

## “ What’s It About? ”

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First in a series on King David.

1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 1.1-18

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What was January 1942 about? War! Japan had just hit Pearl Harbor, expanding the war to make it truly and terribly worldwide. Canadian soldiers were prisoners after the fall of Hong Kong. The Nazis decided on “the Final Solution to the Jewish problem.”

For Odessa and her husband Cassius, January 1942 was about their son’s birth. They named him after his dad, Cassius Clay, Jr. We came to know him as Muhammad Ali, the Champ. For these new parents, all those global events notwithstanding, January 1942 was about their son.

After we hear a very personal story from the Bible, let’s ask what it is about. The Books of Samuel give us the story of King David. But we start earlier, before God’s People had a king. We begin with a family, and a woman in crisis.

Now there was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the highlands of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah. He was from the tribe of Ephraim, and he was the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph. Elkanah had two wives, one named Hannah and the other named Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah did not.

Every year this man would leave his town to worship and sacrifice to the Lord Almighty in Shiloh, where Eli’s two sons Hophni and Phinehas were the Lord’s priests. Whenever he sacrificed, Elkanah would give parts of the sacrifice to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. But he would give twice as much to Hannah, because he loved her, though the Lord had kept her from conceiving.

And because the Lord had kept Hannah from conceiving, her rival would make fun of her mercilessly, just to bother her. So that is what took place year after year. Whenever Hannah went to the Lord’s house, Peninnah would make fun of her. Then Hannah would cry and wouldn’t eat anything.

“Hannah, why are you crying?” her husband Elkanah would say to her. “Why won’t you eat? Why are you so sad? Aren’t I worth more to you than ten sons?”

One time, after eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah got up and presented herself before the Lord. (Now Eli the priest was sitting in the chair by the doorpost of the Lord’s temple.) Hannah was very upset and couldn’t stop crying as she prayed to the Lord. Then she made this promise: “Lord Almighty, just look at your servant’s pain and remember me! Don’t forget your servant! Give her a boy! Then I’ll give him to the Lord for his entire life. No razor will ever touch his head.”

continued . . .

As she kept praying before the Lord, Eli watched her mouth. Now Hannah was praying in her heart; her lips were moving, but her voice was silent, so Eli thought she was drunk. "How long will you act like a drunk? Sober up!" Eli told her. "No sir!" Hannah replied. "I'm just a woman troubled in spirit. I haven't had any wine or strong drink but have been pouring out my heart to the Lord. Don't think your servant is some good-for-nothing woman. This whole time I've been praying out of my great worry and trouble!"

Eli responded, "Then go in peace. And may the God of Israel give you what you've asked from him." "Please think well of me, your servant," Hannah said.

Then the woman went on her way, ate some food, and wasn't sad any longer.

1st Samuel 1.1-18

Adapted from the Common English Bible

## II

What's that story about? (Besides a lot of hard names!)

It's about infertility. Hannah can't have children. Infertility hurts. It can unleash doubts, guilts and grief.

It's about a culture that devalued women. In that time and place (and too many others), motherhood alone measured a woman's worth, her contribution, her future. With such messed-up yardsticks, it was children or nothing! So people wondered, and Hannah must have wondered herself, if she was good for anything?

What's it about? It's about husbands who try. Elkanah loved Hannah. He gave her extra gifts, food. (Did he think that would fill her emptiness?) "*Aren't I enough for you, more than many sons?*" he offered. (Worth noting: sometimes wisdom is silence!) Still, his heart is right.

What's it about? It's about bullying. Elkanah has a second wife, and children through her. Back then they practised *polygyny* (that means "many wives"). When Hannah could not conceive, Elkanah did as expected. He went out and got a spare. In the pecking order of the household, Hannah was first. But with each child she birthed, Peninnah raced ahead. She would not let Hannah forget it. Without mercy she mocked, relentless.

What's the story about? It's about how church can let people down. No, they didn't call it "church" but you get the point. You heard the professional God-type, confusing her intercession for inebriation. Courageously, she does not shrink from Eli the priest. He takes time to listen, lets Hannah set him straight, and joins his prayer to hers. (Ministers can get it right, eventually!)

What's it about? God's dealings with Hannah. This is the first time in the Bible that God is called "The Lord Almighty." The narrator is clear: The Lord Almighty has caused Hannah's childlessness. The logic makes sense. Since the Lord is the Almighty over all things, this must include Hannah's condition. I hope God does not mind, though, if I shake my fist in protest. However, perhaps this also signals some hope. If the Lord can taketh away, then the Lord can giveth too. And God loves Hannah!

### III

What is this story about? There is nothing unique about Hannah's condition. Why, then, does it make it into the Bible? It must be about her, and about her place in something bigger.

She was living long after Joshua had brought these escaped slaves, the Israelites, out of the wilderness, across the Jordan River, around Jericho and into the land. But ever since, some three hundred years, these Israelites were mostly stuck living along a strip of hills, the central highlands of Canaan. Some of these rise more than 2,000 feet, with valleys cut between.<sup>1</sup>

I imagine the Philistines along the coast, and the Ammonites and Moabites to the east, and those up Damascus way looked down on these "Hebrews" like Appalachian hillbillies. Not very sophisticated. Just a gaggle of tribes. Just clinging to old tales of ancestors — Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekkah, Jacob and his sons — about whom no one important had ever heard. Holding to some idea that their "God" had led them to this land. And having the preposterous notion that through them, their "God" was doing something special, that they were God's living promise, God's unfolding mission to bless the world.

They could barely bless themselves!<sup>2</sup> Sometimes they got along. Usually they feuded. An inspiring leader (a "judge") would band them together against some foe, but their coalition would quickly crumble. Marauders raided them. Neighbours attacked them. Nations oppressed them.<sup>3</sup> There was little law and no order. Everyone did what they could get away with.<sup>4</sup> In such times, the strong get away with stuff. While the weak, women in particular, get trampled.

So what's this story about? Is it Hannah's personal crisis about her future, her security, her identity, her empty ache? Yes! Is it about her people's crisis about their future, security, identity and empty ache? Yes!

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography\\_of\\_Israel#Central\\_hills](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography_of_Israel#Central_hills)

<sup>2</sup> Reading through the Book of Judges will bear this out.

<sup>3</sup> No superpower dominated the region to keep a lid on things. So these different peoples were free . . . to beat up on each other. The Hittites (now Turkey) had been destroyed. The Egyptians had withdrawn. The Assyrians (now Syria) and Babylonians (now Iraq) were too busy keeping an eye on each other. In this power vacuum, the people of Canaan were free to beat up on each other. This reminds me somewhat of the story of the nations in what used to be Yugoslavia, after the hegemony of the Soviet Union ended in the early 1990s.

<sup>4</sup> Judges 17.6 and 21.25.

#### IV

What was this week about?

Last Sunday, we were waking up to what happened in Orlando.<sup>5</sup> What was it about? Homophobia? Guns? Toxic politics? All that, and more. But for Juan Guerrero and Drew Leinonen, it was the night they died together. Juan's sister said, *"If it's not a funeral, they were going to have a wedding together. They were honestly so in love. You can tell by how they looked at each other."*<sup>6</sup> So personal. And such a public tragedy! We all need to figure out together how we are going to get along, in a world where we are different, and often disagree about our differences.

What was this week about?

Thursday morning, a British parliament was murdered. It was as personal as one person stabbing and shooting another. And as personal as Jo Cox as a mother, a wife, a brilliant person, stolen from life. But her assassination could not be more public. It is part of the backdrop now against which the United Kingdom is debating its future in Europe.

Also on Thursday, a young man from our town died in a car accident. His family's tragedy is what this week is all about too.

Friday, I was sitting with someone in palliative care. The television was on in the background. We both stopped when Sharlene Bosma began speaking so eloquently and truthfully about her husband Tim, and the conviction of his two murderers.<sup>7</sup> Later, I thought, what was that visit about? I was sitting with cancer-death. And thinking about murder-death. They are so vastly different, and in so many ways the same. Both are part of the wreckage of this world. Everything is part of everything, in all its wonder and beauty, and all its horror and pain. Everything forms the backdrop on this stage in which we are living, personally and publicly.

What is life about? What is this week about? What is Hannah about?

#### V

Notice what Hannah does. She brings her personal pain into the public worship of God. She pushes her pain onto God. She trusts the Almighty will do something with it. Or maybe she hardly trusts at all, yet realizes she has nowhere else to turn. That's okay too. God takes whatever we've got.

Then, she makes a deal. *"Give me a son, and I'll make him a minister!"* (Lucky child!) *"And I'll never let him cut his hair!"* Did her offer change God's mind? Or, did making the offer open Hannah to finally receive what God would do through her and her child, for God's People?

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<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016\\_Orlando\\_nightclub\\_shooting](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_Orlando_nightclub_shooting)

<sup>6</sup> [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3640280/Families-couple-died-gay-club-massacre-say-joint-funeral.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3640280/Families-couple-died-gay-club-massacre-say-joint-funeral.html)

<sup>7</sup> [www.ctvnews.ca/canada/smich-millard-get-life-in-prison-for-bosma-murder-1.2949708](http://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/smich-millard-get-life-in-prison-for-bosma-murder-1.2949708)

Hannah will name him Samuel. He will be part of God's answer to her personal pain (and God answers our pains individually and personally, and never the same, because God loves us.)

And, her child will be part of God's unfolding answer to the world's pain. Through Samuel, God will lift up David to be king. And from David will come Jesus. Jesus is the Almighty salvation, healing, and life for all that he has made, deeply personal and sweepingly public.

All that big stuff going on around us, and all the personal stuff that is happening in our own lives . . . God comes in Jesus for all of us. The Lord Almighty is Jesus, saving and reconciling, vindicating and forgiving, mending and healing, resurrecting and ruling into the pain, personally, and into the pain, publically.

As we remember God is working into all of this, then we can hear Jesus' invitation to be part of it, God's work of making all things new. Amen.