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P R E A C H I N G   T H E   W O R D

# 1 SAMUEL

Looking for a Leader

*John Woodhouse*

*R. Kent Hughes, General Editor*

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*1 Samuel*

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# A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases, and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary — through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it — the Holy Spirit filling one's sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one's hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos* — in terms of preaching, God's Word. This means that as we stand before God's people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is — so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God's Word, but God's actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God's smile in preaching is *ethos* — what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never perfectly embody

the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s *ethos* backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos* — personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but he does.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you preach the Word may you experience his smile — the Holy Spirit in your sails!

*R. Kent Hughes*

# Preface

I am very grateful to Kent Hughes for his invitation and generous encouragement to contribute to the Preaching the Word series of expository commentaries. It has led to a rich experience for me in studying, teaching, and preaching the Books of Samuel in many different settings. I am also indebted to many brothers and sisters who have helped me teach and preach the Books of Samuel, particularly the congregations at Christ Church St Ives and the students and faculty of Moore College in Sydney, Australia.

The commentary has been written out of three particular convictions about the wonderful task of expounding the Word of God.

The first of these is that *the richness of the Bible's message is heard when attention is given to the particular details of the text under consideration*. Certainly the major theme of a passage must be recognized — the “big idea” — but the insight of just this passage is only appreciated by taking seriously the unique way in which this text is expressed.

Therefore each of the expositions in this volume attempts to bring to light the specific shape and precise wording of the specific passage, often giving attention to fine aspects of the text. The written form of the expository commentary has often allowed me to include more of such detail than may be possible in many sermons. Some of the important discussion has been relegated to the endnotes. How much and which details to include in a particular sermon is a judgment that each preacher has to make. Nonetheless I am convinced that sermons are enriched by appropriate examination of the details of the text of Scripture. I have found this to be true in important ways in narrative texts such as the Books of Samuel.

The second conviction that underlies the expositions in this commentary is that *the key to understanding the significance of any text of the Bible lies in seeing the text in question in its context*. Furthermore the context of any Old Testament text such as those expounded in this volume includes not only the whole book in question (here 1 Samuel) or the whole epic history told from Genesis 1 to 2 Kings 25, of which 1 Samuel is part, but also the whole Bible, which is shaped by the Old Testament promises of God that find their fulfillment in the New Testament in Jesus Christ.

Stated briefly the Bible's message is this: God's good purpose in creation (Genesis 1–2) was not abandoned at the Fall (Genesis 3), but God promised to bring blessing to the whole world through Abraham's offspring (Genesis 12:1-3; cf. 22:18). The Old Testament history of Israel is the record of God's faithfulness to this promise despite repeated and disastrous human failure. The New Testament message is that in Jesus Christ God's promises are fulfilled:

*Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. (Galatians 3:16)*

*And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus. . . . (Acts 13:32, 33)*

*Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures. . . . (Romans 1:1, 2)*

*For all the promises of God find their Yes in him [Jesus Christ]. (2 Corinthians 1:20)*

First Samuel is a very important part of the Old Testament history of Israel. Therefore each of the following expositions tries to show not only the place of the text in the story that 1 Samuel tells (though that certainly is important and illuminating), but also how the text relates to the complete Bible message. In particular I have tried to see each passage in the light of the fulfillment of the whole Old Testament message in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The third conviction is even more basic than the first two. It is this: *The proper purpose of Biblical exposition is not simply to find relevant lessons for life from the texts before us but to proclaim Christ.* This ministry is wonderfully summed up in the words of the Apostle Paul:

*Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. (Colossians 1:28)*

Each of these expositions therefore aims to show, by attention to detail and attention to context, how these Scriptures point us to our Lord Jesus Christ and the truth and grace that are to be found in him.

May God, whose words these Scriptures are, speak them again by the power of his Spirit and shine in our hearts "to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

PART ONE

Samuel:  
The Leader God Provided

1 SAMUEL 1–7

# 1

## The Leadership Crisis

1 SAMUEL 1:1, 2

Leadership is as important in today's world as it has been in every society in every age. Some would go further and speak of a contemporary crisis of leadership. There is now widespread cynicism expressed, especially in the media, toward those in leadership. Confidence in our elected leaders is at a low ebb.

Of course, leadership is a much bigger subject than politics. Leadership also matters in the world of business, sports, entertainment, fashion. Indeed leadership is something that touches our lives at every level and in every sphere. All of us *choose* leaders and *reject* leaders. That is to say, we allow some people to influence us, and we reject the influence of others. This happens in many different ways — as we choose a career, as we learn, as we make important decisions, as we make life choices, as we develop our values. We do not do these things in isolation from external influences. On the contrary, our lives are shaped by the influence of different people whose example or ideas or vision or teaching or values we *follow*. These are our real leaders, although it is possible that we do not always think of them, and they do not necessarily think of themselves, as leaders. By definition leaders are those who are followed!

It is interesting to reflect for a moment on the leaders who have shaped your life. Who are the leaders who are now shaping your life? Some will be obvious. Some we might hardly realize.

I recently browsed the shelves of a local bookshop and noticed the number and variety of books on leadership. There is considerable interest in the subject. There is a popular Christian journal called *Leadership*. Mind you, most of the material I have seen is about how to *be* a leader rather than

how to *choose* which leaders you will follow — which is surely the more important question.

However, all of us do both. On the one hand, whether we are high-flying achievers who think of ourselves as leaders or more humble human beings who see ourselves as small players in the game of life, all of us exercise influence (I am calling it *leadership*) somewhere. It may be over your children or within your family, a circle of friends, a neighborhood. To some degree and in some respect and in some areas of our lives, we are all leaders.

What kind of leader are you? What kind of leaders should we be? How do you work that out?

On the other hand, the more important thing is that we all *follow* leaders. No matter how high up the status tree you may think you have climbed (or think you will climb), there is always someone higher. Furthermore we all *choose* to follow leaders, the leaders we decide to trust, the leaders we allow to influence us.

What kind of leaders do we follow? What kind of leaders *should* we follow? How do we work that out?

If we could answer such questions with confidence and had the wisdom to put our answers into practice, it would make a real difference in how well we lived.

I have begun this exposition of the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel with these thoughts because the book of 1 Samuel is about *leadership*. Mind you, what we will learn from this part of the Bible is very different from anything you will find in your local bookshop in the “Leadership” section. Much in these pages will take us by surprise.

## ***ISRAEL'S LEADERSHIP CRISIS***

In 1 Samuel we find the story (which continues into 2 Samuel) of three great leaders of the nation of Israel, through a period when Israel experienced a massive leadership crisis that led to an historic change in the character of the nation's leadership.

The three leaders were:<sup>1</sup> *Samuel* (whose story begins in 1 Samuel 1), *Saul* (the first king of Israel, who will first appear in 1 Samuel 9 and whose death occurs at the end of 1 Samuel), and *David* (Israel's second and greatest king who will enter the story in 1 Samuel 16 but will not become king until the early chapters of 2 Samuel).

Let us briefly set the scene. The book of 1 Samuel takes us back more than 3,000 years. The date was about 1050 B.C. It was a time when the question of *leadership* was very much in the air in the small and relatively young nation of Israel.

There had been about 200 years of extraordinary social upheaval, verg-

ing at times on anarchy. These were the 200 years after the Israelites had come into the land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. The era is often referred to as the period of the judges. Much of it is recounted in the book of Judges, which concludes with this summary: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25).<sup>2</sup> In other words, there was no established and permanent political authority in the land. Anarchy reigned. There was a crisis of leadership in Israel. Or so it seemed.

What kind of leadership did this troubled society need?

We must, of course, remember that Israel was then different from any other nation in the history of the world. Israel was God’s chosen people. They had become a nation because of God’s promise to their ancestor, Abraham. The promise was that God himself would make them into a great nation and that through them he would bring blessing to the whole world (Genesis 12:1-3).

So the leadership question had a particular spin to it in those days at the end of the book of Judges and the beginning of 1 Samuel. What kind of leader did Israel, God’s own people, need? Through the period of the judges God had again and again raised up a leader (a “judge”) according to the need of the moment. But could that unpredictable arrangement be permanent? Could Israel survive lurching from crisis to crisis, as they had for the last two centuries? As we will see, threats from other peoples, especially the Philistines, were growing. We will also see that internal instability, even corruption in the nation’s leadership, was threatening Israel’s life. What was the solution for this special people whom God had made his own? What kind of leadership could provide stability and security to Israel? That is the question in the air as 1 Samuel begins.

Already we should realize that the Bible will introduce an important element to the leadership question: What does *God* have to do with leadership? As we follow the unfolding leadership crisis in Israel, we cannot avoid introducing this new element into the questions of our leadership crisis: what difference does *God* make to the kind of leader I should be and (more importantly) the kind of leaders I should follow?

The book of 1 Samuel is going to tell us the extraordinary story of the leadership crisis in Israel at the end of the second millennium B.C. In ways that will surprise us, it will point us to *God’s* astonishing answer to Israel’s predicament. We will see that God’s answer for Israel turns out to be his answer for the whole world and for each of us individually.

However, we must not jump ahead too quickly. In order to appreciate the important things that God has caused to be “written down for our instruction” (1 Corinthians 10:11)<sup>3</sup> in 1 Samuel, we must listen carefully and patiently to precisely what is written and consider its significance in the context of the whole Bible.

We will begin with the opening paragraph, where we are introduced to a particular family that will play a very important role in the story 1 Samuel has to tell.

### **“A CERTAIN MAN” (v. 1)**

The first few words of 1 Samuel are like the beginnings of a number of Old Testament books. There are names of people and places that seem to the modern reader to be quite obscure. These unfamiliar details do not exactly grab our attention. However, although the writer of an Old Testament book may not have treated his opening sentence in the way of modern authors, there is good reason for us to assume that the first few lines of a book are worth our careful attention.

In the case of 1 Samuel this expectation is rewarded in a surprising and paradoxical way. Remembering that the immediate background to 1 Samuel is the end of the book of Judges, we know that there were grave matters of national importance in the air: no king in Israel, everyone doing what was right in his own eyes. The book opens with details about “a certain man” from the hill country of Ephraim:

*There was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph, an Ephrathite. (v. 1)*

Why are we introduced to this man, Elkanah? The details given to us about him are, to say the least, perplexing.

#### *His Town, His Family, His Connections*

Ramathaim-zophim<sup>4</sup> (or Ramah for short, see v. 19) is not a town of great importance in the Old Testament story so far. It was at this time a relatively obscure town in the hills of Ephraim.<sup>5</sup> There is no obvious reason that we should be interested in “a certain man of Ramah.”

Neither are the family connections of Elkanah striking in any way. Jeroham (his father), Elihu (his grandfather), Tohu (his great-grandfather), and his great-great-grandfather Zuph are all relatively “insignificant and obscure people.”<sup>6</sup> The information in verse 1 tells us only that this man was, as we might say, a “nobody” in Israel.<sup>7</sup> Why, in these critical days, are we being introduced to this insignificant character?

Elkanah himself (or perhaps his great-great-grandfather) is described as an “Ephrathite.” This could mean that he had family connections with Bethlehem (also known as Ephrathah).<sup>8</sup>

We know, of course, that Bethlehem Ephrathah would eventually

become very famous indeed. In the course of this book we will meet another Ephrathite who will make Bethlehem famous for all time. David was “the son of an Ephrathite” (1 Samuel 17:12), and Bethlehem is the town where his story began (1 Samuel 16:1-13). But he is still half a book away! About three centuries later, a prophet would say:

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me  
one who is to be ruler in Israel,  
whose origin is from of old,  
from ancient days. (Micah 5:2)*

That very prophecy was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus (see the citation of Micah 5:2 in Matthew 2:6).

Once again we are jumping ahead too quickly! There is much for us to learn by following the path that begins here with the obscure Elkanah the Ephrathite. At the time of 1 Samuel 1:1 a connection with Bethlehem was no claim to fame.

### *His Important Unimportance*

The very obscurity of the names and places in the opening sentence of the book is what should strike us. Their importance lies in their unimportance!<sup>9</sup> In this case the obscurity is not a consequence of our being modern readers with little familiarity with the world of the Old Testament. These names were little known at the time referred to in 1 Samuel 1. From the point of view of social standing, fame, or power within the nation, Elkanah and his family were “nobodies.”

This is the first hint of a theme that will develop in the course of 1 Samuel. The solution to Israel’s leadership crisis will not be found in the expected places. We do not begin this story with the prominent and the powerful in Israel, but with an unheard of “certain man” from the hill country of Ephraim, possibly with remote family connections to the equally obscure town of Bethlehem. This book is about a God who makes something out of nothing, life out of death, rich out of poor, somebody out of nobody. This theme will be played out in a grand poetic prayer in chapter 2 (see especially vv. 6-8). The obscurity of Elkanah is the starting point of the book.

### ***ELKANAH’S DOMESTIC SITUATION (v. 2)***

From Elkanah himself, introduced in all his obscurity in verse 1, our attention is turned to his unfortunate domestic situation:

*He had two wives. The name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other, Peninnah. And Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. (v. 2)*

This suggests that Hannah was Elkanah's first wife.<sup>10</sup> The couple suffered the all-too-common sadness of being unable to have children, and so, apparently, Elkanah took a second wife. Such an arrangement was not forbidden in Old Testament times but commonly led to the kind of difficulties we will hear about in this chapter (see Deuteronomy 21:15-17). The new wife, Peninnah by name, bore Elkanah a number of children, but Hannah continued to have none.

Although the problem of childlessness can be a major crisis for a couple experiencing this difficulty, and perhaps particularly for a wife, we are again struck by the ordinariness of the situation that is brought before us in this book's second sentence. With a national crisis in the air, our attention is drawn to the sad circumstances of one woman in Israel, the childless Hannah.

There are two reasons, however, that the introduction of Hannah and her troubles should catch our attention.

### *Where Is the Blessing?*

The first is that Hannah's predicament raises a question about God's promised blessing on Israel. "There shall not be male or female barren among you," God had said (Deuteronomy 7:14). If we were wondering about Israel's difficulties in these days when everyone was doing what was right in his own eyes, Hannah's troubles were *a representation of Israel's troubles*. This nation had been promised blessing. Where was the blessing in their threatened existence? Where was the blessing for Hannah as a member of God's people, Israel? Her name, ironically, means "grace." What grace did she know?

### *The Beginning of Something?*

The second reason that Hannah's predicament should arouse our interest is that the Bible has told us of a number of other women in her situation. In each case the woman concerned experienced a particular act of God's grace, by which she did bear a child, and the child played an important role in God's purposes. Sarah "was barren; she had no child" (Genesis 11:30). But God promised Abraham that she would bear a child, and she bore Isaac (Genesis 17:16; 21:1-7). Isaac became the bearer of the great promise of God to bring blessing to the nations of the earth (Genesis 22:16-18). Rebekah "was barren," but Isaac prayed for her, and she conceived and bore Esau and (more

importantly, as it would turn out) Jacob, the father of the Israelite nation (Genesis 25:21-26). Jacob's wife, Rachel, too, "was barren," but "God listened to her and opened her womb," and she bore Joseph, through whom God saved many lives (Genesis 29:31; 30:22, 23; 50:20). More recently (from the point of view of 1 Samuel 1) a woman who "was barren and had no children" was visited by an angel, was promised a son, and gave birth to Samson (Judges 13:2, 3, 24). Samson delivered Israel from the Philistines and ruled Israel for twenty years (Judges 15). Each of these women had shared a sadness like Hannah's, but in each case a child was subsequently born who was God's answer to the crisis of the time.

We are therefore justified in thinking that the very unimpressiveness of the beginning of 1 Samuel may be the beginning of something that God was about to do. Certainly we are right to think that only God could bring something important out of the unimportance and "barrenness" of 1 Samuel 1:1, 2.

Perhaps as we conclude this introduction we might be excused if we look ahead just a little. Indeed, there is no need to apologize for looking ahead. The Bible has a very important story to tell about what God has done to meet the leadership crisis, not just of Israel's day, but of the human race in all of history. First Samuel is a crucial part of that story, but it will only be fully appreciated when it is seen in the light of the story's astonishing end.

Many years after Hannah, there was yet another barren woman. Her name was Elizabeth, and by God's grace she bore a child, whose name was John (see Luke 1:7, 57-60). At about the same time, the sequence of barren women who gave birth came to its climax. There was a woman who was not barren but had not given birth to a child for the more simple reason that she was a virgin. Her name was Mary. While still a virgin, she conceived and gave birth to a child, who was given the name Jesus (see Luke 1:26-38; 2:1-7). It happened in Ephrathah, that is, Bethlehem (see Luke 2:4; cf. Matthew 2:1, 5, 6)!

The lesson for us from 1 Samuel 1:1, 2 is that God's answer to the crisis in Israel, like God's answer to the crisis of the world, comes from the most unexpected quarter. If we insist on looking to the powerful, the influential, and the impressive of this world, we will miss it. It began for Israel with a childless woman with family connections to Bethlehem. That is where we must look if we want to see God's answer — just as we must look to the child of another woman, born in Bethlehem, if we are to see God's answer for the world. The story of 1 Samuel eventually leads to the one whom God has exalted "at his right hand as Leader and Savior" (Acts 5:31).

## 2

# Does God Care?

1 SAMUEL 1:3-28

**D**oes God care? The state of the world raises the question sharply, as does the experience of life. It is one thing to discuss abstractly the existence of “God”; it is quite another to ask whether there is a God who *cares* about the catastrophes reported in this morning’s newspaper or the ups and downs of my life. The answer to the latter question matters enormously. If there is no one other than other human beings who cares about the human race and the individuals who comprise it, that is one thing. If that is the truth, then our hopes rest on the best and wisest people we can find. But if there is a God who does care about these things, we would be very foolish to carry on as though that were not true.

It would be equally foolish to imagine that God’s concerns must be the same as mine. Religious people too easily make God out to be in their own image. God is then no more than a figment of their imagination, and religion is make-believe. But if God is really there, and if he really does care, we would be wise to listen and learn from him precisely what he cares about and how he has expressed or will express his care.

In our introduction to the book of 1 Samuel we began to see the leadership crisis that was facing the people of Israel about the middle of the eleventh century B.C. For some 200 years they had experienced instability as a community and insecurity as a nation. Leadership structures of a permanent and stable kind had not yet emerged in Israel, and life was far from what God had promised before they had entered this land he had given them. *Blessing* was the summary word for what they were meant to enjoy (see, for example, Deuteronomy 7:13-16), but blessing was as far from the national experience as it was from Hannah, the first wife of an obscure man from the hills, who was unable to bear a child.

“Does God care?” was a question raised by the circumstances of Israel in 1050 B.C. as sharply as it was raised by the disappointment of Hannah. If God cared, what precisely did he care about, and how was his care expressed? Did he care about Israel’s suffering? Did he care about Hannah’s distress?

In the opening lines of 1 Samuel 1 we met Elkanah, the man from the hills, Hannah, his first wife, unable to bear a child, and Peninnah, his second wife, who seems to have given birth to children readily. The first episode in the book of 1 Samuel is Hannah’s story, which unfolds in four scenes.

### ***SCENE 1: YEAR AFTER YEAR . . . (vv. 3-7)***

In Scene 1 the particular story we are about to hear has not yet begun. We are given a glimpse of an annual event in the life of Hannah’s family. We observe this yearly family custom and learn something about Elkanah, Peninnah, and Hannah.

#### *Elkanah and His Faithfulness (vv. 3-5)*

*Now this man used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the LORD. (v. 3)*

Shiloh was located about fifteen miles north of Elkanah’s town, Ramah. It was the place where, some two centuries earlier, after the Israelites had entered the land of Canaan in the days of Joshua, the tabernacle had been set up (Joshua 18:1). It therefore became an important location in Israel’s national life. A great assembly of the Israelites was held there on the occasion of the allocation of the land to the twelve tribes (Joshua 18:1-10; 19:51; 21:2).<sup>1</sup> On one occasion the Israelites gathered at Shiloh in preparation for war (Joshua 22:12). The tabernacle (and perhaps by now a structure somewhat more substantial that may have been constructed there with the tabernacle) was at Shiloh.<sup>2</sup> There was an annual “feast of the LORD” at Shiloh (Judges 21:19). Perhaps this was the occasion attended by Elkanah and his family.

At this time the priest in charge of matters at Shiloh was Eli, with his sons Hophni and Phinehas. We will hear a lot more about them in due course. For the moment we are simply given their names.

Every year Elkanah went up to Shiloh to worship “the LORD of hosts”<sup>3</sup> and to offer sacrifices. Our first impressions of Elkanah are of a man who took the Lord seriously and was attentive to his responsibilities before God. Elkanah was a man of faith in God. He gave thanks to God and honored him in the way appropriate to his time.

This faithfulness to God appears to have been matched by proper con-

duct toward his two wives. Verse 4 tells us straightforwardly that Elkanah would give portions of the sacrifice to Peninnah and her children: “On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters” (v. 4).

Despite the fact that we are about to learn that Hannah was his favorite wife, he did not neglect Peninnah. He looked after her and her children’s needs. But verse 5, as translated by the *ESV*, suggests that he did discriminate. In the *ESV* verse 5 reads: “But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb” (v. 5).

This indicates that he gave Hannah “a double portion” because on the one hand “he loved her” and because, on the other hand, “the LORD had closed her womb.” Motivated by his love for her, he tried to compensate for the fact that she could not have children.

However, it is not at all clear that this is what verse 5 actually says.

There are three difficulties in this verse. First, what did Elkanah do? Second, what does that have to do with his loving her? Third, where does “the LORD closed her womb” fit in? Take these three questions in turn.

What did Elkanah do? While the Hebrew text is difficult, it does seem to indicate that, contrary to the *ESV*,<sup>4</sup> Elkanah gave Hannah *one* portion, not a double portion.<sup>5</sup> Elkanah, it seems, was fair in his dealings with his wives. The truth was that Hannah had no children and so needed only one portion.

What does that have to do with his loving her? Elkanah acted in this fair way, which showed no improper favoritism to Hannah, *despite the fact* that Hannah was the one he really loved. The *RSV* captures this sense: “[A]nd, although he loved Hannah, he would give Hannah only one portion, because the LORD had closed her womb” (v. 5, *RSV*).

“The LORD had closed her womb,” then, is the explanation of why the loved wife received less than the other. It was a simple, though of course sad, matter of fact that Hannah had no other mouths to feed.<sup>6</sup>

“The LORD had closed her womb,” then, expresses to us Elkanah’s own perspective on the situation. He did not understand why his loved wife was suffering this sorrow. But he did know that their circumstances were given to them by the God he worshiped. And, of course, he saw rightly. His behavior toward his childless wife was affected by his understanding. He did not express resentment toward her. He did not blame her. He loved her.

Elkanah saw these circumstances in the way in which we should see all of our circumstances, and especially those that are not welcome. All things that come our way (or do not come our way) are God’s doing. He is sovereign over all that happens in his world. He is therefore sovereign over everything that happens (and that does not happen) in our lives. We will see shortly that this does not necessarily mean passive acceptance of the permanence of whatever happens to us. But it does mean humble recognition

of God's hand behind the circumstances in which we find ourselves. This understanding will affect our behavior, especially in difficult and unwelcome circumstances.

Elkanah knew that, and his conduct in this first scene is an expression of that knowledge.

### *Peninnah and Her Taunts (vv. 6, 7a-b)*

From Elkanah's exemplary conduct, we turn to Peninnah, described in verse 6 as Hannah's "rival": "And her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb" (v. 6).

It is possible for the human mind to twist and distort a theological truth, so that it produces not righteous conduct, as we saw in Elkanah, but the opposite. Verse 6 repeats, word for word, the entirely correct understanding of Elkanah reported in verse 5: "the LORD had closed her womb." Now, however, this understanding is part of Peninnah's perspective on the situation, which she makes into a reason to taunt and provoke her "rival."

We can imagine the harsh and hurtful words. "What have *you* got to thank the Lord for, Hannah? It's a bit of a joke, Hannah, *you* coming here to give thanks to the Lord year after year when the one thing you want he won't give you!" "The Lord has closed your womb, Hannah. Isn't it obvious that he does not care about you?"

Exactly the same correct theological understanding of a situation can lead to proper conduct like Elkanah's or can be misused as an excuse for improper conduct like Peninnah's.<sup>7</sup> "So it went on year by year. As often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her" (v. 7a-b).

### *Hannah and Her Suffering (v. 7c)*

At last our attention comes to Hannah herself. There is little to say: "Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat" (v. 7c).

So distraught was she that she would not even eat the one portion Elkanah had given her. So it happened year after year, on these visits to Shiloh. That is our first scene.

## **SCENE 2: ONE DAY AT SHILOH . . . (vv. 8-18)**

Scene 2 takes us to one particular occasion, one of these annual visits to Shiloh.<sup>8</sup> On this occasion Elkanah found his sobbing wife:

*And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" (v. 8)*

He treated her gently, tenderly. While he was powerless to change her circumstances, there is no suggestion that his words were other than understanding and kind.<sup>9</sup> He really did, as we heard in verse 5, love her.

### *Hannah's Prayer (vv. 9-11)*

Hannah, who has so far in the story been the passive recipient of the actions of others (of the Lord's closing of her womb, of Peninnah's taunts, and of Elkanah's words of comfort), now acted. Her action (to all appearances an insignificant action) will turn out to change not only her life but the life of the nation and, indeed, if we dare to see it, the history of the world.

Follow what Hannah did: "After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose" (v. 9a).

Elkanah's words of comfort in verse 8 seem to have had some effect, so that Hannah, on this occasion, participated in the eating and drinking referred to in verse 9.<sup>10</sup> "They" in verse 9 seems to include Hannah.<sup>11</sup>

Hannah "rose" from her place at the table. This is the first action of Hannah in the story so far.

Before we hear what she stood up to do, we are pointed to the other character who will play a role in this scene: "Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD" (v. 9b).

There, seated by the door of the Shiloh temple,<sup>12</sup> was Eli the priest. We will hear much more about Eli in the following chapters. He was effectively the human leader of the people of Israel at this time. At this point he is portrayed as a passive figure ("sitting"). Hannah is the active one.

Our attention returns to Hannah: "She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly" (v. 10).

"Deeply distressed" (literally, "bitter of soul") implies Hannah's "disappointment, dissatisfaction, discontent"<sup>13</sup> with her circumstances. She was a deeply unhappy woman. But out of her misery and through her tears, Hannah "prayed to the LORD."

It should be clear now that Hannah knew what the narrator has told us twice — namely, that it was the Lord who had closed Hannah's womb.<sup>14</sup> This knowledge, however, led Hannah to act in a way different from both her husband and her rival. She "prayed to the LORD."

There is a special logic behind Hannah's action. We might call it the logic of faith. To know that your suffering has come, ultimately, from God's hand could lead to fatalism: "If God is sovereign, then who am I to do anything but passively accept my lot?" But that is not the logic of real faith in God. Alternatively the knowledge that God is Lord, even over my tragic experiences, could lead to resentment: "If God has done this to me, then I want nothing to do with him!" Again, this is not the logic of faith. Faith in God means knowing and trusting God's sovereignty *and his goodness*

toward us. The logic of faith says, “we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose,” and therefore nothing in all of God’s creation “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:28, 39). Faith in God, therefore, leads us in our troubles to pray to the God who is sovereign over all things. That is what Hannah did.

Where did Hannah’s faith come from? Was it make-believe, like so much religion? There is a valuable hint in the language of Hannah’s prayer:

*And she vowed a vow and said, “O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.” (v. 11)*

When Hannah asked God to “look on [her] affliction,” she was echoing the language of God’s dealings with Israel. The exodus from Egypt in the days of Moses — that historic act by which God redeemed his people and brought them to himself to be his people — is typically described like this: “I have surely *seen* the *affliction* of my people,” “when they heard that the LORD . . . had *seen* their *affliction*, they bowed their heads and worshiped,” “the LORD . . . *saw* our *affliction*,” “you *saw* the *affliction* of our fathers in Egypt” (Exodus 3:7; 4:31; Deuteronomy 26:7; Nehemiah 9:9). The words in italics represent the same Hebrew words translated “look” and “affliction” in 1 Samuel 1:11. Hannah begged God to do for her what he had done for Israel in the days of Moses. She was asking God to do what God had shown to be his characteristic behavior toward his people.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, Hannah’s faith, expressed in her prayer, was not make-believe. It was confidence based on knowledge of what God is like and what God had done.

At the same time the language of Hannah’s prayer strengthens the impression we have already noted that Hannah’s experience can be seen as a reflection of the sorry condition of Israel. “Affliction” would not be a bad word for the people’s experience in the last pages of the book of Judges and the beginning of 1 Samuel. We will see that God’s response to Hannah’s need will turn out to be also his response to Israel’s need.

Hannah’s prayer took the form of a vow (“she vowed a vow”). It would be a misunderstanding to think that Hannah was here bargaining with God — making a promise that she hoped would induce God’s favor (“if you do this for me, I’ll do that for you”). Her prayer had the following elements:

- She addressed God in terms that acknowledged his majesty: “O LORD of hosts.”<sup>16</sup> She knew who God is. All true prayer is like that. Prayer has been made possible by God’s making himself known. We dare to speak to God because he has spoken to us.

- She approached God in terms that acknowledged her place before him — “your servant.”<sup>17</sup> She knew who she was before God. All true prayer is like that, too. We can only speak to God humbly.

- She made her request known to God (cf. Philippians 4:6). She asked God for what she deeply desired. And what was that? God’s attention: “if you will indeed *look* on the affliction of your servant and *remember* me and *not forget* your servant . . .” Here again is faith’s logic. Some other logic might want to escape from God if God is ultimately responsible for my sad circumstances. But faith understands that there is nowhere else to go. God is sovereign *and* good. Hannah’s only hope was that God, in his goodness, would attend to her sorrow, just as he had attended to the sorrow of the people of Israel in Egypt. There is a mystery here. Some modern writers set the kind of language used here by Hannah over against other Bible statements. If Hannah asked God to look upon her, does that imply that she had been out of his sight — as though God is not in fact omniscient? But elsewhere we read, “no creature is hidden from his sight” (Hebrews 4:13). If God is to “remember” and “not forget” her, does that imply that he had actually forgotten her, as though God has lapses of memory? But in the next chapter we will hear Hannah describe the Lord as “a God of knowledge” (1 Samuel 2:3). These statements are not in opposition. The language of Hannah’s prayer is the language of human experience. God’s omniscience and perfect knowledge were the *presupposition* of her prayer, but she prayed that God might *so* look on her misery and *so* attend to her that he would now do for her what he had previously not done — give her a son.

- She made her vow to God. Should God grant Hannah her request, then she promised that the child would be given to the one who had given him to her. The sense in which Hannah will “give him to the LORD” is indicated in the words “no razor shall touch his head.” This appears to be a way of saying that he would be a Nazirite — a person particularly dedicated to God’s service. A Nazirite vow was normally a temporary matter. In this case, however, Hannah’s child would be a Nazirite “all the days of his life.”<sup>18</sup>

Such was Hannah’s prayer. The narrator has given us the privilege of hearing Hannah’s prayer as only Hannah and the Lord would have heard it on that day. If we had been an ordinary witness to this tearful woman’s distress that day, we could not have guessed the significance of her action.

### *Eli’s Assurance (vv. 12-17)*

Certainly Eli didn’t. The old priest saw her but completely misunderstood:

*As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was speaking in her heart; only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli took her to be a drunken woman. And Eli*

*said to her, "How long will you go on being drunk? Put away your wine from you." (vv. 12-14)*

In the light of what we will learn in chapter 2, it is likely that Eli's misunderstanding was based on too many experiences of improper conduct at the Shiloh temple (see vv. 12-17). Eli's misunderstanding certainly raises questions about his competence. If Israel had a leader who could not tell the difference between a godly woman's heartfelt prayer and drunken rambling, no wonder Israel had a leadership crisis! This matter will become clearer in our study of chapter 2.

Hannah's response put Eli straight:

*But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation." (vv. 15, 16)*

Later we will hear that Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were "worthless men."<sup>19</sup> Hannah here insisted that she was *not* "a worthless woman."<sup>20</sup> The "worthlessness" of Eli's sons was linked, as we shall see, to the fact that "they did not know the LORD" (1 Samuel 2:12).<sup>21</sup> Hannah, however, was not like that. On the contrary, she had been pouring out her troubled soul to the Lord. In her great sadness, her prayer shows that she, unlike them, knew the Lord.

At last Eli spoke as he should have spoken at first: "Then Eli answered, 'Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him'" (v. 17).

Unknown to Eli he introduced a play on words that will be developed by the end of this chapter. "Your petition that you have made" is, very literally, "your asking that you have asked." This vocabulary of asking occurs seven times in this chapter with interesting implications that we will see in a moment.<sup>22</sup> More importantly (and equally unknown to the old priest) he endorsed a prayer that would lead to his own demise.<sup>23</sup> When the God of Israel granted what Hannah asked of him, Israel would have a new leader.

### *Hannah's Lifted Face (v. 18)*

Hannah's prayer changed things. In the first place it changed her: "And she said, 'Let your servant find favor in your eyes.' Then the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad" (v. 18).

She came away from bringing her request to the Lord a different person from the one Elkanah had tried to comfort back in verse 8. Now she was no longer weeping, no longer refusing her food, no longer sad. We may well

say that she had cast all her anxiety on the Lord, knowing that he cared for her. Certainly she had humbled herself under God's mighty hand, and he had exalted her (cf. 1 Peter 5:6, 7).

There is Scene 2, and the turning point of this story.

### **SCENE 3: BACK HOME AT RAMAH . . . (vv. 19, 20)**

Scene 3 is brief.

#### *Worshipping the Lord (v. 19a)*

In verse 19 we see the family of Elkanah worshipping the Lord the next morning: "They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah" (v. 19a).

I expect that Hannah's worship that morning had a different tone! This year her journey back home was no doubt in a different spirit from the earlier journey from Ramah to Shiloh.

#### *Remembered by the Lord (v. 19b)*

What happened then? Hannah had prayed in verse 11, "If you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and *remember* me . . ." We now read: "And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her" (v. 19b).

Just as the Lord had "remembered" Noah in the days of the flood, Abraham when he destroyed Sodom, Rachel when she conceived Joseph, and his covenant with Abraham in the days of Moses (Genesis 8:1; 19:29; 30:22; Exodus 2:24; 6:5; cf. Numbers 10:9), so he "remembered" Hannah. Whenever God "remembered" his people, it led to his action on their behalf. We will not be mistaken if we expect that his remembering Hannah will involve his remembering his people Israel.

#### *Samuel (v. 20)*

*And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, "I have asked for him from the LORD." (v. 20)*

In Hebrew "Samuel" sounds a little like "Asked for." About this lad we are going to hear very much more.

### **SCENE 4: AT SHILOH AGAIN . . . (vv. 21-28)**

There is one final scene in this story of Hannah. Scene 4 will take us back to Shiloh again.

*Vow Remembered (vv. 21-23)*

The time came around for Elkanah to make the annual journey to Shiloh. “The man Elkanah and all his house went up to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and to pay his vow” (v. 21).

Hannah’s vow had not been forgotten, but now we see that Elkanah also had a vow. We are told nothing specific about this vow, except that he went up with his family to fulfill it.<sup>24</sup> However, Hannah did not go:

*But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, “As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, so that he may appear in the presence of the LORD and dwell there forever.” (v. 22)*

Hannah would not go up to Shiloh until she was in a position to fulfill *her* vow. Elkanah was fully supportive: “Elkanah her husband said to her, ‘Do what seems best to you; wait until you have weaned him; only, may the LORD establish his word’” (v. 23).

What did Elkanah mean by “may the LORD establish his word”? We might have expected him to say, “May the Lord help *you* to keep *your* word.”<sup>25</sup> After all, it is Hannah’s vow to the Lord that is under consideration here. What could Elkanah possibly mean by “*his* [the LORD’s] word”?

There is no explicit “word” of the Lord in this particular narrative. However, God’s “word” is in many ways the theme of the whole story of which 1 Samuel 1 is part. God’s “word” is the expression of his purpose, particularly in his promises to Israel. That was “the good word that the LORD spoke to the house of Israel” (literal translation from Joshua 21:45; cf. 23:14, 15). When we hear Elkanah say, “May the LORD establish his word,” we realize, if we have not realized it before, that the Lord’s answer to Hannah’s prayer is part of his greater purposes for his people. The Lord has answered Hannah’s prayer. May he go on to bring his purposes to fulfillment! Elkanah was a man of remarkable insight. Perhaps he spoke more profoundly than he knew.

There was then a period, perhaps two or three years, during which Hannah cared for her son:<sup>26</sup> “So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him” (v. 23b).

*A Vow Kept (vv. 24-28b)*

When the time eventually came, Hannah took the young boy with her to Shiloh:

*And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine, and she brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh. And the child was young. (v. 24)*

And so with a thank offering of generous proportions<sup>27</sup> Hannah set off to keep her word. The young lad<sup>28</sup> was brought to Shiloh.

*Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. And she said, "Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD. As long as he lives, he is lent to the LORD." (vv. 25-28b)*

As we saw in verse 20, Hannah had named the boy Samuel because in Hebrew "Samuel" sounds a little like "Asked for." Now she used "ask" words four times over. We cannot see this in our English translations, but it is striking in Hebrew: "The LORD has granted me my *petition* that I *made* of him. Therefore I have *lent* him to the LORD. As long as he lives, he is *lent* to the LORD." The words in italics are all forms of the word *ask* in Hebrew. Most curious of all is the fact that while Samuel sounds a little like "Asked for," a little later in 1 Samuel we will come across a name that really does mean "Asked for." That name is identical in Hebrew to the last occurrence of this verb in verse 28. The name is Saul. From the very beginning, long before these things actually took place, Samuel's name was linked to that of Saul.

*Worship (v. 28c)*

For the time being our story concludes with the boy Samuel worshipping the Lord at Shiloh. "And he worshiped the LORD there" (v. 28c).

What, then, are we to make of 1 Samuel 1? If this ancient story is the Word of God, what should we learn from God here? There are a number of possibilities.

We might, for example, notice the character of the excellent Elkanah. He seems to be presented in very positive terms. He is not one of the Bible's better-known figures, but here we see this faithful, godly man and husband honoring God and loving his distressed wife in domestically difficult circumstances. We could do worse than reflect on Elkanah's example. He clearly provides a *good* example (see particularly vv. 3-5, 8, 21, 23).

However, the chapter is much more about Hannah than it is about Elkanah. We may well profit, then, from considering what Hannah did with her distress. Prayer was not for Hannah a formality. It was real. She cast her

cares on the Lord, knowing that he cared for her. And indeed he did. Again we see in Hannah a clearly good example.

Nevertheless I believe that we would be quite right to feel a little unsatisfied with both of those lines of thought. Not that there is anything *wrong* with the observations made so far. This chapter does present good examples in the conduct of both Elkanah and Hannah, but that does not seem to be the central message of this chapter.

We must be very careful when we just take the human characters in a Biblical narrative as *examples*. Of course, there are times when that is exactly what they are, and even chiefly what they are. It would be wrong to deny *any* exemplary understanding of persons in the Bible. But here there is clearly a problem. Are we to conclude on the basis of 1 Samuel 1 that if you are sad because you are a woman who cannot have children (or perhaps sad because of any other disappointment in life) you should pray earnestly to the Lord and the disappointment will turn to joy because you will get what you long for? Is that the message of 1 Samuel 1? If not, why not?

The answer is obvious enough. There must have been many other childless women in Israel. It is reasonable to assume that many of those prayed sincerely for a child. It is equally reasonable to assume that many of those were still not given a child. In other words, we are told this story of Hannah not because it is *typical* of every troubled person in Israel who prayed, but precisely because her story is *unusual*. Of all the troubled women in Israel, the Lord chose to grant the prayer of this one. The unusualness of Hannah's story, then, *limits* the sense in which it can be exemplary.

Why was the prayer of Hannah granted? Was it because she was *so* sincere in her praying? No. Was it because she was the *most* miserable of all childless women? Of course not. Was it because she made such an *extraordinary* vow? Certainly not.

You see, although it is right to see Hannah as an example for us *up to a point*, taken too far the exemplary approach might mislead us into thinking one of those ideas is Biblical.

First Samuel 1 is not primarily about Hannah, any more than it is primarily about Elkanah. It is mainly about God. First Samuel begins by showing us that God cared for Hannah. We will see, as this story unfolds, that his care for Hannah was his care for Israel. What he did for Hannah would turn out to be for Israel. Samuel (and indeed the strangely hinted-at Saul) would turn out to be, in their own ways, part of God's answer to Israel's leadership troubles.

First Samuel 1 points us to a most unexpected starting point for the answer that God is going to provide for the leadership crisis. Who would have looked twice at miserable, sobbing Hannah for the answer to Israel's crisis? We expect to find answers from the powerful. Hannah was not pow-

erful. Her family were “nobodies.” The point of her story, however, is that God cares.

Does God care? Yes, he cared about the leadership of his people Israel and gave Hannah a son. Yes, he cares about the leadership of the world and of us. Hannah’s son will be surpassed by Mary’s son. God’s care for us all finds its fullest expression in Jesus Christ. If you belong to him you can learn to “cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

# Notes

## CHAPTER ONE: THE LEADERSHIP CRISIS

1. As the book begins we will see that the leadership of the nation was in the hands of Eli. However, Eli is a relatively minor character in the book, quickly displaced by Samuel.
2. First Samuel is rightly seen as the immediate sequel to the book of Judges. In the Hebrew Bible 1 Samuel follows Judges. In English Bibles, following the Greek version known as the Septuagint, the book of Ruth has been placed between Judges and 1 Samuel because its story was set “[i]n the days when the judges ruled” (Ruth 1:1).
3. This refers directly to the books of Exodus and Numbers but applies in principle to the whole of the Old Testament Scriptures.
4. The NIV and NRSV follow an emendation of the Hebrew supported by the Septuagint: “There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite. . . .” Likewise P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes & Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, Vol. 8 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), p. 51. Elkanah’s being called a “Zuphite” tells us no more than that he belonged to a relatively unknown family line in the tribe of Ephraim. Zuph’s only claim to fame in the text of the Old Testament is the territory named after him (see 1 Samuel 9:5).
5. The long name, Ramathaim-zophim, appears nowhere else in the Old Testament. It is identified by some with the New Testament’s Arimathea (Matthew 27:57; John 19:38). Patrick Arnold identifies no less than five different towns called Ramah in the Old Testament. Patrick M. Arnold, “Ramah,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 613, 614. This one has been identified with at least four proposed sites, all about twenty miles north or northwest of Jerusalem. J. A. Thompson, “Ramah,” in J. D. Douglas et al, eds., *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Part 3 (Leicester, UK and Wheaton, IL: Inter-Varsity Press and Tyndale House, 1980), p. 1318. Prior to 1 Samuel, this Ramah has been mentioned in Joshua 18:25 (in a list of the cities of the children of Benjamin); Judges 4:5 (mentioned incidentally in the account of Deborah); Judges 19:13 (again incidental to the story of the Levite couple who chose not to stop there). This Ramah’s greatest claim to fame, however, is its role in the story of Samuel, which begins and ends in Ramah (see 1 Samuel 1:19; 2:11; 7:17; 8:4; 15:34; 16:13; 19:18, 22, 23; 20:1; 25:1; 28:3). Joshua 19:8 mentions another Ramah to the south (“Ramah of the Negeb”), Joshua 19:29 another somewhere near Tyre, Joshua 19:36 yet another (a fortified city of Naphtali).
6. Lyle M. Eslinger, *Kingship of God in Crisis: A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1–12*, Bible and Literature Series, 10 (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1985), p. 66. A number of commentaries seem to assume that the relatively long genealogy given for Elkanah is itself “impressive,” indicating that “Elkanah has a proud past.” Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 12; cf. Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *1 & 2 Samuel: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1964), pp. 22, 23; Peter R. Ackroyd, *The First Book of Samuel*, Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 19; John Mauchline, *1 and 2 Samuel*, New Century Bible (London: Oliphants, 1971), p. 42; Robert P. Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel: A Commentary* (Exeter, UK: The Paternoster Press, 1986), p. 72. This seems to seriously miss the point of verse 1. Granted that a person’s genealogy is typically given to indicate his significant pedigree, the irony of 1 Samuel 1:1 is precisely that there is no one of

note in Elkanah's past. This genealogy perplexes us because it reveals an insignificant pedigree. That is its point!

7. A puzzle arises from 1 Chronicles 6:26-28, and especially verses 33-38 where Elkanah appears as belonging to the tribe of Levi. There is no hint of this in 1 Samuel 1:1, and if, as many argue, "Ephrathite" means "Ephraimite" (SO NIV; RSV; NRSV; REB; Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary, 10 [Nashville: Word, 1983], p. 6; Mauchline, *1 and 2 Samuel*, p. 42), there is an apparent inconsistency. In this case only two explanations appear possible. Perhaps Elkanah was a Levite, and "Ephrathite" (= "Ephraimite") in 1 Samuel 1:1 refers to his place of residence. Some arguments in support of this are offered in M. J. Selman, *1 Chronicles*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester, UK and Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 111; see also C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Books of Samuel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1950), pp. 17, 18. Alternatively Elkanah was an Ephraimite who because of his famous son's priestly status was "adopted" into the Levitical line. So J. M. Myers, *1 Chronicles: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes & Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, Vol. 12 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), p. 46; cf. H. G. M. Williamson, *1 and 2 Chronicles*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI and London: Eerdmans and Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1982), p. 72. An alternative, considered in the next note, is that "Ephrathite" links Elkanah to Bethlehem rather than to the tribe of Ephraim. The inconsistency then dissolves (see Joyce Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988], pp. 50, 51). For our purposes in reading 1 Samuel, we simply need to note that here there is no hint of a connection with the tribe of Levi. Further reading on this subject is indicated in Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 331, note 2.
8. There is potential confusion here. Ephrathah is an alternative name for Bethlehem in Judah or for a region including Bethlehem (so Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary 2 [Nashville: Word, 1994], p. 326; see Genesis 35:19; 48:7; Ruth 4:11; Micah 5:2; Psalm 132:6). "Ephrathite" can therefore mean a person from Bethlehem (1 Samuel 17:12; Ruth 1:2). In at least two other places, however, "Ephrathite" seems to mean "Ephraimite" (Judges 12:5; 1 Kings 11:26). It is often supposed that since Elkanah was from the hill country of Ephraim, "Ephrathite" in 1 Samuel 1:1 means "Ephraimite." Menahem Haran, however, mounts a good case that Elkanah may have been "of Bethlehem stock rather than an 'Ephraimite,' though he did dwell in the hill country of Ephraim." Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into the Character of Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 308.
9. Cf. Eslinger, *Kingship*, p. 66.
10. The order in which they are mentioned suggests this, and the Hebrew word translated "the other" literally means "the second."

#### CHAPTER TWO: DOES GOD CARE?

1. Other locations could also be places of national assembly, such as Shechem (Joshua 24:1).
2. It is called "the house of God" in Judges 18:31, "the temple of the LORD" in 1 Samuel 1:9, "his dwelling at Shiloh, the tent where he dwelt" in Psalm 78:60, and "my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first" in Jeremiah 7:12.
3. This is the first occurrence in the Old Testament of the title for God variously translated "the LORD of hosts" (KJV, RSV, NRSV, REB, ESV) or "the LORD Almighty" (NIV). "Hosts" appears to refer to all the heavenly powers under God's almighty command. The title is often used to exhibit the Lord "as at all times the Saviour and Protector of his people (Ps. 46:7, 11)." G. T. Manley and F. F. Bruce, "God, names of," in J. D. Douglas et al, eds., *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Part 1 (Leicester, UK and Wheaton, IL: Inter-Varsity Press and Tyndale House, 1980), p. 573. After Chapter 1 the expression occurs three more times in 1 Samuel: in connection with the ark ("the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts," 1 Samuel 4:4), in the solemn announcement of judgment on Amalek ("Thus

- says the LORD of hosts," 1 Samuel 15:2), and in David's defiant challenge to Goliath ("I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts," 1 Samuel 17:45).
4. As well as NKJV, NRSV, NIV. These translations follow an ancient Syriac version.
  5. See RSV, NEB, REB. This aspect of the Hebrew text is supported by the Septuagint, which is followed by these translations.
  6. It has to be admitted that difficulties remain with all available translations of this verse. See discussions in Robert P. Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel: A Commentary* (Exeter, UK: The Paternoster Press, 1986), pp. 73, 74 and Lyle M. Eslinger, *Kingship of God in Crisis: A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1–12*, Bible and Literature Series, 10 (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1985), pp. 71, 436, note 6.
  7. Lyle Eslinger correctly insists that the repetition of the phrase "the LORD had closed her womb" (with a small variation in the Hebrew) in verses 5, 6 must be taken seriously, against a number of commentators who regard it as redundant (Eslinger, *Kingship*, p. 437, note 8). However, Eslinger treats the information in the phrase as reflecting simply the narrator's "omniscience" (p. 71) and stressing "that events on the human plane of the narrative are the product of an initiative from the divine plane" (p. 74). He fails, in my view, to appreciate that, while the observation is clearly made by the narrator, at this point he is signaling the point of view of the respective characters. Elkanah understands that the Lord has closed Hannah's womb and accepts this fact but treats his wife fairly (v. 5). Peninnah understands the same fact and torments Hannah because of it. For a discussion of this narrative technique see J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Ineke Smit (Louisville and Leiderdorp, Netherlands: Westminster John Knox Press and Deo Publishing, 1999), pp. 147, 148.
  8. The Hebrew syntax suggests that the shift from the account of what used to happen "year by year" to the particular episode that is about to be told begins with verse 8. Elkanah responded to Hannah's grief on one particular occasion with the words of verse 8, and the events of verses 9ff. ensued. KJV, RSV, NRSV, ESV ("said") reflect the Hebrew in verse 8 better here than the NIV ("would say"). If this is correct it would be better to make the paragraph break at the beginning of verse 8 rather than at verse 9.
  9. Against, for example, John Goldingay, *Men Behaving Badly* (Carlisle, UK and Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2000), p. 10 who sees Elkanah as "your average not-very-sensitive guy." There is a danger to be avoided in reading Biblical narrative of passing judgments on the actions of the characters from our (the readers') point of view. Unless this is also the point of view of the text (or the narrator), such judgments are unhelpful impositions that amount to misunderstandings.
  10. The NIV begins verse 9, "Once when they had finished eating and drinking . . ." "Once" has no basis in the Hebrew text and is misleading if, as argued here, verse 8 is the beginning of Scene 2. The sense of the Hebrew would be better expressed if "Once" were moved to the beginning of verse 8.
  11. Indeed the Hebrew could be translated, "After *she* had eaten and drunk . . ."
  12. We know very little about what exactly is meant by "the temple" at Shiloh. It is generally considered that the tabernacle alone would not be referred to by this word, which presupposes a more substantial structure. For a helpful review of the evidence see Joyce Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1988), pp. 65-68.
  13. S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Book of Samuel with an Introduction on Hebrew Palaeography and Facsimiles of Inscriptions and Maps*, second edition (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1913), p. 12.
  14. Contrary to Eslinger, *Kingship*, p. 77, who sees irony in the fact that Hannah prays to the Lord *without* knowing that it is the Lord who had sealed her womb. This is hardly possible with a woman of Hannah's evident piety. To confirm this point, if confirmation is needed, see 1 Samuel 2:5-8.
  15. The language of God "looking" on the "affliction" of someone is also found in Genesis 29:32, when Leah gave birth to Reuben; Genesis 31:42, when God blessed Jacob despite Laban's ill treatment of him; 2 Kings 14:26, when the Lord had mercy on Israel in the

- days of Jeroboam II; Job 10:15, in Job's cry to God out of his misery; Psalm 9:13, 25:18, 31:7, and 119:153 in the prayers of David in the face of his enemies; Lamentations 1:9, in Jerusalem's plea to God after her destruction.
16. This is the second occurrence in the Old Testament of the title "LORD of hosts." See verse 3.
  17. More literally, "handmaid" (קַיִו) or "maidservant" (RSV).
  18. On Nazirites see Numbers 6:1-21. A Nazirite could be a man or a woman (Numbers 6:2). Strictly speaking the expression translated "son" in 1 Samuel 1:11 (literally, "seed of men") is not gender specific (Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 75). It is not explicit that Hannah was praying for a *son*.
  19. Literally "sons of worthlessness" (1 Samuel 2:12). The Hebrew idiom will appear again in 1 Samuel — in 10:27 (the "worthless fellows" who despised Saul), 25:17 (the "worthless man" Nabal), and 30:22 (certain "worthless fellows" among David's men). See also 2 Samuel 16:7; 20:1; 22:5 (where the word for "worthlessness" is translated "destruction"); 23:6.
  20. Literally, "daughter of worthlessness."
  21. So ESV, NIV, NRSV, RSV have "had no regard for the LORD."
  22. It is not possible to reproduce the wordplay in English. The Hebrew asking words occur in verses 17 ("petition," "made"), 20 ("asked"), and 27 ("petition," "made"), and 28 ("lent" [twice]). The wordplay on the verb "to ask" extends, as we will see, to Saul, whose name means "Asked For." See 1 Samuel 9:2.
  23. There is an ambiguity in the Hebrew. Eli's reply may have been a prayer (as the ESV has it) or a promise ("the God of Israel will grant your petition").
  24. The vow of Elkanah in verse 21 is variously treated in the commentaries. Klein deletes it as a "gloss." Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary, 10 (Nashville: Word, 1983), p. 3. McCarter suggests the opposite course, expanding the text with some help from the Septuagint to read, "and to redeem his vow and all the tithes of his land." P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes & Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, Vol. 8 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), p. 55.
  25. Indeed the Septuagint has "your word" rather than "his word" and is followed by NEB. See Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 77.
  26. "Weaning was celebrated in ancient times as an important moment (see Gen. 21:8 for a feast at Isaac's weaning); it might well be postponed until a child's second or third year." Peter R. Ackroyd, *The First Book of Samuel*, Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 28.
  27. The thank offering may have been of even more generous proportions than the ESV indicates. The Hebrew has "three bulls," but since only one bull is mentioned in verse 25, the ESV and other translations have followed the Septuagint with the rendering, "a three-year-old bull" in verse 24. For details see Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 78.
  28. "And the child was young" is puzzling in the Hebrew, which may be represented as, "And the child was a child." Alter has suggested the rendering, "and the lad was but a lad." Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1999), p. 7. The term translated "child" here and in verses 22, 25, and 27 (cf. 4:21) has a wider range of meanings than the English word *child*. In 1 Samuel it is most frequently used to refer to various servants (as in 1 Samuel 2:13, 15; 9:3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 22, 27; 10:14; 14:1, 6; 16:18; 20:21, 35-41; 21:2, 4; 25:5, 8, 9, 12, 14, 19, 25, 27; 26:22; 30:13). It appears to have this connotation when applied to Samuel in 1 Samuel 2:11, 18, 21, 26; 3:1, 8. It is also used of Jesse's sons (1 Samuel 16:11) and other youths (1 Samuel 2:17; 17:33, 42, 55, 58; 30:17).

### CHAPTER THREE: THE GOD OF KNOWLEDGE

1. Note that according to 1 Samuel 2:21 Hannah bore five more children, in addition to Samuel. In her prayer she celebrates the fact that "The barren has borne seven" (v. 5), but that need not be a direct or literal reference to her own circumstances.