

# BARTIMAEUS

## The Ring of Solomon

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Sunset above the olive groves. The sky, like a bashful youth kissed for the first time, blushed with a peach-pink light. Through the open windows came the gentlest of breezes, carrying the fragrances of evening. It stirred the hair of the young woman standing alone and pensive in the centre of the marble floor, and caused her dress to flutter against the contours of her lean, dark limbs.

She lifted a hand; slim fingers toyed with a ringlet of hair beside her neck.

“Why so shy, my lord?” she whispered. “Come near and let me look on you.”

In the opposite pentacle the old man lowered the wax cylinder in his hand and glared at me with his single eye. “Great Jehovah, Bartimaeus! You don’t think that’s going to work on *me*?”

My eyelashes quivered, my bosom heaved. “I’ll dance too, if you’ll only step a *little* closer. Come on, spoil yourself. I know a move that’ll make your loincloth steam.”

The magician tapped the cylinder irritably. “No, thank you. And you can stop *that* too.”

“Stop what?”

“That... that *undulating*. Every now and then you – *There!* You did it again!”

“Oh, come on, sailor, live a little. What’s putting you off?”

The magician uttered an oath. “Possibly your clawed left foot. Possibly that scaly tail extending from your undergarments. Also possibly the fact that even a new-born babe would know not to step outside his protective circle when requested to do so by a wicked, duplicitous spirit such as yourself. Now silence, cursed creature of air, and abandon your pathetic temptations, or I shall strike you sideways with such a Pestilence as even old Egypt never suffered.” The old boy was quite excited, all out of breath, his white hair a disordered halo around his head. From behind his ear he took a stylus and grimly made a notation on the cylinder. “There’s a black mark there for you, Bartimaeus,” he said. “*Another* one. If this line gets filled you’ll be off the special allowances list for good, you understand? No more roasted imps, no time off, nothing. Now, I’ve a job for you.”

The maiden in the pentacle folded her arms. She wiped the back of a dainty hand across her pretty nose and sniffed. “I’ve just done a job.”

“Well, now you’ve got another one.”

“I’ll do it when I’ve had a rest.”

“You’ll do it this very night.”

“Why should *I* do it? Send Faquarl or Rizim.”

A bright jag of scarlet lightning issued from the forefinger of the old man, looped across the intervening space and set my pentacle aflame, so that I wailed and danced with mad abandon.

The crackling ceased; the pain in my feet lessened. I came to a standstill and blinked about in mild perplexity. “Why’s it gone all dark?”

The old man spoke testily. “Your skirts are over your head. As well you know. If this is meant to be a further temptation it’s a pretty poor effort, Bartimaeus, since you have the hindquarters of a ram. Still, another notch upon the cylinder it shall be.”

I adjusted my dress with exemplary haste. “No, no – there’s no need for that.” To my great relief the stylus was slowly replaced behind the aged ear. I clapped my hands vigorously. “So, another job, you say? What joy! I’m humbled that you have selected me from among so many other worthy djinn. What brought me to your attention tonight, great master? The ease with which I slew the giant of Mount Lebanon? The zeal with which I put the Canaanite rebels to flight? Or just my general reputation?”

The old man scratched his nose. “None of that; rather it was your behaviour last night, when the Watch Imps observed you in the form of a mandrill swaggering through the undergrowth below the Sheep Gate, singing lewd songs about King Solomon and loudly extolling your own magnificence.”

The maiden gave a surly shrug. "Might not have been me."

"The words 'Bartimaeus is best', repeated at tedious length, suggest otherwise."

"Well, all right. So I'd had too many mites at supper. No harm done."

"No harm? The Watch reported it to their supervisor, who reported it to me. I reported it to high magician Hiram and I believe it has since come to the ears of the king himself." His face became all prim and starchy. "He is not pleased."

I blew out my cheeks. "Can't he tell me so in person?"

The magician's good eye bulged; it looked like an egg emerging from a chicken.<sup>1</sup> "You dare suggest," he cried, "that great Solomon, king of all Israel, master of all lands from the Gulf of Aqaba to the broad Euphrates, would deign to speak with a sulphurous slave such as *you*? The idea! In all my years, I have heard nothing so offensive –!"

"Oh, come, come. Look at the state of you. Surely you must have."

"Two more notches, Bartimaeus, for your effrontery and cheek." Out came the cylinder; the stylus scratched upon it furiously. "Now then, enough of your nonsense. Listen to me closely. Solomon desires new wonders for his collection. He has commanded his magicians to search the known world for objects of beauty and power. This very moment, in all the wall-towers of Jerusalem, my rivals conjure demons just as hideous as you and send them out like fiery comets to plunder ancient cities, north, south, east and west. All hope to astound the king with the treasures they secure. But they will be disappointed, Bartimaeus, will they not, for *we* will bring him the finest prize of all. You understand me?"

The pretty maiden curled her lip; my long, sharp teeth glinted wetly. "Grave-robbing again? Solomon should be doing seedy stuff like this himself. But no, as usual he can't be bothered to lift his fat little finger and use the ring. How lazy can you get?"

The old man gave a twisted smile. The black hollow of his lost eye seemed to suck in light. "Your opinions are interesting. So much so I shall depart right now and report them to the king. Who knows? Perhaps he will choose to lift his finger and use the ring on *you*."

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<sup>1</sup> Faquarl had got the other eye out on a rare occasion when the magician had made a slight mistake with the words of his summoning. We'd additionally managed to scorch his backside once or twice, and there was a scar on his neck where I'd come close with a lucky ricochet, but despite a long career commanding more than a dozen formidable djinn, our master remained vigorous and spry. He was a tough old bird.

Bartik is the default theme for Drupal 7. To download Bartik, download Drupal 7. You can find documentation about it here: <http://drupal.org/documentation/themes/bartik> A huge thank you to the dozens of people who worked on this theme, and to everyone who supported the effort. Any bugs found in Bartik should be filed as part of Drupal core. You can read the list of reported See more of Bartik on Facebook. Log In. or.