

Aaron's Wife

By Mesu Andrews

Chapter One

*“Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp,
far off from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting.
And everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting...”*

Exodus 33:7

Elisheba

“Ouch!” I dropped the sharp, bone needle and sucked blood from my finger.

My husband’s sister set aside the high priest’s turban she was sewing. “That’s the second time you’ve pricked yourself since midday, Elisheba. Your mind is elsewhere.”

“My husband and four sons are about to be anointed Israel’s priests, and I’m hurrying to finish their robes. Where else could my mind possibly be, Miriam?”

Her brown eyes saw past my gruff reply. “Even as a little girl, you got angry when you were scared. Tell me why you’re frightened.”

I choked out a laugh. “You mean besides that all five men in my family will represent Israel’s sins before the God who covered Mt. Sinai with fire? Why should I be frightened?” I swiped errant tears from my cheeks. “Why can’t Moses be our high priest and *his* sons wear these robes?”

“Because Moses said Yahweh chose Aaron.” Miriam wrapped my hand with hers.

“Moses said,” I mumbled, pulling away before my fragile control dissolved into sobs. I resumed my task, refusing to appear weak in front of my only friend.

Why didn’t I feel honored that my men had been chosen as priests—especially after Aaron allowed himself to be bullied into making that golden calf? He’d always been too easily swayed by others. But in his defense, Moses had been atop Sinai with God’s fiery presence for

nearly forty days when the people came to him in a panic. We all feared that Moses was dead, and the people needed hope, a symbol of life and prosperity.

We're fortunate our whole family didn't end up on the sharp end of a sword.

"Ouch! Uhh!" I stuck another bloody finger in my mouth, threw the robe onto Miriam's lap, and stormed outside. Maybe a long walk would calm my nerves.

The dusty path was lined on both sides with extended family from our tribe of Levi. I nodded half-hearted greetings to those busy with last-minute tasks for tomorrow's consecration of the tabernacle while the desert sun beat mercilessly on my back.

The whole camp had been toiling for nearly seven months to meet the exact specifications Moses brought down from his long meeting with Yahweh. Everyone had a job. Even the children.

I kept nodding. More people greeted me. My heart sped and I hurried my pace, rushing through the tribal section of Judah. My breathing grew labored and dizziness threatened. I had to get away. How long since I'd known *silence*? My legs kept moving and, finally, I reached the outer limits of camp. Leaning over, I braced my hands on my knees and stared at my sandals, puffing short breaths. For how long, I don't know, but when I stood to inhale deeply, the tent of meeting stared back.

Not much farther than I could throw a stone, the tent where Moses met with Yahweh was pitched at the base of Mt. Sinai. It looked like a scrap of cloth on the landscape in the mountain's shadow. Ten busybody women sat near its canopied entrance, finishing the blue and purple curtains that would form the walls of the tabernacle and the courtyard around it.

A cynical huff escaped. I recognized three widows among them. They had little else to keep them occupied. But five young wives sat with them as well. Who was watching their

children? Baking their family's bread? Washing their laundry? Miriam had organized an entire army of Levite women to *serve* at the entrance. What kind of service was this? They could sew and weave in their own tents!

I looked up, wondering why the fiery God on top of the mountain cared to have women near His tent anyway. Miriam said they sometimes sang. I hadn't heard them, but our tent was hidden among the Levites' tent in the center of camp. The only time I knew something was happening here was when everyone in camp put down their work and went to the entrance of their own tents to kneel in worship.

After Moses brought the stone tablets with the Law down from the mountain, his eighty-one-year-old bones weren't anxious to climb Mt. Sinai every time he wanted to chat with Yahweh. So he placed the small tent of meeting outside the camp at the base of the great mountain. When Yahweh met him there, the heavenly cloud shrouded the tent, and the whole camp worshiped.

Moses said anyone could come to meet with Yahweh, and then he put their only place of worship outside the camp as sort of a test—to see who would seek out Yahweh. And I never heard of anyone going into the tent except Moses. Now, only twenty paces from the entrance, my palms grew sweaty. Had any of these women gone into the tent? What would I say to them?

“Elisheba?”

I nearly jumped out of my wrinkled skin when Miriam rested her hand on my shoulder. I whirled on her. “Don't sneak up on me. I nearly soiled my tunic!”

“I'm sorry, my friend.” Her grin didn't appear sorry. “Would you like to join the women making the curtains?”

“No! I was just . . .” What was I doing here?

“Would you like to go in and meet with Yah—”

“No!”

She patted my arm as if petting an Egyptian cat. “It’s all right. Joshua stays inside the tent and can fetch Moses to intercede for you with Yahweh.”

I didn’t want Moses to intercede. I wanted to tell Yahweh myself that He couldn’t use my husband and sons as His priests. Considering the top of His fiery mountain again, the thought of entering His tent terrified me. “Get Moses.”

Miriam nodded and we ventured the remaining steps toward the canopied entrance. Though I knew eight of the women there, not a single one looked up to greet us. Heads bowed over busy hands, they whispered indistinguishable words. And not to each other.

I leaned down, pressing my lips against Miriam’s head scarf. “What are they saying?”

“They’re praying,” she whispered back.

Incredulous, my skepticism erupted. “Praying? How?” Miriam shushed me like I was a child. But I was a grown woman who knew it was silly to whisper prayers to a God who spoke only to one man.

No one ever whispered prayers to the gods of Egypt. Had Moses told the women Yahweh listened to whispered prayers? I’d heard only Yahweh’s dealings with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Our fathers never whispered.

Before I could tell Miriam what I thought of her women’s new ideas, Joshua emerged from the tent. “Shalom, Elisheba. Are you well?”

“Perfectly well, thank you.”

He and Miriam exchanged a glance, something unspoken, and he walked toward Moses’s tent without another word. I stared at the tent of meeting’s entrance, listening to Joshua’s

footfalls grow fainter, while everything inside me screamed, *Run, you fool! What will you say to Moses? This God could destroy you with a breath!* Dread crawled up my spine like a scorpion. Moses said the fear of the LORD was good, but somehow the churning inside my gut felt anything *but* good.

Miriam slipped her arm around my waist, and only then did I realize I was trembling. My sister-in-law's kindness closed my throat with emotion. I didn't want to *need* anyone, but I leaned into her embrace, dread overwhelming my pride. Still, I sniffed back tears, refusing to surrender completely in the battle for dignity.

Behind us came the tell-tale sound of Moses's three-stepped approach. *Step-staff-step; step-staff-step*. I wasn't even surprised when my husband's younger brother patted my shoulder and stood too close—a bad habit that others found endearing.

“Elisheba, my sister, I'm sure Yahweh will rejoice that you've come to seek His counsel.”

Still trembling, I had to grin. What a ridiculous thought. Yahweh would rejoice over me? Before I could share my thoughts, Miriam squeezed my waist. “I'll see you back at camp.” She hurried away before I could catch her arm, and I refused to call out for her. With a huff, I turned and found Moses smiling, his eyes crinkled at the corners.

“What troubles you, Elisheba?” He set aside his staff and gathered my hands between his. “I can see you're more troubled than usual.”

More troubled than usual? I had to concede that *troubled* was my frequent state. But didn't I have plenty to be troubled about? “Why must Yahweh take *all the* men of my household as priests? If He should prove as capricious and moody as the Egyptian gods—”

“He’s nothing like them.” Moses’s amusement disappeared. “Yahweh has commanded that we have no other gods *beside* Him. He promised blessing for obedience and curses for rebellion, and He fulfills all His promises, Elisheba—both blessings and curses.”

His exhortation did nothing to ease my fears. “How can I know my family will be safe, Moses?” My voice broke on his name, and I could no longer stem the tears.

“I’ve only known Aaron since he met me in the wilderness, after Yahweh appeared at the burning bush. But everything I know about my brother—”

“What is it you think you know about *my* husband?”

“Aaron yearns to please, Elisheba—sometimes to a fault.” I wanted to argue but couldn’t. “But I believe Aaron will serve well as Israel’s first high priest because Yahweh knew he would comply with every law given.” He held my gaze for a long moment before leaning in to kiss my forehead. “Now, wait here while I talk with Yahweh. Your husband and your sons will be the last names that pass my lips in this tent. After tomorrow’s dedication of the new Tabernacle, it will be Yahweh’s priests who will intercede for His people.”

“What? I—”

He ducked under the flap and was gone before I could question further. Wouldn’t Moses still lead us? Wouldn’t he still be the one God spoke to most?

Like a wave of the sea, Yahweh’s thick cloud descended over the entrance, and I scurried back ten paces. I could no longer see the women who still sat at the entrance or hear their whispers. When I looked over my shoulder at the camp behind me, thousands of Israelites halted their activities and bowed to worship wherever they were. I’d seen them do this before, but I’d always stayed in my tent, too busy or embarrassed to join them. Now, I’d be a spectacle if I didn’t bow.

Facing the tent again, I noticed the Cloud had expanded—to barely a hand-breadth from me. It extended all the way up to the sky above, connecting heaven to the earth on which I stood. Dare I reach out and touch it? The urge nearly consumed me. Overwhelmed at the thought, I closed my eyes and fell to my knees, praying:

Yahweh, can you hear the thoughts of an old woman? I've been angry so long—and I'm not sure why. I want to do things right, but everything about my world seems wrong. Why do things bother me so greatly when others seem to care so little? Show me how to care less or make others heed me more—the latter seems the better choice. I mean no disrespect, but I don't think You've chosen the right men to be Your priests. Aaron will do well, but my sons . . .

I couldn't bear to even pray silently the things that tormented my heart. Plus, my knees hurt from the sharp rocks beneath them, so I stood and found Moses waiting in front of me.

“You didn't talk with Him long.”

He grinned again. “Yahweh doesn't want you to care less, Elisheba. He wants you to trust Him more.”

Speechless, I tried to recall . . . had I prayed that part out loud? “How do you know what I—”

Moses turned me toward camp and offered his arm. I grudgingly accepted the support as we walked. “Yahweh knows the number of hairs on your head,” he said. “It's a simple thing for Him to reveal your prayer to me. He also knows Aaron and each of your sons intimately well—better than you do.”

My insides fluttered. Yahweh listened to *me*? I halted, stopping Moses too. “If Yahweh told you my prayer, does that mean He can *always* hear me? Or just while you're in that tent?”

He pulled me into a crushing hug. “The God of all creation knows everyone’s thoughts, Elisheba, no matter who is in a tent or tabernacle.”

I squirmed from his grasp and straightened my robe. “I’m not sure that’s good news.” I continued toward camp without waiting for him.

Hearing his chuckling behind me only fueled my anxiety. I found nothing amusing about this day. Did Yahweh truly know *every* thought? The fear I’d felt before was now focused and well-defined. If Yahweh knew us so completely, He knew two of my sons—Nadab and Abihu—were too much like me to be compliant priests.