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Hannah's Song

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Abstract

There are 150 psalms in the Book of Psalms as printed in both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. However, the Septuagint (the version of the Bible translated into Greek for the Jews of Alexandria) has 151 psalms and there are references up to Psalm 156 in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Elsewhere, there are a number of poems, psalms in all but name, of which Jonah's prayer (in Jonah chapter 2) is one of the best known.

This work examines another prayer: Hannah's Song, a hymn of thanksgiving by the one-time infertile Hannah, on the birth of her son Samuel.

Biblical background: The Books of Samuel were originally one; it was the Septuagint which divided it in two owing to its length. The division between 1 and 2 Samuel is somewhat arbitrary. 1 Samuel ends with the death of Saul. In the Protestant tradition, the book is sometimes known as '1 Reigns' or '1 Kingdoms'.

The Book of Samuel opens on the domestic front, with the description of a devout family: Elkanah son of Elihu, from the hill country of Ephraim, and his two wives, Hannah (meaning "graciousness" or "favour") and Peninnah (meaning "pearl"). It is not unusual for principal characters in Biblical narrative to be introduced by name, ancestry and geography. Polygamy was widespread at that time! Peninnah had children but Hannah was barren and was teased as such by her co-wife. Hannah (like Rachel before her) was her husband's favourite and he displayed his preference by giving her a larger portion of the sacrificial offering.

The story starts just before the birth of Samuel (and hence – in accordance with Hebrew practice - the choice of his name of the book.) The overarching theme of the Books of 1 & 2 Samuel is

of the transition from the rule of chieftains (judges) to the monarchic system of government. There are three major biographies: those of Samuel, Saul and David; the period covered is ~1050 – 970 BCE. Incidentally, neither Eli nor Samuel were succeeded by their sons.

Unlike Rachel, Hannah did not turn to her husband for help. She was so desperate for a child and prayed to YHVH in the ‘house of the Lord’, the sanctuary at Shiloh. This is the first time in the Hebrew Bible that a woman turns directly to YHVH for help.¹ Fertility was understood as a divine gift. The High Priest, Eli, mistook her ecstatic prayer² for drunken behaviour and scolds her. Later, on discerning the true nature of her appeal, he adds his blessing to her petition.

Circumventing the authority of Eli and Elkanah, Hannah vowed that she would dedicate her child to God. “And she made this vow ‘O LORD of hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the LORD for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head.’”³ Hannah was promising to consecrate her son as a Nazarite. This incident gave one enduring gift to Jewish prayer. Hannah was the first to offer silent worship.

In due course, Hannah “knew” (1:19) Elkanah and she conceived; in time, Samuel was born. After the child had been weaned, Hannah took her son to Eli, to be dedicated to YHVH – for service in the Sanctuary – for as long as he lives (1:28). So the first chapter ends.

1 Sam. 2 starts with Hannah’s Song. This is reckoned to be one of the oldest poems (along with Gen.49, Ex.15, the story of Balaam in Num.23 – 24, Deut.32 & 33 and various prophetic oracles and a few Psalms) in the Bible, dating back to the Early Iron Age, c1200 – 1000 BCE.⁴

The song breaks the narrative from the end of chapter 1 (“... and he {Samuel} worshipped YHVH there.”). Narrative resumes in 2:11. Hannah had plenty to sing about.

- She had fulfilled her desire for a son.
- Her experience demonstrated that YHVH, far from despising her, had known about her and had answered her prayer.
- She knew for certain that her God controlled the world. Everything was in His good and capable hands.

There seem, however, to be two incongruities.

¹ Esther Fuchs, *The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Alice Bach (New York, Routledge, 1999) p. 132. YHVH, **the divine name of God**, revealed to the Patriarchs and later to Moses, was known only to the High Priest. It is composed of four Hebrew consonants: *yod hey vav hey* (no vowels), transliterated as **YHVH**. We no longer know how this name was pronounced. When reading Hebrew, the word “Adonai”, Lord, is often substituted. Many modern prayer books substitute gender neutral interpretations such as “The Eternal”.

² Lips moving; no sound.

³ 1 Sam.1:11.

⁴ FW Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry* (Oxford: University Press, 2015), p. 313.

- The song does not seem to be relevant to Hannah’s situation. However, its pious outpourings could match her personality as revealed in chapter 1, although its combative timbre suggests another voice has entered the scene. In fact, I believe three voices speak in this poem; more on this later.
- In verse 10, a king is mentioned, but the monarchy was established through the work of Samuel himself.

Incidentally, about a thousand years later, Mary adapted Hannah’s song in Luke 1:46ff; “Magnificat”.

Personal translation (preserving the Hebrew word order where feasible).

- 1 Now Hannah prayed and she said:
My heart exalts in YHVH
My horn is (raised) high through YHVH.
My mouth is wide over my enemies
I rejoice in your deliverance.
- 2 There is no holy one like YHVH
For there is none beside (You)
There is no rock like our God.
- 3 Do not talk any more (in an) exceedingly haughtily (way)
Arrogant speech comes out of your mouth.
For YHVH is a God of all knowledge
By Him, wanton deeds are estimated.
- 4 The bows of the mighty men are shattered
Those that are stumbling are girded with strength.
- 5 Those sated (with food) hire themselves out for bread
They that were hungry have ceased.
The barren woman bears seven
She of many children grows feeble.
- 6 YHVH kills and grants life
Brings down to Sheol and lifts up.
- 7 YHVH brings down (i.e. impoverishes) and makes rich
Bringing low and lifting up;
- 8 He causes the poor to be raised up from the dust
From the dung-hill, He lifts up the needy
To sit with nobles (or “princes”)
A throne of honour He gives them.
For YHVH’s are the pillars (or “supports”) of the earth
Upon them He has put the world.

- 9 The feet of His pious ones, He guards
(Those) guilty of sin in darkness will be struck dumb
For not by strength does a man prevail.
- 10 YHVH shatters those displaying contention (against Him)
Against them, in the heavens, He will thunder.
YHVH judges the ends of the earth.
He will give power to His king,
And caused to be raised high (the) horn of His appointed (one).

A Verse Analysis of the Poem

- V1 We are told that Hannah prayed but was any part of it audible? We do not know if Eli and Elkanah remained present to hear her words.

Following the statement that Hannah prayed, the hymn moves on to praise in 1b, which has four parallel lines. Jewish prayers do begin with praise of the Eternal before the petitioner makes his (or – here – her) request.

The principal Hebrew lexica list “My horn is raised” as a Hebrew idiom, denoting increase of might or dignity. The allusion is to an animal carrying its head high, proudly conscious of its strength. The individual whose horn is raised is conspicuously fortunate because there is a visible symbol of success. Hannah’s horn hints at her dignity.¹

However, there is a secondary meaning – that of offspring – and this can be gleaned from 1 Chron.25:5. “All these were the sons of Heman, the seer of the king, (who uttered) prophecies of God for His greater glory. God gave to Heman fourteen sons and three daughters.”

The clause “my mouth is wide over my enemies” could refer to

- swallowing / triumphing over one enemies
- gloating or deriding one’s enemies, such as sticking one’s tongue out and adding a derisory comment
- an expression of joy, the latter as a poetic parallel to the next colon.

Now Hannah has a child, she could play down Peninnah’s taunts.

On the wider stage, this verse introduces two themes, particularly to an exilic audience.

- The barren woman can be read as a metaphor for a desolate community in exile.
- The asked-for son could be a prelude to the Israelites wanting a king.

¹ David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007) p. 142.

The next two verses continue the theme of the end of verse 1: YHWH's Holy sovereignty.

V2 Hannah affirms her conviction in the glory of the Eternal.

At first reading, the middle clause might be read as a declaration that other gods exist, but the first and third lines rule out such an explanation. All three lines express the same idea that YHWH is unique.

The Hebrew word *tzur* = rock/mountain conveys an image of strength and permanence; it has found its way into Rabbinic thought and prayer as an epithet for YHWH.¹

V3 Here, the focus changes and enemies are addressed; the verse is a single strophe.² Hannah addresses people whose hubris leads them to demean the less fortunate. In particular Peninnah is the probable "target" of the first clause.

Today, we treat it as axiomatic that God knows absolutely everything, even our hidden and inner thoughts. That idea does not pervade the Hebrew Bible.³ However, Hannah clearly has views ahead of those of her time.

So the warning against arrogance is grounded in God's omniscience and in particular in His ability to see right to the heart of people and evaluate their true intentions. Enemies might interpret Hannah's sterility as a sign of her weakness, but YHWH would see through any protestations of sincerity and deal with them in a just manner.

The actions referred to in the final clause are those of God. As Exodus 6:6 relates: "... I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements". Everything He does is weighty, not trivial.

There is a possible deeper layer of meaning in this verse. The first clause could be translated "Do not multiply your speech, O tall one!"⁴ The narrator might be preparing us for the arrival on the scene of Saul, the first prince and later king of Israel. He was chosen for that role by his outward looks; a mistake which God came "to regret".

This ends the first stanza.

The song goes on, in the next stanza (which has two strophes), to fashion, in an artfully constructed series of oppositions, a picture of the "world turned upside down", the new world order in which the outsider, the downtrodden and the miserable become invested with the trappings of power. The dominant note is that of reversal of roles, of status and of fate, all as a consequence of the will of YHWH. He is characterised as the "God of surprise".⁵ Not only are the bows of the mighty broken, but the feeble gird on strength. The formerly

¹ See Deut.32:4 and elsewhere.

² J P Fokkeman, *Reading Biblical Poetry: An Introductory Guide*, translated by Ineke Smit (Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) p. 212.

³ See Gen. 22:12 for example.

⁴ Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel: A narrative Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008) p. 28.

⁵ Francisco Garcia-Treto, *A Mother's Paean: Reflections on the Use of Poetic Inclusions in the Books of Samuel*, Shofar. Volume 11, Number 2, Winter 1993, p. 61.

sated look desperately for any work, even as day-labourers, yet the once hungry common workmen become fat.¹ It may well be a call to a nation in exile. This is a message for us today. We must not walk arrogantly past people like the sellers of the *Big Issue*; perhaps we should stop and help them.

- V4 Hannah continues to use elaborate language in her exaltation and gives illustrations of how God reverses the fortunes of powerful men. The delusions of those with temporal power mean nothing to the Almighty. However, there is no specific reference to the agent, although the actions clearly relate to YHVH.

The verb “shattered” is restricted to poetry.² The noun derived from it means “tiny broken fragments”, so the sense is stronger than “to break”.

Verse 4 relates that God will provide military aid, by breaking the bow of the proud warriors. This idea is echoed in prophetic writings. Two examples:

- “Thus said the Lord of hosts: I am going to break the bow of Elam, The mainstay of their strength.” (Jer.49:35)
- “I will strike your bow from your left hand and I will loosen the arrows from your right hand.” (Ezek.39:3)

An alternative explanation has some merit. We could see the reference to “bows” as another hint that warrior kings are in the offing.

- V5 The theme of verse 4 is continued here. The text is somewhat cryptic³ and may have been miscopied by a scribe at some past time. Various scholars have suggested assorted emendations.

In verse 4, the sequence of action is that the strong become weak and the weak become strong, a pattern repeated here in 5ab. In contrast, the order is reversed in 5cd. This places special emphasis on God’s particular concern for the weak and uses an example that fittingly refers to Hannah herself. The number seven is a poetic motif for perfection.⁴

Some read the last line as a prophetic reference to future redemption - when the barren, widowed Jerusalem will be filled with joy whilst Rome, which destroyed the Second Temple, will decay into nothingness.

The next verses 6 – 10a extol the character of YHVH as displayed in His actions. His holy sovereignty is discussed in vv6 – 7. He is mentioned by name and this intensifies Hannah’s confession. Both verses climax in a positive assertion.

¹ Francisco Garcia-Treto, p. 56 paraphrased slightly.

² Robert Alter, *The David Story: A translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York & London: WW Norton & Company, 1999) p. 10.

³ Alter, p. 10.

⁴ Hannah only had six children.

- V6 We read of a negative action followed by a positive one in both cola of this verse. Preserving life by healing those who are desperately ill is mentioned first.¹ The phrase ‘kills and granting life’ is an example of a merism. Then it is stated that the Almighty holds total authority over life and death.

Sheol is an Israelite term for the underworld or realm of the dead. The name, which I’ve transliterated, is possibly derived from a term meaning “place of inquiry via necromancy”. It **was** regarded as a place of both judgment and of final residence. The Hebrew poet was influenced by the cosmological notions common in the ancient Near East. A modern translation might well be “grave” as the King James Version of the Christian Bible uses. The thought of resurrection was probably not intended here, although some commentators (e.g. Radak) took the wording literally. In the Talmud,² Rabbi Eliezer reckons Hannah referred to Korah who was swallowed into the earth.³ She was praying for Korah to be raised from the grave to have a share in the world to come. YHVH can certainly redeem souls from Sheol, although whether they would then return to a resurrected body or would be taken to heaven is something which modern Judaism leaves undefined.

In somewhat old-fashioned English, the phrase “quicken the dead” appears, as in Psalm 22 (KJV), but my teacher on the Former Prophets said this presented him with an image of zombies on roller-skates!

- V7 Again, there is a negative action following by a positive one – polar opposites; i.e. merisms – in both cola. Poverty and wealth are not permanent conditions. This verse reinforces the previous one but adds little, although it does conjure up the charming image of a once-wealthy magnate becoming the employee of a one-time pauper.
- V8 This starts with a lengthy four-part description of YHVH’s positive action on behalf of the poor. The words are very similar to Psalm 113:7 – 8. Conceivably they formed a recognised formula which could be used, albeit with mild variations, by Hebrew poets.

There is a chiasmus in the first two lines: poor/dust/dung-heap/wretched.

Hannah’s experience parallels that of Israel as a nation; it too will be lifted to a seat of honour.⁴ The language here might (probably does) anticipate the reference to the monarchy in verse 10. The word, “*ki’sēi*”, which I have translated as “throne” could be read as “chair” or “seat”. Looking ahead a couple of chapters (in 1 Sam.), we read of Eli’s death: “When he mentioned the Ark of God, (Eli) fell backward off his seat beside the gate, broke his neck and died; for he was an old man, and heavy. ...”⁵ The same Hebrew word is used here for Eli’s seat.

¹ “See, then, that I, I am He; There is no god beside Me; I deal death and give life; I wounded and I will heal: None can deliver from My hand.” (Deut.32:39)

² Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 108a.

³ Num.16 – 17.

⁴ Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel: A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008) p. 30.

⁵ 1 Sam.4:18.

There is one person – Joseph - who was catapulted from prison to a seat at the monarch’s right hand. This allusion confirms that what this verse is talking about is not a rise in material wealth but a change of prestige and status, from degradation to a position of honour.

The fifth and sixth cola celebrate God’s role as the creator of everything. It is to validate His concern for the welfare of the marginalised and downcast. He is able to reverse history or positions in society. The pillars of the earth are a feature of the cosmology (“geophysics”?) of the ancient world and are mentioned, *inter alia*, by Job.¹

However, the meaning of the word I have translated as “pillars” is unclear. McCarter² interprets these as the “great rivers of the underworld”. Both Israelite and other Near Eastern cosmologies take the earth as being on foundations of water. Others prefer to treat the phrase as a metaphor for righteous people.³ At least one scholar⁴ states that the meaning is “unknown”. Make your own choice.

- V9 This continues the theme. YHVH, who stabilised the earth on its pillars, looks after His faithful servants. No-one can succeed solely by his own ability; only when God steers the feet of the pious ones can they prevail against the power of darkness. This poem picks up on a prophetic statement “... This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit – said the LORD of Hosts.”⁵

The poetic: “Those guilty of sin in darkness will be struck dumb” refers to death. Elsewhere, the underworld is called the realm of silence or speechlessness.⁶ This may seem a complicated way of making the point that the wicked face death, but it fits in well with the poem. The haughty and arrogant (verse 3) are now silenced forever.

- V10 The Masoretic Text translates in the plural whereas the Samuel fragment from Qumran has God as the (singular) subject of the verb, with the adversaries as the object.⁷ Is Hannah praying for the protection of her son or the future king? It is The Eternal who is victorious over His enemies, the all-powerful One whom the poet asks to bless the king, to bring fertility, peace and prosperity to the whole nation.

Whether the thunder is in or from the heavens depends on one’s understanding of the Hebrew preposition, *b*.

¹ “Who shakes the earth from its place; Till its pillars quake” (Job 9:6)

² P Kyle McCarter, Jr, *The Anchor Bible: 1 Samuel...* (New York: Doubleday, 1980) p. 73.

³ Rabbi Nossan Scherman, *The Early Prophets with a commentary anthologised from the Rabbinic Writings* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications Ltd, Artscroll Series, 2002) p. 15; quoting Radak.

⁴ Tsumura, p. 148.

⁵ Zechariah 4:6 part

⁶ “O LORD, let me not be ashamed, for I have called upon Thee; let the wicked be ashamed, let them be put to silence in the nether-world.” (Ps.31:18)

⁷ Alter, p. 11.

The concluding benediction suggests a royal background. It may be that this song was written in a different context, perhaps for the thanksgiving after a royal birth,¹ and later edited into the Book of Samuel. However, prophetic vision could have provided Hannah with her inspiration. The birth of Samuel was the overture before the birth of the institution of kingship. I prefer this explanation and read v10b as making clear that the monarchy to come is essentially God-willed, His way of steering the Israelites to fulfil their side of the bargain to preserve the covenant.

The theme of raising a horn (in triumph) is a re-statement of the phrase in verse 1. This helps establish the boundaries of this poem and eliminating the idea that we have a late redaction. Such a device is called an *inclusio*. However, there is a significant difference. Hannah's horn is the subject of v1; in v10, the horn is of the king.

The phrase "His anointed", clearly a reference to the king, appears here for the first time in the Hebrew Bible. This emphasises the importance of this song as the place where such an important concept is introduced. Thus, the song concludes with a plea to God to elevate the king of Israel to a prominence worthy of the Great God who appointed him.

Conclusion

I mentioned earlier that three voices can be discerned in this song.

- Hannah, the jubilant mother;
- The persona of the king;
- The implied author (The Deuteronomist, the "author" – or redactor - of the song in its present setting at least.)

Chapter 2 returns to narrative, noting that Hannah went to the home of Elkanah in Ramah, leaving Samuel to serve God under the direction of Eli. It goes on to contrast Samuel with the sons of Eli, good-for-nothings. Just as Hannah's song gave several examples of transformations of fortune, so we will read of the downfall of Eli's family as it gives way to the rise of Samuel.

The Song of Hannah is an exclamation of pious thanksgiving, brought about by a dramatic occurrence. This personal good fortune is attributed to *Adonai*, recognised as the God with the (sole) authority over human affairs, a God who is prepared to take positive action for His people. As the poem progresses, we have an affirmation of the relationship between divine justice and the human condition.

However, Hannah's feelings for her son, Samuel, are not mentioned. It is not until verse 19 of the chapter that we read an enchanting coda: "His mother would also make a little robe for him

¹ McCarter, p. 73.

and bring it up to him every year, when she made the pilgrimage with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice.”

Just as Samuel was born to a meek and formerly-barren woman, so – later in the Book of Samuel – we will read of the elevations of Saul and subsequently of David from humble circumstances. The weak became strong – and the strong weak. Some see this as a metaphor for the salvation of the nation. The power of God, which can make a barren woman rejoice in a child, can transform tribal Israel into a nation.

Hannah’s poem is a prophetic song looking forward to the victory of kingship in Israel, its themes being echoed by David’s final song in 2 Samuel 22.2b ff. Her arrogant enemies now include all those within Israel who oppose kingship for whatever reason. The song puts the life of Samuel in perspective. However important Samuel may have been as an individual, his life is spent in bringing about the monarchy, a divinely approved form of government.