

Claiming
Canaan:
Milcah's Journey

Barbara M. Britton

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Claiming Canaan: Milcah's Journey
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Dedication

To all the men and women who go forth with God.

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The Daughters of Zelophehad

Mahlah

Noah

Hoglah

Milcah

Tirzah

The Tribes of Israel from Numbers 26:

Reuben

Simeon

Gad

Judah

Issachar

Zebulun

Manasseh, firstborn of Joseph

Ephraim, son of Joseph

Benjamin

Dan

Asher

Naphtali

Levi, no inheritance of land

Books by Barbara M. Britton

Tribes of Israel Series

Providence: Hannah's Journey

Building Benjamin: Naomi's Journey

Jerusalem Rising: Adah's Journey

Daughters of Zelophehad

Lioness: Mahlah's Journey

Heavenly Lights: Noah's Journey

Claiming Canaan: Milcah's Journey

Prologue

Six years after the battle for Ai

The camp at Gilgal, outside the fallen fortress of Jericho

Milcah *bat* Zelophehad stood in the noonday sun, on a hill not far from the rowed tent tops of camp. She waited with her older sisters. Her sisters waited for their husbands. She waited for Hanoch, the man who had asked her eldest sister if he could arrange a betrothal when he returned from battle. Hanoch, a brave soul, did not care that another suitor lay buried deep beneath the ground somewhere in Canaan.

Battle-hardened warriors traipsed along the path toward their homes in Gilgal. Men from the tribes of Israel, the sons of Jacob, carried satchels of spoils. Some bulging. Others thin. But all contained wealth from fallen cities.

“Do you see them?” she asked, rising on tiptoe. She twisted the gold band on her finger—the ring with the ruby as solid and handsome as her Hanoch. He had sneaked it to her before he departed.

“Not yet,” her sister Hoglah said. “I have seen few of our tribesmen. Perhaps the men of Manasseh ventured farther north with Joshua.”

Two men passed on the trail. One fighter tugged a wide-bellied cow toward its new home. Would Hanoch bring her livestock?

Her eldest sister's brow furrowed. "Reuben assured me our clansmen would return before spring. Our men may be burdened with carts or taking care of any wounded," Mahlah said.

Hurry beloved. Milcah fisted her hand. Her golden band fit snug against her skin. She would not leave her sundrenched outpost until Hanoch marched toward her eldest sister, bowed, and settled on a time to discuss a marriage feast. *Please, God. May Hanoch make haste.*

Drawing closer, Mahlah wrapped her arm around Milcah's waist. The softness of her sister's veil and the slight scent of myrtle bolstered Milcah's weary bones.

Until.

Until she glimpsed Mahlah's husband, Reuben, stalking closer alongside men from their clan and alongside Hoglah's husband.

She strained her neck. Where was Hanoch? He should be with his clansmen.

Reuben's firm-set mouth and pity-filled eyes impaled her hopeful spirit.

Her vision blurred so that all the men of Manasseh were buoyed by a sea of tears.

"No. It cannot be." She swallowed the last of her whisper.

The shake of Reuben's head revealed her fate.

She slumped in the dirt and wailed.

Death had claimed another intended.

1

So Joshua took the entire land, just as the Lord had directed Moses, and he gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions. Then the land had rest from war.
Joshua 11:23

One year later

The Israelite camp at Gilgal in the conquered land of Canaan

Milcah braced her legs on either side of the tent peg, wrapped a cloth around the tip, and wiggled, jiggled, and wiggled the peg some more. After almost seven years of being staked in the same place, the peg battled to stay in the ground. On this day she would leave Gilgal and leave the sad memories of lost loves behind.

She dropped her weight and struggled to free the bronze anchor anew. With a fierce tug, the stake escaped from its soil home. Taut ramskin buckled as the once-tall tent sagged to the side.

A squeal emerged from within the cock-eyed dwelling.

Tirzah, Milcah's youngest sister, poked her head from the tent flap. Her lips crumpled downward like their home.

"What are you doing? I'm hardly dressed."

Tirzah's gaze darted down the main pathway. "Enid isn't about? Is he?"

Milcah flung the hand-saving rag over her shoulder. "Your betrothed is in the fields where I am going to fetch a cart and a donkey. We don't want to carry this tent on our own." She quirked a brow at her prune-nosed sister. "Do we?"

Tirzah arched her back. "Truly, not." She covered a yawn. "Will you see if Hoglah has bread baked?"

"Hah. Waking you was trouble enough. Demanding food from Hoglah will make a balking donkey seem tame."

"There may be bread leftover in my pouch," Tirzah said.

"The one with the rocks?" Milcah's mouthed soured. "I'm sure our sister has prepared food for our travels. I'll see what hasn't been packed." Milcah grabbed a coil of rope. "And you have our belongings ready to move. I'd rather donkeys and camels carry the weight and not our shoulders."

As she turned to leave, she thought she saw a tongue returning to Tirzah's mouth. She may have been mistaken. Dawn did not cast much light.

"*Shalom*, Sister." Milcah stifled a laugh. Nothing was going to steal her tempered joy this morn. Year after year of battles had come to an end. No more men would die by the sword. And she and her sisters would claim a portion of the conquered land in their father's name. The name of Zelophehad would live again through his daughters' inheritance.

Whoosh.

A few yards from the trodden path, a tent flattened in the shadowy sunlight. The tribes of Israel would soon be on a march to Shiloh to set up the

Tabernacle, the home of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Afterward, her people would not congregate in a camp as one people. The tribes of Israel would separate and settle the land God had bestowed on each son of Jacob.

Milcah headed into the outskirts where her sisters Noah and Hoglah cared for livestock with their husbands. Farther and farther, her sisters had settled to keep up with their growing herds. Bounty was a blessing, but the memory of five dark-haired girls sharing the same tent still nestled in her heart.

Her mother and father had prepared their offspring well for this journey. A heaviness settled behind her eyes. If only her parents had lived to see this day. Mahlah had become a strong leader. Noah oversaw abundant livestock. Hoglah prepared the tastiest of food. All three daughters had married within their father's clan. The clan of Hephher. Her sisters had done as God commanded. Their tribe of Manasseh wouldn't lose a single portion of land. Now, Tirzah was set to marry. Milcah had taken care of their youngest sister all her life. A tear dripped from Milcah's lashes. When Tirzah slept in Enid's tent, what would be left for the fourth daughter of Zelophehad? What did a woman without a husband do as she aged? Those thoughts were best left for another day.

The murmur of excited voices, the squeak of rolling carts, and the clank of clay jars banished the usual silence of early morning.

Dodging a wagon in her path, she cut between staked tents whose owners had not begun their labors. The ground dipped. A pebble lodged between her toes.

Ugh. Not now. She had too many nieces, nephews, and sisters to organize for their journey north.

She grasped the lip of a cleansing jar, bent, and tried to free the small stone making its presence known by poking her fattest toe.

"Why are you dismayed?" a man asked.

Jerking upright, she glanced for the speaker. She was alone in the small alley.

"Isn't your brother married to one of Zelophehad's daughters?"

The questions came from inside the upright tent. Who was inquiring about her sisters?

A laborer in the distance glanced her direction, and she took off her sandal and jiggled the leather all the while listening to the veiled voices. Surely, the neighbor rolling ramskin would see and understand her distress as she balanced on one foot.

"My brother would never listen to reason," a gossipier rasped.

"Your brother cannot hear anything. He's a mute."

Chuckling carried through the tent wall.

Ahh. She knew the identity of one of the men in the tent. Her teeth clenched at the thought of Keenan. The troublemaker had tried to trick her sister Noah into marrying him. Praise God, Keenan's scheme had not succeeded. Though, the menace was now her sister's brother-in-law.

"I am well aware of my brother's curse." Keenan's final word hissed through the tent wall. "My brother will oversee the land of his wife, but two of the daughters of Zelophehad are unmarried. Why should unwed women be allotted land they did not fight for?"

Because God gave us our father's land.

She forced her sandal onto her foot and shuffled forward with a feigned limp.

Why was Keenan bringing up her inheritance

now? Seven years ago, she and her sisters sought out Moses and asked to inherit their deceased father's land. God honored their request, and Moses proclaimed God's ruling to an assembly of elders. Did Keenan mean to question God?

"Moses gave them their father's portion. Do you mean to question his judgment?" Another man's voice echoed Milcah's silent question.

Toda raba. Someone awakened with sense.

"Joshua is the one who conquered Canaan," Keenan argued. "He should limit the girl's allotment. How much land can these women possibly work? The sons of Joseph are a numerous people and our given land is full of forest. Do you want to clear the hillsides while women settle flatter lands?"

"You will need more elders to agree to your demands if you mean to overturn Moses' decree."

Hushed murmuring blended together into an undecipherable hum. Discerning whether Keenan's case gained supporters was futile. Would these men agree with Keenan's assessment? No one was going to steal her inheritance. Not for lack of a husband. Praise be for a troublesome rock. She had stumbled upon another one of Keenan's devious schemes.

Voices quieted.

The tent flap whipped open.

She lunged forward. Her heart skittered into an all-out gallop. Chin down, she pulled her head covering tight to her face, and hurried out of camp, never chancing a glance at Keenan or his cohorts.

Her first chore this morning would be to warn her sisters of Keenan's plot. She had to gather four sisters and get to Joshua before Keenan persuaded elders from the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh to question

her family's allotment. Her sisters had men to challenge this undoing. She did not have a husband or a betrothed. Truly it was not for a lack of trying, but after two dead suitors, no one had ventured to her sister's tent flap to ask about an arrangement of marriage.

Would Joshua heed Keenan's challenge and limit her land? She would not relinquish one crag or valley of her allotment. Seven years had passed, that was true, but elders from Manasseh and all the tribes of Israel, had heard God's decree through Moses. Whether married, or unmarried, her father's double portion of land was coming to his daughters. Zelophehad's name would be carried into Canaan. She had already started to pack her tent and seek a new life.

Only her wicked kinsman could ruin such a glorious day.

2

After warning Hoglah and Noah about Keenan's latest scheme to snatch her land, Milcah hurried to inform her eldest sister. The people of Israel had made haste in their packing. The camp resembled the inside of her tent when all five sisters were changing robes. Men yelled orders. Tents collapsed. Donkey-drawn carts and oxen-led wagons headed north to Shiloh. Warriors from the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and some Manassites traveled closer to the Jordan River.

Rushing down the wide path toward Mahlah's tent, Milcah's chest tightened. Her home lay flattened. She had told Tirzah to finish the work, but the openness, the sight of nothing where she had lived with her family, cramped her stomach. Tirzah had listened. For once. The daughters of Zelophehad were going forth with God into His Promised Land. The land God had portioned for her father.

Reuben, Mahlah's husband, and Jonah, his son, rolled ramskin with ease. Jericho, the walled fortress that had greeted her people, lay ruined, conquered, and burned. The remains of the city were a reminder of the power of the One True God. If God could fell a stone fortress, He could certainly provide a fearless husband for Milcah.

Mahlah carried baby Aaron on her hip while her older children, Amos and Abigail, placed wooden

plates and cups into satchels. Working hard as usual, Milcah's sister splayed a blanket on a camel's back with her free hand.

"Good morning, Sister," Mahlah said. "Where is your cart? We must be on our way."

If only packing was their sole worry this day.

"We can pack later. We must seek our leader, for there is another scheme about." Milcah brushed the sweat from her brow. She had raced home like a king's messenger. "Noah and Hogleh will arrive soon with a cart."

"Scheme? What scheme?" Mahlah shifted Aaron on her hip. "Joshua will be supervising the Tabernacle servants. The Ark of our God is being moved to Shiloh. Our leader is not judging petitions."

"Not yet." Milcah bent at the waist and breathed deep. "But soon Joshua's plans will be interrupted by elders from our tribe and others. Keenan is plotting to steal some of our land. I heard him trying to gather supporters when I left camp."

"This is madness." Mahlah's features grew serious. "God bestowed our inheritance. The matter is settled."

"Is anything settled when Keenan is involved?" Contentment never found her kinsman. "He is persuaded that since Tirzah and I do not have husbands, our land should be given to our clansmen."

Reuben stomped closer. A mallet dangled from his hand. "If my wife and sister-in-law are talking about Keenan *ben* Abishua, I know no good can come of it."

"I heard him with my own ears." Milcah leaned forward and tickled her nephew's cheek. "He is challenging some of our inheritance because Tirzah and I have no husbands."

"Nonsense." Reuben rubbed his bearded jaw. "Tirzah is betrothed."

Milcah's spirit heard her brother-in-law's unspoken worry. She was not betrothed. Though, hadn't she been doing what her parents would have wanted? Taking care of her youngest sister, an orphan no less? Her older sisters had families and husbands to attend. Even at nineteen, she could still find someone in due time. Now that war had ebbed, perhaps men interested in her hand would not be concerned about dying in battle.

"Keenan has no right to challenge the amount of land we receive," Mahlah said.

Her sister's one-armed hug was a balm to Milcah's soul. Even baby Aaron reached to grab Milcah's chin.

"We will go to Joshua and remind him of Moses' proclamation."

"Toda raba, Sister." Milcah lay her head on Mahlah's shoulder and kissed her nephew's inquisitive fingers.

Reuben handed his mallet to Jonah. "I will not allow a kinsman to dishonor my father-in-law's name." He turned toward his eldest son. "Jonah, look after your brother and sister."

Amos jutted his chin. "I can look after myself."

Reuben straightened his robe. "Then you watch over Abigail."

Amos arched his back and complained to the blue sky. His younger sister squealed and hugged her brother tight.

"Must we always have the loudest dwelling in camp?" Hoglah halted her plump donkey and guided the cart nearer the sluggish camel.

Praise be her sisters had gathered, Milcah thought.