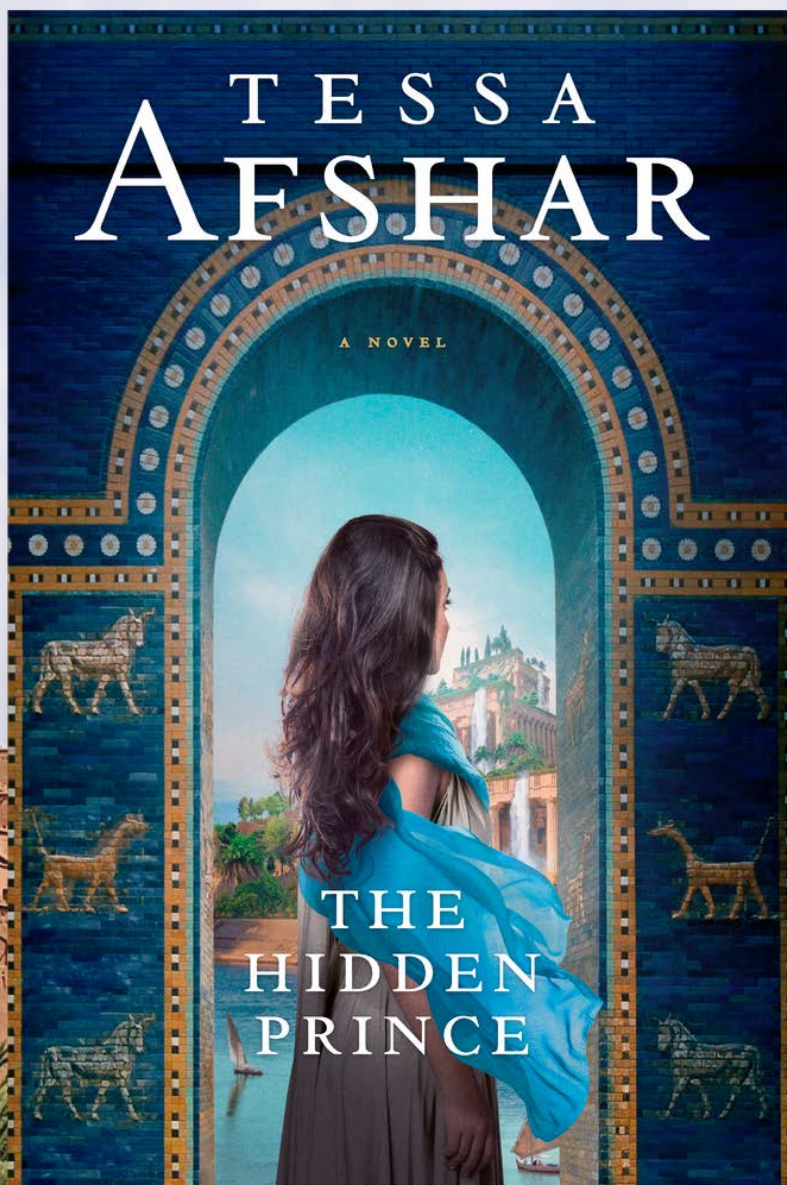


BOOK CLUB KIT



"Tessa Afshar combines adventure and romance in a fast-paced novel that kept me turning pages. I loved the way she brought so many historical figures to life. I highly recommend *The Hidden Prince*!"

Francine Rivers, *New York Times* bestselling author



About Tessa Afshar

Tessa Afshar is an award-winning author of biblical and inspirational historical fiction. She holds a master of divinity from Yale University, where she served as cochair of the Evangelical Fellowship at the Divinity School. After working in women's ministry for nearly twenty years, Tessa became a full-time writer and speaker. Tessa and her husband live in New England, where they proudly tend their mediocre garden.

Visit her website at tessaafshar.com.

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Dear brilliant book club readers,

I am so honored that you have chosen to read *The Hidden Prince*. I hope you will find the world of ancient Babylon and Persia as captivating as I did.

The Hidden Prince tells the story of a young woman who loses everything and discovers that her destiny is forged in the midst of that loss. Keren's experiences remind us that the best is waiting around the corner, just a few steps beyond the worst. I hope you will have a few belly laughs along the way, one or two I-didn't-see-that-coming curveball gasps, and if you shed a tear or two, please forgive me!

-Tessa



Q&A with Tessa Afshar



**Tessa Afshar
talks about her
research for the
novel, why she
wrote Keren's
story, and more!**

[Read this interview with your
book club to gain more insight
into the story.](#)

What are some challenges involved in researching and writing about this period in Israel's history?

The Hidden Prince takes place more than a decade after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. A great number of Judeans have been taken captive by this time and are living in various parts of Babylonia. We know certain things about their lives in this period. But many of the daily details remain hidden from us. Complicating our understanding of the Judean captive's life is the fact that they did not seem to live a one-size-fits-all existence. They appear to have occupied many roles, from slave to palace official.

Life in Ecbatana and Anshan seemed shrouded in even greater mysteries. As an author, I found the research into this complicated era daunting and yet undeniably exhilarating. I was writing the story of events and nations both well-known to us and also hidden by the mists of time.

Continued on next page

What inspiration and ideas led to Keren, your protagonist in *The Hidden Prince*?

I wanted to portray a woman who, in the course of the novel, loses everything and discovers that her destiny is forged in the midst of that loss. Keren grows up as a captive. But in that captivity, she is able to discover and use her gifting. That discovery is further enlarged by the seismic events that change her life. At the height of discouragement, Keren is presented with a mystery: teaching a shepherd boy how to become a king. I love this thread, because it draws the two halves of the novel together and pulls the events of the larger world onto the smaller stage of Keren's life.

Can you tell us a little about Jared, Keren's friend and love interest?

Jared is born into minor nobility and, like Keren, has grown up as a Judean captive in Babylon. As such, he has to negotiate through life as a second-class citizen without growing bitter and resentful. He holds on to his faith during a time when other Judeans are being absorbed into Babylonian culture and religious practice.

When Jared is injured during a tragic accident, he discovers that chronic pain is not merely a physical issue. *The Hidden Prince* examines the emotional and spiritual fallout of how a good God could allow a terrible loss. In one scene, Jared has a conversation with himself that captures our struggle with God during seasons of unexpected and protracted suffering. Ultimately, Jared learns to resist the erroneous conclusions about God that his heart is struggling against.

What is your hope for readers of this novel?

First, as with any good story, I hope they will find themselves escaping into a different realm populated by friends they love. If that world should come alive for the reader in a fresh way, allowing for a deeper understanding of the world of the Bible, then so much the better. I also hope that Keren and Jared's inner journeys throughout this story will offer my readers new insight into possibilities for their own future, regardless of where they find themselves today.



1. This type of novel is called “biblical fiction,” a genre that sets stories during the time of the Old or New Testament and incorporates people we know of from the Bible (in this case, the prophet Daniel and the prophesied Cyrus). Do you enjoy reading biblical fiction? What are its benefits for contemporary readers? What are its drawbacks?

2. Did you enjoy the historical information about the lands of Persia, Media, and Babylon and their customs? In what ways does it add to or detract from the story?

3. From the time we first meet Keren, it’s clear that she is both intelligent and adventurous. How do these characteristics prepare her for the tasks she’s called to undertake? Do you have personality traits that have uniquely prepared you for challenges you’ve faced?

4. When Daniel takes Keren to the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon, he tells her they are an illustration of God’s promises. Do you find evidence of God’s love and provision in nature?

Discussion Questions

Use these questions to jumpstart your book club's discussion of *The Hidden Prince*.

5. Daniel teaches his young students about the word endure, which is often repeated in Scripture. “We think of hardship when we think of endurance. But sometimes, when God whispers endure, he isn’t talking about pain. He is talking about love. His love for you endures.” How have you experienced both types of enduring in your life?

6. Jared's father appeals to the ancient Code of Hammurabi, which demands "an eye for an eye." Jesus referred to this in Matthew 5:38-42. What was his take on it?

7. Daniel tells Keren, "Your mistake has not destroyed God's ability to fulfill his will in your life." Have you—or someone you care about—ever made a mistake that seemed as if it might derail God's plans? How have you seen God's restoration and grace in such situations? What encouragement would you give someone who is currently struggling with something like this?

8. Daniel tells Jared about his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace and how they pledged to continue serving God even if he didn't deliver them. (You'll find this story in the Bible in the book of Daniel, chapter 3.) Have you ever had to choose to continue loving and serving God, even

though he didn't answer your prayers in the way you wanted him to? What helped you to make that choice, or is it something you are still struggling with?

9. As she is setting out for her new life, Keren remembers the story of Jacob dreaming of a ladder to heaven. (You'll find this story in the Bible in the book of Genesis, chapter 28.) She prays, "Set the foot of your ladder right here, my Lord. Be with me and keep me." How is this image a comforting one? Where would you like to ask God to set the foot of his ladder for you?

10. Jared realizes he has two stories to live—two different ways, both true, to look at what has happened to him. What situations in your life could be viewed from different perspectives? Why is it sometimes helpful to reframe our circumstances like this?

11. What do you think is next for Jared, Keren, and their children? For Cyrus? Are you eager to see where the author takes them in the next book?

12. The book ends with Daniel's reminder of God's promise, through the prophet Jeremiah, that he will make a "new covenant" with his people: "One day, another will come. A true Savior. One with power to write God's law on our hearts. And blessed are those who live under his rule." (You'll find this prophecy in the Bible in the book of Jeremiah, chapter 31.) Jesus referred to this in Luke 22:19-20, during the Last Supper. What does God's new covenant mean for us today? Have you entered into this covenant with him?





SPOILER ALERT

Historical Note

By Tessa Afshar

History has bequeathed to us several different accounts of Cyrus's childhood. Sources referring to Cyrus's early life are predominantly Greek, and like other ancient Greek histories, they represent an amalgam of legend and truth, and at times it is hard to tell one from the other. For the purposes of this novel, I relied on the most well-known account, which is recorded by Herodotus. Since I am a novelist rather than a biographer, I could not resist this exquisite, though probably mythical, early narrative about the boyhood of one of the world's most famous kings.

Of course, Herodotus's legend does not mention Jewish companions who helped save Cyrus from Astyages's bloodthirsty clutches. Keren's presence in young Cyrus's life is purely fictional, as is the novel's account of Cyrus's return to his parents, starting with his escape from Ecbatana.

After Cyrus created his dynastic empire, the Persian court became populated by many well-respected foreigners, including talented Jewish administrators such as Daniel and Nehemiah. This story attempts to provide a believable narrative that explains, in part, Cyrus's later attitude toward Jews, and indeed, all the captives whom he set free.

Continued on next page —————>

The Hidden Prince tries to capture the beginnings of a time in Persian history when Jews and Persians were friends and nations became better and stronger thanks to that friendship.

Many of the characters in this novel are based on historical figures. These include Daniel, Cyrus, Harpagus, Astyages, Cambyses, Mandana (the Persian pronunciation of Cyrus's mother's name), and Nebuchadnezzar. The Bible is silent on whether Daniel was married or single. Some historians have even concluded that he might have been a eunuch. I saw no evidence of this and chose to give him a family.

While this novel is a work of my imagination, where possible I have tried to remain faithful to historical and archaeological details. If you are interested in further reading, I recommend the classic textbook *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* by Pierre Briant and *Discovering Cyrus: The Persian Conqueror Astride the Ancient World* by Reza Zarghamee. The events of chapter 54 surrounding the disputed coat are based on a story told by the Greek historian Xenophon about Cyrus's childhood, which I found in Zarghamee's book, *Discovering Cyrus*. Although Otanes is a fictional character, the general story felt like a perfect fit for this thread of the novel. Biblical references to Cyrus include Isaiah 44:28–45:7; Jeremiah 51:11, 28-29; 2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-11 and 5:14-15. Some of these verses were written decades before Cyrus was born and are considered prophetic in nature, while others describe the return of the Jewish captives to Jerusalem and Cyrus's role in those events.

During my reading of the book of Jeremiah, I was reminded of a riveting talk given by the beautiful Jennifer Kennedy Dean, author of *Heart's Cry* and *Live a Praying Life*. Years ago, I heard Jennifer speak about Moab "settling on his dregs" (as described in Jeremiah 48:11). While I have no notes from that presentation, I believe I have captured some of its essence in Keren's ruminations in chapter 31. Jennifer is with the Lord now, but her teachings live on as evidenced by this paragraph in my book. Even though this is not a direct quote, it was Jennifer's presentation that birthed the idea.

I'd like to make special mention of my friend Diane Galloway, who during a conversation told me, "Grace means allowing room for someone to grow." I was so struck by this notion that I used it in chapter 53 as Keren's response to a painful situation.

In the timeline of *The Hidden Prince*, Persia is a small kingdom, growing in independence, but nowhere near the power that it later became under Cyrus's leadership. His rise to glory is an extraordinary tale, fraught with danger and sprinkled with the miraculous. But that is a story for another book.



RECIPES

And a note from Tessa Afshar

This story takes place in three historical cities: Babylon, Ecbatana, and Anshan. I am going to share a little information about each city and give you a few fun recipes to help you experience these kingdoms in a more up-close and personal way.

During the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon was a wonder to behold. From its crenelated double row of walls with their glazed bricks, to the man-made canals that crisscrossed the city, to the Hanging Gardens built on the rooftop of the king's new palace, Babylon's grandeur left its visitors breathless. In the 6th century BC, when the events of *The Hidden Prince* take place, a quarter of a million people inhabited what was at that time the largest and most spectacular city in the world. Famed for its love of debauchery, Babylon became home to many of the captives from Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Several recipe tablets from ancient Babylon survive, although we don't understand all the Akkadian words and sometimes have to make an educated guess. Like most ancient recipes, they are missing amounts and detailed instructions. But considering they are over three thousand years old, it's a wonder they exist at all.

I have chosen a meat stew for you, which would probably have been made with mutton or lamb, since I mention it in the story. The Babylonians finished off the stew by adding milk. But my Jewish characters adjust the recipe to Israel's dietary laws. For those of you who are adventurous cooks, I am including the original recipe, followed by my version for the modern cook. My husband said, "Wow!" when he tried this one. Hopefully you will like it just as much.

The original recipe reads: "Meat is used. You prepare water. You add fine-grained salt, *risnatu* [scholars think this might be a barley or emmer bread], onion, Persian shallot, and milk. You crush and add leek and garlic."





Risnatu

Recipe courtesy of Tessa Afshar

Ingredients:

- 1 cup flour (I used einkorn flour, an ancient grain)
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons melted butter
- 1/3 cup warm water
- Additional butter for frying

Directions:

Mix flour, salt, melted butter, and warm water. Knead until no longer sticky. Divide into three balls. Roll out each ball to a 1/8" thickness.

Heat an iron skillet over medium heat. Add a small pat of butter. (Be careful to keep it from burning.) Cook the *risnatu* one at a time, flipping often until golden, about six minutes total.

Note: If you are pressed for time, you can use toasted whole-wheat naan instead of making risnatu.

Create a delicious pairing with *risnatu* and a tasty stew:

Across the Zagros Mountains to the east of Babylon was the second most powerful kingdom in the world: Media. The Median capital, Ecbatana, was described by Greek historians like Herodotus as having seven concentric protective walls, each with battlements that had been painted in different colors. Astyages, the king of the Medes, was the second most powerful man in the world after Nebuchadnezzar. In spite of his wealth and power, he was not a very popular man.

There are no surviving recipes from Media during this period. So I am sharing a dish from modern Iranian cuisine since that is where ancient Media was located. I have adjusted the recipe to use only ingredients that were available 2500 years ago. Today this dish is eaten with basmati rice, which wouldn't have been available during the time of Astyages. You can serve it as a stew with *risnatu* or whole-wheat naan instead.

Stew recipe on the next page —————>

P.S. Be sure to exercise caution as you make and try out this and any other recipes in the book club kit. Some ingredients may contain allergens.



Stew

Recipe courtesy of Tessa Afshar

Ingredients

- 1 lamb shank
- 3 tablespoons butter, divided
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 2 large garlic cloves, minced
- 1-1/2 cups water
- 3 shallots, chopped
- 1/4 cup dried Persian shallots, soaked and finely chopped
- 2 leeks, washed and chopped
- Salt to taste
- 1 *risnatu* cake, crumbled by hand (I skip the milk as they did in Daniel's household)



Note: If you choose to add milk, wait until toward the end of the cooking time. Otherwise the milk will separate, which is not very pretty!

First, a note on Persian shallots: They are not shallots! They are a bit like elephant garlic but have a unique flavor. You can buy them in dried form. (I found them on Amazon.) Soak them overnight. After rinsing, cut off darker bits and they are ready to use.

Salt the lamb shank to taste and brown it in a large skillet or saucepan. Set aside. Don't wash the pan!

The original recipe says "You prepare water." This is such a common part of Babylonian cooking that they don't explain how to do it. Here is how I prepared my water: In the same pan where you browned the lamb, combine 2 tablespoons butter, half of the chopped onion, and half of the minced garlic. Stir often over low heat until golden in color. Add the water and bring to boil.

Add the rest of the ingredients, including lamb, salt to taste, and *risnatu* crumbs. (I don't like raw garlic or leek, so I cooked mine first. You can save a little for garnish at the end, as per original recipe.)

Cover and let simmer for 1 to 1-1/2 hours, until the lamb is falling apart and can be cut with a fork. Serve with the rest of your *risnatu* with the stew. Delicious!



Lamb and Quince Stew

Recipe courtesy of Tessa Afshar

Ingredients:

- 1 fresh quince (you can find these in season, around September–November)
- 2 tablespoons butter, divided
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 shallots, chopped
- 2 cloves of garlic, chopped
- 1 teaspoon turmeric
- 3/4 pound lamb, cut in pieces
- 1/2 cup water
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon saffron, ground

Directions:

Peel the quince and cut it into pieces roughly the size of an orange slice. Brown in 1 tablespoon butter. Be careful as quince burns quickly. (Not that I know what that's like.) Set the quince aside.

Using the rest of the butter and the olive oil, fry the onions on low heat for a couple of minutes, then add shallots and garlic. Stir until golden. Add turmeric. Add lamb and brown it.

Add water and salt and cover. Simmer on low heat for 1 hour, or until lamb is tender enough to cut with a fork. Add additional water if necessary. You want a thick stew consistency.

After the lamb is cooked, add the saffron and quince and let simmer on low heat until the quince is tender, but not mushy (about 5 minutes). Enjoy with bread. You can use the *risnatu* from the recipe above or whole-wheat naan. If you want a more modern flavor, add the juice of half a lemon and serve with basmati rice.

Noosh-e-jaan! (Persian for “May it add pleasure to your life!”)



To the south of Media, also at the foothills of the Zagros Mountains, sat the small kingdom of Persia. Its capital city, Anshan, had once belonged to the Elamites before the Persians made it their own. Lack of water and arid conditions made this a harsh land. The Medians and Persians were cousin nations, sharing the same root language and ancestry. Although the Persians paid Media tribute, they were predominantly an independent country.

At this time in history, the Persians were a poor people. They were cattle barons and farmers. Although we have no surviving recipes, their foods would have been simple. I have included a very simple repast, still popular in Persia, and one of my lunchtime favorites. Even today, when you visit a Persian home, they will serve some form of this cheese and herb plate alongside lunch or dinner.

At the center is either thick, strained yogurt or white sheep cheese—a sort of feta, and unbelievably delicious if you can get your hands on a good variety. I found some at Whole Foods. I've included instructions on straining your own yogurt if you want to try that, or you can purchase labne (also spelled labna), sold as “Middle Eastern yogurt spread” or “kefir cheese spreadable yogurt.”

You will need 1 cup of strained yogurt, labne, or white sheep cheese and any combination of the following fresh herbs: mint, tarragon, parsley, spring onions. Place the yogurt or cheese in the center of a large plate. Surround with fresh herbs and serve with pita bread or *risnatu*.

Strained Yogurt:

- 1 cup whole-fat yogurt with live cultures
- 1/4 teaspoon salt



Line a colander with cheesecloth and set it over a bowl. Let the yogurt rest in the cloth overnight. Squeeze gently to remove any remaining water. (Don't dump the water. You can use it to cook rice in.) Add salt.

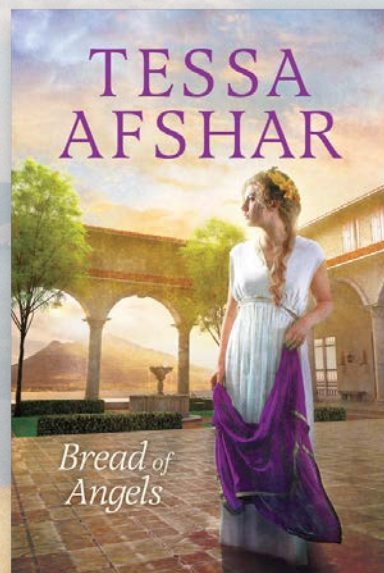
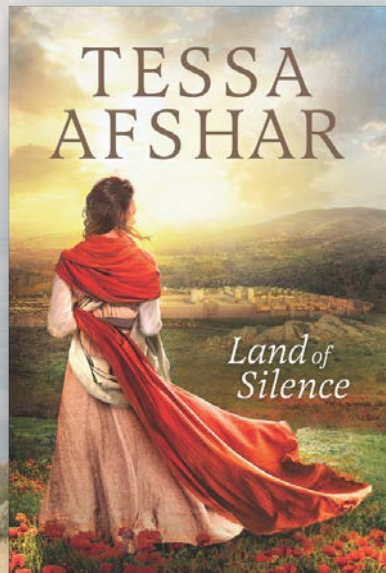
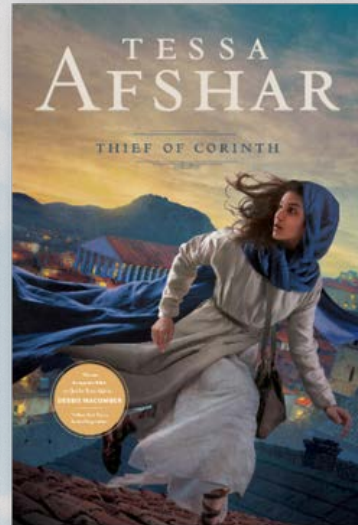
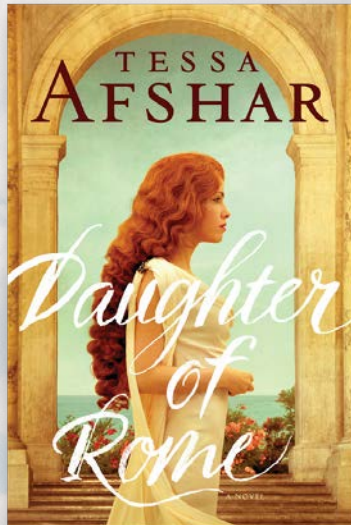
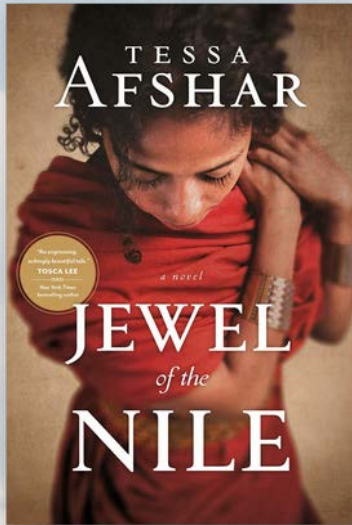
Voila! If you want a fancier version, you can add dried mint and chopped onions.

Book Club Notes

DATE: _____

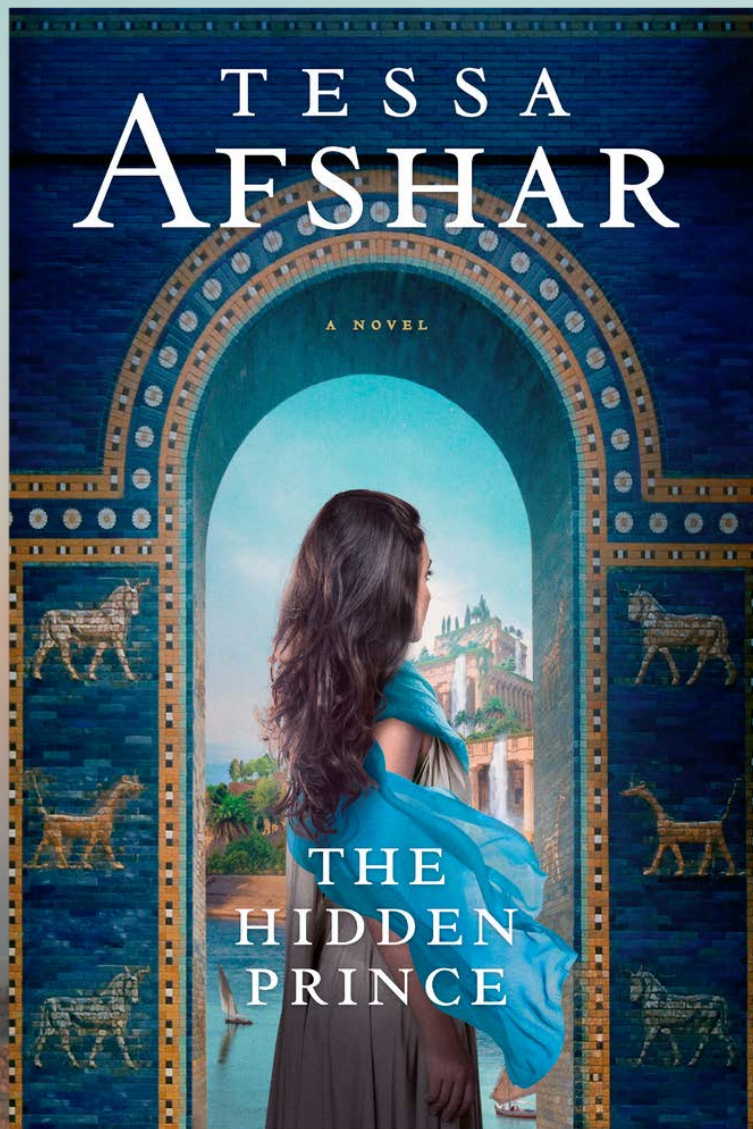
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