Story in the Days
of King Hezekiah*

JOANNE
WILLIAMSON

GOD KING

ALSO BY JOANNE WILLIAMSON

Jacobin's Daughter
The Eagles Have Flown
The Glorious Conspiracy
Hittite Warrior
The Iron Charm
And Forever Free
To Dream Upon a Crown

GOD KING



JOANNE
WILLIAMSON

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Introduction

THE PERIOD of Egyptian history (around 710-702 B.C.) depicted in *God King* is pretty obscure to the average person. We tend to study "Ancient Civilizations" during the mid-to-late elementary years. The typical unit on Egypt emphasizes the time between the unification of the Two Kingdoms through the Age of the Pyramids (The Old Kingdom: about 3100-2600); then the heights of Egypt's political power during the reign of Thutmose III (1504-1450 B.C.*). Akhenaton (1379-1362 B.C.) and his interesting but failed attempt to impose monotheism on Egypt is studied next. His successor, the very weak Pharaoh Tutankamon, is only mentioned in conjunction with the modern recovery of his tomb and its spectacular treasure.

From around 1100 B.C. Egypt's national power degenerated, due to the kinds of cutthroat political power struggles that seem inevitable to every large empire. So it is easy to see why this is the place where many teachers and textbooks give a brief summary of Egypt's decline, and move on to the more interesting things happening in Ancient Greece. Egypt

* Egyptian dates in this introduction are from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*

doesn't reappear on the scene until Alexander the Great's conquest of it in 332 B.C.

God King fills in this gap. What is even more valuable, it helps us connect various ancient cultures in our minds—Kush, Egypt, Assyria and Judea. Too often, we study one culture or country in isolation from others. A novel such as *God King* breaks through this narrow focus and builds a more unified sense of ancient history, and along with it, a sense of the historicity of Sacred Scripture.

As our story opens, Egypt has been under the rule of Kush (located in what is at present northern Sudan) for several generations. The New Kingdom with its long series of dynasties had collapsed. First Libyan princes from the west, and now Kushite leaders from the south had each succeeded for a time in imposing their own dynastic rule on Egypt. But as the rapidly expanding Assyria in the north absorbs one nation after another, Egypt is very interested in maintaining a buffer zone between itself and these latest invaders. Thus it is supporting Palestine and Phoenicia in their doomed efforts to ward off the Assyrian threat. Now the king of Judea hopes for that same support.

Since the death of King Solomon around 922 B.C., Israel had been divided into two kingdoms, Israel in the North, and Judea in the South. Both kingdoms had been weakened by conflict with one another. Worse still, as the Old Testament Scriptures relate, God's chosen people in both kingdoms had largely turned to idolatry, often with the en-

couragement of their kings. The Northern Kingdom had fallen to Assyria in 721—less than a generation before the events of our story. Over her history, only eight of Judea's twenty kings worshipped the true God, and even these did little or nothing to abolish idol worship among the people. It was during these centuries that great prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Joel called upon the people and their rulers to reform. Hezekiah, the King of Judea whom we meet in this book, was one of those few whose faith in God was rewarded. His kingdom, although much reduced, was not annihilated by the Assyrians. This story speculates about the persons and events through which God arranged this.

Well-researched, well written fiction like *God King* opens our mind and imagination to the past. We learn about a people's everyday customs—how they ate, dressed, conducted business, worshipped, etc. We pay better attention to such a presentation of customs than we would by simply reading about it in a textbook, for now we care about the characters who use these customs. It all comes alive. Because these fictional characters are given real personalities, we see them reacting to various situations with anger, humor, fear, embarrassment, or affection—just as we would. We can gaze across enormous chasms of time and culture and look into the eyes of friends. Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve. Human nature, for better or worse, hasn't changed. This is one of history's greatest lessons.

NOTES TO THE HOME EDUCATOR

Integrating *God King* into your curriculum is as simple as reading it aloud in the evening, a chapter or two per night. Later on, show your children where this story takes place on a timeline (around 710-702 B.C.), in comparison to other events you have studied in Egyptian, Greek, Roman, or Bible history. Read the biblical passages mentioned in the author's afterword. Compare a map of ancient Egypt and its surroundings with a modern globe. Locate Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan (where ancient Nubia and Kush were located) and Iraq (Assyria). Look at a map of biblical Palestine and locate the kingdoms of Judah and Samaria.

Fans of the classical or Charlotte Mason method will want to have the children re-tell sections of the story after it is read to them. This may be done orally or in writing, depending on the child's abilities or the homeschool's time constraints. Another approach is not so much to re-tell the story in detail as to summarize each chapter, trying to determine the main point or action that occurred. Although some reluctant student writers need to be encouraged to give detailed descriptions, others have the tendency to cover sheets of paper with needless and repetitive detail. This latter group must learn to reflect, and then to determine what is the essence of the story they have heard. Students like this may be challenged to tell or write in a single sentence the most important event of each chapter.

Depending on your student's age or interest, look up several sources that deal with this period of Egyptian history, and see what is said about Taharka and Shabataka. You will find that they conflict with this book (again, see Author's Note) and probably with one another. Little is known about this time, and scholars have to guess from the small amount of information and legends that exist. Differing viewpoints often turn on the author's recognition or lack of recognition of the Bible as a source of historical information (yet Bible scholars also may differ). If archaeology fascinates your student, you may wish to go to the library to find books and magazines which tell about discoveries in the Middle East. Many of them present facts that strengthen our knowledge of the historical reliability of Scripture.

God King may also be studied as literature. It is a historical novel. Although at its core is a real event, much of the story, in its small events, minor characters, and indeed the personalities of its major characters, is invented. You may wish to compare it in discussion with your student to other historical novels he has enjoyed. Some of these propose to shed light on a real event or person; others dwell mainly on a fictional subplot, with the historical event merely as background. A comparison essay along these lines on two historical novels may be a worthwhile project for an older student.

If your child excels in creative writing, *God King* may inspire him to try his own hand at historical

fiction. Find some other event and person in history about whom only a few bare facts are known. Have fun brainstorming possible situations that lead up to the event. What was this person's childhood like? Did he or she, like Taharka, wish at times to escape his role in life and be someone else? Were there any particular strengths or flaws in his personality that affected his future? Who were his best friends in times of trouble? Would you like to work an animal (like Taharka's donkey) into the story? One word of caution. Do not try to do ALL of the above-mentioned activities. A mother's runaway enthusiasm may become a student's overkill. Select one or two activities that seem to fit with your child's abilities. The main event should always be parent and child enjoying a wonderful, memorable story together.

Daria Sockey

SOME OTHER HISTORICAL FICTION RELATED TO EGYPTIAN HISTORY

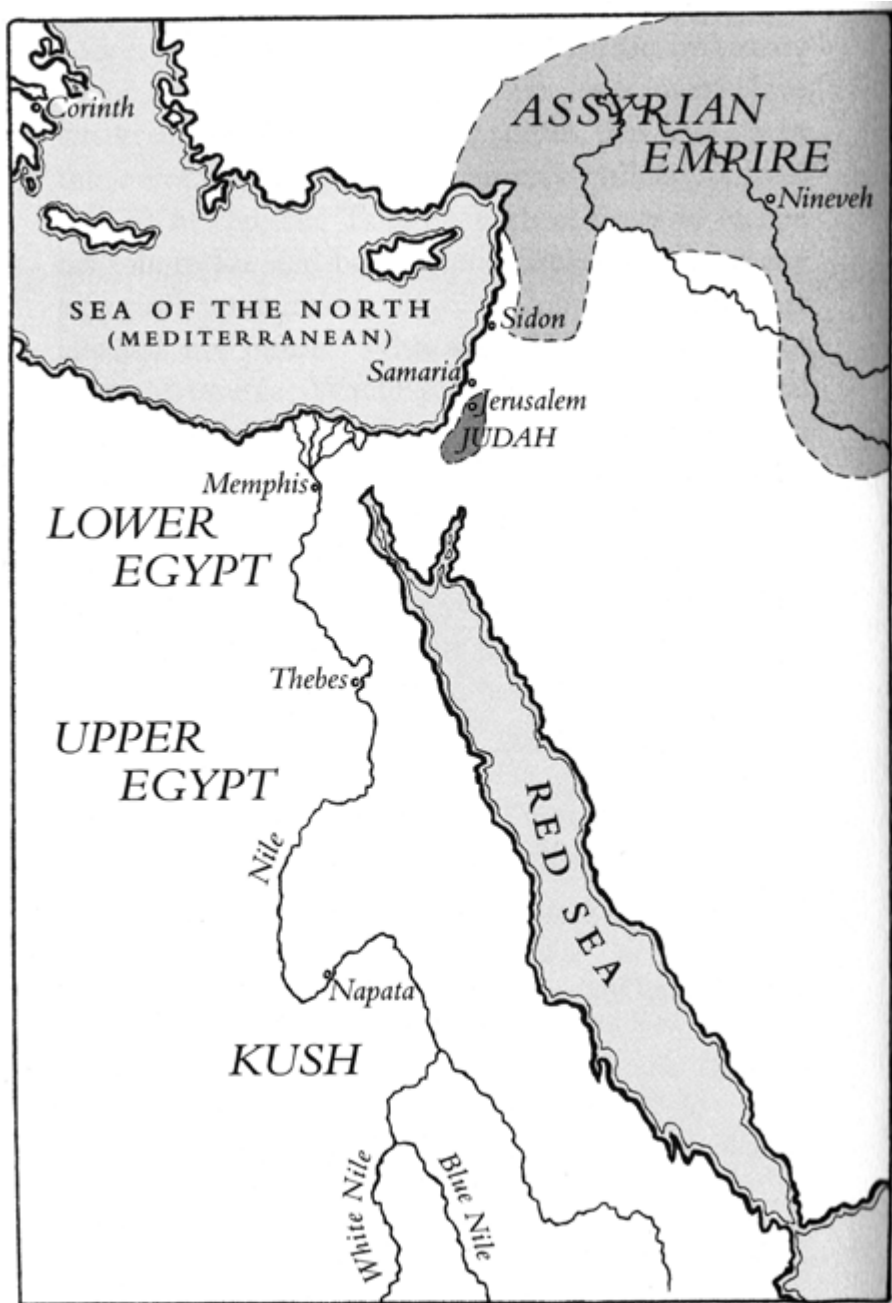
Shadow Hawk, Andre Norton. Nubia, 1570 B.C.: end of rule of Hyksos and dawn of the 18th dynasty.

Mara, Daughter of the Nile, Eloise Jarvis McGraw. Time of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III around 1480 B.C.

Scarab for Luck, Enid La Monte Meadowcroft. Time of Amenhotep II, son of Thutmose III, 1450-1425 B.C.

The Lost Queen of Egypt, Lucille Morrison. Time of Akhenaton and Tutankhamon, 1350 B.C.

A Camel for a Throne, Eloise Lownsbury. Time of Pharaoh Amenemhet, founder of 12th Dynasty of Middle Kingdom, about 2000 B.C.



701 B.C.

Be strong and of good courage. Do not be afraid or dismayed before the king of Assyria and all the horde that is with him; for there is one greater with us than with him.

Hezekiah, King of Judah
Bible, II Chronicles 32:7

In the days of Assyria's might even Egypt feared her aggressions. Egypt was then ruled by Kushite princes, around whom one of them, Taharka, this story unfolds.

Prologue

IT WAS CHILDREN'S nap time in the women's quarters, but the boy and the girl in the garden were not asleep.

"Hold him still," said the boy.

The girl held hard to the injured lamb while the boy bound splints to the broken leg, as they had taught him at scribe school.

"Where did you find him?" he asked her.

"In the main kitchen. I was stealing a honey cake."

The boy laughed. "And you came out with this instead?"

"They were going to cook him. Well, they won't cook him now."

He laughed again, patted the animal and watched it hobble off.

"You're good at this," said the girl. "Just like a doctor."

"That's what I would like to be. That, or maybe a soldier. They say I'm good with the staff and the spear, and it would get me out of here." They gazed around at the high walls hemming them into the garden with the lotus pool.

"I'd be anything, to get out of here. Except," the

girl looked suddenly into his eyes. "Except that I wouldn't see you again."

After a moment he looked away. He caught a glimpse of a tall, handsome youth crossing the garden, followed respectfully by two priests. The girl saw him too.

"At least," she said, "I'd never have to see *him* again."

"You'd better get used to him," said the younger boy, soberly. "Someday—"

"Never," said the girl. She rose. "They're calling me. I'll have to go now." She walked slowly toward the door of the Great House where the head nurse awaited her, frowning angrily.

The boy stared up at the high sandstone walls. A prison, he thought. It's like a prison. Except that sometimes they let him out. Like tomorrow. The hunt. He brightened a little at the thought of tomorrow.

He glanced toward where the handsome youth had disappeared around a corner.

At least, he thought, I'll never have to be king.

Crocodile!

“GET BACK in the boat, Lord Taharka! Back! You must be ready when he comes!”

The boy Taharka stood ankle deep in the thick black mud of the great river. It was hot, hot, hot. Not far away, across the lush green banks, the sun shimmered on sand and rock. The boy's skin, black as the rocks on the bank of the Nile, was protected by a loose white cloth that beat back the wicked rays. Already it was soaked with sweat.

“He's slow. He's lazy,” said the boy, though his heart was beating very fast.

“Don't count on it. He can move like the rapids downstream, and you won't hear a sound.”

For the first time in his twelve years, Taharka had been brought out on a crocodile hunt. The crocodile was sacred to Sebek, the crocodile god, of course, but that was all right for Taharka was a prince. Not a very important prince, but a prince, one of the many sons of Shabaka, king of Kush, who ruled as a god in the Kushite city of Napata.

He had no quarrel with Sebek (he had been taught that all the gods were his cousins) and was not really looking forward to the killing. But Embutah had said it was a lesson—something that must be learned.

"Don't play games," said Embutah grimly. "This isn't the day for it."

Embutah was his uncle, once a slave, now a high captain in the army. Taharka had always followed his orders without question, so now, heat or no heat, he got back in the boat. He leaned back to gaze at the shimmering blue sky, at the water birds passing overhead. A flock of storks beat by, up river from the great sea of the north, so far away that he did not believe it really existed, though his own grandfather had once seen it. He bowed his head in respect as the sacred ibis skimmed majestically by.

"Look!" said Embutah.

Taharka's heart jumped, for he thought that the crocodile had come. But it was the kingfisher, hovering still as death above them. It dove as he watched, plummeting down like a rock from the sky. The three of them—Taharka, Embutah and Net the boatman—watched spellbound, as if it had been the first time they had seen it.

So they did not realize that the crocodile was really there.

He had come swiftly, as Embutah had warned, only his dark green back showing above the water. He was very hungry and very silent and the first

they knew of his presence was the shock to the boat as he struck it with his tremendous tail.

And then the scream. A heart chilling scream, despairing and wild.

Net, the boatman, had fallen into the water.

Taharka had once seen a condemned criminal thrown to the crocodile. He had often dreamt of it. But this was real. This was Net. There was only one thing to do.

He scrambled to the spot from which Net had fallen, seizing the spear with its iron head. Embutah was shouting at him.

"No, Lord, no! Let him go! Get back!"

Sebek was already upon the boatman. Those terrible teeth were closing on his arm. Taharka struck the beast with the spear and, at the same time, saw the water redden with blood—Net's or the crocodile's, he didn't know which. But the flat head was driven aside. And suddenly Sebek had turned on him, the great jaws opened wide as in his dreams, ready to seize and crush him and drag him down.

Something struck him and threw him flat. The jaws had snapped shut, but on the empty air. Embutah was leaning over the side, his powerful hands clamped around the ugly snout, squeezing it shut.

"The spear! The spear! Remember what I taught you!"

His great muscles were trembling. The sweat was pouring down his arms.

Suddenly Taharka was very calm. He grasped the spear, positioning his hands just as Embutah had shown him. He fixed his eyes on the thrashing back of the beast, on the spot where the spear must enter, at the base of the ugly head.

He drove down the spear.

The waters churned. There was a great cry from Embutah, thrown back into the bottom of the boat. Then the waters were dyed red as Taharka had never imagined, and began to grow still.

They dragged the boatman over the side. Blood was spurting from an ugly wound in his arm where the beast's teeth had grazed him. He was trembling with pain and shock.

Taharka could see that the man might bleed to death. He knew a little of what must be done. All the children of the god were instructed in the sacred medicine at their scribe school—the formulas, the prescriptions, the magic spells. The bleeding must be stopped with a tight binding above the wound.

"I can stop the bleeding," Taharka said.

"How? We have no cloth," said Embutah.

Without thinking, Taharka tore off the fine cotton cloth—the sacred cloth, so it was said—that shielded him from the sun. He looked defiantly at Embutah. Embutah was silent. Taharka hesitated, holding it out to the aging warrior, for Embutah had stanching the blood of many battle wounds.

Embutah shook his head.

"Try your skill," he said. "You've come this far. Finish it."

Taharka gritted his teeth. He was frightened. The man's life might depend on what he did. He grasped the wounded arm, feeling for the spot where the terrible spurting must be stopped.

And suddenly he was no longer afraid. He could do it. Blood was life, but after all it was only blood, and if you stopped the leak it couldn't get out.

It must be tight enough. He needed something to twist with. He broke off a stalk of reed. He knotted the cloth in place.

The man lay in the boat, still shaking and moaning. Now that it was over, Taharka found that he was shaking too. But somehow he had never felt better in his life.

Embutah examined the dressing.

"It will hold. It wasn't as bad as I thought."

They were no longer alone. Several of the small reed boats had pulled up close, drawn by the shouts and the cries. Men with nets and wooden spears, hunting for water fowl. They stared at the boy with the emblems of the royal clan of Napata on his thin breast. They whispered together. Embutah pointed one of them out.

"You." He nodded toward the injured boatman. "Take his place."

The fowler, without question, scrambled over the side.

"Away!" Embutah shouted at the others. "What are you looking at? How dare you lift your eyes to a son of the god?"

As they pulled away, Taharka heard one of them mutter, "A son of the god! He has broken the tabu. He has laid hands on a slave. He has bound his wound with the sacred cloth."

Under the burning sun, Taharka felt suddenly cold. The tabu. The law. His flesh was not mortal flesh, he had been taught. His very clothing must not be defiled. He had forgotten about that. What would they do to him when they found out?

But he knew that, even if there had been time to think, he would have done the same.

"I had to do it," he said to Embutah.

"I know. And, you being you, I couldn't have stopped you. Hold your head up and be ready for punishment if it comes. Don't think about it now."

And, on the way back to the city, he tried not to think about it, tried to think about the approach to Napata, which he loved, with its great temple and towering tombs. The air had already begun to hum with voices. The scattered huts along the river bank thickened into clusters stretching as far as he could see.

After a while they came to a quay, and the fowler moored the boat. A chariot was waiting, the driver standing patiently beside it. Behind him stood another man with the solemn, self-important air of an

official. But Taharka thought that he looked anxious, even a little frightened.

He waited while Embutah ordered a longshoreman to take the injured boatman to one of the huts. Then he spoke.

"The Lord Taharka is commanded to appear at once in the great hall of the god."

For a moment Taharka couldn't move. Had they found out about the sacred cloth already? But the man spoke again.

"All the children of the Great House are summoned. The god is dying."

Death of a God

TAHARKA thought he could count on his fingers the number of times he had seen his father, though he had sometimes felt his eyes upon him, heard something almost like a chuckle as the awesome figure passed him in its gold-washed litter, borne on the backs of four strong men.

The god had many wives and a great many children. Some were important because their mothers were princesses. Taharka's mother was not; though, of course, the priests had made her one when the god had chosen her. She was just a girl who had been brought with other slaves and a cargo of gold up from the far off Zambesi River. She had died some years before, and Embutah, her brother, was all that Taharka had left of her.

So Taharka was not one of the important children of the god. But they all played together and learned together in the women's quarters—learned reading and writing, languages and dancing, magic and heal-

ing and the many laws and tabus of Kush—and, above all, the lore of the gods, their cousins.

Today, Taharka was not taken back to the house of the women. Just as he was, looking like a boatman's boy, he was brought into the god's great chamber to see his father die. The sweat on his face was cold now as he joined the throng of children—brothers, sisters, cousins of all degrees—some of them shivering with fear, some giggling softly in nervous excitement.

His cousin, Shepnuset, was there. Bad little Shepnuset, who had stolen a lamb from the kitchen. They had been keeping a close watch on her since the day another cousin, whose mind had not grown with his body, had reached out smiling to touch a poisonous asp. Shepnuset, attacking the creature with a stick, had almost gotten herself killed. That would have been a disaster, for Shepnuset was the niece and destined heir of Taharka's great aunt, the high priestess of Amon, who ruled as the god's deputy for Egypt in far off Thebes. She would one day be almost more sacred than the king himself.

Taharka liked to look at her. Even today he could not help looking at her, though the other children whispered that she was really not that pretty. It was on the day of the killing of the asp that he had decided that marriage might not be so bad after all. Of course there was no question of his marrying Shepnuset. She was destined for his half-brother Shabataka. That, he thought, was as it should be.

Shabataka. Sixteen years old, tall, strong, grave and handsome. After today, the god. There was no doubt about that. The priests had prepared for it for years. Only Shabataka could really be said to know his father. Only Shabataka was allowed to slip into his presence unannounced. Only Shabataka could stand at his side, listening and learning while the Lord of Kush gave audience. Taharka's reverence for his older brother was second only to his reverence for the god himself. What must Shabataka be feeling now? he wondered. Grief, certainly.

The god himself was not seated on the golden stool as Taharka had always seen him before. His cedarwood couch had been carried into the great hall. He lay upon it, propped up on cushions, his breath faint, his clouded eyes wandering over the faces of the priests and magicians and captains and the many wives and children.

"Why are they here?" he whispered. "Must I give a judgment?"

The priest of Sebek the crocodile was on his knees beside the couch.

"Yes, a judgment, Great God. The time has come. You must take the wand of succession in your hand. You must declare your choice."

"My sons," said the god Shabaka. "Bring them to me. Pi-Ankhi—Shabataka—Kashta—Taharka—"

"Taharka, no!" said the crocodile priest. He raised his head from the ground and spoke so all could hear him. "The Lord Taharka has broken a tabu. He

has touched the flesh of a slave. His godhood is sullied. We will pass judgment on him later."

Taharka could not have moved. They knew! How had they known so quickly? It didn't matter. They knew.

The god was speaking. His voice was stronger.

"*We* will pass judgment? *I* am the god on earth. *I* will pass judgment. Taharka my son, seed of my father Pi-Ankhi, seed of my father Kashta the king, come to me."

On his knees and elbows Taharka crawled the length of the stone floor to his father's couch. The god's voice was weaker now.

"Why have you done this thing?"

Taharka raised his head.

"The man would have died," he whispered.

Though it was forbidden to look into the god's eyes, Taharka knew that, through the mist of weakness and pain, they were as hard as the black rock of the holy mountain. In terror, he searched for words that the god would understand.

Suddenly he found them. He straightened on his knees and his voice rang out as firmly as the voice of the priest of Sebek.

"The man belonged to the God. Everything belongs to the God—the water of the river, the grain in the fields, the laborers and priests and chieftains of the land. I, too, am the slave of the God. I must preserve what belongs to you, Great God Shabaka."

The great god Shabaka fell back upon his cushion.

A groan of dismay ran around the great chamber. If the dying man had used up his strength on this trifling matter, what would become of the succession? Would the land be left without a god on earth to bring the rising of the sun and the flooding of the river and the growth of the grain?

But the god had raised a trembling hand. The priest of the sun in Napata hastened to place within it the wand of gold, the magic wand of succession, the scepter of the god. The wand wavered a moment, then fell. Its tip pointed toward the boy kneeling beside the couch.

There was a long moment's silence. The figure on the couch did not move. At last the priest of the sun broke the silence.

"The Great God," he said, "has become one with his father. See the wand of succession. It has declared his choice."

The priests, the warriors, the many wives and children, fell upon their knees, their foreheads pressed to the cold floor of the chamber. Taharka heard again the voice of the sun priest.

"Taharka, child of the god, rise."

He was trembling. What did it mean? What had happened? Was he to be punished now?

His hands were being crossed upon his breast. Something cold and smooth was being pressed into them.

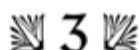
It was the golden wand of the god.

"Take possession of the land, Taharka, soul of the

hawk, beautiful child of Ra, son of the sun, bringer of the Nile, Lord of Kush, Great God of Napata and Meroe, and Pharaoh of Egypt."

Taharka had become a god.

He had also received his punishment.



Shabataka

THE PUNISHMENT was this: Taharka, the Kushite boy, was now all those things that the priest of the sun had called him. He was king of a land that stretched from the mouth of the Nile on the Northern Sea—some day to be known as the Mediterranean Sea—to the southern border of Kush.

He was immensely rich. He owned copper mines in the Sinai desert, gold mines in the highlands of Ethiopia and the jungles of Zimbabwe. He owned every inch of farmland and forest land, every wild beast and every goat and sheep and cow. He also owned every man, woman and child, and every fruit of their labor, for he was the god on earth.

As the god, he had many duties. He must be up before the sun and in his golden chair, carried by four porters around the walls of the Great House—for if he were not there, the sun would not rise at all! He must be on his golden stool before the sun was high to receive the gifts of foreign princes and tribal chiefs (which were then shut away somewhere

where he would probably never see them again.) There were the judgments, and this he hated most of all, for the sun priest had already decided them, and cruel as they might be, he was expected to pronounce them. After a while, he let the sun priest make the pronouncements himself. The sun priest raised no objections.

And there were the tabus. Now that he was the god, so many things were forbidden him. He could eat no meat but the flesh of a calf or a goose, and only flat bread made without yeast. Only at certain hours of the day, or at festivals, was he allowed outside the walls of the Great House; and then his head must be covered by the double crown and his feet must not touch the ground. The day of the crocodile hunt, the sun on his skin, the mud on his feet, began to seem like a wonderful, impossible dream.

Taharka had become a prisoner, a prisoner who must not even dream of escape. For if any of the tabus were broken, he knew that disaster would come upon the people. The sun would not rise in the morning, the river would not rise, and all the land would dry up and wither away.

He was very lonely. Those who spoke to him must kneel, their faces to the ground, for it was believed that the sight of Pharaoh's radiant face would strike a man blind. For that matter, not many people were allowed to speak to him at all.

Of course, there was Shepnuset.

Shepnuset, the untouchable Shepnuset—little Prin-



RELUCTANT RULE

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IT IS AROUND 701 BC and Egypt is being ruled by the Kushite dynasty. Young Prince Taharka, interested in healing, is content to be the very minor royal son he is and leave the ruling to others. However, it is he and not the expected Prince Shabataka who succeeds to the throne of Kush and Egypt—a "divine" rulership—and he is no longer free to live his own life. Then a treacherous plot, long brewing, forces him to fly for his life.

Far from home, in the land of Judea, Taharka encounters two kings in conflict. One is the mighty Assyrian, Sennacherib, promising alliance; the other is Hezekiah, the Jew who trusts in Yahweh. Taharka, his own fate and that of his land in the balance, must choose with whom to live or die.

A never before published tale, by the author of best-selling *Hittite Warrior*. Introduction, with home-education suggestions, by Daria Sockey.



RL 4.3 • Ages 10-up