



# The Man in the Cistern

A Short Story of Kephrath  
~ Richard Abbott ~

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Richard Abbott

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*For Roselyn, for family*

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# **The Man in the Cistern**

**Richard Abbott**

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## Preface

This short story takes place about ten years after the end of the full length novel *In a Milk and Honeyed Land*. Most of the characters in this story - and of course the setting of Kephrath itself - will be familiar from the novel. A small glossary at the end will help readers who are not familiar with the novel to orient themselves in this world.

Briefly, Kephrath is one of four towns linked by custom, tradition, and a common religious and cultural leadership. Local stability in the village is in the hands of Damariel and Nephernet, serving their community as priests and seers. Similar couples fulfil this role in the other three towns. The towns are grouped together in the hill country, close to one of the main routes down into the lowlands. Overall leadership in both peace and war used to be provided by a chief from one of the families in the towns. One of the changes brought about by the events described in *In a Milk and Honeyed Land* is that this leadership is now in the hands of the Ibriym, a formerly nomadic group now settling in the hill country to the north of the four towns.

## The Man in the Cistern

O Highest One, restore us,  
shed the light of your face and set us free.

### In Kephrath

The Mitsriy were withdrawing from their outpost up at Ramoth Hurriy. Damariel the seer had first caught rumour of the move nearly a year ago, but had waited to see if there was real substance in it before taking the news seriously. These days, there were always stories of this place or that being abandoned, and so many of them were either scare-mongering or wishful thinking, depending on who was talking.

Now, for sure there would be little impact on Kephrath and her three sister communities, the four towns Damariel cared for. Ramoth Hurriy was south of Shalem, up on the heights overlooking the southern edge of that town, and Damariel was not sure he had ever met anyone who lived there. So far as he knew, there was only a shrine to the goddess Hathor served by a few Mitsriy priestesses overseeing a training centre for Kinahny girls who had been given over by their families to her service, a small garrison of bowmen,

and a straggle of traders adhering to the slight wealth as best they could. At a guess, only the Mitsriy would actually return home, and the temple novices and acolytes, as well as the traders and their families, would be left to reintegrate as best they could into Shalem itself, or maybe down into the lowlands.

So it was not the fact of withdrawal that crossed his mind as he walked back towards the great house beside the high place of Kephrath. It was the wider vision that this one event captured in miniature. The Mitsriy really were pulling back from the hill country – not that they had ever had a great presence up here – and were confining themselves, year by year, little by little, into the valleys and coastal plain, where roads could be easily defended and troops could be mobilised at need. How long, he wondered, before they ceased even asking for tribute and gifts of loyalty from the towns and villages of the hill country? At what point would they decide it was more trouble than worth to collect? On the other hand, an over-optimistic guess about that very issue had contributed to the former chief's unlamented downfall.

Damariel had just been down at Hannah Taliy's home to pray over her son, who was ill – once again – with a fever. It was not the first time, and to Damariel's dispassionate eye he seemed a sickly child who might not survive the rigours of childhood. For today he had been content to minister in prayer, and to administer a healing paste mixture he had acquired some while ago from one of the itinerant pedlars

who had a fair reputation for medicines. But at some stage he might need to prepare Hannah Taliy and her husband Nathan for a less pleasant outcome.

Nepheret, his wife of something over ten years now, had gone out very early in the morning when they had heard that Laylah had gone into labour. Looking up at the house, he guessed that she had not yet returned, and wondered if he should put in an appearance himself. Not yet, he thought, not unless they sent someone for him. That would also mean that their son Ankhy-hotep was still out with his long-time friend Kothar learning his trade.

It was not hearing confirmation of the Mitsriy departure from Ramoth Hurriy that had preoccupied him. He had been troubled all week by stories brought back by some of the townsmen pasturing their flocks and working their lines of traps and snares southward. It seemed that a group of men had set up a transient camp a little way towards Shalem, a short walk down from the main ridgeway track and obscured by a stand of scrub and trees. He had asked Kothar to weigh them up from a distance, but he had found out only a very little more. A few were armed, most not. A few might have been military but not most of them. They were a ragged group of men with only a couple of women and no children.

He frowned, head down as he thought about it. He really should know more about them; who could say in these less settled times if they were simply migrant workers, or soldiers deserting from the Mitsriy army, or lawless

brigands. Properly speaking he should ask the Ibriym to check the situation over, as they were the land-holders and his own people named simply as vassals. But the Ibriym still had their hands filled with negotiation and conflict up in the north and on the fringes of the lowlands, and Damariel doubted that they would spare the manpower to investigate some travellers unless there was good reason. In any case, the relationship between the two peoples had always been much more complex than just that of lord and vassal. Abiy'el, who had taken over as war leader of the Ibriym from his old confidante Yahusharar, would expect Damariel to reach his own conclusions first.

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a movement. He stopped, looking over towards the large cistern just below the high place, beside Sara's house. It was mostly sunk into the ground, with a raised surrounding parapet made of a couple of layers of stone flags. He was convinced that the bald crown of a head had lifted itself above the stone lip for a brief moment to look around, and had then dipped back down again.

He turned and started to walk over towards the cistern, when he noticed three Mitsriy soldiers coming up from the bottom of the village. They had only just come into view around one of the houses, and would take a little while to get up to him. He looked around, saw the single line of footprints leading up to the cistern, and moved by a sudden impulse called out to one of the village lads who was leading some goats nearby. The boy came across, and

nodded, slightly mystified, as Damariel pointed across to the track on the other side of the standing stones of the high place. As he went off again, his little flock of goats scuffled away all trace of the trail across the ground.

Damariel sat on a stone a little way from the cistern edge and waited for the weary soldiers to draw near. The more senior one, a minor officer, looked at the kef he wore on his head that signalled his status, said something quietly to the other two, and then addressed Damariel politely in his own Mitsriy language, asking if he had seen a fugitive. Damariel, who after years of marriage to Nipheret spoke the Mitsriy tongue perfectly well, put his head on one side, looked puzzled, and shook his head as though baffled by the words. The officer looked around, pursed his lips, then tried again in extremely poor Kinahniy...

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## About the author

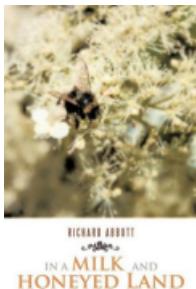
Richard Abbott has visited some of the places that feature in this story and others set in broadly the same region. As well as fictional accounts of the period, he also participates in the lively academic debate surrounding it.

Richard now lives in London, England. When not writing he works on the development and testing of internet applications, and also creates mobile and tablet apps with a focus on the ancient world. He enjoys spending time with family, walking and wildlife - ideally combining all three of those pursuits at the same time.

Look out for his other works, which include the following.

### **Fiction - full-length novels:**

- ***In a Milk and Honeyed Land***, available from June 2012 from Amazon, other online retailers, and general booksellers in
  - soft-cover (ISBN 978-1-4669-2166-5),
  - hard-cover (ISBN 978-1-4669-2167-2), and
  - ebook format (ISBN 978-1-4669-2165-8).



In case of difficulty please check the website <http://www.kephrath.com> for purchasing options.

- *Scenes from a Life*, a follow-up novel to *In a Milk and Honeyed Land*, being prepared for publication in 2013.

#### Fiction – short stories:

- *The Lady of the Lions, a short story of Kephrath*, published in ebook format by Matteh Publications and available at online retailers, ISBN 978-0-9545-5353-1.



The Lady of the Lions

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### Non-fiction:

- *Triumphal Accounts in Hebrew and Egyptian*, available shortly in electronic format through Mat-teh Publications, ISBN 978-0-9545-5352-4.



Triumphal Accounts in  
Hebrew and Egyptian

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