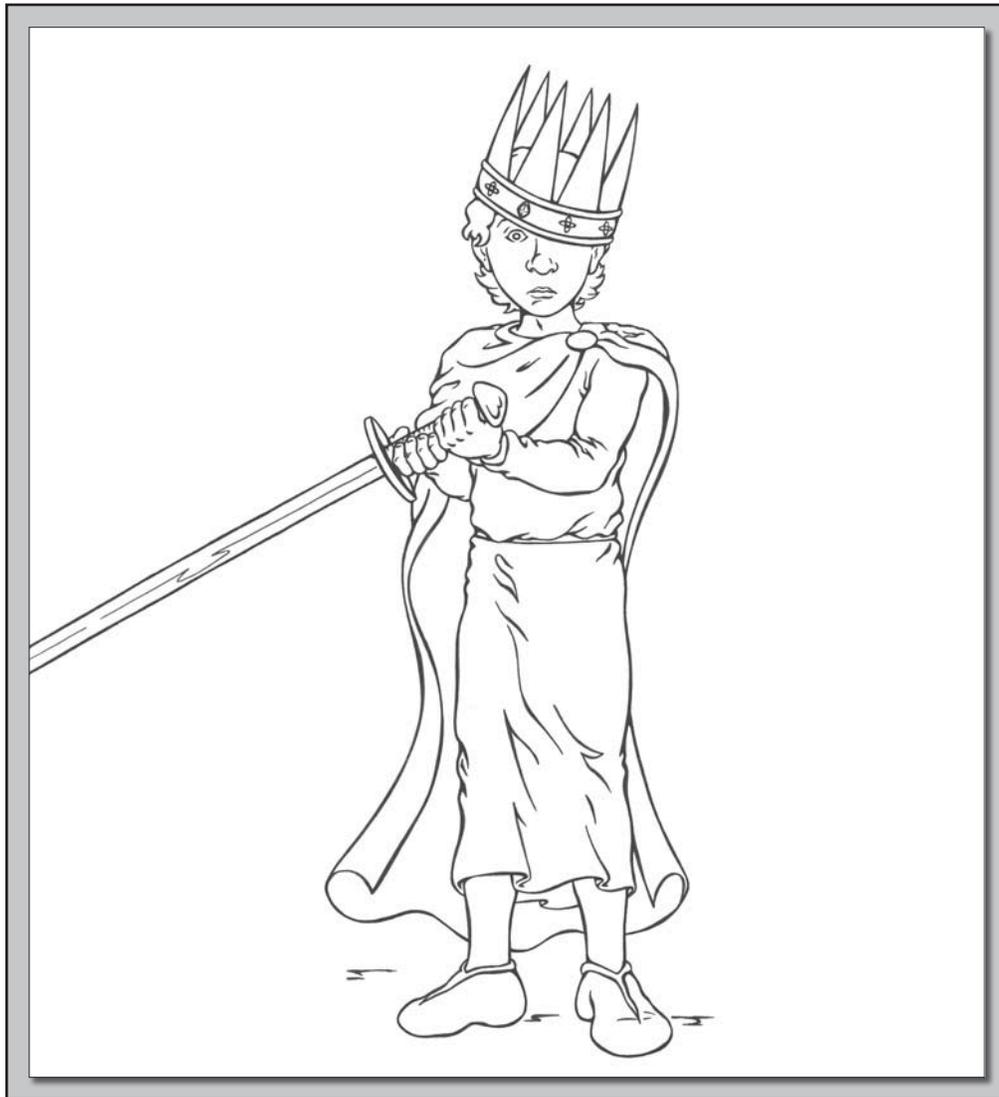


WHO IN THE WORLD WAS THE UNREADY KING?

THE STORY OF ETHELRED

by Connie Clark
Illustrations by Jed Mickle



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Books for the Well-Trained Mind

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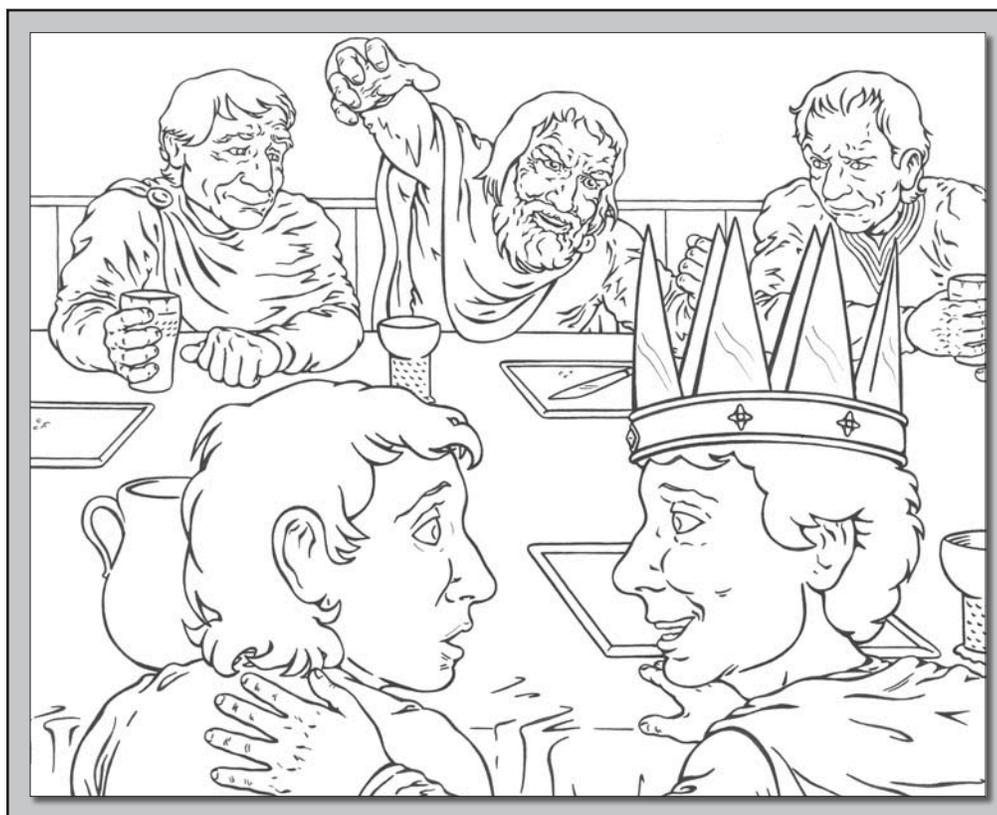
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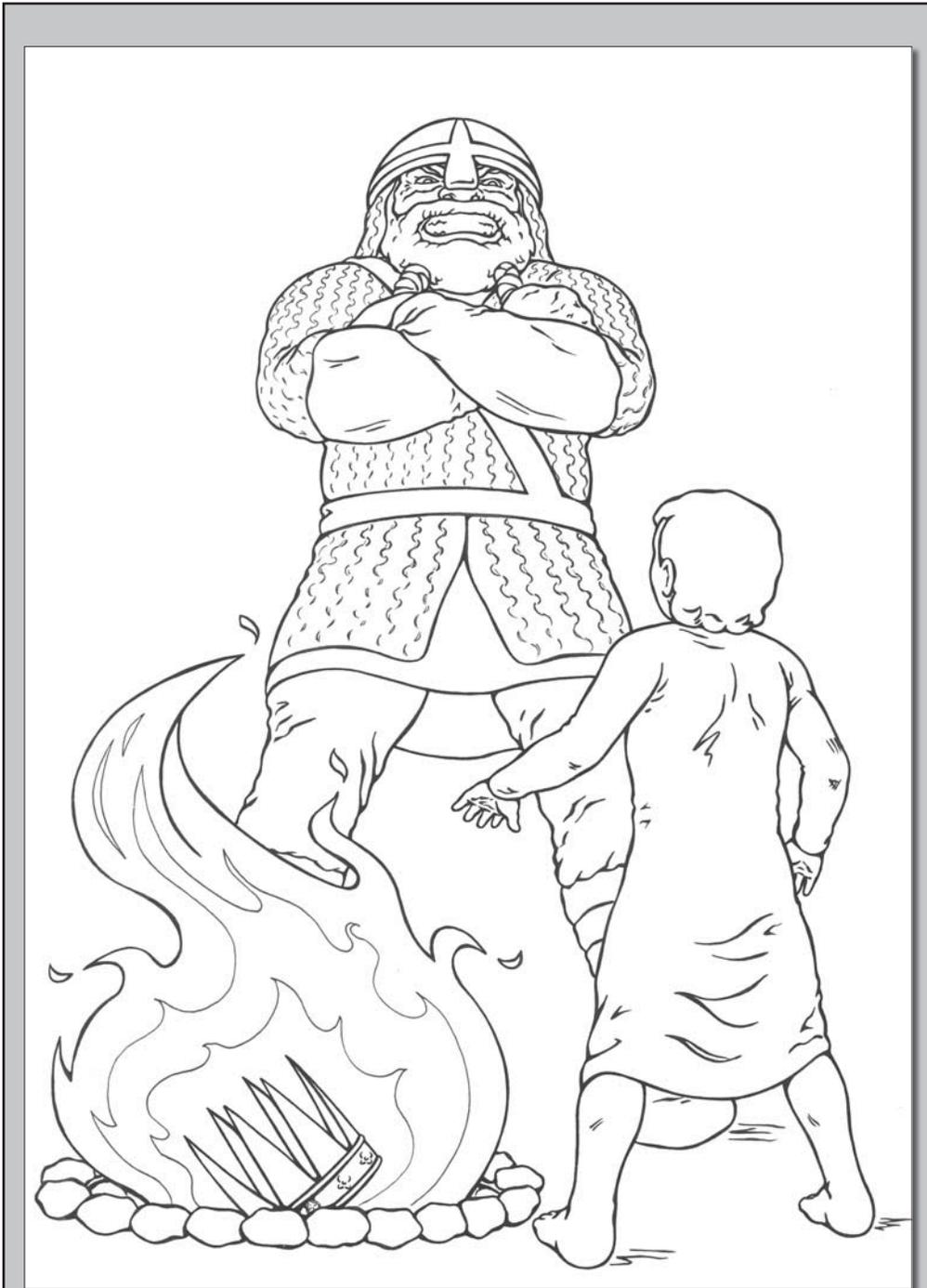
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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Boy King	1
Chapter 2: A King's Job	9
Chapter 3: The Vikings	17
Chapter 4: Emma and the Normans	27
Chapter 5: Bad Days	33
Chapter 6: The Viking King of England	39
Epilogue	45
Author's Note	46
Bibliography	47
Index	48





A tall, blond warrior wearing a strange horned helmet stood over him, his angry face lit by the fire.

CHAPTER 1



BOY KING

Ethelred stared at the crown. It was solid gold and dotted with red and purple jewels. He'd never seen anything like it, but as he stood before the fire in the great hall of the castle, a terrible thing happened. The crown slipped from his fingers and into the flames below.

A tall, blond warrior wearing a strange horned helmet stood over him, his angry face lit by the fire.

“You dropped it! That crown was worth millions. You owe me, Boy King.”

“But I'm not the king,” Ethelred pleaded. “Where will I get that kind of money?”

The warrior sneered. “You're the king of England. You can do anything you want.”

“I’m not the king,” Ethelred repeated. “I’m only ten years old!”

Ethelred awoke suddenly, covered in sweat and breathing hard. He looked around. He wasn’t in the great hall. He was in his own room. It was very dark, but Ethelred could see that there was no angry warrior standing over him. No fireplace. No gold crown.

Of course, he thought. It was only a dream.

“I should be used to it by now,” he muttered. After all, he’d had that same dream many times before.

Ethelred shivered as the cold March wind blew through the window, a simple slit in the earthen wall. It had snuffed out all the candles in his room hours ago. As Ethelred settled back under the covers, he couldn’t stop thinking about the dream.

“I’m not the king,” Ethelred said in a loud voice. “I never want to be king.”

Ethelred thought about kings. There were lots of them in his family. His great-great-grandfather had been such a great king that everyone called him Alfred the Great. Then there was Ethelred’s father, Edgar, who had raised a huge fleet of ships and then sailed them all the way around England every spring.

But three years ago, King Edgar had died. He left behind two sons—Ethelred and his older stepbrother, Edward. Since Edward was older, he was named king.



*Ethelred thought about kings.
There were lots of them in his family.*

Ethelred and Edward were stepbrothers. They had the same father—King Edgar—but Ethelred had a different mother. The boys were good friends, and even though Edward was only sixteen, Ethelred thought he was a good king. Edward was fair and just, and he listened to everyone.

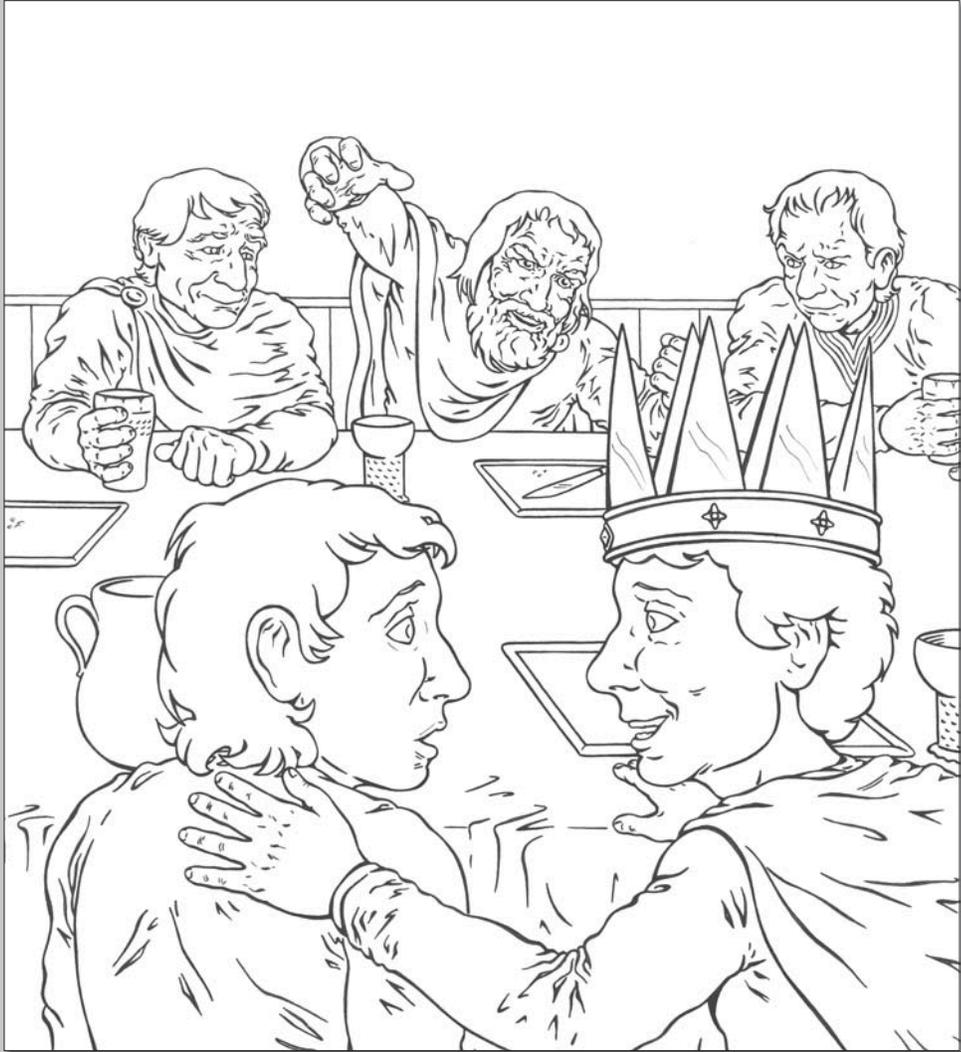
But not everyone liked Edward. Especially Ethelred’s mother. She was furious when Edward was crowned, because she felt that Ethelred should have been king.

She secretly plotted against Edward. She told his advisors to ignore him. And she tried to bully him into passing laws she wanted for herself.

Ethelred had always been glad that it was Edward who sat on the throne. He felt sorry for his older stepbrother, who spent most of his days in meetings with bishops and other important men called earls (*urles*). They spent hours discussing things like taxes and laws. It all sounded very dull.

Ethelred, on the other hand, spent his days outside. He practiced archery, rode his horse, and explored the forest. In the evenings he feasted with Edward and the royal court, listening to warriors tell tales of glory. His favorite was Byrhtnoth (*BURT-noth*), the white-haired earl who told about Ethelred’s great-great grandfather Alfred.

“The enemy Danes conquered our land,” Byrhtnoth said. “King Alfred hid in the marshes and made battle plans. Then he led his men against the Danes and won back our land.”



In the evenings he feasted with Edward and the royal court, listening to warriors tell tales of glory.

Ethelred smiled as he remembered Byrhtnoth's stories. Then he remembered how cold he was. Dragging an itchy wool blanket over his shoulder, he got up and walked through the darkness to the great hall.

Normally at this hour the hall was full of servants or visitors sleeping by the fire. But tonight it was empty except for the long wooden feasting table and the fire pit in the center of the room. All that was left of the fire were a few glowing embers, and Ethelred thought crossly of the servant who had let the fire go out.

There was a strange silence about the hall. But as Ethelred poked at the fire with a stick, he heard shouting. He turned, and several people burst into the room.

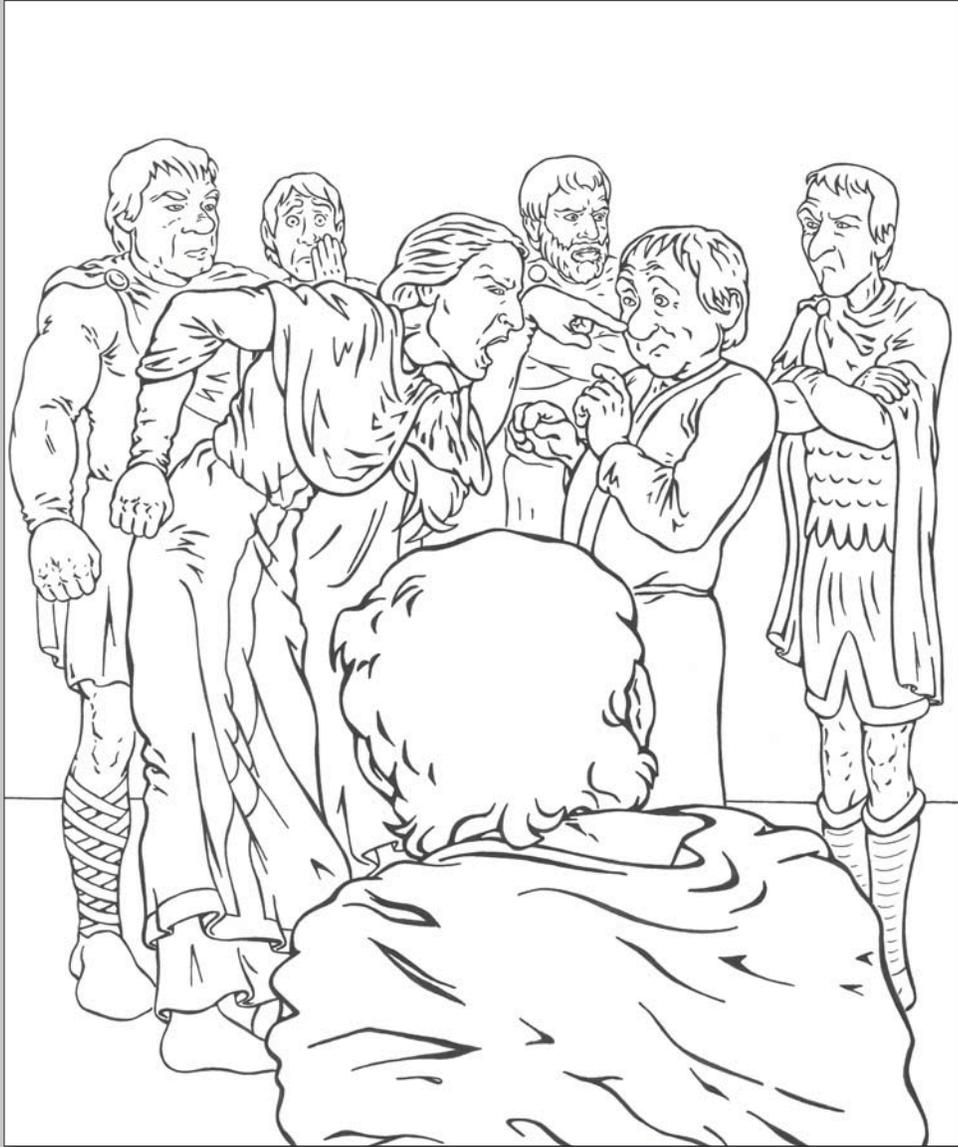
Ethelred could see the tall thin figure of his mother and the short, stumpy outline of an earl. He didn't know the others. They were arguing and hadn't noticed Ethelred.

"But ma'am, we must have a proper king's funeral," the earl begged.

"If I had wanted him buried I would have ordered that when I told them to kill the brat." His mother stopped when she saw Ethelred.

The earl turned. "Uh, my lord," he stammered. "We, ah—didn't see you there."

Ethelred's mother stepped in front of the earl. "Leave us," she ordered. Ethelred began to follow the others, but he felt a cold hand on his shoulder.



“If I had wanted him buried I would have ordered that when I told them to kill the brat.”

He raised his eyes to his mother. She looked like a ghost in the dim firelight.

“Prepare yourself,” she whispered. “Next month you will be crowned king.”

Ethelred stared at her. “I beg your pardon, ma’am?”

His mother turned to go. “King,” she said loudly. “You are the rightful king.”

“But Edward is the king,” he said.

“Edward is dead,” his mother replied. “You are the king.”