



ILLUSTRATION BY JASON EDWARDS



# MELKART AND THE WHORE OF BABYLON

By MARK MELLON

**“D**o you see, master? Shining ahead?” “That glint to the east, Kisu?”

“Yes! It’s the Esagila’s gold roof. The city’s in sight. Your journey’s end draws near.”

“Then thanks be to the gods.”

The narrow keeled long ship sailed on the Purattu through a vast, flat, fertile plain, filled with date palms and green wheat, the black dots in the fields toiling peasants, bent over with bronze hoes. Melkart stood at the stern with Kisu, the ship’s captain. Carried by the river’s swift current alone, with no need for the furlled lateen sail, the ship steadily made way.

The big man leaned against the gunwale and watched the riverbank. Bent low to fill clay jugs with water, two girls paused to shyly smile and wave hello. Melkart waved a muscular arm back.

“You’re lucky, master, to come during the Akitu. You’ll see our fabulous city at the best time. Nothing compares to Babylon, not even Memphis in Aegyptus.”

“I look forward to it.”

The Purattu’s roiling waters pushed steadily on toward the Sea above Akkad. Villages along the riverbanks steadily increased in number, size, and apparent wealth, clumps of low, mud brick houses amid date palms, some with stone-built temples and market squares. Other ships sailed with the current, fraught with cargoes of tin, copper, lapis lazuli, diorite, wool, cotton, gold, frankincense, and myrrh, all bound for Babylon, the world’s marketplace, where everything imaginable could be obtained for sufficient wealth. As ships passed, Kisu shouted greetings in Aramaic and Akkadian to his friends. The ship rounded a bend.

“There, master. Isn’t it magnificent?”

Verily, the colossal prospect before Melkart took his breath away, seasoned traveler that he was. For before him loomed a city as grand and mighty as the mind of man could conjure under the gods’ inspiration and protection. A high stone parapet reinforced by sturdy towers flanked the Purattu, forty cubits high in a rectangular circuit a league and a half long, the largest span of fortified walls ever built. A temple to the supreme Babylonian god Marduk, the Esagila towered over the lofty walls, golden roofed, the world’s tallest building, seven stories high, each painted a different bright color, topped by the god’s bright blue sanctuary. Behind the walls, black smoke trailed skyward from countless cook fires, and the air was ripe with garbage and the stench of human waste.

“Runners have already told of our approach. We’ll dock at the King’s private pier. High officials will greet and honor you, perhaps the King’s own steward, Haban. You must anoint yourself; wear your best raiment.”

“Good advice, friend Kusi.”

Melkart cleaned his thick, blue black beard and hair with pure olive oil that he rinsed out with water. He combed his hair with an ivory fine-toothed comb, scented it with attar of roses from an alabaster vial, and donned the imperial red tunic and mantle the Lord of Tyre’s favorites wore. Splendidly attired, Melkart cut a striking figure as the ship dropped anchor and made fast alongside a quay on the river’s left bank, by the broad stone bridge that crossed the Purattu. The walled banks were lined with ships, drawn by the commercial opportunities the Akitu presented. Music resounded from the city, joyous hymns accompanied by sistrums, flutes, and knuckle bone castanets.

Melkart disembarked down a narrow gangplank. As Kusi predicted, a delegation awaited, three older men, shaven headed, dignified in long, fringed kilts and capes, their thick, hennaed beards woven into tresses. Each man placed a right hand to his heart and bowed low. One stepped forward, cunning eyes masked by kohl intaglios.

“I am Hanab, Chief Steward to Belshazzar, King of Babylon. I do you honor, great lord.”

Melkart bowed in turn. “I’m no lord, only Melkart, a servitor of Lord Toqeph of Tyre. I bring imperial red mantles and tunics, a gift from my lord to King Belshazzar to celebrate the New Year.”

Hanab smiled with a diplomat’s practiced ease. “You timed your arrival well, just before the festival’s last day. The King knows you’ve arrived. He’s pleased by your lord’s gift and invites you to feast with him. Come ride in my litter.”

Melkart reclined on a broad palanquin’s soft cushions, built from palm logs, chased with gold and silver, topped by a white linen canopy to ward off the sun’s heat. A dozen Hurrian slaves groaned under the burly Tyrian’s added weight as they hefted the palanquin aloft and bore it through the arched gate into the Inner City.

They entered a saturnalia, a wild, riotous celebration in the city by everyone in their hundreds of thousands, from babes in arms to the elderly borne upon stretchers, from the wealthy few and their households to the many poor artisans and even slaves, all out in the streets clad in fine new clothes, arms outstretched and joyous as they shouted hosannas and prayed for good luck in the upcoming year.

"The Akitu is always lively," Hanab said.

"It's the only real holiday the people have, ten days without work, so they get excited."

"I don't blame them."

Burly Assyrian guards lashed out with knouts at the throngs, but they still made slow progress down the broad Sacred Way. The palanquin rocked and swayed as the crowds gave way. To their left, the Esagila towered overhead, the multiple stories' orthogonal facets crisply defined in the pale blue morning air. Blocks of tall buildings stretched past the Esagila, closed to the outer world, their windowless, yellow facades blank. The air was heavy with incense and perfume while hysterical cries of maddened religious frenzy rang out everywhere.

"Hail Ishtar, Queen of Creation," a woman screamed.

"Aye. Hail Inanna, her high priestess," another cried.

"Nay, whore," a man retorted. "Ba'al-Shem-Nibburath is the true goddess."

A fight broke out, but the Assyrians smote them hip and thigh, and the palanquin pushed past the disturbance.

"Is there trouble in Babylon?"

Hanab dismissively waved his ivory handled flywhisk. "Minor religious differences. 'Tis ever thus in Babylon. Nothing to worry about."

The palanquin turned sharply left on the Sacred Way. Ahead stood the fabled Ishtar Gate, high arched, crenellated, the bright blue tiles adorned with gold and yellow bas reliefs of bulls and dragons. The King's palace was to the left of the gate, a massive, columned, windowless structure built of sandstone, protected by

its own walls. Beside the palace, brick terraces ascended skyward, the famous Hanging Gardens. Amply watered by gushing fountains, the scented terraces were thick with verdant palms, fruit, almond, and olive trees, a green Paradise for the King to spend happy moments with his wives and concubines.

Greek mercenaries kept guard outside the gates, their number doubled for the festival. Burnished bronze armor gleamed in the late morning sun. They opened the massive double gates and waved the palanquin inside. The bearers gratefully set the palanquin down.

"You're fortunate the King takes time to see you. The Akitu is our busiest time."

"I'll be sure to thank him."

Hanab led Melkart to the Hanging Gardens. Naked slaves salaamed as they passed into the shady oasis. Gardeners harvested fruit and trimmed dead branches with long handled billhooks. In a shady courtyard, a white linen pavilion stood, the sides raised. Concubines swayed ostrich feather fans to stir the heavy, humid air while a young Egyptian woman, with jet-black hair that reached down her back, sat cross-legged under a palm's shade and skillfully played a mournful air on two long reed flutes. A man lounged on a couch joined from ivory, electrum, and ebony. He wore a dark blue fringed tunic, heavy gold chains, soft leather shoes with pointed, curled toes and a conical crown cunningly wrought from golden scales.

Hanab knelt and bowed low. Melkart followed his example.

