

When the King is Evil  
A Tale of Faith and Civil Conflict

A novel by

Mike Dixon

**UNEDITED**

First Draft

## Introduction

In a college class on the Old Testament years ago, I memorized the kings of Israel and Judah and whether each was a good or bad king. I have forgotten that information, but I've carried unanswered questions ever since: what about the ordinary people living in those kingdoms? Surely not everyone was evil because their king was. Not all of them were good when the king was. And what happened to the people when they had an evil king?

Always, they suffered. Some people lost everything they had; others died as captives in a foreign land. Yet, a remnant remained who clung to their faith even as prophets proclaimed their doom. They trusted God and recited His promises even in their despair.

Today, many of us are worried about the political chaos in our own country. What will happen if the leader we want loses an election? I have been caught up in those feelings in the past and I know I haven't been alone.

I am reminded that my understanding of current events is temporal and that there is much more going on than what I might observe or think. The eternal God reigned over our world in the last election whether we liked the results or not. He will be in control in the next election and in the one after that. When the King is Evil isn't about conservatives or progressives. It's about this never changing truth: the Creator of All Things will forever be sovereign in human events. We may not understand all the Creator does or chooses not to do, but that truth endures. If you are concerned about government leaders and political change, I hope the story of Avri of Talla encourages you.

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## Chapter 1

The rhythmic clip-clop of a donkey's hooves on cobbled streets disrupted the silence as the city slept. After two days of Festival, the narrow streets of Larsa were now dark and deserted as most citizens were long ago in their beds. The donkey slowly pulled a plain, wooden farm cart toward the city gates.

Avri had chosen to take his family home at night because recent days were stifling hot. The air was cool with a light breeze as he hoped, but he noticed clouds high above the city, pouring over the edge of the Pyrrian plateau.

*"Rain . . . "* he thought, *"but we should be home before it comes."*

Up ahead of the farmer's cart, Darsinian soldiers waited under lanterns at the main gate. Their captain called out a low order. Guards snapped to attention and tapped their spears in unison on the hard stone of the street. The captain saluted the family as they rode by. Avri was surprised as he knew this acknowledgement was not given to many.

Casual travelers often found the road down the mountain treacherous, especially at night. Its unprotected edge was steep and the road itself was strewn with stones, but Avri had made this descent many times before. The sounds of the creaking cart and the grinding sand beneath its

wheels comforted him. He knew he was heading home.

At the halfway point, the farmer stopped his cart and looked up at the city, high on its mountain. Its white walls and high towers gleamed, even in the dwindling moonlight. The capital city was beautiful, especially at night.

“These next years will be difficult ones,” he whispered to his wife.

“Why, Avri?” Mya asked.

He snapped the reins to resume the ride home.

“King Castor isn’t well — and Devin doesn’t have his father’s character.”

#

Festival is an annual holiday to commemorate the time long ago when competing kings peacefully chose one of their own to lead all of Darsinia. The people celebrate in villages all across the land, but the biggest party is always in the capital city.

Avri brings his family to Larsa every year. His wife, Mya, accompanies him to royal banquets and Caleb stays out late singing and dancing with friends. Avri’s family loves to go to Festival and they don’t mind the long trip from their farm.

Tonight, though, he sensed their exhaustion. Neither seemed like they wanted to talk.

“We’ll be home in a few hours,” he encouraged. “Did you enjoy Festival?”

“It was lovely as always, Avri. I’m just sad to know Castor is ill.”

“I wish I could tell you he’ll recover, but this seems serious, Mya. In one of the Friends’ meetings, he told us he is often sick. He has no energy for kingdom matters and he’s worried what his health might mean with the Malechian army threatening us.”

“Jadon thinks they’re only warning us not to attack them,” Caleb added.

“Maybe, but Malechians enjoy fighting. I believe Prince Devin would attack them first if

he were our king.”

Avri sighed under the weight of his fears. *Prince Jadon is his father’s son, noble and good, but Devin’s greed and arrogance will destroy us.*

#

“With Jadon as commander, I believe we would defeat the Malechians,” Caleb boasted.

“I would be proud to join Jadon and defend Darsinia.”

Mya turned to face her son sitting behind them in the cart.

“Caleb, Malechians raid our homes and steal from us, but those aren’t reasons for a war. Your father and I would worry about you.”

Caleb was always grateful for his mother’s care for him, but it was awkward sometimes. Quickly, he asked his father to tell them about the Friends of the Realm, even though he’d heard the story dozens of times. Besides, he knew Avri liked to talk about the Friends of the Realm and their special relationship with the king.

“Your grandfather was a servant of Castor’s father, King Halyen,” Avri began. “He was the king’s gardener and they became friends because of a shared interest in gardening. Castor and I were boys together . . . but you know this. We have been close friends since childhood.

“When Castor became king, he was young and knew he needed counsel from those who had advised his father. He created the Friends of the Realm for this purpose and he included me, a commoner. Through the years, I have persuaded him to invite others like me to join us. Each year he honors the Friends with this Festival. The people seem to like seeing their king taking counsel. My role as a Friend humbles me. It is a great honor.”

“Caleb is just changing the subject, Avri,” Mya said with her knowing smile. “But thank you for reminding us.”

#

After several minutes, the family arrived at the base of the mountain.

“Here, we are at our last checkpoint before we head into the country,” Avri said.

He stopped and spoke to the sentries from his seat in the cart. “We’re Friends of the Realm returning to our home in Talla.”

“We know you, Avri of Talla,” a guard said. He and his two men seemed excited to meet an actual Friend of the Realm. “The king is fond of you, Sir. Hello, Mya, Caleb.”

#

The road flattened before the family as they rode away from the checkpoint. Caleb stretched out in it and closed his eyes as they rode across the wide valley between the Pyrrian and Elivan Mountains. The moon illuminated the quiet pastures and dark farmhouses the family passed. The land was peaceful tonight. Mya snuggled next to Avri.

“Tell me, husband. You’re always joyful on the journey home. Is there more you’re not telling me?”

“Prince Devin is proud and selfish, Mya. When Castor is gone, he will be a harsh king.

“He hates Pyrrians. He says they’re all common criminals and complains that they rob our treasury of its resources, but he can’t explain how. At the Friends’ banquet, he told Ginn he will send them all to the Northern Islands when he is king.”

“Our friend, Ginn, who lives near the mountains?” Avri nodded.

“He was stunned by the prince’s strong words. No one at his table knew what to say. Devin’s reign will be a hard one.”

“Well, the Pyrrians on our farm work hard for what they have, Avri. They’re not criminals. They won’t obey Devin.

“And those islands are so isolated and rugged. How will they survive? And what of their children in such a place?” Mya’s mother’s heart worried for the immigrant families.

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The moon hid behind gathering clouds in the early morning when Avri’s family reached their farm. Nathan, the farm foreman, had lit torches and placed them around the courtyard between the house and barn. Their soft light pushed back the darkness and welcomed the weary family. He dozed in a chair propped against the barn until the donkey’s bray told him the family was coming. He stood to greet them and to take care of their cart.

“Welcome home, sir.”

“It’s good of you to wait for us, Nathan.”

“Sir. For you, I am always here. Your trip was a good one?”

Avri handed the reins to Nathan and nudged Mya who still snuggled against him. Sleepily, she moved to step down from the cart. Caleb helped her down and the two of them went into the house and to their beds.

“Yes, it was a good Festival. How is the farm?”

“Two lambs were born yesterday and we made good progress on the new well.”

“Thank you, Nathan. I’m always glad you’re here, especially when I have to be away.”

Nathan was glad the family was home. It was then he felt most like he belonged, that he was accepted. Avri had hired him long ago, when no one else would, after Nathan’s older brother died. He was slender, fair-haired and quiet like most of the farm laborers in the area, just one more among thousands of Pyrrian immigrants.

Nathan wasn’t concerned about his heritage, but he did consider himself Darsinian because his mother was and because he was born near Talla. It didn’t matter to Avri and when he

understood the man Nathan was and what he could do, he put him in charge of his farm. Avri had given his lonely foreman a place, an identity, and Nathan was forever grateful.

They walked together as Nathan led the donkey into the barn. They both noticed the glow in the Elivan Mountains to the east.

“What is it, Sir?”

“I’m afraid it’s the Malechian army camped on our border.”

Nathan didn’t react to the news of the invaders as he tended the donkey. He didn’t like to think about Malechians.

“I’m sorry, Nathan, I forgot. Your brother was killed in a Malechian raid.”

Nathan stopped brushing the animal and looked at Avri.

“No apology is needed. It was a long time ago and my brother was foolish. But, I don’t like Malechians.”

Avri brought water for the donkey and pushed the cart into its place in the barn. He said good night to his friend. Nathan finished brushing the donkey and brought more water before he went to his bed.

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Avri struggled to sleep that night. He worried about King Castor. He was fearful about what a future King Devin would mean to Darsinians. He tossed and turned in his bed.

He thought, *“Is this the time? Will I finally understand Renlag’s prophecy?”*

The stress of his friend’s illness forced the familiar memory into his mind as he tried to sleep. He relived that time when, as a boy, the scary man had approached him and his father. Some people believed Renlag could see the future, but he had always frightened Avri. The man’s wild hair, his long, scraggly beard, his coarse clothes . . . even his unwashed shepherd’s smell . . .



terrified him.

Avri and his father never spoke about the encounter with the mystic. Neither did they tell anyone else about it, but it was one of those childhood events seared into Avri's memory. It lived daily just beneath his consciousness, but he didn't talk about it ever, not even with Mya.

Even now, long after Renlag died, Avri remembered the wild man stooping down to look into his eyes, his rough hands clamped on either side of Avri's head. To Avri's father, he said, "This one will defend our land. Darsinia will need him. Peace go with this boy."

His father had kept his hand on Avri's shoulder as Renlag spoke, but Avri's fear of the man still made his heart race. Reliving the prophecy over and over tonight as he lay in his bed, he cringed.

Whenever Avri couldn't fall asleep, his habit was to pray. He started by giving thanks for Mya and Caleb. He gave thanks for his farm and home, a bequest to Avri's father when King Halyen died. Avri's family lived in what was once the king's summer residence.

He had learned expressing gratitude would eventually quiet his heart. Thankfulness would replace his cares and he would soon be asleep, at peace. Tonight was no different.

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The next morning, Avri's family, Nathan, and his wife, Abigail, joined with others to walk the short distance to their village, Talla. It sat at the intersection of the north-south road between Cirtke and Shakko Dar and the road west to Larsa. Talla's walls, baked by the sun to their rusty brown color, made the village seem bigger than it was. Only a few merchants and ministers to the king lived within them.

Traders' wagons lined the streets daily and nearby farmers came when they wanted to sell what they had grown. Talla's market was active — noisy, crowded and filled with energy as

people jostled one another for the produce. Even when it rained, the market kept going by moving into the village storehouse.

But Avri's family wasn't going to the market. They were among those Darsinians who are keepers of an ancient faith which considers Elyon to be the Creator of all that is. They had learned of the Creator in the Writings and regarded Elyon as the Holy One. Not all Darsinians held this faith. They didn't believe a Creator existed and they rejected the Writings. Still, followers and deniers respected each other and they lived peaceably together.

The traders didn't mind when an assembly took over their storehouse for an hour each week, especially since Simon was its leader. They liked the stout, old farmer who taught the Writings with conviction, despite his gentle disposition.

Traders and worshipers had been especially kind to Simon recently. The aged assembly leader struggled to cope with the great sadness from the loss of his wife. She and he never had children and it was now just Simon and his housekeeper in his home. He looked forward to being together with his friends in the assembly now more than ever.

Avri was respected because of his relationship with King Castor and his status as a Friend of the Realm, but he agreed Simon was the one who should lead and teach them.

"The coming rain will keep some away, Avri," Simon greeted his friend.

"Perhaps, but my fields can use this rain."

"Did you want to talk about Festival this morning? It seems everyone else is."

Avri smiled. "Thank you, Simon, but I'd rather hear your thoughts today. The text reminds me that the Holy One reigns in creation. I'll talk about Festival another time."

The two men squeezed by Mya and her three friends, who were having a grand conversation. The women listened intently to Mya's account of all she had experienced at

Festival last week.

“Come. Let us gather,” Simon said to them and to others outside their meeting place.

#

As Simon took the book of the Writings, villagers found their usual seats on rows of simple, backless benches. Caleb sat with Debra. They had been friends for years, growing up in the assembly together, but lately their relationship had grown beyond friendship. Caleb was anxious for a wife, but Debra’s parents wanted them to wait to marry. They knew Avri was successful and respected, but they wanted to see more of the man Caleb would become.

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Simon greeted the people and offered a prayer before he read the text. The people were hushed, even the noise outside the storehouse seemed to quiet when Simon read. His voice was a good one for reading aloud. Simon read,

A Song of the Creator  
The Holy One dwells in his high place,  
Beyond the earth, its sky and space.  
Sing praise to Elyon for his great love,  
Sing praise to him for his creation.

He tells the sun how warm to shine,  
For grapes to make the sweetest wine.  
Sing praise to Elyon for his great love,  
Sing praise to him for his creation.

He cares for creatures, small and great,  
Foresees their births, their lives, their fate.  
Sing praise to Elyon for his great love,  
Sing praise to him for his creation.

Within his will, kings rise and fall,  
To all of us he gives a hope and call.  
Sing praise to Elyon for his great love,  
Sing praise to him for his creation.

A gentle rain began to fall as Simon finished, spilling droplets on the cobbled streets outside the storehouse. He closed the book and started his teaching.

“I love the truth of Elyon, the Holy One, as Creator.

“I think because I’m a farmer, I love the image of him as one, growing grapes and tending his animals. Like you, I till, I plant and water my fields, but each harvest still amazes me. I don’t know how it happens, but Elyon does and he does it year after year.

“It is good to praise him for his creation. He cares for it as he cares for us. Like all his creatures, he knows all about our births, our lives and even when we will die. As our Creator, he knows what’s happening among us right now and what will happen in the future.

“In the song I just read, the writer tells us about our kings. King Castor rules Darsinia because of who his father was, but he is also king because the Holy One allows him to be.”

The Talla assembly liked to interrupt and ask questions of Simon as he taught. Today they asked questions about why some harvests were better than others if the Holy One controlled them. They questioned Simon and argued among themselves about kings and their special relationship to Elyon.

“Could the Holy One give us an evil king? King Castor is a good king. So was King Halyen. But, what if Prince Devin is an evil one?” someone asked.

Avri and Mya glanced at each other. This was the very question they’d wrestled with on the road home last night.

“The writer of this song wanted us to know that all creation is ruled by the Holy One. I think the truth we are to learn is that he allows men to reign. He knows the heart of every man, including kings. He knows whether a king will govern wisely or whether he will abuse his power, but the Holy One is still the ultimate ruler in our land.”

Most people in the assembly accepted Simon's answer, but there were some who weren't sure. Everyone could agree it was always good to pray for the king, especially an evil one.

"As we leave our gathering, take these truths with you. This is his creation and it always will be his. Nothing happens in it that he doesn't know. We can trust the Holy One, whether our king is good or evil, because he loves us. Peace go with you."

As the assembly scattered from the storehouse, Avri grasped Simon's hand. "Thank you, Simon. We must remember our king and princes to the Holy One."

#

On the eastern side of the Pyrrian Mountains, multiple ridges of lower peaks reach like a spider's legs into the valley. Long ago, a Darsinian king chose one of the highest mounts in those ridges for his capital city. Its situation is easy to defend and fresh water springs could help its citizens survive any siege. Larsa is Darsinia's oldest city. Its white buildings, spires and towers sparkle in the sunlight above white-washed stone foundations and great walls. Perched high on its mountain, it is also a beautiful city.

The king wanted his city to be seen from as far away as possible, to glimmer in the light from its formidable mountain top. He, and those who succeeded him, commissioned stonemasons to construct the city using white limestone. The gleaming city amazes travelers, invites them in and sparks pride in the hearts of the people who live there.

The kings also wanted their palace to impress. Its great white walls and watch towers loom over an enclosed courtyard. Soldiers drill and kings address the people there. The palace floors are covered in mosaic tiles which took Kriva craftsmen three years to make and install. The most beautiful place in the palace is the king's court. From this cavernous room, the king rules Darsinia and receives visitors to the kingdom. Dozens of clerks and minor officials who

tend to the king's business are easily accommodated in rows of simple wooden desks and chairs. The administrative workers sit between the first row of huge columns in the court and the palace walls. Massive timbers from the Shakko Dar forests were transported up the mountain and expertly fitted into high vaulted ceilings above limestone walls. Long ago, a king commissioned craftsmen to create the tapestries that hang in the halls and court. The work of Darsinian artisans long dead is forever preserved throughout the palace.

The royal family's rooms on the second floor are a small part of the palace complex. Storage areas, the palace guards' meeting room and the king's kitchen are in the basement. The king's family rarely visits these rooms, but Prince Devin had secretly come to the kitchen.

"Festival is over. I want you to increase the poison," he demanded.

"People will become suspicious if his death is too sudden, Prince Devin." The cook trembled as he spoke. "He is not yet the age of King Halyen when he died. Please, Sir, let's go slowly as we planned."

"No! The Malechians are camped right now on our side of the Elivan Mountains. We must drive them out!" Devin insisted. "If you want the land and gold I promised you, do it!"

He shoved the king's cook into a table, knocking him and several bowls to the floor. He stormed from the kitchen, thinking the conversation was a private one.