



# Bartimaeus and the Ring of Solomon

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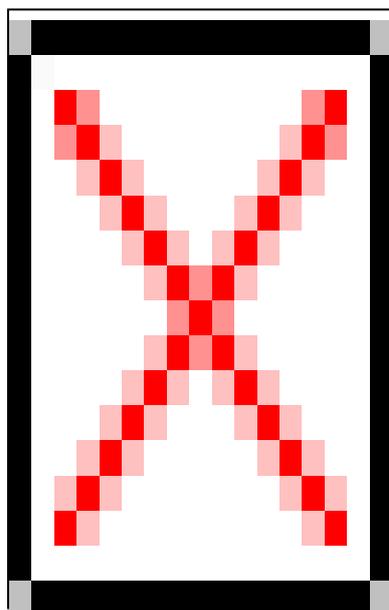
[185](#) [2]

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**Bartimaeus and the Ring of Solomon**

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## 1

Sunset above the olive groves. The sky, like a bashful youth kissed for the first time, blushed with a peach-pink light. Through the open windows came the gentlest of breezes, carrying the fragrances of evening. It stirred the hair of the young woman standing alone and pensive in the centre of the marble floor, and caused her dress to flutter against the contours of her lean, dark limbs.

She lifted a hand; slim fingers toyed with a ringlet of hair beside her neck. 'Why so shy, my lord?' she whispered. 'Come near and let me look on you.'

In the opposite pentacle the old man lowered the wax cylinder in his hand and glared at me with his single eye. 'Great Jehovah, Bartimaeus! You don't think that's going to work on *me*?'

My eyelashes quivered beguilingly. 'I'll dance too, if you'll only step a *little* closer. Come on, spoil yourself. I'll do you the Twirl of the Seven Veils.'

The magician spoke with irritation. 'No, thank you. And you can stop that too.'

'Stop what?'

'That . . . that *jiggling about*. Every now and then you? *There!* You did it again!'

?Oh, come on, sailor, live a little. What's putting you off??

My master uttered an oath. ?Possibly your clawed left foot. Possibly your scaly tail. Also possibly the fact that even a new-born babe would know not to step outside his protective circle when requested to do so by a wicked, duplicitous spirit such as yourself. Now silence, cursed creature of air, and abandon your pathetic temptations, or I shall strike you sideways with such a Pestilence as even great Egypt never suffered!?

The old boy was quite excited, all out of breath, his white hair a disordered halo around his head. From behind his ear he took a stylus and grimly made a notation on the cylinder. ?There's a black mark there for you, Bartimaeus,? he said. ?*Another* one. If this line gets filled, you'll be off the special allowances list for good, you understand. No more roasted imps, no time off, nothing. Now, I've a job for you.?

The maiden in the pentacle folded her arms. She wrinkled her dainty nose. ?I've just done a job.?

?Well, now you've got another one.?

?I'll do it when I've had a rest.?

?You'll do it this very night.?

?Why should *I* do it? Send Tufec or Rizim.?

A bright jag of scarlet lightning issued from the forefinger of the old man, looped across the intervening space and set my pentacle aflame, so that I wailed and danced with mad abandon.

The crackling ceased; the pain in my feet lessened. I came to an ungainly standstill.

?You were right, Bartimaeus,? the old man chuckled. ?You *do* dance well. Now, are you going to give me any more backchat? If so, another notch upon the cylinder it shall be.?

?No, no ? there's no need for that.?

To my great relief the stylus was slowly replaced behind the aged ear. I clapped my hands vigorously. ?So, another job, you say? What joy! I'm humbled that you have selected me from among so many other worthy djinn. What brought me to your attention tonight, great Master? The ease with which I slew the giant of Mount Lebanon? The zeal with which I put the Canaanite rebels to flight? Or just my general reputation??

The old man scratched his nose. ?None of that; rather it was your behaviour last night, when the watch-imps observed you in the form of a mandrill swaggering through the undergrowth below the Sheep Gate, singing lewd songs about King Solomon and loudly extolling your own magnificence.?

The maiden gave a surly shrug. ?Might not have been me.?

?The words ?Bartimaeus is best?, repeated at tedious length, suggest otherwise.?

?Well, all right. So I'd had too many mites at supper. No harm done.?

?No harm? The Watch reported it to their supervisor, who reported it to me. I reported it to High Magician Hiram, and I believe it has since come to the ears of the king himself.?

His face became all prim and starchy. ?He is not pleased.?

I blew out my cheeks. ?Can't he tell me so in person??

The magician's eye bulged; it looked like an egg emerging from a chicken.<sup>1</sup> ?You dare suggest,? he cried, ?that great Solomon, King of all Israel, master of all lands from the Gulf of Aqaba to the broad Euphrates, would deign to speak with a sulphurous slave such as you? The idea! In all my years I have heard nothing so offensive!?

?Oh, come, come. Look at the state of you. Surely you must have.?

Two more notches, Bartimaeus, for your effrontery and cheek. Out came the cylinder; the stylus scratched upon it furiously. Now then, enough of your nonsense. Listen to me closely. Solomon desires new wonders for his collection. He has commanded his magicians to search the known world for objects of beauty and power. At this very moment, in all the wall-towers of Jerusalem, my rivals conjure demons no less hideous than you and send them out like fiery comets to plunder ancient cities, north, south, east and west. All hope to astound the king with the treasures they secure. But they will be disappointed, Bartimaeus, will they not, for *we* will bring him the finest prize of all. You understand me?

The pretty maiden curled her lip; my long, sharp teeth glinted wetly. Grave-robbing again? Solomon should be doing seedy stuff like this himself. But no, as usual he can't be bothered to lift his finger and use the Ring. How lazy can you get?

The old man gave a twisted smile. The black hollow of his lost eye seemed to suck in light. Your opinions are interesting. So much so that I shall depart right now and report them to the king. Who knows? Perhaps he will choose to lift his finger and use the Ring on *you*.

There was a slight pause, during which the shadows of the room grew noticeably deeper, and a chill ran up my shapely spine. No need, I growled. I'll get him his precious treasure. Where do you want me to go, then?

My master gestured to the windows, through which the cheery lights of lower Jerusalem winked and shone. Fly east to Babylon, he said. One hundred miles south-east of that dread city, and thirty miles south of the Euphrates's current course, lie certain mounds and ancient diggings, set about with fragments of wind-blown wall. The local peasants avoid the ruins for fear of ghosts, while any nomads keep their flocks beyond the furthest tumuli. The only inhabitants of the region are religious zealots and other madmen, but the site was not always so desolate. Once it had a name.

Eridu, I said softly. I know. (2)

Strange must be the memories of a creature such as you, who has seen such places rise and fall . . . The old man gave a shudder. I do not like to dwell on it. But if you recall the location, so much the better! Search its ruins, locate its temples. If the scrolls speak truly, there are many sacred chambers there, containing who knows what antique glory! With luck, some of the treasures will have remained undisturbed.

No doubt about *that*, I said, given its guardians.

Ah yes, the ancients will have protected them well! The old man's voice rose to a dramatic pitch; his hands made eloquent fluttering gestures of dismay. Who knows what lurks there still? Who knows what prowls the ruins? Who knows what hideous shapes, what monstrous forms might? Will you stop doing that with your tail? It's not hygienic.

I drew myself up. All right, I said. I get the picture. I'll go to Eridu and see what I can find. But when I get back I want to be dismissed straight off. No arguments, no shilly-shallying. I've been on Earth too long now and my essence aches like a mouldering tooth.

My master grinned a gummy grin, stuck his chin towards me and wagged a wrinkled finger. That all depends on what you bring back, doesn't it, Bartimaeus? If you impress me, I may let you go. See that you do not fail! Now prepare yourself. I shall bind you to your purpose.

Midway through his incantation the horn blew hard below the window, signalling the closure of the Kidron Gate. It was answered, further off, by the sentries on the Sheep Gate, Prison Gate, Horse and Water Gates, and so on round the city walls, until the great horn on the palace roof was sounded and all Jerusalem was safe and sealed for the night. A year or two back I'd have hoped such distractions would make my master stumble on his words, so that I might have leaped forth and devoured him. I didn't bother hoping now. He was too old and too experienced. I needed something better than that if I was going to get him.

The magician finished, spoke the final words. The pretty maiden's body became soft and see-through; for an instant I

hung together like a statue formed of silken smoke, then burst soundlessly into nothing.

*1 Rizim had put the other eye out on a rare occasion when our master had made a slight mistake with the words of his summoning. We'd additionally managed to scorch his backside once or twice, and there was a scar on his neck where I'd come close with a lucky ricochet, but despite a long career commanding more than a dozen formidable djinn, the magician remained vigorous and spry. He was a tough old bird.*

*2 Eridu of the Seven Temples, the bone-white city, glittering in green fields. One of the earliest cities of men. In its day its ziggurats rose high as falcon's flight, and the scent of its spice markets drifted on the winds as far as Uruk and the sea . . . Then the river changed its course, the land went dry. The people grew thin and cruel; their temples toppled into dust, and they and their past were utterly forgotten. Except by spirits such as me. And, naturally ? whenever their gold lust overcame their fears ? by magicians too.*

[Read our review of Bartimaeus and the Ring of Solomon](#)[3]

Page Number:

35

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