

1 Samuel 2:1-10

Hannah's Prayer

This prayer is explicitly introduced as being a prayer. It is common to describe it either as a hymn or psalm of thanksgiving. Because of its closing assertion it has sometimes been classed as a royal psalm.

To set Hannah's prayer in its context we must recognize six things:

1. That it is occasioned by the birth of Samuel and must be understood with reference to the importance of Samuel himself.
2. That it is all voiced in anticipation of the provision of Israel's first king (v11).
3. That the sentiments of the prayer provide foundations for understanding kingship and setting it in his right context. In particular it will be critical for God's people to understand that the provision of a king does not change the reality that God himself is the ultimate king and that the human king is merely the vehicle through whom God accomplishes his sovereign purposes and exercises his role as King-Judge.
4. In framing her prayer Hannah particularly takes up language, imagery and thought from Exodus 15.
5. It anticipates God's judgment against the house of Eli.
6. Many of the essential features of Hannah's prayer, which centre on what God will do through his Messianic King, are picked up by David in his own great song of praise, 2 Samuel 22, with these two songs functioning as an *inclusio* for 1-2 Samuel. Consequently, Hannah's prayer is "a thematic and structural introduction to Samuel."¹

This prayer can be broken down into four parts²:

1. The Cause of Joy
2. The Uniqueness of Yahweh
3. Yahweh as Judge
4. Yahweh and his Messiah

The prayer begins with two uses of the name Yahweh and finishes with two uses (v10a), followed by the concluding declaration concerning the Lord's Messiah.

The Cause of Joy

Hannah expresses that her rejoicing and exaltation - the 'lifting of her horn' - are "in the LORD" (v1). What does "lifting of the horn" mean? In Psalm 92:10, having been saved from enemies, the psalmist says, "You have exalted my horn like that of a wild ox; fine oils have been poured upon me." The exalting or lifting of his horn means that God has placed him in a strong and honoured position. The image is probably of a horned beast adopting an intimidating pose, asserting its strength over any would-be enemies. Following the birth of Samuel Hannah feels that she is in a strong and honoured position and the association of a lifted horn and the blessing of children also occurs in 1 Chronicles 25:5. But Hannah also rejoices in how God has lifted her horn high with respect to her enemies. Similarly, she ends off her prayer with an *inclusio*, by speaking of how God will give the king a strong and honoured position with respect to his enemies, literally, how God "will exalt the horn of his anointed" (v10b).³

Alternatively, she may be likening victory over enemies with the way a huge beast opens its capacious mouth to swallow its prey⁶.

Given the controlling function of verse 10b on this prayer the humbling of Hannah's enemies is fundamentally something effected by God through the human king he will raise up and empower. Consequently, Hannah's enemies cannot be limited to Peninnah and such like but encompasses the enemies of God's people and, indeed, of God himself, anticipating the Philistines and, indeed, all those like Hophni and Phinehas who show arrogant contempt for the Lord. So the humbling of Hannah's enemies, given the link with the Song of Moses, suggests that God will deal with them as he dealt with Pharaoh's armies in the Red Sea.

Once this connection is realized then we appreciate that the reversals that are involved in the exercise of God's judgment has its first expression in what happened in the Red Sea deliverance.

The Uniqueness of Yahweh

Evidently Hannah is convinced that no other God can answer prayer as Yahweh does. In saying that "there is no one holy like the LORD" (v2a), she is simply saying that God is unique, utterly incomparable. Among all the gods worshiped by various peoples only Yahweh is completely dependable and trustworthy, the perfect source of security: "there is no Rock like our God" (v2b).

Given that verse 11 presupposes that God will exercise judgment through the king he raises up verse 2 is important in emphasizing that it is God, not this king, who is the ultimate sovereign. Hence the stress of verse 10 in saying God will give strength to his king.

The statement about God's holiness is important in a context in which the worship system has been corrupted. It is precisely because God is holy that it is necessary for him to judge. Consequently, there is an intimate relationship between verse 2 and verse 3.

It is also crucial to recognize that Hannah's statement about God in this verse presupposes Exodus 15:11 where in the Song of Moses, following the Red Sea deliverance, Moses and the Israelites sing, "Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you - majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" Similarly, her designation of God as "the Rock" is drawn from Moses' other great song, Deuteronomy 32 (vv4, 15, 18, 30, 31). From this background we can see that Hannah's statement in verse 2 does not presuppose abstract Western conceptualization. Her statement is not so much ontological as it is functional. That is, she declares that there is "no one holy like the LORD"; that "there is no one besides you" not because of philosophical reflection on the nature of God, but because of what God has done and will do, through his king. In other words, no one can "save" like the Lord.

Yahweh as Judge

Most of Hannah's song is concerned with Yahweh as Judge. He "is a God who knows" (v3b). On this basis Hannah can warn, "Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance" (v3a). In other words, God is totally aware of everything everyone says and he constantly assesses those words, especially looking for evidence

of either pride or humility. The NIV continues: “and by him deeds are weighed” and, if this is a correct translation, it adds the thought that God not merely judges every word but also every deed. However, Tsumara (138) argues for the rendering: “and his [sc. the Lord’s] deeds are immeasurable”, on the basis that “deeds” stand in parallel with God’s knowing and that in the Bible this term is never used for human deeds. If this is right, then presumably the thought is that it is foolish to trifle with God, given his infallible knowledge and the awesome might he has displayed in his mighty works. Indeed, Hannah’s warning carries the implication that her God is poised to strike down those who vaunt themselves, who speak in a proud or arrogant manner.

The immediately ensuing context will describe the wickedness of Hophni and Phinehas who “had no regard for the LORD” (v12). Indeed, “they were treating the LORD’s offering with contempt” (v17). The fact that they reject their father’s attempt at correction (v25) clearly indicates their arrogance and ultimate defiance of God himself. The story will go on to show how God will judge these arrogant sons and bring them down. At the same time, in parallel with this, we will be reminded how God continues to exalt his humble servant, Samuel.

In 2:29 we are provided with an example of God assessing Eli: “Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for my dwelling? Why do you honour your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?”

Given Hannah’s own experience in Chapter 1 we can also conclude that among those deemed to speak arrogantly would be those who presume upon God’s favour, for example, those whose experience of God’s blessings causes them to conclude that they have impressed God.

However, the examples Hannah goes on to supply indicate she is considering how God judges in broad terms. Indeed, what she says can be summarized in terms of God being the One who humiliates the proud and exalts the humble. As Hannah goes on to describe the humble it becomes apparent that these are people who are often devalued and disparaged in society. This presumably reflects Hannah’s own experience as a barren woman on the basis of which she was made the butt of Peninnah’s taunts, expressive of the shame she experienced in the society of that time.

Hannah provides the first example of God’s “immeasurable deeds”, namely how he breaks the bows of warriors and causes those who stumble in their relative weakness to be armed with strength. The first group would be mighty soldiers confident of their prowess and arrogantly presuming they can thumb their noses at God, dealing with his people how they please. The second group would be the forces led by God’s king. As verse 10 indicates Hannah ultimately has in mind that God will provide a king and it is through such a king that God will effect military victory. In verse 4 it is presupposed that God’s king may well find himself standing against vastly superior forces, at least from a human standpoint. By contrast, it might seem that his own seemingly inadequate troops are stumbling and staggering as they go into battle. Yet God will arm them with strength and bring victory through them.

She reflects how well-fed women are reduced to such destitution that they hire themselves out as prostitutes to get the money they need to pay for food. Again this is

an illustration of God judging the proud so it is implicit that the prior wealth and prosperity of such women had caused them to become proud, perhaps arrogantly presuming they were approved by God despite the moral failings in their lives.

By contrast “those who were hungry hunger no more” (v5b). This is an illustration of how God as Judge effects great reversals, exalting the humble. It would be a misunderstanding of Hannah’s words to construe them as meaning that one day God will ensure that all starving people in the world are well-fed. Rather, she has in mind those who humbly walk with God and who despite this suffer grievously, having little with which to feed themselves. God “knows” and will rectify this situation in due course.

Moving closer to her own experience she reflects, “She who was barren has borne seven children, but she who has had many sons pines away” (vv5c,d). Clearly, in speaking of “seven children” she is using an ideal number, generalizing from her experience. For Hannah herself had three sons and two daughters (v21), either 5 or 6 children depending on whether Samuel is included her or not.⁷ In her own case she was one who humbly depended on God and eventually she experienced fecundity. It is possible that in speaking of the woman who meets with misfortune that she is thinking of her rival Peninnah. However, there is doubt that the NIV rendering “pines away” is correct and Tsumura (146), noting that the verb normally means “become a widow”, argues the sense here is “become childless”, also discounting the translation “become barren, infertile.” He argues that the contrast between the cola “requires the idea of losing all her sons, like the king losing all his sons, ‘seven’ // ‘eight’, in the Keret epic.”

But it would be a mistake to press this since the context has no interest whatsoever in what happened to the individual Peninnah, only in the general principle of divine judgment. The point is that a mother with many sons makes a grave mistake when she proudly presumes, on this basis, that God is impressed with her. God weighs our deeds, including our words, not our ability to produce children.

The principle of great reversals implicit in God’s work of judgment is ultimately expressed in Hannah’s next reflection: “The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up” (v6). Given that God’s people, including Hannah, had had no experience of individual resurrection, it is probable that she is speaking metaphorically here. She has in mind how the people of God can be reduced to such dire straits of oppression and humiliation that it is as though they were dead. It might seem as though there is no future for God’s people. By contrast the enemies of God’s true people, which include faithless Israelites as well as godless pagans, may seem to thrive and enjoy all the blessings of life. Yet God will bring all such people down to Sheol, that is, he will bring death to all such people. Of course, having said that Hannah speaks metaphorically, we also recognize that she speak prophetically. Under the inspiration of God’s Spirit her words carry a deeper meaning than she herself realized. Consequently, her words are also fulfilled in actuality. God is the one who literally will raise from the dead all who belong to his humble people, depending on him.

The notion of God raising actual people from Sheol and not merely mythical deities and figures makes him far greater than other deities associated with a measure of

control over death in the ancient Near East, e.g. the sun goddess Shapshu who, in the Ugaritic funerary cult, was involved in sending the recently deceased king Niqmaddu to the netherworld (Tsumara, 146-147). As Tsumara observes Hannah's confidence in her God's life-giving ability far transcends that of Gilgamesh who finally despaired of achieving immortality for himself.

The principle of reversal continues to be expressed in Hannah's next reflection: "The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts" (v7). The humbleness or exaltedness of a person's condition is very much dependent on their socio-economic standing and it is the Lord who determines this. In particular, Hannah is considering those whose experience of material blessings - now she is thinking of more than being merely well-fed - causes them to presume that God is impressed with them. God, as the One who assesses deeds is not impressed with such a mentality. He will send poverty to such people, even if they might experience this posthumously. By contrast, those who belong to his humble people and who experience a low socio-economic standing will in due course be exalted and enjoy the wealth of God's blessings. Hannah is probably thinking that this will be fulfilled in this life, but given the deeper meaning involved in verse 6, we can conclude that her prophetic words may find a posthumous fulfillment.

Again the principle of reversal is expressed in this thought: "He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honour" (v8). This is a natural development of the thought of verse 7 which already assumes that when God exercises judgment this will find an expression in social standing. The poor and needy are those who are socially vulnerable and often exploited. They are treated as disposable, worthless commodities, like articles to be thrown out on to the mound of dung and other rubbish⁸ for burning. For those of God's humble people who experience this plight there is the assurance that the time will come when God puts this right. Indeed, he will so exalt them that they will reign with kings and enjoy supreme honour.

What is the basis of Hannah's confidence that God will exercise judgment and effect these great reversals? This is expressed in the second half of verse 8: "For the foundations of the earth are the LORD's; upon them he has set the world." Here Hannah is comparing the world, the Earth, with a building. It is possible that the word rendered "foundations" should be translated "pillars". If so, this would reflect Hebrew and general ancient cosmologies that saw the earth as propped up with pillars. However, the uncertainty of translation has led to the employment of "foundations."⁹

The world is a strong building that will not crumble or be swept away because it is built on strong foundations. It is the LORD who is responsible for building those foundations. It is implicit that these foundations are invisible, hidden. Though many may not acknowledge the fact it remains true that the stability of the world order depends on none other than Hannah's God, the God of Israel. This thought returns to the fundamental identity of God with which Hannah began, namely Yahweh is the Rock of his people.

It seems clear that when Hannah speaks of this physical undergirding of the world order she really has in mind its counterpart in the moral world. She is inferring that the moral foundations of the world belong to God and this is the way she is connecting

this statement to what she has already emphasized about God as the Judge. Consequently, her understanding of God being responsible for the foundations of the world causes her to conclude, "He will guard the feet of his saints, but the wicked will be silenced in darkness" (v9). The God who ensures that the Earth-building stands on sure ground is well able to ensure there is sure footing for his saints. The contrasting statement does not reverse this image, as we might expect. Rather, the conception is of the arrogant voice of the wicked being swallowed up in the overwhelming darkness of chaos.¹⁰ That is, whereas the saints, God's humble people, belong to the God-dependent order of creation, the wicked are creatures of chaos.

Her rounding off comments form an *inclusio* with verse 3. There she warned that God will judge those who speak arrogantly. Now in similar vein she declares,

It is not by strength that one prevails; those who oppose¹¹ the LORD will be shattered. He will thunder against them from heaven; the LORD will judge the ends of the earth (vv9b-10a).

Here Hannah is connecting with her meditation on the foundations of the earth. What must people depend on if they are to 'prevail', to enjoy life and divine blessing? They must depend on the Lord since world depends on him. To depend on one's own strength for security is foolish and doomed to abject failure. All who do so are setting themselves against the Lord. Their lives will be shattered, smashed to pieces. This is so because ultimate strength is located in heaven, not on earth. The Lord who founded the earth judges it from heaven. Thunder frightens people and animals and the Lord will terrify people when he speaks. Hannah has, of course, just spoken of the wicked being silenced and her initial remarks concerned the arrogant speech of the wicked whose words are noted by the God who "knows". The time will come when the 'power' of the words of the wicked will pale into insignificance compared to terrifying thunder of God's voice of judgment. Unlike the storm god Baal, a localized deity, the thunder of God's judgment will extend to "the ends of the earth." Consequently, Hannah's comments about divine judgment involving the principle of reversal do not merely pertain to Israel and her immediate concerns about the plight of the nation. Rather, the principle applies to all people living on the face of the globe.

It seems probable that the imagery of God shattering his opponents and his thundering from heaven is an echo of Exodus 15:6-8 which speak of God shattering his enemy and also describe how the waters of the Red Sea piled up at "the blast of [Yahweh's] nostrils". This connection is all the more telling when we appreciate that in Exodus 15 "the sea" is not merely a literal descriptor of the Red Sea but also a metaphor for chaos, with 1 Samuel 2:9a also involving chaos imagery.

Yahweh and his Messiah

Hannah concludes her prayer with a climactic statement: "He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed" (v10b). This forms a clear *inclusio* with verse 1 where Hannah spoke of her own horn being exalted. It was the birth of Samuel that causes her own horn to be exalted. Consequently, there is a close relationship between Samuel and Israel's king.

It would be a serious misreading of Hannah's prayer to think of this as something merely additional to what has already been voiced by Hannah, as a discrete supplementary reflection, a kind of appendix. No! The whole point of this climax is to indicate how God, the Judge, will effect the reversals that are implicit in just

judgment, how he will judge the ends of the earth. He will do so through “his king”, that is, through the one he has chosen or appointed, “his anointed”, that is, “his Messiah” (v11). Hannah is the first person to speak of the king as God’s Messiah.

Given our comments on verse 2 and the way in which this prayer anticipates Chapter 8 and the historical reality of kingship it is of critical importance to recognize that Yahweh is the ultimate king and that the human king’s strength and exaltation comes from him. Here chapter 8 is being anticipated and the sin of God’s people, a dependence on a human ruler that involves an effective rejection of God’s rule.

However, it is incorrect to read Hannah’s prayer as an implicit critique of human rule and certainly erroneous to think the reference to the king is anachronistic, as, unfortunately, many do. For example, Klein states that the “final prayer for the king is impossible for Hannah: her son Samuel, as an old man, held earthly kingship to be a rejection of Yahweh’s kingship” (14). No! This is a fundamental misunderstanding of 1 Samuel 8. Human rule is God’s intent, as anticipated in Deuteronomy 17:15. It must be stressed that the king, as depicted in verse 10, is **not** “*their* king”, the king of the Israelites, but “*his* king”. The king is the means God himself adopts for exercising his reign and instituting true global justice. The danger is that the essential basis of the relationship between God and the king will be forgotten or ignored and that the king will be given a standing which rejects God’s own sovereignty. Here we must also remember that there is an essential relationship between Hannah’s song and the Song of Moses (Exodus 15). So we must take special note of the way the Song of Moses ends: “The LORD will reign for ever and ever.” But the question remains: How?

Verse 10 must not be taken as referring to local Israelite rulers but, in the first instance, anticipates the rise of David. However, the rule of God, his ultimate and perfect justice, will find its supreme expression in the rule of “the King of kings”, our Lord Jesus Christ, clearly the understanding of the early church, as the striking parallels between this prayer and the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55) make plain.

Hannah’s prayer and the birth of Samuel

It is important to remember that all that Hannah says is occasioned by the miraculous birth of her son, Samuel. Prophetically, she knows that her son is linked to the provision of Israel’s first king through whom God will effect universal judgment and prove himself indeed to be the Rock of his people.

The fact that Hannah’s prayer is intimately associated with the birth of Samuel is indicated by the following chiasmic structure identified by Eslinger (103):

- 1:26f Hannah prayed to Yahweh, praying for Samuel (this lad)
- 1:27 Yahweh gives Samuel to Hannah
- 1:28 Hannah dedicates Samuel to Yahweh
- 2:1 Hannah prays (to Yahweh, thanking and praising him)

The association of the prayer with Samuel is also confirmed by verse 11. The boy Samuel ministers in God’s presence. This is a pregnant statement, implying that this fact will somehow lead to the fulfillment of what Hannah envisaged in her prayer.

Hannah’s Prayer (1 Samuel 1:10ff; 2:1-10) and David’s Song of Praise (2 Samuel 22)
There are many points of correspondence between these prayers/songs¹²:

1. David begins by emphasizing that God is his Rock and Deliverer from enemies (2 Sam 22:1-4), the precise opening emphases of Hannah's prayer (1 Sam 2:2). Indeed, in a highly similar manner David asks, "For who is God but the LORD? And who is the Rock except our God?" (2 Sam 22:32). The connection between Rock and salvation is made explicit at 2 Samuel 22:47: "The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock! Exalted be God, the Rock, my Saviour!"
2. David speaks of the distress he experienced and how in his distress he cried out to God in his temple (2 Sam 22:5-7). In her distress Hannah similarly went to the sanctuary and cried out to God.
3. David speaks of his distress as being akin to one overwhelmed by "the waves of death" (2 Sam 22:5). Hannah, following her experiences, speaks of God as the one who "brings death and makes alive", who "brings down to the grave and raises up" (1 Sam 2:6).
4. David, using Sinai imagery and also re-applying language from Exodus 15, speaks of God thundering from heaven and dealing with his enemies (2 Sam 22:14-16), just as Hannah, alluding to Exodus 15, similarly does (1 Sam 2:10a).
5. God's exaltation of the humble, so emphasized by Hannah (1 Sam 2:4-8) is played out in David's own experience (2 Sam 22:28).
6. Hannah emphasizes that God gives strength to his king (1 Sam 2:10b) and David acknowledges, "It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect" (2 Sam 22:33). Again, "You armed with strength for battle; you made my adversaries bow at my feet" (v40).
7. Hannah promises, "God will guard the feet of his saints" (1 Sam 2:9) and David declares, "He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he enables me to stand on the heights" (2 Sam 22:34). He adds, "You broaden the path beneath me, so that my ankles do not turn" (2 Sam 22:37).

What these correspondences establish is this: that we are correct to interpret 1 Samuel 2:10b as the control for the entirety of Hannah's prayer in verse 1-10. It is indeed understood that God will effect all he does, by way of exercising his rule and establishing justice, through his Davidic king.

¹ Bailey cited by Tsumara, 135.

² This is a sharper breakdown, in our opinion, than Tsumura's proposed outline, because it fastens on the central notion of Yahweh as Judge:

- (1) Yahweh's holy sovereignty (vv1-3)
- (2) Reversal of human fortunes (vv4-5)
- (3) Yahweh's holy sovereignty (vv6-7)
- (4) Reversal of human fortunes (v8a)
- (5) Yahweh's holy sovereignty (vv8b-10a)
- (6) The theme of kingship (v10b)

³ Tsumara (141) observes that in 1 Samuel 2 while in the ancient Near East the animal horn is sometimes used to symbolize the strength and pride of divinity, it is here used with respect to kingship.

⁴ For example, Klein, 14-15.

⁵ For example, Gordon, 79.

⁶ Compare Tsumara (142).

⁷ There is no reason to take this difference as indicating the psalm had a different setting and function prior to its ascription to Hannah. Contra Klein, 14.

⁸ Gordon, 80.

⁹ Another possibility, ventured by McCarter, is to render the phrase “the straits of the earth” and construe it as referring to the subterranean waters upon which the earth is founded, although, if this is valid, Gordon (80) proposes “the straits of the underworld”, recognizing *eretis* occasionally supports such a sense.

¹⁰ Gordon (80) considers “darkness” here to refer to “the nether gloom which engulfs the wicked at death and which may be experienced already in this life.”

¹¹ “Those who oppose” or “adversaries” may have a legal connotation, according with the depiction of God as judge of the earth - Gordon (81).

¹² Some of these are noted by Patrick Reardon, editor of *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity*. See <http://trushare.com/80JAN02/JA02REAR.htm> Downloaded 20/1/08.