



## The Harpist

In the ancient world of the middle east, stories of great events and heroic deeds were carried from village to village, town to town, by the travels of itinerate traders. They moved about in caravans for safety sake. In addition to the merchants, their numbers included slaves, pilgrims, immigrants, and often entertainers. Of special note was the harpist, who carried a primitive lyre harp that he would strum to attract attention from villagers passing by to stop and hear his stories and songs. He would find a spot near the village well, and when he attracted a small crowd he would begin, his hat strategically placed on the ground for tips.

The more talented harpist would perhaps weave his stories into melodies, but more than likely he would talk out his stories using lyre strums like punctuation to add an element mystery and excitement to his tales. Over time his repertoire of stories would feature those tales that were received with the greatest enthusiasm by his listeners. Samson, a mythical strongman, killing a lion with his bare hands, losing his strength to the wicked Delilah who cut off his hair, Samson pulling down the temple, were favorites. Daniel, in the lion's den rescued by God, Joshua pulling down the walls of Jericho with trumpets, Jonah living in the belly of the whale, Noah and his arc, the parting of the Red Sea, David and Goliath, were all stories people liked to hear over and over again. Particularly fascinating to the children were ghost stories, spirit visitations, or people brought back from the dead by some priestly necromancer. Often the adults would drift off after a few stories, but the children would stay to the very end of his performance. He would save the stories the children liked best for those final moments.

On one particular day, as our harpist was gathering his things and preparing to leave, a precocious young boy approached him scowling and asked, "Harpist. Are your stories true?" He was impressed by the young man's seriousness and sat down with him to gather his thoughts before answering.

When he was ready, he told the boy, *"Stories begin like the seeds of grain. In fact, they begin as grains of truth. Some event plants the story-seed and like the grain, it grows over time with each telling. The imagination of each teller of the story leaves its mark on the tale. Most of the changes that occur in the story are innocent embellishments, but many are deliberate changes intended to press some cause or to enhance the reputation of one of the characters, or perhaps even of the teller of the story. I, myself have been on occasion guilty of such enhancements. But there is no harm in it. We need our stories and we need our heroes. Most of life is a fiction anyway."*

*Gene Ziegler, Chandler Arizona January 2020*