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of the *Mantle*

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# *Miracles of the Mantle*



**Pacific Press® Publishing Association**

Nampa, Idaho

Oshawa, Ontario, Canada

[www.pacificpress.com](http://www.pacificpress.com)

Cover design by Gerald Lee Monks  
Cover resources from Lars Justinen  
Inside design by Aaron Troia

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Additional copies of this book may be obtained by calling toll-free 1-800-765-6955 or  
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ISBN 13: 978-0-8163-2453-8  
ISBN 10: 0-8163-2453-0

## *Dedication*

This book is dedicated to my son, Steve, who has been a source of pride and inspiration for me. My prayer is that Steve will take his stand for the One true God as Nathan did in this story, and that he will discover the power in the “Mantle.”



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## *Chapter 1*

Rivulets of sweat trickled down Nathan's face as he set down the full clay jar of water to rest his tired arms. He hated hauling water from the village well halfway across town. Hauling water was girls' work, but there was no one else to do it. His older brother, Reuben, wouldn't; he had no sisters, and his mother had enough to do without having to walk to the nearest village well twice a day to bring home water.

For as long as anyone could remember, Bethel, Nathan's hometown, had been known for its wells supplied by bubbling springs with the best water anywhere around. Longer than anyone could remember, longer than any of the ancient chronicles kept by the city elders, the wells had been there before the coming of wicked King Ahab and his wife Queen Jezebel. The springs had been around before good King David and before the times of the judges. In fact, a thousand years before, when father Abraham had first settled in these parts, the wells had been here with their springs of water, cool and invigorating and sweet.

But Bethel had been known for other things too. When the tribe of Ephraim had conquered the idolatrous Canaanite, it had become an important religious center. For centuries it had been used by famous judges like Deborah and Samuel and by kings such as Saul and David. And when the ten northern tribes of Israel split from Judah, Jeroboam set himself up as king and established Bethel as a center for the worship of Baal, a god represented by a golden calf.

Nathan splashed water on his dusty face as a little gray lizard skittered across his pathway and then up onto the top of a stone wall beside the village winepress. The little creature stopped for a moment and cocked his head to one side as if to inspect the boy. Nathan's dusty clothes and dirt-streaked face were a sight, but the boy didn't care. He pushed his shock of black hair away from his eyes and picked up the water jar again. *Better get this water back home before people begin coming out into the streets again*, Nathan thought. Having people see him doing girls' work was something he wanted to avoid.

But as he hoisted the jar to his shoulder and glanced up the street toward the city gate, he saw that he was too late. Amzi, a popular ring-leader in town, and his gang of teenage ruffians had already spotted Nathan from the shade of an archway over the city's huge iron gates.

"Well, what do we have here?" Amzi crowed. Scowling, he stepped out from the shadows and pointed in Nathan's direction. "It's the Water Boy, come to do a girl's work!" Eight other boys followed Amzi into the sunshine, with hands on their hips and sneers curling their mouths.

What could Nathan say? He *was* doing women's work, and he had let them catch him at it! But it didn't make him want to stick around and discuss it. In fact, he suddenly had the urge to drop the water jar he was carrying and make a run for it. He was fast enough to outrun them all. But he knew it would do him no good to run now. Amzi and the others would just catch up with him sometime, somewhere, and then they'd probably beat him up for being a coward and running off like a scared chicken.

Nathan didn't say anything as he watched the gang leader swagger down the hard-packed dirt street toward him, his gang of hooligans behind him. Amzi had picked fights with Nathan before. He was a year older than Nathan, and Nathan always came out the loser.

Nathan didn't know much about Amzi, but the boy was obviously a troubled lad. At least that's what Nathan's mother always said every time Nathan came home with torn clothes or a black eye. "That boy's mother ought to teach him some manners!" she would always add with a flash of righteous indignation as she put ointment on a cut or a fig poultice on a swollen eye.

No matter. He set the jar down again and stood in the middle of the street. Better to face them now and take whatever it was they had in store for him.

Amzi walked right up to Nathan and got in his face. “We don’t like you!” he snarled, flicking strands of hair from in front of his black eyes. “We don’t like your family, and we don’t want you in this town! Why don’t you just get your stuff and go back to wherever it was that you came from?” Amzi snorted and glanced over his shoulder at his friends as they began jeering.

“Our family’s been here long enough.” Nathan stood his ground. “My father came here to work before any of you guys were born, so we’ve got just as much right to be here as any of you!”

“Woo-hoo!” Amzi narrowed his eyes to mere slits as he squinted at Nathan scornfully. “I’m really impressed with your big talk, water boy! Who cares about your family and your father? Who cares about that crazy prophet school your pa worked at way up on the hill? You’ve got no friends in this town, and that means you’re a nobody!” Amzi leaned in even closer to Nathan, his nose almost touching Nathan’s nose. “You’re just a mangy dog like your papa was before you!”

Nathan’s eyes flashed. When Amzi talked like that, it made him mad! Dogs were just about the lowest kind of animal around. Packs of them roved the streets of Bethel looking for anything they could find to eat. They ranged over the countryside, attacking and killing lambs and even sheep.

How dare Amzi compare Nathan’s father to a thieving dog! Nathan’s father, Laadan, son of Zimmah, had been a good man from the northern hill country of Ephraim. He had come south years before to be an instructor in the Bethel school of the prophets under Prophet Elijah. And he had been a good one, Nathan had been told, caring for the students at the school like they were his own family.

But Amzi didn’t care anything about that! All he cared about was himself and his rude, crude gang. “Come on, Water Boy!” he shouted as he began circling Nathan. “Let’s see what you’ve got! Anybody who worships Jehovah has got to be a stripling and easy to whip. Jehovah’s the weakest god around!”

“You think so?” Nathan heard himself say. “How so? Prophet Elijah serves Jehovah, and Elijah is no weakling! He has more power than you’ll ever have!”

“Elijah? Ha! I’ve seen him come through town before. Looks like a crazy man with that wild hair and big beard of his—isn’t that right, guys?” The boys all began laughing.

“And now he always brings that other guy with him too. The one with no hair on the top of his head. We call him Baldy. He’s as bald as the other guy is hairy!”

Nathan cringed at Amzi’s disrespect for Prophet Elijah. It wasn’t right! Not right at all, but there was nothing he could do about it. After all, the odds here were nine to one.

“Too bad you don’t worship Baal, ’cause he’s gonna help me beat you bad!” Amzi sneered as he continued circling Nathan. The horrible taunts against Jehovah kept coming, but Nathan hardly heard them. He was too angry for words now.

First, Amzi had insulted Nathan’s father, then Elijah, and now Jehovah! How could anyone curse God like that? Amzi had no shame! Bethel had become a horrible town, and Amzi and his gang were just another example of what Queen Jezebel had done to the country of Israel! It all started with her rampages against Jehovah’s people. Then she brought in hundreds of her own idolatrous priests and prophets to change the way people worshiped in Israel! People no longer talked about Jehovah, the true God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob! When they came to the temples and holy shrines in the groves of trees on the highest hills in Israel, they worshiped Baal and Asherah!

And Nathan’s family had become caught in the middle of it. When Nathan’s father had spoken out against Queen Jezebel and her wicked forms of worship, she became angry. To everyone’s horror, she promptly ordered the execution of all the young men and their families at the school of the prophets in Bethel. Even King Ahab was shocked! And she would have pulled it off, too, if Nathan’s father and Obadiah, a royal official from King Ahab’s court, hadn’t risked their lives to hide them.

But, in the end, Queen Jezebel had a partial victory. She had arrested Nathan’s father on a charge of treason and had him executed.

Nathan wanted to feel sorry for himself and his family, but there was no time to think about that right now. Amzi wanted a fight, and it looked like he was going to get it. Nathan might be outnumbered, but he was going to give Amzi a fight he wouldn’t soon forget.