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TO KEEP HER ORPHANED SISTERS  
TOGETHER, MAHLAH MUST  
BOLDLY REQUEST AN INHERITANCE  
THAT WILL CHANGE HISTORY.

# LIONESS

~MAHLAH'S JOURNEY~

Lioness:  
Mahlah's  
Journey

*Daughters of Zelophehad, book 1*

Barbara M. Britton

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**Lioness: Mahlah's Journey**

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## *Dedication*

To my sister Tove, and my sisters-in-law Sherrie and Suzanne. 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



# A Prior Journey

After the Hebrew people fled slavery in Egypt, they wandered in a desert wilderness for forty years until it was time to take possession of God's Promised Land. Passing through Moab, the Israelites now camp across the Jordan River from the fortress of Jericho and wait to conquer their inheritance.

At last, the battles begin...





# 1

*Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;  
but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.*  
*Proverbs 31:30*

Mahlah arched her back. A sky, blue and crisp like a faceted gem, draped over the camp. No trade winds cooled the warmth of the fresh, new sun. She picked up a basket from outside her family's ramskin tent and wedged it against her hip. Grasping her woven belt, she shifted the leather, so her knife was but a flinch away. She wouldn't allow any beast in the wilderness to harm her sisters.

"Come on, Tirzah. The dew is gone."

Tirzah emerged from behind the tent flap. She blinked at the brightness and wrinkled her nose. "Why do I have to gather manna?"

"Because it is your turn." Mahlah reached to take the hand of her youngest sister. "Hurry now, before Father stirs."

A gurgling noise rumbled from Tirzah's belly.

Mahlah stifled a laugh. "We better go before your hunger wakes the neighbors."

"It won't." Tirzah pressed her lips together. Her stone-collecting satchel hung at her side.

"If we stay here and let our kin harvest the closest

man, your rumble will turn into a roar." Bending low, Mahlah lunged forward and wrapped an arm around her sister. She lifted Tirzah off the ground and twirled her in the direction of the outskirts. "Manna awaits."

Tirzah giggled. A few sleepy gatherers scowled and clutched their unfilled baskets.

The tent flap flung open. Zelophehad stomped into the small clearing outside their dwelling.

Stiffening, Mahlah faced her father. Heat crept from her neck into her cheeks. She lowered her sister to the trampled path.

Tirzah pressed her weight against the folds of Mahlah's robe.

"Enough of this silliness." Her father glowered at her empty basket. "How can I oversee a brood of girls on an empty stomach?"

"I'm sorry we disturbed you, Father." Mahlah's heartbeat pounded in her throat. "We won't take long."

Head down, Mahlah tugged her sister toward the next tent. Nothing she did of late pleased her father.

Tirzah jogged a few steps. "Are we breaking camp today?"

"We'll see from the hill."

Mahlah hurried Tirzah past row after row of ram-skin tents occupied by their tribesmen of Manasseh. The sour scent of the hides filled her nostrils as she hastened toward the fields bordering their camp.

A few women chatted in hushed voices. They, too, needed to collect a day's worth of God's provision this morn.

"I'm tired of the desert." Tirzah scuffed her sandals along the dirt path separating their clan of

Hepher from other families within the tribe of Manasseh.

"Shhh." Mahlah glanced to see if any of the women had heard her sister's complaint. Not one head turned. Praise be for sleepy neighbors.

"I am weary, too, little one, but someday soon we will have a house to keep and land to farm. You can tend the livestock or weave our garments."

Tirzah puckered her cracked lips. Her eyes grew wide. "I'd rather cook."

"Ah." Mahlah chuckled. "May God grant me the remembrance of your volunteering for labor."

The desert outside the encampment opened into an expanse of nothingness. The soil and hills and bramble bushes were muted shades of nutshells.

Layers of manna rested on the parched grass. This bread of heaven came in the morning while quail came at night. These provisions were bestowed by their God. The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

*Shalom, Adonai.* Mahlah stooped to break off pieces of the thin, bumpy bread. With four sisters to feed and an aging father, no complaint would leave her mouth about the lack of variety in God's gift. Every finely ground tidbit tasted of fire-roasted grain. She accepted the nourishment with pleasure.

"Do we have honey at home?" Tirzah nibbled a piece of the unleavened bread. Her satchel bulged from her labors.

Mahlah nodded. *Home.* The word sounded strange, as if spoken in a foreign dialect. For the last five years, they had traveled without a mother. A mother who had made their tent a refuge in the desert. On the providence of God, their family moved from

place to place. At times, the marching seemed aimless. And aimless is what her father's direction had become.

Leaving Tirzah at the base of a hill, Mahlah climbed higher and shaded her eyes to survey the camp. Tent upon tent formed a perfect square with the Tabernacle of God set in the center of the tribes of Israel. A cloud hovered over the sacred site. No marching would be done today. Only waiting. Would the rest heal her father's weariness?

Mahlah gripped her basket and hurried down the slope. Her sandals skidded on loosened pebbles. She left the small stones embedded in her toes, and hurried, hoping her father had not grown impatient. She prayed a full stomach would breed acceptance of their wandering.

"We have enough, little one." Mahlah tapped Tirzah's shoulder and trudged ahead. "Let's go."

Tirzah gripped her satchel as if a thief might snatch it away. "Slow down. Your legs are longer than mine."

"Only for a while with as fast as you're growing." Mahlah hurried toward their family's tent.

Tirzah hopped behind her, one footstep to the other, as her manna-filled satchel beat a rhythm against her hip.

Mahlah shook her head at the drumbeat her sister created and grinned. "I will volunteer to eat your manna crumbs."

Her father rounded the far side of their tent. "Where is my food?" His words pierced the morning calm, drawing the attention of nearby kin. He overturned a water jug. "Again, we have nothing to drink."

Every muscle in Mahlah's arms tensed. Her

knuckles ached as she gripped the handle of her basket. She slowed her pace. Her mind searched for an excuse as Tirzah slammed into the back of her legs. Sweat pooled above Mahlah's lip. With one swipe of her tongue, she removed the moisture but tasted salt and grit.

What could she say to calm her father's ire so his temper did not draw another reprimand from the elders? She stepped forward, her progress hindered by Tirzah's grasp.

*God give me wisdom.*

"I'm sure our goats have been milked. Isn't milk more satisfying than water?" She tried to smile, but her lips quivered.

"Babble!" Their father hurled the stone jar at the ground.

Mahlah flinched. Shards of baked clay decorated the dirt. Her sisters, Hoglah and Milcah, stood in the tent opening, eyes wide and mouths gaping as if they'd encountered an evil spirit.

"You are a fool if you think there is enough to drink. We will wither away like your mother." Pacing in a circle, their father ripped his turban from his head. "Don't offer me that awful bread."

"Father, please." *Forgive him, Lord.* Mahlah handed her basket to Tirzah and pushed her younger sister nearer the tent.

"Moses has cursed us all," her father shouted. "Do you see a bountiful land? What bounty can I claim with no heir?"

Fisting her hands, Mahlah strode toward her father. Hadn't she worked beside her father and done everything an heir could?

"We are blessed. With life." Her head covering

shifted to one side, but she would not stop to right it. "I beg of you. Go inside and eat. I will send Tirzah to fetch some milk."

Nemuel, an elder from the tribe of Manasseh, stomped into the open space between the tents. His son, Reuben, lagged, towering over his father.

Her father slipped off his belt and whipped it high. "Moses must answer for our hardship. Who believes as I do?"

Mahlah bit down on her lip. Her family did not need another tongue-lashing from a leader. Her father's discontent would draw another public reprimand. Nemuel showed no compassion toward his kin, but perhaps Reuben would remember favorably the girls growing up in the tent a few paces from his own.

She stepped closer to her father and feigned lightheartedness. "Hunger has made you like a bear." She grinned as if they attended a celebratory feast. "Come and eat with your girls."

A few men approached the clearing. Had they heard the commotion?

"Zelophehad." Nemuel crossed his arms, splaying the tassels on his garment. "Repent of this grumbling and see to your daughters."

Swinging his belt high as if harvesting wheat with a sickle, her father remained silent.

Nemuel backed away.

Elders retreated.

A tiny spasm twitched in the corner of Mahlah's right eye. She blinked, trying to calm the flutter. Why now eye? She needed to take heed of her father's actions.

"Lead the way to justice, Zelophehad," a man

yelled from a neighboring tent.

"No." Mahlah pointed at the heckler. She drew to her full height and fingered the blade on her belt. How dare this sluggard threaten her family?

"Be still," she said. The spasm in her eye tugged at her cheek.

Her father snapped his belt inches from her toes.

Mahlah's heart raced, but she did not retreat. She swallowed the lingering taste of fine grain and swept moisture from her eye. "*Abba.*" She croaked her plea. "Let us sup as a family." She indicated her sisters huddled outside the tent. "Follow me inside."

She did not recognize the snarl of the madman beholding her with eyes as dark as a moonless midnight. Where was the loving father who had laughed at his daughters' antics?

"It is time I take my grievance to the Tabernacle." Her father strode toward the center of the camp while holding his belt aloft like a scepter. "Moses must answer for my misery."

Men from the tribe of Manasseh marched after their wayward clansman.

"Father, wait." Why wasn't he listening?

"Repent of this wickedness," Reuben called out, echoing his father's wisdom. "God's wrath will find you."

Should she follow her father? She glimpsed her youngest sisters, Tirzah and Milcah, sobbing into their older sister's apron. Didn't their father care about the future of his offspring? Life would be uncertain for women with no protector and no heir.

"What is wrong with you people?" Nemuel chastised the onlookers as he shuffled in the direction of another leader's dwelling. "You stand and gossip