

# A SHEPHERD BOY ON MT. NEBO

by Mesu Andrews

## *Chapter One*

*“The Lord said to Moses and Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest,*

*‘Take a census of the whole Israelite community by families—*

*all those twenty years old or more who are able to serve in the army of Israel.’*

*So on the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho,*

*Moses and Eleazar the priest spoke with them.”*

### **Numbers 26:1-3**

Ima said I was too young to fight with the men of our tribe, but at sixteen, I’d been killing jackals and lions to protect our flocks for eight years. “I’m ready for war,” I said, kicking a loose stone off the mountain path as I climbed. Glancing over my shoulder, I began counting. *Two, four, six . . . twenty.* Yes, all my goats and sheep followed. I kept placing my toes on small ledges and pulling myself up until I reached a high outcropping of rocks where a few green sprigs grew. Only the goats could reach it. They scampered up the rock face as if it was a rolling meadow, but my sheep bleated their displeasure from a lower cliff below.

With a sigh, I set my staff aside and scanned the rocky terrain, shading my eyes from the early-morning sun. A nearby wadi trickled with a little water into the valley below. I’d find a few tufts of green down there to nourish the less agile of my hungry charges. The goats had nearly devoured the greenery already.

“You’ll find a patch of mirr bushes over the next rise.” A deep voice shattered the stillness.

I jumped to my feet, grabbed my staff, and turned, ready to defend.

Moses, the man of God, stood on an overhanging cliff above me, hands lifted in surrender. “I didn’t mean to startle you, young man. You did well to find this patch of green for

your goats. I'm impressed."

His face radiant and uncovered, I fell to my knees. Everyone knew his face glowed when he'd been speaking to Yahweh. I knew it was death to look on God's face, but would I die for seeing His glory on the prophet? "Forgive me, my lord, I . . . I, uh . . ."

"Stand up, son." The rocks above me shuffled, and when I looked up, the 120-year-old used his staff to scurry down the cliffside like one of my goats. In moments he stood beside me. "You really shouldn't gape," he said. "A desert fly could land on your tongue." Curling a knuckle beneath my chin, he snapped my jaw shut. "What's your name, boy?"

I wanted to say, *I'm not a boy*, but I rolled my shoulders back instead and stood as tall as my sandaled feet allowed. "I am Lemuel ben Joseph, from the Hephherite clan of Manasseh."

He nodded, assessing me head to toe. "Your family is among the half-tribe that will settle with Reuben and Gad's tribes on this side of the Jordan."

"Yes, but our tribes have vowed to fight with our brothers to destroy the Canaanites from the other side before we fully rest in this land." He was nodding, so I pressed my case. "I'm just as strong as my brothers and better with my sling, but Ima won't let me fight in the conquest." Somehow, I sounded like a whining child instead of a man aching for battle.

"Your ima won't allow it, hmm?" he said, stroking his gray beard. "And how old are you, Lemuel ben Joseph?"

There it was. The question everyone used to disqualify me. Furious, I'd let action answer instead of words. I drew my sling, loaded a stone, and let it fly—smiting a red rock thirty paces away. Slowly turning, a satisfied grin on the doubter, I slid my weapon back into its holster on my belt and I folded my arms across my chest. "Does age matter when I've killed both jackals and lions since I was a boy?"

His bushy gray brows shot up. “Since you were a boy? That long?”

His chuckle sent heat surging up my neck and into my cheeks. I didn’t need the greatest man among our people to tell me I was smaller and weaker than other boys my age. I’d heard it from my brothers all my life. Turning on my heel, I’d taken only one step when Moses grabbed my arm.

“I’m sorry.”

But I couldn’t face. Not with tears threatening.

“I didn’t mean to dismiss your arguments,” he said, releasing my arm. “I can see you’re passionate about serving the Lord and your tribe.”

“I’m passionate when things are *unfair*.” I spat the last word, bitter on my tongue from tasting its fruit most of my life.

“Lemuel, I believe you and I suffer the same complaint.”

I turned to look at him then. “You’re certainly not too young to fight.” Gasping a little, I fell to my knees before lightning struck. “Forgive me, my lord. I shouldn’t have spoken so...so...”

“Truthfully?” He laughed. “I’m old. It’s the truth.” He hauled me to my feet. “You’ve got the fire to fight, Lemuel, but zeal wasn’t Yahweh’s requirement for military service, was it?”

I started to explain why Yahweh’s requirement shouldn’t apply to me, but he silenced me by lifting one hand and both brows. “Yahweh Himself set the military age when He commanded Eleazar and me to take a census of men *twenty* years and older. Not me and not your ima.” His intense stare nearly speared me through. “Manasseh’s fighting men numbered 52,700 and your name was not among them.”

I stared right back. “Well, it should have been.”

Our gazes held in the silence like two rams locking horns. Finally, Moses snorted and threw his hands in the air, shouting at the sky, “Is this how I sound to You? Like a spoiled child who wants his own way?”

I looked at the sky and considered running. What if Yahweh answered? When neither lightning struck nor thunder rumbled, I decided to defend myself. “I’m not a spoiled child, Prophet. I’m trying to be an adult!”

He shook his head and sighed, resting his hands on his hips. Then he turned and studied me for a long while—long enough, I began shifting awkwardly. What was he thinking? And what had he meant when he said we had the same complaint?

“Yahweh won’t allow *me* to go into the Promised Land either.” His voice was so quiet I barely heard. “And He said I can’t even argue with Him about it.”

“You argue with Yahweh?”

He sort of laughed, but I could tell he didn’t think it was funny. “Everyone argues with Yahweh, Lemuel. It’s what you’re doing—even though you think you’re angry with your ima.” He sat on a boulder and rested his bearded chin on his hand.

I couldn’t just leave him there looking so sad, so I sat down beside him. “How can you not go into the Promised Land? You’re our leader.”

He pursed his lips and looked at me, eyes watery. “Do you remember what happened when we entered the Wilderness of Zin and settled in Kadesh?”

“Your sister Miriam died.”

“After that.”

“I couldn’t find water for my flocks.”

Moses grinned and swiped his tears away. “The people were thirsty too, Lemuel. In fact,

they complained so violently that Aaron and I fell on our faces at the entrance to the Tabernacle, begging Yahweh to intervene.” He looked at his staff, sneering at it as if it had offended him somehow. “The LORD said to take this staff and *speak* to a rock outside camp so it would give water to our whole community. Instead, I *struck* the rock and spoke to Yahweh’s people as if I was somehow better than they.”

He closed his eyes, sending a stream of tears down his cheeks. “I’m tired, Lemuel ben Joseph. Tired of these stiff-necked people. I want to blame *them* for keeping me out of the Promised Land. I want to make it *their fault* that Yahweh has forbidden me to enter the Land of Promise.”

“It’s not fair that one mistake keeps you out of the Land.” I clapped my hand on the old man’s shoulder, hoping to strengthen his resolve. “Yahweh should consider how you’ve led our people faithfully for forty years. Ima says you always obey. I was mad when you led us the long route around Edom and Moab to ensure Esau’s and Lot’s descendants kept their land. But Ima said you did it to obey Yahweh. Doesn’t all that obedience mean more than a single mistake?”

A faint smile curved his lips. “Obedience means everything, Lemuel, but Yahweh sees the heart behind it. I’ve followed Him long enough to trust that He knows my heart better than I do.” He motioned toward a nearby peak. “Come a little higher with me. I want to show you something before you take your sheep to those mirr bushes I mentioned.”

Israel’s faithful shepherd scaled the rocky path to the summit, and we stood side-by-side, gazing north as he pointed out the valley below. “After we’ve crossed the Arnon River into the plains of Moab, I’ll give my final charge to Israel, recounting all God’s Law. Then Yahweh will show me the Land, but I won’t step foot in it.”

He seemed healthy to me. “How can you be sure?” I thought he was being overly

pessimistic.

“Because Yahweh told me, and He never lies or changes His mind.” He looked down at me then, the radiance having returned to his features. “I know you’re brave, Lemuel, but when we attack the Canaanites on the other side of the Jordan, you’ll see the horrified shadows on our returning warriors’ faces and understand why military age is set at twenty.”

Unconvinced, I still felt cheated and lashed out one last time. “And when will you accept that *you* can’t enter the Promised Land?”

“On the day I take my last breath, Lemuel.”