

HANNAH'S PARALLEL THOUGHTS AND ALLUSIONS

RONALD T. HYMAN

*And Hannah prayed:
My heart exults in the Lord;
My horn is high through the Lord.
My mouth is wide over my enemies;
I rejoice in Your deliverance
There is no holy one like the Lord;
Truly there is none beside You;
There is no rock like our God.
Talk no more with lofty pride,
Let no arrogance cross your lips!
For the Lord is an all-knowing God;
By Him actions are measured.
The bows of the mighty are broken,
And the faltering are girded with strength.
Men once sated must hire out for bread;
Men once hungry hunger no more.
While the barren woman bears seven,
The mother of many is forlorn.
The Lord deals death and gives life,
Casts down into Sheol and raises up.
The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
He casts down, He also raises high.
He raises the poor from the dust,
Lifts up the needy from the dunghill, Setting them with nobles,
Granting them seats of honor.
For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's;
He has set the world upon them.
He guards the steps of the faithful,
But the wicked perish in darkness —*

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*For not by strength shall man prevail.
 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.
 He will give power to His king,
 And will raise the horn of His anointed one.*

(I Sam. 1:1-10)

The sages have observed that frequently in the Bible the following phenomenon is true: The experiences of the ancestors are re-experienced by their descendants. My aim in offering this conjectured colloquy between Hannah and her husband Elkanah is fourfold: in allowing her to express: her strong need to become a mother of a son; her faithfulness to the Lord; her deep recognition that there is a connection between her and her ancestress; and what she felt about her place in the context of Israel's culture.

Let us imagine that Hannah has come home from her prayers at the shrine in Shiloh, has eaten her evening meal alone with Elkanah (Peninnah, her scourge, is busy elsewhere), and now is the chance for relaxed discussion. Elkanah asks Hannah about the prayer he saw her offer to the Lord.

HANNAH. I will try to tell you what I thought and the parallels I felt when the spirit of the Lord entered me at Shiloh and inspired me to offer a prayer to the Lord. Actually, I was praying to the Lord for the second time, but this time it was an entirely different kind of prayer. After all, the situation was very different (I Sam. 1:8-10;16). The first time at Shiloh, I was bitter and crying – desperate, disgraced, and . . . and needful (I Sam. 1:8-10). I was barren, like my ancestors Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and like Manoah's wife, the mother of Samson (Gen. 16, 25, 30; Jud. 13:2). I had to look on while Peninnah had your children, like Sarah and Hagar, who gave Abraham children, and Rachel and Bilhah, who gave children to Jacob. I, like them, cried to the Lord. It was hard, Elkanah.

This time, at Shiloh, my heart exulted. I was happy. I was satisfied. I was fulfilled. I was no longer barren – the Lord had answered my prayer. I had prayed and made a vow, like Father Jacob when he awoke from his dream of the ladder. If the Lord would remember me and grant my plea, I would dedi-

cate my son to Him. The mother of Samson offered her son as a *nazir* (Jud. 13:5). Remembering her, I vowed that no razor shall touch the head of my son. The priest at Shiloh reminded me – he really didn't need to – of what Scripture says about vows: *When you make a vow to the Lord your God, do not put off fulfilling it because you have made it with your own mouth* (Deut. 23:22). Samuel is mine, yours and mine, Elkanah, and the Lord's. I knew that you, as my husband, would not force me to rescind my vow. Thank you, beloved Elkanah, for agreeing with me to dedicate Samuel to the service of the Lord.

ELKANAH. Yes, Hannah, it was also difficult for me to give up my son. I agreed with you because I knew that you needed to fulfill your vow. Maybe we'll have another child to refill our hearts (I Sam. 2:21).

HANNAH. Do you know, Elkanah, I rejoiced in the Lord's spirit like Miriam and Deborah? After escaping from the Egyptians, Miriam sang a song of thanksgiving to the Lord (Ex. 15:20). And Deborah, after defeating King Jabin, sang a victory song of thanksgiving to the Lord God of Israel (Jud. 5). [*Smiling*] When I was singing my own song of exultation, Elkanah, the thought came to me that maybe this, too, is a parallel with them, and I will be called a prophetess, too.

ELKANAH. (*Smiling, too, but more tightly*) Beware, dear wife, you are beginning to sound . . . prideful!

HANNAH. Well, people at our village gate are saying that I sound like a prophetess.

ELKANAH. Remember, Hannah: Arrogance can lead to disgrace; modesty is a sign of wisdom.

HANNAH. You are right, my Elkanah. On the other hand, the Lord did notice me, blessing me with a son. Perhaps, after all, I will be considered a prophetess. Sarah, Miriam, Deborah were.¹ If I am destined to be a prophetess, I must accept the responsibility. It is not only a matter of honor. I will serve the Lord

with our people in the hills of Ephraim, and do so with you, my dear husband, so strong and faithful to the Lord, as everyone knows. I trust your judgment, and if you caution me, I know it is for my own good.

Do I not remember that you comforted me when I was barren (I Sam. 1:8)? As loving as you are, you could not understand – or feel – how deeply I wanted a son. Every woman of Israel wants and needs a son to set her place in our tribe. Do you not think that Sarah and Rebekah and the others were concerned about their place in the home, in the family, and in the tribe? But more than that: they felt a destiny stirring within them to honor the Lord's name . . . to fulfill a Divine plan for our Hebrew people. Elkanah, it is a sin for me to deny that I feel the way they did. God in heaven! I have lent Him my first-born son to serve Him in His House (I Sam. 1:24)!

ELKANAH. So have I, Hannah, so have I. I tried in the short time that Samuel was in our house to fulfill my responsibility of teaching my son the Torah of Moses (Deut. 6:7).

HANNAH. I know that Samuel will serve the Lord well and become a leader in Israel, as did Moses. I am sure that Samuel will learn from Eli the priest how to serve the Lord faithfully and what to do as a leader in Israel. From the time I nursed him, I sensed that young Samuel has the heart and spirit to be the Lord's special servant. He will bring honor to his father, and to me, and to all our family and to all Israel. Maybe he, too, will be called a prophet of the Lord (I Sam. 3:19-20).

ELKANAH. Amen. Fortunate is the man who has a son *and* a wife prophesying for the Lord.

HANNAH. Now the unfaithful should practice silence. They should understand that I am no longer barren. The Lord has remembered me, answered me, redeemed me. They should remember that the Lord is all-powerful. He can raise the weak and bring down the mighty. Women also are His instruments of destiny. The words of Deborah to Barak still echo in my head: *'There will be no glory for you in the course you are talking, for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman'* (Jud. 4:9). Look at what He did to Sisera, King

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Jabin's commander-in-chief of his mighty army. Deborah outwitted him, and Yael – personally – struck down the great general in her own tent!

Eli the priest at Shilo whispered his blessing into my ear, *'Then go in peace and may the God of Israel grant what you asked of Him'* (I Sam. 1:17) Eli also quoted what the Lord said to Moses when he wondered about feeding 600,000 Hebrews in the desert: *'Is the Lord's hand too short?'* (Num. 11:23). That reminded me what God said to Abraham when my ancestor Sarah laughed to hear that she would bear a child in her ripe old age: *'Is anything impossible for the Lord?'* (Gen. 18:14) Well, God did it for me, too, and more! He rewards the faithful, the steadfast, like my heroine, Ruth.

ELKANAH. I believe you are right, Hannah. The history of our people proves that the Lord favors the steadfast, not the mighty.

HANNAH. Yes. As I think back on my prayer now, I surely know that the spirit of the Lord entered me, and my words flowed easily from my lips. I prayed sincerely, yes, for myself, I admit, but more for us and the people. I am not arrogant, my husband, though God has answered all my prayers. I am humbled by the fact that he chose me to follow the paths of my ancestors. My cup truly runneth over. Should I change anything in my prayer? My question asks for no easy compliments and assurances. I beg your wisdom; I value your counsel.

ELKANAH. I say to you, your prayer was good, for the spirit of the Lord indeed was with you that day. I bless you that your spirit teaches you to number your days rightly so your heart shall be not only warm but wise. Like your ancestors, the wives of our forefathers, like Deborah and Yael, like Miriam and Ruth, your success shall give hope and confidence to your daughters until the world's end.

NOTES

1. On Hannah as prophetess, see T. Megillah 14a. Jonathan ben Uzziel in his *Targum of the Prophets* considers Hannah a prophetess based on what he claimed were predictions of coming events in her prayers, like Samuel becoming a prophet. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence from the prayers that she can be considered to have been a prophetess based on her message and spirit, not necessarily on her alleged predictions of future events.

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