I AM THE WOMAN: THE STORY AND PRAYER OF HANNAH, A BIBLICAL FEMINIST TEXT

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The story and prayer of Hannah in I Samuel 1-2, so familiar to the Jewish people as the Haftarah for the First Day of Rosh Hashanah, is a text that presented a positive feminist perspective millennia before the word or concept of 'feminism' existed. In the story, the male characters of Elkanah and Eli do not understand Hannah's despair and need to be shown the power of her incredible faith in God. Her prayer, which most modern scholars consider an artificial interpolation, should be seen as an astonishing expression of faith that emerges from the heart of a common woman. This prayer is not only beautiful but also efficacious; God hears it and grants her what she wants so desperately, and then blesses her beyond her dreams. Hannah's ritual participation, her naming of her son Samuel, her decision-making about when and how she will participate in the cult and when Samuel will enter the temple service, all culminate in one of the earliest psalms that is in many ways theologically ahead of its time. The very fact that this prayer, whatever its origin, is presented here demonstrates the perspective of the author/editor/tradition that attributes it to a woman who influences her own destiny and the destiny of her people.

I will present what I believe to be the *peshat*, the contextual and literal level of I Samuel 1-2. It may seem as if this is a reading from a feminist perspective, but the point here is that for all the feminist interpretations of the Bible that speak of "texts of terror" against women,[1] this one, at least, portrays a main female character who makes the men around her look limited and who in her religious devotion is nothing short of transcendent.

The Book of I Samuel follows the Book of Judges without any transition. In between the books, one surmises, decades have passed since the days of the High Priest Phinehas, grandson of the first High Priest Aaron, and the current priest, Eli. Eli already an old man with two grown sons, Hophni and Phinehas, is the priest of the LORD of Hosts at Shiloh, to which people like the family of Elkanah would make pilgrimages.[2]

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Elkanah is an Ephraimite, not a Levite (which is interesting, because his son will become the priest of the cult that, according to the Torah, requires personnel from the tribe of Levi), *who has two wives, one named Hannah, and the other Peninnah; Peninnah had children, but Hannah was childless* (1:1-2). Just as we are told about Sarah's infertility as soon as she is introduced in Gen. 11:29-30, the reader of the Bible is alerted and focuses on Hannah.

When Elkanah offers sacrifices, he gives portions *to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters, but to Hannah he would give one portion only—though Hannah was his favorite—for the LORD had closed her womb* (1:4-5).

This verse is quite ambiguous: it may either mean that Elkanah gives Hannah a huge portion equal to that of Peninnah and her progeny or that Elkanah only gives one portion to Hannah, while her rival gets many for her and her progeny, even though Hannah was his favorite. The next verse, in the NJPS translation, seems to imply the latter interpretation: *Moreover, her rival, to make her miserable, would taunt her that the LORD has closed her womb* (1:6). *Moreover* makes it seem that Peninnah piles on abuse at the very moment that Hannah symbolically most keenly feels the absence of children by Elkanah's unequal distribution of the meat.

Alternatively, as in the first explanation, one could translate: *But to Hannah he would give one choice portion, for Hannah he loved, though the LORD had closed her womb. And her enemy would vex her with utter vexation in order to enrage her, for the LORD had closed her* womb.[3]

Whatever portion Hannah is given, she does not seem to eat anything, Elkanah says, attempting to comfort her: *Hannah, why are you crying and why aren't you eating?* (1:8). She gets up from the meal to go pray; she may be fasting, afflicting herself in her desperation.[4]

Elkanah also asks: *Why are you so sad? Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?* (1:8). We see similar words spoken to Naomi: *He will renew your life and sustain your old age; for he is born of your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons* (Ruth 4:15; see also how both Hannah and Naomi speak of their "bitter" spirit in I Samuel 1:10 and Ruth 1:20, respectively). But this is after Naomi has a grandson, whom she names and who will carry on her family's line. Elkanah loves Hannah and means the

question rhetorically, but Hannah's unspoken answer is 'no, your devotion to me is not better than even one son.' The gap between Elkanah's rhetorical question and our understanding that the answer is 'no', means that the narrator is showing Elkanah's limited though well-meaning perspective. The narrator understands Hannah better than her husband.[5]

The immediate reason that Hannah is in such despair is that she is suffering from the taunts of her co-wife. Is Elkanah truly unaware that Peninnah is doing this repeatedly? Why does he not rebuke or stop Peninnah from bullying Hannah? If he is unaware, he shows, again, how limited he is in understanding what is happening in his own family. Perhaps Elkanah thinks Peninnah taunts Hannah not so much out of gloating as out of jealousy about his love and concludes: 'If Peninnah can be jealous of my love for Hannah, perhaps this is what is so important to these women.' Elkanah has children and wants Hannah to be content with her childlessness; he does not hope that God still may give Hannah a son. She will show him the power of faith.

Though cruel, Peninnah is only claiming what the narrator has said: *the LORD has closed Hannah's womb* (1:5). If so, we wonder again: Has God closed Hannah's womb for a reason? Perhaps Hannah wonders, as we do: Has God kept her infertile as He had other famous women such as Sarah and Manoah's wife to show that the eventual pregnancy would be a miracle and that the baby would have a special destiny? Has God had His eye on Hannah all along?

The narrative indicates that this was not the case. It appears that when Hannah *prayed unto the LORD* (1:10) she caught the attention of God. God would have chosen a leader to replace Eli instead of his two corrupt sons, but the fact that that leader will be Samuel son of Elkanah was because of Hannah's 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* (1:11).

Why does Hannah make this particular vow? Again, her husband is not of the priestly or Levitical class; why would her son be accepted into temple service? And why does she say that no razor shall touch his head? He could be devoted to the temple service and still get his hair cut. One wonders if

there is not a connection to the famous story of Samson, where the angel of the LORD commands Manoah's wife: *For you are going to conceive and bear a son; let no razor touch his head, for the boy is to be a nazirite to God from the womb on* (Judg. 13:5). Hannah may take a page from this tale and think, quite logically, that this is what God wants from those whom He creates in special births.

Hannah does not offer her vow out loud; *she was praying in her heart; her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. The priest Eli was sitting on the seat near the doorpost of the temple of the LORD… So Eli thought she was drunk.* He rebukes her: *How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!* Hannah replies: *Oh no my lord! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but I have been pouring out my heart to the LORD* (1:13-15). Just as Manoah's wife was instructed by the angel to drink no wine nor strong drink in preparation for the miracle child, Hannah has not drunk. Again, this may show that Samson's birth is on her mind, even though she does not explicitly say this in her vow in v. 11. She does not tell Eli what she has prayed for, or the vow that she has made.

Just as Elkanah has misunderstood Hannah, so has Eli. He seems to think that prayer must be said out loud for God to hear it, while Hannah trusts that God can hear the silent prayer of her heart. Eli now hears her well-spoken response. And that is a point in itself: She is an articulate, faithful, sensitive, understanding woman, and Eli now appreciates her: *Then go on peace … and may the God of Israel grant what you have asked of Him* (1:17). Hannah leaves and eats; she goes back into the world with confidence and hope.

Early the next morning they arose and worshiped before the Lord and then went back to their home at Ramah (1:19). The plural v*ayyishtahavu* for Elkanah and Hannah in 1:19 may be the point at which Elkanah makes *nidro* "his vow," the vow that is referred to in 1:21, which does not say "votive sacrifice" as in NJPS but "his vow." Perhaps when Elkanah hears about Hannah and Eli's dialogue, he makes his own vow, not just taking her vow as his own as in Num. 30. This would mean that rather than being sanguine about Hannah's childlessness as he had been before when he thought that his love was equal to her having ten sons, he is now completely with her. She has taught him the meaning of faith. What if their united prayer for a child helps create the child?

A feminist critic says that this narrative is meant to show that women have no control over their own reproduction: "What seems to be a sentimental narrative about the happy transition from emptiness to fullness and from failure to victory is a carefully constructed story intended among other things to promote the institution of motherhood…The fact is that the annunciation type-scene…drives home the…message: that woman has no control at all over her reproductive potential."[6]

We can say, however, that the story has the exact opposite message: Women can indeed influence their reproduction, and their lives. If God has closed her womb, Hannah does not take "closed" for an answer. God listens to Hannah like He listened to Abram in the negotiation over the fate of Sodom in Genesis 18.

Hannah empowers and asserts herself through ritual participation.[7] She prays, alone, in the temple. She *bows low before the LORD* with Elkanah early in the morning before going home (1:19). She names Samuel, invoking God's name and thanking Him. She is in control of when she will return to Shiloh; she does not go for the next annual sacrifices (vv. 21-22). She controls when Samuel will enter the temple service. When she has weaned him and is ready, she takes him up with her, along with *three bulls* (probably it is really one three-year old bull, born around the same time as Samuel; see that only one bull is sacrificed in v. 25),[8] *one ephah of flour, and a jar of wine* (1:24). When they come to Eli, it is Hannah who speaks: *I am the woman who stood here beside you and prayed to the LORD. It was this boy I prayed for; and the LORD has granted me what I asked of Him. I, in turn, hereby lend him to the LORD…. An her bowed low there before the LORD* (1:26-28). Notice how many times Hannah refers to herself in the first person. Meyers points out that the versions diminish her role.[9] In the same way, modern scholars such as McCarter, in calling this story "the birth of Samuel," diminish Hannah's importance.[10] Yet there is only a Samuel at all because of Hannah's prayer.

Vayyishtahu in 1:28 may be translated as *he worshipped*, meaning that Eli praises God for the miracle of the boy, or *they worshipped*, meaning "Eli and Hannah" or even "Hannah and Elkanah," praying in thanksgiving. But it is Hannah who is central, as we see in what follows. If we remove the traditional and chapter breaks, Hannah now breaks through with a whole song, leav-

ing all other worship or prayers looking relatively perfunctory and routine. All her ritual acts will culminate in this immortal psalm.

HANNAH'S PRAYER[11]

I Samuel 2:1-10 is seen as one of the earliest poems in the Hebrew Bible. Freedman holds that Psalm 113 is from the twelfth century based on the divine names used and that the Song celebrated the monarchy. Hurvitz, on the other hand, believes that I Samuel 2 is older.[12] The point here is simply that Hannah offers one of the first psalms.

And yet, most scholars see Hannah's prayer as secondary here:[13] "The thanksgiving hymn found in I Samuel 2:1-10 has a timeless character. Most scholars assert that it had an independent life apart from its present context.[14] We can quickly consider the reasons for the scholarly view that this prayer does not fit the context. The question is: Does this song fit with what Hannah would have said? The link between the narrative and the poem would seem to be in 2:5: *While the barren woman bears seven; The mother of many is forlorn*.[15]

Yet even this apparent connection is tenuous. While the reader will find out that Hannah will later bear *three sons and two daughters* (2:21), Hannah does not know this and probably does not even dream about additional children. As Rendsburg points out: "Of all the women involved in the "barren woman" motif, only Hannah goes on to have additional children and a large family. Is the special nature of Hannah's bearing further children the direct result of her … poignant prayers to God?"[16]

Hannah might be resentful of Peninnah's cruelty, but would she speak of "enemies" and use military imagery? *The bows of the mighty are broken; And the faltering are girded with strength* (2:4). Would she use the phrase *ʾel deʿot*, "the all-knowing God" (2:3) which does not appear anywhere else in the Bible? And is she speaking metaphorically when she sings: *The LORD deals death and gives life, Casts down into Sheol and raises up* (2:6), or is she so advanced in her theology that she refers to the resurrection of the dead?

The most difficult problem in accepting Hannah as the author of this psalm is found in v. 10b: *He will give power to His king; And triumph to His anointed one.* The two words *ֽmalko*, "His king," and *məšiḥo*, "His anointed

one," introduce the theme of kingship which will be the main subject of the books that follow. But why would Hannah think in terms of human kingship? Her son Samuel, towards the end of his life, will be crushed by the Israelites' insistence on a king.

It is possible that v. 10b is a later addition. If so, the beginning of the psalm, about God's triumph in v. 1: *I have triumphed through the LORD. I gloat over my enemies; I rejoice in Your deliverance* will be matched by God's triumph in the conclusion of v. 10a: *The foes of the LORD shall be shattered; He will thunder against them in the heavens, The LORD will judge the ends of the earth.*

The idea that v. 10b is a later addition is enhanced by seeing how this blessing of the king creates an overarching literary structure as a parallel with II Samuel 22, which concludes with God being a *Tower of victory to his king, Who deals graciously with His anointed* (II Sam. 22:51).[17] This is fitting in a major literary work, but how and why would Hannah anticipate human kings? After all, the point of the psalm is about God's control over everything, how He raises the lowly and casts down those on high. A general reference to "the lowly" could be to all the characters in the Israelite past who had been raised to high station by God. But would she anticipate the lowly becoming king? Did she see the future? Is she now a prophetess, given a vision of the future by God? This psalm is attributed to a common woman who is not a prophetess like Miriam or Deborah who transmitted God's words.

For all these reasons, we need not insist that Hannah said these words. Still, it is important to read these chapters as a literary critic, who sees the text as it is, rather than a source critic, who might claim that the psalm was once an independent prayer or traditional text of thanksgiving that was only later interpolated into the Hannah story. We should recognize that whether she said these words or not, this text explicitly and consciously puts this magnificent song into her mouth. The psalm is presented as Hannah's song, not a psalm she is reciting. That is, it could have been said that she sang this psalm or modified it. But there is no such indication. The attribution of this song to Hannah proclaims: A woman can pray. A woman can pray even if a ritual leader doesn't understand and cruelly puts her down. A woman can pray with efficacy and be blessed by God.

The point here is not that a woman does not have control over her reproductive potential; the reader assumes the biblical viewpoint that God is the Master of Life. This is why Hannah is praying; she is the first to acknowledge that her fertility or infertility is up to God. This is not a text of terror; it is a text of faith, and Hannah is our model.

The very idea that a woman would be credited with this beautiful psalm is remarkable, and quite an answer to Eli's impatient rebuke. This woman who was accused of drunken gibberish explodes with poetry. Eli eventually blesses her, Elkanah will make his own vow, but their words are nothing compared to hers.

Hannah was in the most desperate emotional straits. She could not be comforted. The message is: If you find yourself in despair, pray to God and trust in Him. And in this way, she is the psalm-creating forerunner of David, who, at least according to Biblical tradition, wrote so many psalms when he was in despair, when the Philistines seized him (Ps. 56), when he was fleeing from Saul (Ps. 52, 54, 57), when he was running from Absalom (Ps. 3), when he repented after the Bathsheba affair (Ps. 51). We began by stating that there is no transition between the Book of Judges and these passages at the beginning of I Samuel. And yet Walfish points out about Hannah that, as opposed to the ambitious weaknesses of Micah the Ephraimite at the end of Judges who brings his people to the brink of disaster, "with the bravery of her simple and persistent soul, she proves the only power capable of raising the horn of the cult of God, the abode of God and God's people."[18]

This is not just a 'feminist reading' but a feminist text that highlights a woman who has the deepest possible faith and who offers what is one of the earliest psalms in the middle of a very human story that has a message for her time and ours.

NOTES

1. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984). For a comprehensive and detailed treatment of the story, see Uriel Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives* (Indiana Studies in Biblical Narrative; Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 1–50. While Simon calls this chapter "The Birth of Samuel," he states, "although she [Hannah] is undoubtedly the heroine in our narrative, and even though Samuel's role in it is secondary and passive, the story ultimately focuses not on her but on him" (p. 33).

2. Since around a century later, God will send a message through the prophet Nathan to David in 2 Sam. 7:4-7 that He has never had a house for worship of Him but has moved about with Tent and Tabernacle, we are puzzled by the "Temple of the Lord" in this passage (1 Sam. 1:7, 9; 2:3, 15 and perhaps implied in Judges 21:19), which clearly is not just a Tent but a structure with a door and a doorpost (1 Sam. 1:9) that houses the Mishkan or Tent of Meeting (1 Sam. 2:22; 4:4). Perhaps God does not refer to that earlier "temple/House" in 2 Sam. 7 because it was better off forgotten; perhaps it was not a substantial structure and it had been discredited by the disaster that struck Shiloh and the Ark and the corrupt priestly house that had served it. Perhaps Eli should never have presided over a house that God had not requested; the capture and travels of the Ark in 1 Sam 4-7 would show the irrelevance of a building. Or perhaps some Biblical traditions hid the fact that an earlier Temple had existed.

3. So others, such as A. Grame Auld, *I and II Samuel* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), p. 21.

4. David Lambert, "Fasting as a Penitential Rite: A Biblical Phenomenon?" *The Harvard Theological Review* 96 (2003), pp. 482-–484.

5. Yairah Amit, "`Am I Not More Devoted to You Than Ten Sons?' (1 Samuel 1.8): Male and Female Interpretations," in *Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to the Bible 5* (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 68-76.

6. Esther Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, Adele Yarbro Collins, ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), p.129.

7. Carol Meyers, "The Hannah Narrative in Feminist Perspective," in *"Go to the Land I Will Show You": Studies in Honor of Dwight W. Young* (ed. Joseph E. Coleson and Victor H. Matthews; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), p. 123.

8. In 1:24, NJPS has "three bulls" but the NJPS note, LXX, 4QSam and Gen. 15:9 all indicate one bull. See Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, p. 26.

9. Carol Meyers, "The Hannah Narrative in Feminist Perspective" xxx; Theodore J. Lewis, "The Textual History of the Song of Hannah: 1 Samuel ii 1–10," *VT* 44 (1994): pp. 18–46. Stanley D. Walters, "Hannah and Anna: The Greek and Hebrew Texts of 1 Samuel 1," *JBL* 107 [1988), pp. 385-412).

10. P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel (*AB 8; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), p. 62.

11. This is Simon's conclusion: "The account has a complete and independent existence without the psalm" (Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, p. 31); see also, for example, David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007).

12. David Noel Freedman, "Psalm 113 and the Song of Hannah," *Eretz-Israel* (H. L. Ginsberg Volume) 14 (1975), pp. 56–70; Avi Hurvitz, "Origins and Imitations in Biblical Poetry: A Comparative Examination of 1 Sam 2:1–10 and Ps 113:5–9," in *Biblical and Related Studies Presented to Samuel Iwry*, eds. Ann Kort and Scott Morschauser (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1985), pp. 115–121.

13. See, e.g., McCarter*, 1 Samuel*, 57-58, 75; Marc Brettler, "The Composition of 1 Samuel 1-2," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116 (1997), pp. 602-603.

14. Theodore J. Lewis, "The Textual History of the Song of Hannah: 1 Samuel ii 1–10," *VT* 44 (1994): p. 18.

15. There is a midrash that has Hannah bearing more children and Peninnah losing two for each of Hannah's. While this seems to be vengeance for Peninnah's cruelty, it does explain why *the mother of many is forlorn*.
16. Gary Rendsburg, *1 Samuel* (Phil.: JPS, forthcoming).
17. Randall C. Bailey, "The Redemption of YHWH: A Literary Critical Function of the Songs of Hannah and David," *Biblical Interpretation* 3 (1995), pp. 213-31.
18. Abraham Wallfish, "The Prayer of Resentment and Humility, *Meggadim* 20, p. 75 (my translation).