

1 Samuel 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 11 July 2020

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- [0 : 0 0] 1 Samuel chapter 2 And Hannah prayed and said, My heart exalts in the Lord, my horn is exalted in the Lord. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation.
- There is none holy like the Lord, for there is none besides you. There is no rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly. Let not arrogance come from your mouth.
- For the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, and the feeble bind on strength. Those who are full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who are hungry have ceased to hunger.
- The barren has born seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The Lord kills and brings to life. He brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich.
- He brings low and he exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust. He lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour.
- [1 : 0 3] For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world. He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness. For not by might shall a man prevail.
- The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces. Against them he will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king, and exalt the horn of his anointed.
- Then Elkanah went home to Ramah, and the boy was ministering to the Lord in the presence of Eli the priest. Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the Lord.
- The custom of the priests with the people was that when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, and he would thrust it into the pan or kettle or cauldron or pot.
- All that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, Give meat for the priest to roast, for he will not accept boiled meat from you, but only raw.
- [2 : 1 3] And if the man said to him, Let them burn the fat first, and then take as much as you wish, he would say, No, you must give it now, and if not, I will take it by force.
- Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the Lord, for the men treated the offering of the Lord with contempt. Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy clothed with a linen ephod, and his mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice.
- Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife and say, May the Lord give you children by this woman for the petition she asked of the Lord. So then they would return to their home.

Indeed the Lord visited Hannah, and she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters, and the boy Samuel grew in the presence of the Lord. Now Eli was very old, and he kept hearing all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who were serving at the entrance to the tent of meeting.

And he said to them, Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all this people. No, my sons, it is no good report that I hear the people of the Lord spreading abroad.

[3 : 25] If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him. But if someone sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him? But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the Lord to put them to death.

Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord, and also with man. And there came a man of God to Eli and said to him, Thus says the Lord, Did I indeed reveal myself to the house of your father, when they were in Egypt subject to the house of Pharaoh?

Did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to burn incense, to wear an ephod before me? I gave to the house of your father all my offerings by fire from the people of Israel.

Why then do you scorn my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded for my dwelling, and honour your sons above me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel?

Therefore the Lord, the God of Israel, declares, I promised that your house and the house of your father should go in and out before me forever. But now the Lord declares, Far be it from me.

[4 : 32] For those who honour me I will honour, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed. Behold, the days are coming, when I will cut off your strength, and the strength of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your house.

Then in distress you will look with envious eye on all the prosperity that shall be bestowed on Israel, and there shall not be an old man in your house for ever. The only one of you, whom I shall not cut off from my altar, shall be spared to weep his eyes out, to grieve his heart, and all the descendants of your house shall die by the sword of men, and this that shall come upon your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, shall be the sign to you.

Both of them shall die on the same day. And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. And I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed forever.

And everyone who is left in your house shall come to implore him for a piece of silver, or a loaf of bread, and shall say, Please put me in one of the priest's places, that I may eat a morsel of bread.

In 1 Samuel chapter 2, Hannah responds to the birth of her son Samuel with a prayer of rejoicing. It's a prayer which provides the pattern for Mary's magnificat in the Gospel of Luke. The story of Hannah began with a prayer of sorrow and desperation in the temple, and it concludes with a prayer or song of joy.

[5 : 57] Much as the parents of Noah, Moses, John the Baptist, and Jesus, Hannah realises that the birth of her son Samuel heralds more than her own vindication against Peninnah.

It is a sign that the Lord is about to turn Israel upside down, throwing down the rich and mighty and raising up the weak and the poor. Hannah's prayer praised the Lord that he was about to tear down the corrupt house of Israel and re-establish it again upon righteous foundations.

Like the prophetess Anna, who prayed fervently in the temple like her many centuries later, Hannah sees in a young child the sign of the redemption of Israel and declares the joyful news to others.

Hannah's prayer makes the startling association of the reversal of the spiritual and political fortunes of the nation with God's answers to the prayers of an unknown woman for a child.

While the connection between the quiet and private victories of obscure individuals and the grand turnarounds in history are generally only seen in retrospect on the very rare occasions where they are seen at all, by the spirit, faithful Hannah is able to recognise in God's answer to her distress the faintest foreshock of forthcoming seismic events in Israel's history.

[7 : 10] In God's gift of life to her barren womb, Hannah recognises the working of a resurrection power. The Lord kills and brings to life. He brings down to Sheol and he raises up.

And this cannot but lead to radical social upheaval in the future. God has vindicated her and he will vindicate his people. She praises the great works of the Lord in visiting those in need.

She speaks of the exalted horns of the anointed. It begins with the exalted horn of Hannah and it ends with the exalted horn of the anointed king of the Lord. In verse 10, the lifting up of Hannah initiates a series of events that will lead to the lifting up of the king.

In the time when Hannah is praying this prayer, Israel is being oppressed by the Philistines. Hannah is being oppressed by Peninnah and there are parallels between these two things. The wicked are prospering and oppressing the righteous who are languishing.

Yet in all the situations where the righteous are suffering, in lack of food, in their weakness, in their barrenness, in their suffering, whatever it is, the Lord is going to intervene and there's going to be a great reversal.

[8 : 17] We might relate this to the beginning of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes, another set of teachings that speak of a great reversal that is about to come. Likewise, the prayers and the prophecies in the opening chapters of the book of Luke set the terms for understanding the entire book.

They prepare us for the action that will follow and it's the same here. Hannah's prayer here is the book of Samuel in miniature. God is going to act in a corrupt society and he's going to turn things upside down.

We need to read Hannah's prayer alongside the rest of the chapter also. It foreshadows the judgment on Eli and his sons. They are the full who will end up hiring themselves out for bread.

They've been getting full on the sacrifices of the Lord, which they've been taking from the Lord and also from his people. In verse 5, Hannah talks about those who will hire themselves out for bread.

And in verse 36, we read that this is the state to which Eli's descendants will be reduced. All of this is part of a greater event of resurrection. The God who brings life from the dead is going to act in Israel's history.

[9 : 26] The Lord is creator and he is the judge. He will set the world to rights and establish justice in his world. It's a remarkable declaration of confident faith in the darkest of times.

Samuel is now left at the temple. The seed of the new order that the Lord is about to establish is deep in the soil, as it were. And there are constant juxtapositions of Samuel's growth and the decay and the sin of Eli and his sons.

Brief references to Samuel's growth regularly punctuate the narrative in verses 11, 18, 21 and 26. And he is the alternative and the contrast to the evil sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, because he will ultimately take their place.

Samuel's steady growth frames the description of the wickedness of Eli's sons. Samuel has been adopted into the house of Eli and he will take the place of the wicked sons who will be destroyed.

He's described as acting in a priest-like fashion, even as a child. He's clothed with a linen ephod and he ministers to the Lord in the presence of Eli the priest. His mother brings him a robe every year, again connected with the garments of the priest.

[10 : 37] Samuel is presumably working alongside the Levites. We discover that he was a Levite himself in 1 Chronicles chapter 6. Eli's sons despise, by contrast, the sacrifice of the Lord.

They take what isn't theirs to take. In Leviticus chapter 7 verses 28 to 34, we read the portions of the sacrifices that belong to the priests. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, speak to the people of Israel saying, whoever offers the sacrifice of his peace offerings to the Lord shall bring his offering to the Lord from the sacrifice of his peace offerings.

His own hand shall bring the Lord's food offerings. He shall bring the fat with the breast, that the breast may be waved as a wave offering before the Lord. The priest shall burn the fat on the altar, but the breast shall be for Aaron and his sons.

And the right thigh you shall give to the priest as a contribution from the sacrifice of your peace offerings. Whoever among the sons of Aaron offers the blood of the peace offerings, and the fat shall have the right thigh for a portion.

For the breast that is waved and the thigh that is contributed, I have taken from the people of Israel out of the sacrifices of their peace offerings and have given them to Aaron the priest and to his sons as a perpetual Jew from the people of Israel.

[11 : 52] Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas then, are robbing the Israelites of their proper portions of their peace offerings, preventing them from enjoying blessed meals in the presence of the Lord in the way that they ought to.

They also robbed the Lord and treated him with contempt by taking raw meat from the Israelites before the fat had been given to the Lord. They even threatened force if they were not given the meat that they demanded.

From this gross sin against the Israelites and against the Lord, we turn to Hannah and Samuel again. The chapter is juxtaposing these two things, Hannah and her son, and Eli and his sons.

Hannah visits for the yearly sacrifice. She is blessed by the Lord and ends up with three sons and two daughters. On the other hand, Hophni and Phinehas sleep with the women serving at the tabernacle.

The serving women at the tabernacle, which we also read of in Exodus chapter 38, were presumably virgins who were dedicated to that service. In their dedicated virginity to the Lord, they would represent Israel.

[12 : 53] But Hophni and Phinehas are violating them, violating the people of Israel, the bride, and violating the Lord, their husband. Phinehas is also acting in a way that greatly contrasts with the actions of his namesake in the book of Numbers.

In Numbers chapter 25, Phinehas stands up and intervenes to stop the plague by driving a spear through a couple engaged in inappropriate sexual relations. Far from standing in the gap and maintaining the holiness of the Lord's people, Phinehas is violating them and repeating the sorts of sins that almost got Israel destroyed.

Eli rebukes his sons, but only in a very vague, general, and toothless manner. They don't listen, understandably. It is a rebuke with little strength. The Lord sends a man of God to Eli, and he brings a message of condemnation.

Eli and his family had been uniquely honoured by the Lord, but they had scorned the Lord's sacrifices. They had responded to honour with dishonour. Eli had also seemingly become fat on the portions of the sacrifices that his sons had stolen.

In this way, he was a participant and implicated in their sins. Eli's house, the word house is repeated on a number of occasions in this section, would be brought low. This is the beginning of the reversal that the Lord had promised through Hannah.

[14 : 12] Samuel is growing up, but Eli's house is being brought down. The book of Samuel contains three different models of leadership that Israel could have taken. It begins with Eli the judge and the high priest.

It moves on to Samuel the judge and the prophet, and then it moves on to the king, David. Here we see the failure of the priestly ruler, the way that Eli and his family utterly failed to guard the holiness of the Lord and his people.

A question to consider, what can we learn from the parallels between Hannah and the women at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke?

