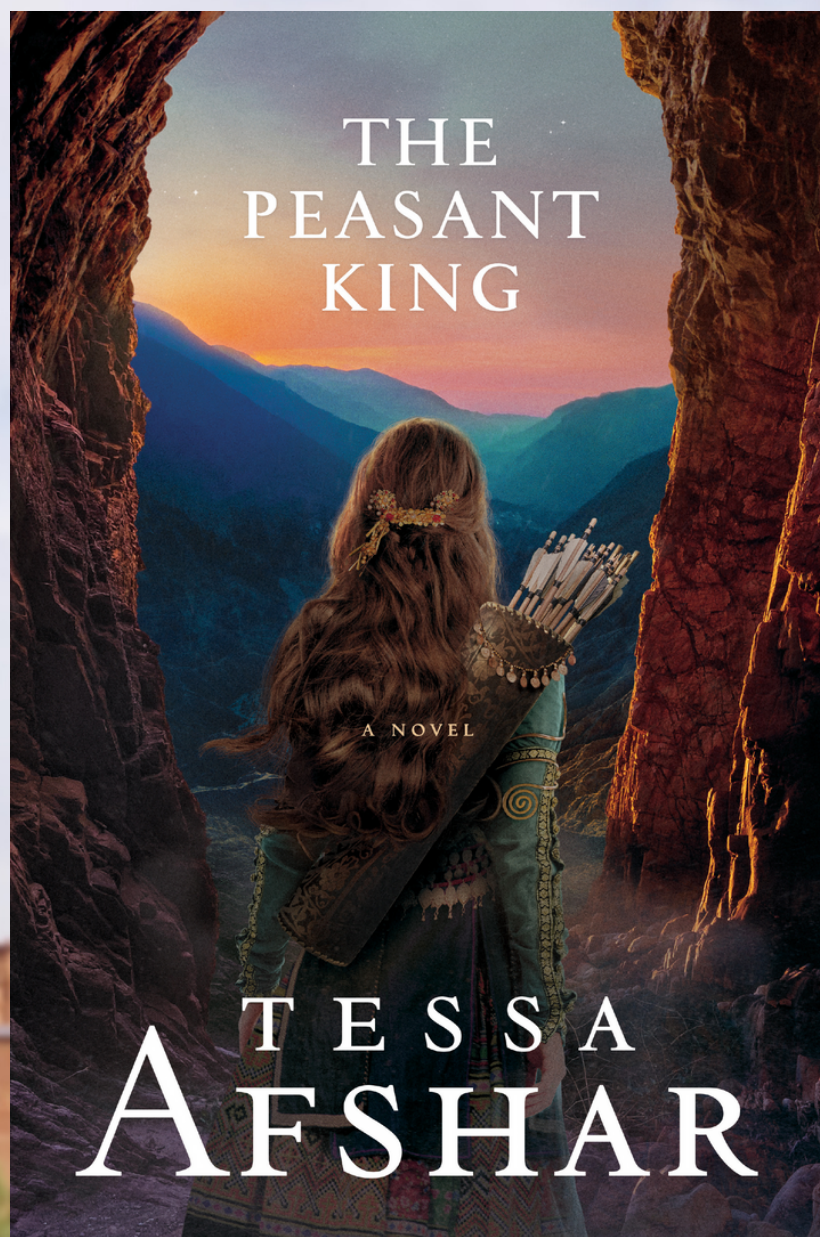


BOOK CLUB KIT



“Rich with themes about God’s presence even in dark times, *The Peasant King* is a historical romance novel in which a couple refreshes their faith in times of peril.”

Foreword Reviews



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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A note from the author

Speaking to the Judean captives in Babylon, Jeremiah said, “The Lord has stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it” (Jeremiah 51:11).

The kings of the Medes. It was the leaders of Media who would one day destroy Babylon and set the Judean captives free.

Jeremiah most likely wrote this prophecy when Cyrus was a mere boy. Long before he was in any position to win the crown of Media. As I studied the historical accounts of Cyrus’s ascension to the throne of the Medes, I realized the fulfillment of this single verse required innumerable miracles. The intricate threads of Cyrus’s story fascinated me. He needed countless tiny impossible victories to win that extraordinary conquest.

In another prophecy, Isaiah mentioned Cyrus by name, the only Gentile as far as I know to be called the Lord’s anointed:

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus . . .

“I will go before you
and level the exalted places,
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
and cut through the bars of iron.”

Isaiah 45:1-2

God himself promised to make a way for Cyrus. And in doing so, he engineered the freedom of his people from captivity in Babylon.

Cyrus the Persian became king of the Medes. But he did not do so alone. The hand of God was with him. The hands, also, of unknown men and



and women whose sacrifices fulfilled God's will in these verses. Those were the stories I wanted to capture alongside the famous one, stitching the tale of a few fictional Judeans into the fabric of the historical accounts we have of Cyrus's victory over Media.

Most of us are familiar with Cyrus in the later years of his rule. When he rode down the streets of Babylon and, as its new king, declared freedom to the captives. But before that story could be told, there was this one. There was that tiny fraction of Jeremiah's prophecy that had to be fulfilled. Cyrus had to rise up to become a king of the Medes.

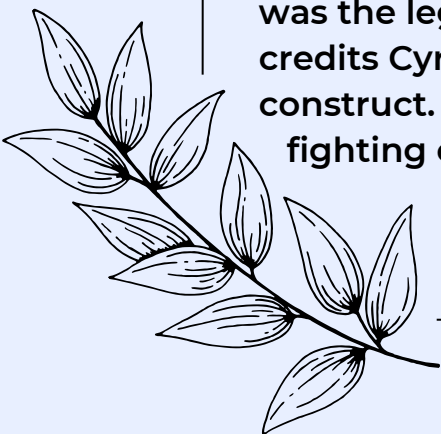
Jemmah, Asher, Zarina, Keren, Jared, and Johanan are fictional, of course. But their journey points to an inconceivable reality. God uses the courage and faith and obedience of nameless people like you and me in order to fulfill his great Kingdom plans.

Not all my characters are denizens of my imagination. Several historical people are running around the pages of this book, including Cyrus, Daniel, Astyages, and Harpagus.

The scythed chariot is a real thing. According to the ancient historian Xenophon, Cyrus made this innovation, which allowed the cavalry to penetrate a closed formation of armed infantry. Using this new technology against the seasoned Lydians, the Persians broke through the deadly hoplite forces and won another unexpected victory.

One of the more well-known features of the Persian Empire was the legendary guard known as the Immortals. Xenophon credits Cyrus with the creation of this successful military construct. I tried to depict the beginnings of this elite fighting corps at its earliest stages under Cyrus's reign.

Incidentally, the Persian king was also fond of his spies. Hence Prexaspes. Cyrus might not have had an actual spy who was a waste remover.



But I bet he wished he did.

While it is historically accurate that the Persians lacked a written language, not all scholars agree Cyrus devised the Old Persian alphabet. I found enough evidence to credit him (and Johanan, since I reasoned Cyrus would have needed the help of at least one scholar) with the invention. (See *Discovering Cyrus: The Persian Conqueror Astride the Ancient World* by Reza Zarghamee.) However, written Old Persian never became very popular. If you have been trying to pronounce some of the names in this novel, you know why.

The scenes depicting the events of the last battle against Astyages are based on the reports of ancient historians such as Nicholas of Damascus, Polyaeus, and Justin. The battle seems filled with inexplicable moments where the whole tide of events turns inconceivably in favor of the Persians. Even the role the women of Pasargadae play in encouraging their disheartened army seems the stuff of Hollywood rather than the realm of history. Cyrus had no business winning that victory against such a mighty force. But he did. Miraculous. Told you so.

A word on Zarina's background: The Sakas and their close relatives, the Scythians, were a collection of nomadic tribes spread throughout a vast landmass north of the Persian Empire. Fierce warriors, they spent their days on horseback and welcomed women as soldiers. Recent DNA studies of Saka remains have revealed a blue- or green-eyed, fair-skinned people. However, excavations of burial sites suggest that the ancient Saka lords had a fondness for women with Asian features. Now you know how Zarina came into existence!

If you read *Harvest of Rubies* and *Harvest of Gold*, my other books based in the Achaemenid period of the Persian Empire, you will discover a much



more formal world where aristocratic women, though enjoying certain freedoms, live a more constrained life. That is because by the time of Esther and Nehemiah, less than a hundred years after Cyrus, the Persian court had become highly regimented. But in Cyrus's Persia, women still enjoyed a more flexible life. That's why I gave Jemmah the freedom to travel alone with Asher. Although I stretched the bonds of propriety just a smidgen, it felt like a believable choice during the chaos of war.

You can find out more about the story of Keren, Jared, and Cyrus in *The Hidden Prince*.

For updates and to sign up for my monthly newsletter, please visit my website at tessaafshar.com. I love hearing from my readers.

Tessa Afshar



Hear from Tessa Afshar

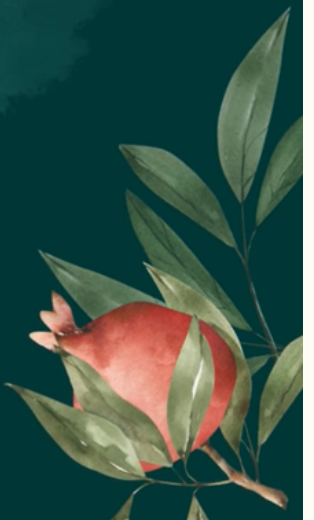


In this exclusive video created for this book club kit, Tessa Afshar shares a short message for you and your book club on the history behind *The Peasant King* and insights into what Tessa hopes readers will be able to take away after reading the novel.

[Click here or the image below to listen to Tessa in Historical Insight into *The Peasant King*.](#)



An ordinary woman,
A mysterious prince,
An impossible task,
and the God who overcomes
the ghosts of the past
to fulfill the promises of the future.



A photograph of ancient stone ruins built into a hillside in a desert landscape. The ruins are made of reddish-brown stone and are partially collapsed. In the background, there are more hills and a clear blue sky with some clouds.

Historical and Biblical Notes

By Tessa Afshar

While Persia was still a small country, Isaiah prophesied that the people of Judah would one day be delivered from their captivity to Babylon. Who would accomplish this extraordinary task? A king named Cyrus.

This is a shocking prophecy on many levels. For one, the deliverer of God's people would be a Gentile. He is the only Gentile to whom God refers as his anointed one (Isaiah 45:1-3).

In addition, there was no way the little kingdom of Persia had the power to rescue anyone. They did not possess the military might to defeat Babylon at the time the prophecies were given.

In a later prophecy, Jeremiah predicted that the kings of Media would be the ones to destroy Babylon. In other words, the Persian king, Cyrus, would one day have to rule the Medes in order for both prophecies to be fulfilled. He had to first defeat the powerful nation of Media before he could even set his sights on Babylon.

But how was such a feat to be accomplished? In sixth-century BC, when the events of The Peasant King take place, the Median empire was the second most powerful nation in the world after Babylon. In fact, the Persians had to pay tribute to the Medes merely to retain some semblance of independence.

How could God's promises be realized?

History points to the numerous miracles God had to work in order for these prophecies to be fulfilled. When Cyrus

Continued on next page —————>

became king of Persia, almost fifty years after the first captives from Judah were deported to Babylon, Persia was a poor country with few resources. Jeremiah's portion of the prophecy had not yet been fulfilled. It seemed impossible that Cyrus could become the ruler of Media.

In the Bible, the first time we meet Cyrus, he is already the monarch of a powerful empire. But Scripture does not tell us how this transformation from minor king to mighty ruler occurred.

The rich historical data available through secular sources provides us with the details that the Bible leaves out. What becomes evident is that transforming the small nation of Persia into a global empire mighty enough to defeat Babylon needed God's intervention.

Before the captives could be set free, God had to implement a number of other rescues. As foretold by Isaiah, God would equip Cyrus and go before him to open the doors of bronze—those impediments that human hands could not break down (Isaiah 45:2, 5).

This is the story that serves as the backdrop of *The Peasant King*. As I studied this period in history alongside God's Word, I discovered once again that we serve a God who is able to overcome every impossible circumstance.

Reading about these events gave me a deeper appreciation for God's influence, power, and protection over nations, as well as individuals, throughout time. I hope it will do the same for you.





1. This novel sets a fictional story in the context of the Old Testament and incorporates people we know of from the Bible, such as the prophet Daniel and the prophesied Cyrus. Do you like reading fiction set in biblical times? What are some benefits for contemporary readers? What may be some 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. In chapter 6, Keren tells Jemmah, “It’s not Astyages who controls our world. He has his role to play.” What do you think she means by this?

Discussion Questions

Use these questions to jumpstart your book club's discussion of *The Peasant King*

4. In chapter 7, Jared has to make a hard decision. How does Jemmah convince him to remain behind? Do you sometimes find yourself fighting God when he asks you to remain behind or stay out of something?

5. Asher and Jemmah are both stuck in certain areas of their lives. Do you have a similar experience in your life?

6. What are the different things that finally help Asher get free of the wounds of his father's abandonment?

7. When Jemmah has to treat her mother's broken arm, she prays using Scripture: "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you." Could you relate to this prayer? If yes, in what way?

8. Jemmah has to learn the "little by little" of God in her life. Have you ever had to learn that lesson? How did Jemmah's story encourage you in yours?

9. In chapter 27, Jemmah answers Zarina's practical concerns about the war by reminding her that "our God is the Lord of hosts and the God of armies." In what ways do you see faith and practical realities clash in your own life? How do we live a balanced life between the two?

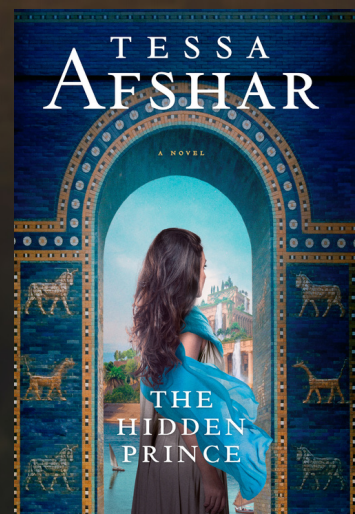
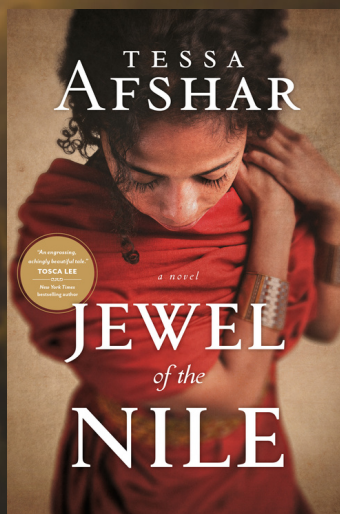
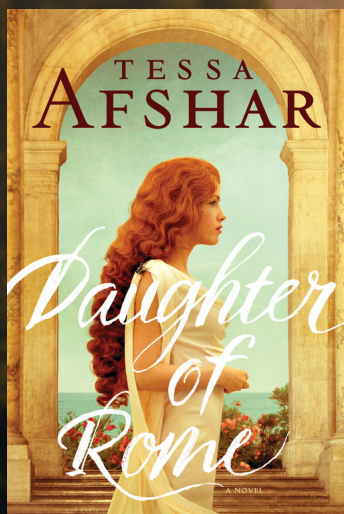
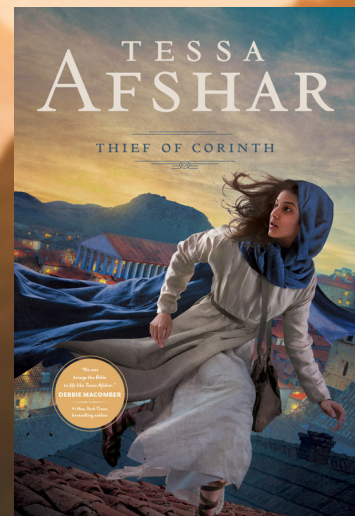
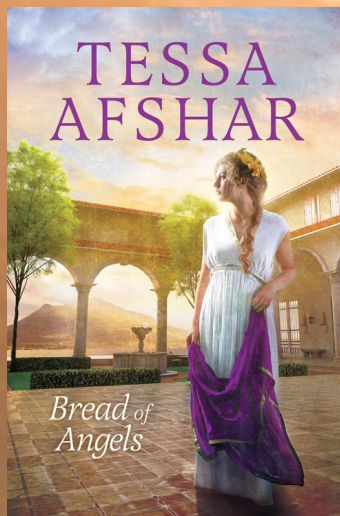
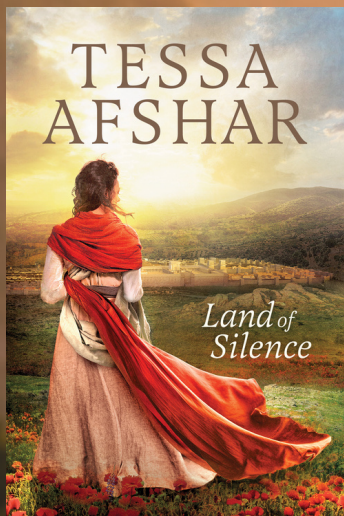
10. Toward the end of the story, Asher talks about the way God fulfills his promises by weaving a thousand different strands together. "Each one of us was a tiny strand in his hands. Insignificant in ourselves. And yet he used the insignificant in order to bring about his glory." What do you think Asher means by this? Do you see your own life as one of those strands in God's hands? If so, how important does that make you in the eternal schemes of God's plans?

Book Club Notes

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Discover more great historical fiction by Tessa Afshar



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