

Views from the Pews – The Song of Hannah

In a long footnote to 1 Samuel 2:1-10, the Oxford Study Bible provides a wonderfully helpful background to this apparently simple account of answered prayer. Apparently, Biblical editors often inserted poetry into long books of prose history. The poems may be older or later than the contexts into which they are inserted. In this case, the poem seems to be considerably later. It is really a psalm of national thanksgiving, rather than about Hannah herself, and in the context of the times (the history of the establishment of the kingships of Saul and David), it was appropriate. More important, the Song of Hannah became the model for the Magnificat.

The grammar, correctly translated, takes a bit of getting used to, because the “I” can refer to the nation as well as to the worshipper in a way very strange to modern thinking. So in v 1, it is not Hannah as an individual exulting in “My strength”, but the nation of Israel as a whole. Likewise, in v 3, “Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth”, Israel is addressing her enemies.

In vv 4 – 5a, the reversal of fortunes for the downtrodden and oppressed (“ The bows of the mighty are broken...Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread ”) is a common Biblical hope. V 8 is a direct quote from Psalm 113:7-8: “ He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes”.

The line “ The barren has borne seven” in v 5b does not refer specifically to Hannah, since v 21 states that she had only five more children after Samuel. But “Seven” is a common symbol for a large family. Verses 6-8 are a statement of faith that God controls all of life. The term “Brings to life” is a poetic description of the birth process. Sheol is the realm of the dead, believed to lie under the earth, or a place of despair among the living. The world was conceived as a platform upheld by “The pillars of the earth” (V 8).

The idea that the good would prosper and the wicked would suffer (v 9) was widespread in those times, a world-view strongly protested by the book of Job. V 10 looks forward to God imposing final justice; “his king” could be the future King David.

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