

# PROLOGUE

**1141 BC**

Hannah walked with her father and brothers and fellow Kohathites from Ramathaim-zophim in the hills of Ephraim, nearly skipping for joy at the chance to accompany them to Shiloh during their week of work. Her friends Meira and Lital had joined her, as they were all at last at an age when they were allowed to participate with the singers at the Tent of Meeting.

“I think I have wanted this my entire life,” Hannah said, clasping her hands lest she do something foolish like giggle or twirl in a circle as she’d done when she was small. “The music is always so joyful there.”

Meira leaned closer and touched Hannah’s arm. “No doubt you will have even more reason to sing once this week is past. That is, if my brother gets his wish.” She gave Hannah a conspiratorial grin, and Lital laughed.

“I knew it,” Lital said, her smile as wide as Meira’s. “I told you that you would not remain at the tabernacle to

serve unmarried indefinitely.” She gave Hannah a sideways embrace. “You are blessed indeed.”

Hannah stopped walking and grasped each friend’s hand. “Enough of such talk. We know nothing yet. Elkanah has not even spoken to my father, so you could be completely wrong.” Though her heart flipped a little at the thought of Meira’s brother making his interest in her known to his family.

“I’m not wrong.” Meira’s lower lip resembled a pout, and Lital laughed softly again. “Elkanah has waited for you. If he doesn’t speak here, you can be sure he will speak soon.”

“And I will stay at the tabernacle,” Lital said, suddenly sobering. She shrugged at Hannah’s empathetic expression. “It is nothing to be distressed over. My father is dead. My mother cannot afford to live if I do not serve in this way, and there has been no man seeking my hand. I am content with it.”

Hannah watched her friend, a few years her senior and one who certainly could have married by now if not for her father’s untimely death. “Surely you have a relative who would redeem you. I hate to leave you here with no male relative to watch over you.”

Lital waved a sturdy hand as if brushing away an insect. “I will be fine.”

“But the rumors . . .”

“Are just rumors. What have Hophni and Phinehas done other than take too much meat from the sacrifices? That is wrong, of course, but I don’t think they are dangerous.” Lital tucked her headscarf closer to her neck. “I look forward to serving the Lord in that place. My father served there.” Her gaze held a faraway look. “I think he would be proud.”

Hannah patted Lital's arm. "If he could see you now, I *know* he would be proud of you." Meira said the same, and the subject changed as the group drew closer to Shiloh's gates.

"Do you really think Elkanah likes me?" Hannah asked, unable to keep her curiosity in check.

Meira nodded, grinning again. "I think Elkanah is besotted with you. Just wait and see."

Hannah glanced ahead to where Elkanah and his brothers walked among the throng of men. Could he really care for her? Her heart tripped again as she recalled the way he had looked at her at the last feast when she danced with the virgins. She had been ready for marriage then, and Elkanah was twelve years her senior. Why did he wait so long to act?

As they entered Shiloh's gates, she pushed the thoughts aside. She was here to sing, to worship before Adonai, a longing fulfilled at last. She would think about a husband later. Though she knew that in her attempts to banish that thought, she was only fooling herself.



The tabernacle of Shiloh came into view, and Hannah left her friends to join her father and brothers as Meira did hers. Lital remained at Hannah's side.

"Are you sure you want to remain here at week's end?" Hannah looked into the round, tanned face of the girl who had been forced to work too hard since her father's passing, the only child of her mother. "How will your mother get along without you?"

"Ima is strong, Hannah. She urged me to come to earn enough money to help keep us from becoming gleaners in our neighbors' fields. She can manage the house and garden

alone.” Lital glanced about, her expression curious. Though Lital had come here often with her father, Hannah suspected that without him things seemed new, different. Hannah followed her gaze as they entered the area where the Levites stayed, awed by the lavish houses of the priests.

They had passed the large brown tented tabernacle held upright with poles and the fabric fence surrounding it. The bronze altar with four bronze horns and the bronze bowl filled with water stood before it. More utensils and carts surrounded the area where the priests would slaughter each animal and catch the blood in a bowl.

Hannah closed her eyes, imagining the part she hated most—sacrifice. Sacrifice of the perfect lamb brought the reminder of what God required. Would she ever live up to the law’s demands? Sometimes they seemed so impossible, yet at other times she sensed that God was as real to her as her breath. She spoke to him, even in childhood, and always felt a kind of kinship with the Unknowable One—like He saw her and He cared.

A sense of contentment filled her. She glanced at her father, Hyam, who walked slowly ahead of them toward the rooms they would occupy. He turned to face her. “You will room with Lital and Meira between our room and Jeroham’s. Take care not to go out at night alone.” His brows furrowed. “Not that you need fear, but one can never tell when a wild beast will get past the gates.”

“I’ll be careful, Abba.”

Her father nodded once and motioned the girls toward their room. In the distance, the sound of singing wafted to them, and the scent of the evening sacrifice floated on the breeze.

*“Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, you His servants. Praise the name of the Lord. Let the name of the Lord be praised, both now and forevermore. From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised. The Lord is exalted over all the nations, His glory above the heavens. Who is like the Lord our God, the One who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap. He seats them with princes, with the princes of His people. He settles the childless woman in her home as a happy mother of children. Praise the Lord.”*

“You have a beautiful voice.”

Hannah jumped and turned to find Meira’s brother Elkanah watching her. Had she joined in the singing? She shook herself. “I was so caught up . . . I didn’t realize . . .”

His smile caused butterflies to take wing inside of her. She touched the clasp of her veil, grateful that she was partially hidden from his perusal.

He glanced around and she did the same. Lital had somehow deserted her during the singing, and she saw that her father and brothers were some distance away, leaving her alone to speak with Elkanah.

“Nevertheless, you sing like an angel.” He placed both hands behind his back. “Your father allowed me to speak with you. I hope you do not mind.”

“No. No. That is, I do not mind speaking to you. Your sister mentioned you on the walk from town.” Hannah felt her hands grow clammy, and she longed to cross her arms over her chest to still a sudden trembling and the fear that she had not said the right thing at all.

He lifted a brow. “Did she? And what did that little mischief maker have to say?”

It was her turn to give him a curious look. “I believe she wanted to warn me about you.” Hannah could not hold back a smile.

“I’m beginning to think you are both mischievous.” He drew a circle in the dirt with his toe.

“We have been known to consider a prank or two.” Why ever was she talking like this? She sensed that neither one of them was ready to say anything serious.

“Did she also tell you that I have spoken to your father about you?” The sudden turn of the conversation and intensity of his gaze caused a hitch in her breath.

Hannah could not look at him. “She intimated as much.”

He stood in silence a moment until she looked up and met his gaze. “I’ve watched you for several years, Hannah. At past feasts, in town, when you come to worship Adonai, I see in you a kind woman with a love for our God. Exactly the kind of woman I would like for my wife.” He ran a hand over his beard, cut in the tradition of the Kohathites.

“Only the ‘kind’ of woman, or is it me specifically you want?” She held his look, for she realized all of a sudden that she had to know. With their difference in age, he could have married years ago, and her father had hinted that there were others who had approached Jeroham regarding Elkanah.

*Is this truly the man You want for me, Lord?*

“You. Specifically.” He smiled. “If you are willing, I would like to pursue a relationship with you. Your father is willing to allow us to get to know one another. We could simply sign a betrothal, but I realize that you don’t know me like you do my sister.” He winked and angled his head in the

direction his sister had gone. “And I would like to change that.”

A wave of shyness crept over Hannah. “I would like to change that too,” she said after drawing in a deep breath to steady her heightened nerves.

“Good. Then after our return home, I will call on you.” He inclined his head toward her and turned and walked toward her father.

Hannah watched him go, shaken. Elkanah was not at all what she expected. She assumed her father would handle everything and she would have no choice. But here was a man willing to give her time and choice. Both things she valued but had never expected.



## **SIX MONTHS LATER**

Hannah slipped into the tent her mother had set up on the south side of the tabernacle, where the rest of her Kohathite relatives had placed similar enclosures. Though they were from Ephraim, Kohathites stayed to the south rather than the west with the rest of Ephraim's tribe.

"Can I help you with anything, Ima?" Though she was used to Elkanah's visits at their home in Ephraim, Hannah's pulse still quickened with the sense of urgency. He was coming tonight during this Feast of Weeks to celebrate with them! Would this also be the night they would settle the date for their betrothal?

Adva took a sack of grain from a saddlebag on the donkey's back. The beast had pulled a cart filled with their offerings and food to last their entire family during this feast.

"You can grind the grain for the evening meal." She placed the sack in Hannah's hands and motioned her toward the grindstone at the front of the tent. "There is no time to waste

if your Elkanah is joining us this night. The men will be back before the bread is fully baked if we do not start now.”

“Yes, Ima.” *Soon he will truly be my Elkanah.* But when?

She sank onto the ground and arranged her skirts, poured the grain from the goatskin bag to the stone, and turned the wheel. She worried her lip as she worked, watching as women across their small compound also set about grinding grain. Children ran between the tents, and in the distance a baby cried. If she had a babe so young, she would stay home from such a feast.

She shook herself and gave attention to the grain as she turned the grindstone. As for tonight, she was worrying for nothing, of course. Elkanah and her father would work out the time soon. She had nothing to fear.



Evening shadows fell across the camp and the moon rose high, a round beacon to accompany the stars in guiding the men from the altar to the tents to celebrate the feast. Hannah watched her mother snatch bowls of garden vegetables, leeks, onions, garlic, and cucumbers, and move them from one end of the rugs where Hannah had spread the food to the other end, replacing them with the bread and dipping oil.

“The men will want to break the bread first. And we must have salt.” Adva gave Hannah a frantic look. “Where is the salt?”

Hannah had not thought of that. Her father would want bread and salt between himself and Elkanah. It was a sign of continuing friendship, acceptance. “I don’t know. I’m sure we packed it.” Her mother would not have forgotten such a simple meal staple.

“Look in the bags. If you can’t find it, go ask your sisters-in-law. They may have taken it before I could think to do so.”

Hannah simply nodded as her mother frantically rushed about the tent, straightening this pillow or that cushion. Was her mother as nervous about the betrothal as she?

She moved to the bags that had been nearly emptied of tools and utensils and food, searching. Finally, from the last bag that had somehow fallen behind the others, Hannah pulled out a small sack of salt.

“It’s here.” She straightened and handed the sack to her mother.

“Oh, good.” Adva placed the salt in a small bowl and set it near the bread and oil. She rushed to the tent opening and peered into the gathering dusk. Male voices came from a short distance. “They’re coming!” She whirled around and hurried to the back of the tent, where she removed her old robe that she used to work in and put on a fresh one. “Go to the tent of your sisters-in-law. You must not be here when he arrives.”

Hannah lifted a brow, taken aback by this turn of events. “I am always here when Elkanah comes.”

“Tonight is different.”

Hannah tilted her head. “What do you know that I don’t?” Elkanah had said nothing to her about setting a date, though she had been sorely tempted to press him.

“You will know soon enough. Now go!” Adva pointed to the tent door. “If things go as I think they might, you may speak with Elkanah outside the tent near the door afterward.”

“Alone?”

“I will be close enough to listen.”

Of course she would. Why should Hannah expect anything different?

“Shall I send one of my sisters-in-law to help you?” she asked.

“Send Malka. Watch her children so she doesn’t worry.”

Hannah nodded and slipped from the tent. Her mother’s nerves were as frayed as an old coat, adding to Hannah’s own nervous state. She looked toward the road, where she could see her father leading her brothers and Elkanah in her direction. He carried a clay pot in his hands, no doubt filled with the meat left over from the sacrifice. Her stomach rumbled at the thought of food and the smells of the fresh bread still coming from her parents’ tent.

She hurried to the shelter beside theirs and ducked under the flap. “Malka, Ima needs your help.” She walked to the corner where Malka had just placed her youngest among the blankets.

She looked at Hannah and smiled. “Watch him carefully. He just ate and is likely to need changing soon.” She stood and glanced at her other children. “Be good for Aunt Hannah. Ima will be back soon.” To Hannah she said, “There is bread and a little wine waiting for them. Dip the bread in the wine. They will sleep better for me, and I need them to sleep!” She stifled a yawn. “It is unfortunate that Adva could not have allowed you to help tonight. I want nothing more than to rest.”

Hannah touched Malka’s arm. “I would gladly help her, but she is insistent I not be there for whatever the men plan to discuss.”

Malka nodded. “Of course. It was the same way when Dan came to speak to my father. It is the way of things.” She touched Hannah’s cheek. “You have grown up, my sister. Soon we will be celebrating your wedding feast.”

Her smile caused Hannah's heart to flutter. This meal truly was more serious than the ones they had shared in the past. But hadn't she seen it in Elkanah's eyes? Hadn't Meira warned her? Her hands grew moist with the thought of all that could come of this night.

She glanced at the baby, who kicked his feet and cooed. One look around the tent reminded her that she wanted this. She was old enough to enter marriage, and she wanted a family of her own.

*Please, Adonai, let this be the night. But also please let things proceed according to Your will.*

The end of the meal and time with Elkanah suddenly couldn't come soon enough.