

## “DEEP BREATHING”

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### 1. Introduction

Just a couple of blocks away from the “Advent House”, the Seventh-day Adventist congregation in modern Jerusalem, is the location of the “Hekal Schlomo,” or the “Temple of Solomon.” This impressive white marble synagogue complex is the world headquarters of Orthodox Judaism. There, as in any synagogue, the Sabbath worship service consists largely of the profound prayers of repentance and rejoicing in Torah, sung and spoken by the cantor and worshipers.

There are over 400 synagogues in Jerusalem alone. Since there is no motorized traffic in Jerusalem on Sabbath, the narrow streets are filled with the sounds of praying by our Jewish brothers and sisters instead of the normal overwhelming noise of buses, trucks and cars. The Jewish people have a long tradition of praying, going back to the times of Scripture. The OT Psalter contains the classic collection. However, examples of biblical praying are not limited to these prayers. Many people are seen praying all throughout Scripture.<sup>1</sup> Let us look at one found in the OT.

When studying the historical books, it is often customary to pass over the lengthy narrative of one woman, delving more into the life of her noble son, Samuel. Three prominent persons certainly dominate the Samuel books: Saul, David and Samuel. Yet these books open with a detailed picture of Hannah. In the pivotal shift of Israel’s history from the period of the Judges into the monarchy, Hannah is the key transitional figure. The historical books of the OT open with an extended portrait of this woman.<sup>2</sup> We

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of these prayers, see, e.g., Herbert Lockyer, *All the Prayers of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959); Ronald E. Clements, *The Prayers of the Bible* (London: SCM, 1986); and Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer: As a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> For a sensitive analysis of the Hannah narrative and its highlighting of the value of this woman, see Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed: Women’s Voices in the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 115–39. See also Yairah Amit, “‘Am I Not More Devoted to You than Ten Sons?’ (1 Samuel 1,8): Male and Female Interpretations,” in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings* (ed. A. Brenner; FCB 5; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 68–76; Lillian R. Klein, “Hannah: Marginalized Victim and Social Redeemer,” in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings* (ed. A. Brenner; FCB 5;

are told comparatively little about her husband Elkanah. It is Hannah who inaugurates and anchors the outset of this time period.<sup>3</sup> The unusual amount of detail involving Hannah presented in the opening records of the era of the Monarchy invite our attention. The following study represents an original “close reading” of the Hannah narrative.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Hannah’s Prayer Habits

Attention to the “particulars” within the first two chapters of the Samuel books yields impressive information of Hannah’s life. First, a description of her household is presented. Next, we find Hannah at the sanctuary praying. In fact, we see her in prayer and worship more than any other activity. Her initial petition to God is the first words we hear her say. And after this she speaks more than anyone else in the first two chapters of the Samuel books.

Her initial prayer in First Samuel portrays Hannah crying to God in “bitterness of soul and [...] [that she] wept in anguish” (1 Sam 1:10, NKJV).<sup>5</sup> Hannah does not need her husband Elkanah to pray for her at the sanctuary—she prays. And the words of her prayer are the first by a woman recorded in the OT. We know that other women before her, such as Rebekah,

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Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 77–92; Carol Meyers, “Hannah and Her Sacrifice: Reclaiming Female Agency,” in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings* (ed. A. Brenner; FCB 5; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 93–104; Ken Mulzac, “Hannah: The Receiver and Giver of a Great Gift,” *AUSS* 40 (2002): 207–17; and Adele Berlin, “Hannah and Her Prayers,” *Scriptura* 87 (2004): 227–32.

<sup>3</sup> The same phenomenon occurs at the outset of the Exodus. The women Jochebed, Miriam, Shiphrah, Puah, and the Egyptian princess inaugurate the events leading up to the exodus from Egypt, another major event in Israel’s history. The opening chapters of the book of Exodus feature five women. The name of the Egyptian king is not even given. We hear of him only by his title “Pharaoh”. Five women are the focus of attention in the inaugural Exodus narratives. For literature, see, Dennis, *Sarah Laughed*, 84–114; J. Cheryl Exum, “‘You Shall Let Every Daughter Live’: A Study of Exodus 1:8–2:10,” *Semeia* 28 (1983): 63–82; idem, “Second Thoughts About Secondary Characters: Women in Exodus 1:8–2:10,” in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy* (ed. A. Brenner; FCB 6; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 75–87; Imtraud Fischer, *Women Who Wrestled with God: Biblical Stories of Israel’s Beginnings* (transl. L. M. Maloney; Collegeville: Liturgical, 2005), 113–28; Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women’s Stories in the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 69–88; Moshe Reiss, “The Women Around Moses,” *JBQ* 33 (2005): 127–30.

<sup>4</sup> See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), and idem, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic, 1985), for recognized introductions that are sensitive to the biblical text as it reads.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah was praying with such intensity that Eli rebuked what he took to be drunken behavior. It was a terrible mistake, but suggests something about the problems he apparently had to contend with at that time.

prayed to God (Gen 25:22), but the actual words of their prayers are not preserved. However, in this instance, we hear Hannah's prayer. She even pledges to God that if he would grant her a son, that promised son would be dedicated to Him as a Nazarite:

Then she made a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts,<sup>6</sup> if You will indeed look on the affliction of your maidservant and remember me, and not forget your maidservant, but will give your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head." (1 Sam 1:11, NKJV)

In Numbers 6 God had established the Nazarite vow to those who would personally choose such consecration. However, here we find Hannah making this vow for her yet-unborn, and even unconceived, child.

Later Hannah brings Samuel to Shiloh in fulfillment of her vow to God. Again the focus is solely on her. She travels with her husband, we are told,<sup>7</sup> but the worship experience is initiated solely by Hannah. The text specifies that she is directly involved:

Now when she had weaned him, *she* took him up with *her*, with three bulls, one ephah of flour, and a skin of wine, and brought him [Samuel] to the house of the LORD in Shiloh. And the child was young. (1 Sam 1:24, NKJV, emphasis added)

These actions of Hannah become even more significant when we recall that Elkanah was a Levite (1 Sam 1:1; 1 Chr 6:33–38). However, Hannah went to Shiloh expressly to fulfill her own vow.<sup>8</sup> The text specifically describes her as the one who brought such expensive offerings to present at the tabernacle along with her own beloved promised son to dedicate him to God's service. Even the choice of bulls for offering, when smaller animals would have been acceptable (Lev 12:6) is indicative of the deep gratitude of Hannah.

In a later century Mary will also present gifts with her son Jesus at the Temple in Jerusalem. However, Mary returns home with her child after the

<sup>6</sup> This name for God, "LORD of hosts," is first used in the OT here by Hannah and then occurs frequently in the books of Samuel (1 Sam 1:11; 4:4; 15:2; 17:45; 2 Sam 5:10; 6:2, 18; 7:8, 26–27), Kings, Chronicles, and the prophets.

<sup>7</sup> After Hannah presents Samuel at Shiloh: "Then Elkanah went to his house at Ramah" (1 Sam 2:11). See also Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Boise: Pacific Press, 1958), 571: "Once more Hannah journeyed with her husband to Shiloh, and presented to the priest, in the name of God, her precious gift."

<sup>8</sup> Her husband supports her: "And Elkanah her husband said to her, 'Do what seems best to you [...]' (1 Sam 1:23, NKJV).

ceremony. In this instance, Hannah will return home without her son. This is an offering without parallel in all Scripture.<sup>9</sup>

Hannah's devotion did not diminish when her earnest prayer was granted. At this moving moment, Hannah again pours out her soul to God. This second prayer of Hannah is arresting. We do not hear the words of a gentle lullaby as typically attributed to mothers. Instead we find a rather "unladylike" vigorous shout of triumph! She begins with exuberant highly personal expressions, using no less than four first-person statements expressing her great joy in the LORD: "My heart [...] my strength [literally, 'horn'] [...] my mouth [...] I rejoice" (1 Sam 2:1). Hannah's whole being unites in praise because of what God has done. First of all she extols God's holiness and knowledge (v. 2). Then she continues with examples of providential reversals that God has brought about, affecting: strong and weak; full and hungry; barren and fertile; dead and alive; sick and well; poor and rich; humble and exalted (vv. 4-7). She also speaks of war, announcing that the enemies of the LORD will be broken in pieces (v. 10). Hannah praises God for victory in the battles of life.

She concludes with a prayer for the king (2 Sam 2:10). However, in Hannah's day there wasn't even a hint of the monarchy yet. Nevertheless, Hannah's prayer includes mention of an anointed king! Even though Israel did not have a king until some years after this, whom her son Samuel will anoint, a promised king was part of the Abrahamic covenant where God pledges: "I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you" (Gen 17:6). Hannah prophesies about the glorious Messiah king!

Hannah's earnest prayer life reveals her conscious, intimate relationship with God. One cannot help but be impressed with the strength of this relationship as it is reflected in her prayers. Even praying in such a manner that it constrained a presiding priest to chide her for being drunk.

What can we learn from Hannah about prayer? First of all, we find Hannah going directly to God pouring out her pain and grief. She did not think of prayer as merely a proper eloquent exchange between a polite, reverent believer and God. No, when Hannah ached, she cried out painful words, the text records. For her, God is very real and her prayers are in earnest. Biblical prayer regularly reveals a depth and intensity that often separates it from our own present-day practices.

<sup>9</sup> The contrast between Hannah's selfless devotion and the self-indulgence of the priests at Shiloh (1 Sam 2:12) highlights further the cost to Hannah of leaving her son Samuel there.

Later we observe Hannah again praying to God, but this time it is to praise him, showing that for her God is not merely a last resort, only in times of crisis. She also offers prayers of joy and praise to God. However, Hannah has not hesitated to beg God for help.

### 3. What We Can Learn

Hannah's two prayers are brimming with valuable instruction. Her first prayer in extreme anguish can encourage us that God is not afraid of our negative emotions, and that we do not need to "buck up" before we come to him. In fact, God no doubt appreciates our complete honesty. He already knows, even before we pray, what is in our most secret thoughts. Thus perhaps he rejoices when we finally face ourselves truthfully, and trust him with our pain. We often discern this kind of integrity in biblical praying. The Psalter includes many of these "daring" prayers: "Remove your plague from me; I am consumed by the blow of your hand. When with rebukes you correct man for iniquity, you make his beauty melt away like a moth [...]" (Ps 39:10–11, NKJV [ET 11–12]). It is instructing to note that over half of the prayers in the Psalter deal with the protests and complaints of believers.<sup>10</sup>

Hannah's second prayer reminds us of the attitude of thanksgiving. In fact, this is one of the rare prayers in Scripture that doesn't petition God for anything. Instead, Hannah's profound faith comprehends that God's mighty sovereignty still directs all human history, and she exalts him in praise:

"My heart rejoices in the LORD;  
 My horn is exalted in the LORD.  
 I smile at my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation.  
 There is none holy like the LORD,  
 For there is none besides you.  
 Nor is there any rock like our God.  
 Talk no more so very proudly;  
 Let no arrogance come from your mouth,  
 For the LORD is the God of knowledge;  
 And by him actions are weighed [...].  
 He will guard the feet of his saints,  
 But the wicked shall be silent in darkness.

<sup>10</sup> Though rarely referred to in modern Christian worship, many of the Psalter's prayers are rugged. For example: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?" (Ps 13:1–2). Some modern critics assail these types of prayers as signs of immaturity. But, perhaps, it is modern Christianity that has not matured in its understanding of prayer and its thinking about God.

For by strength no man shall prevail.  
 The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken in pieces;  
 From heaven he will thunder against them.  
 The LORD will judge the ends of the earth.  
 He will give strength to his king  
 And exalt the horn of his anointed." (1 Sam 2:1-3, 9-10)

Hannah's prayer life also yields a vivid portrait of a person who maintains a vital relationship with the God of heaven, even though struggling with difficult personal problems. Moreover, she did this at a time when the "church-at-large" was not healthy. Recall how Eli, the high priest, was soon to be reprimanded by God and the ark captured by the Philistines. Yet Hannah does not withdraw from the people of God just because there are serious sins in his people. Instead we find her praying at Shiloh. Nor does she give up her faith in despair. Hannah maintains a fervent communion with God during very troubling times. She has obviously not reduced faith to "positive thinking." Nor has she believed that it is better to be nice at the throne of God than it is to be honest. She was not in the habit of denying reality when approaching God.

To Hannah, God was not a personal valet or some celestial Santa Claus doling out blessings upon request. Nor was God an impersonal "force" maintaining the universe. No, he was someone very real to her, and apparently she often communed with him. Ellen White describes Hannah praying even when sewing:

When separated from her child, the faithful mother's solicitude did not cease. Every day he was the subject of her prayers. Every year she made, with her own hands, a robe of service for him; and as she went up with her husband to worship at Shiloh, she gave the child this reminder of her love. Every fiber of the little garment had been woven with a prayer that he might be pure, noble, and true. She did not ask for her son worldly greatness, but she earnestly pleaded that he might attain that greatness which Heaven values—that he might honor God and bless his fellow men.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. Other Biblical Examples

All through the OT we find women and men often praying with intensity, their prayers repeatedly displaying a fervor not often seen today.<sup>12</sup> We sure-

<sup>11</sup> White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 572.

<sup>12</sup> Note the prophet Jeremiah's outburst: "'O LORD, you induced me, and I was persuaded; you are stronger than I, and have prevailed. I am in derision daily; everyone mocks me. For when I spoke, I cried out; I shouted, 'Violence and plunder!' Because the word of the LORD was made to me a reproach and a derision daily. Then I

ly can learn much from our forebears, including women like Hannah, about approaching God with deep-felt convictions, honesty and emotion. If prayer is the breath of the soul, as Ellen White suggests, we find Hannah breathing deep.<sup>13</sup>

The power of God has not been withdrawn. Rather, it is we who have lost our energy to wrestle with God, as Jacob did, crying “I will not let you go, except you bless me” (Gen 32:26). We become so absorbed in our tasks and responsibilities that we feel there is little time to pray, and perhaps have but little interest in prayer. However, this is not the picture we find in Scripture. Even Jesus was much in prayer, and how earnest and fervent were his petitions: “In the days of his flesh, he offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears [...]” (Heb 5:7).<sup>14</sup> If he, the divine Savior, prayed so earnestly and often with such agony in our behalf, how much more do we need to have our whole souls stirred to wrestle with God.

As mentioned above, Ellen White calls prayer “the breath of the soul.” But we must not let the familiarity of this phrase blunt its impact. For it is

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said, ‘I will not make mention of him, nor speak anymore in his name.’ But his word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, and I could not” (Jer 20:7–9, NKJV). Ellen White writes of Moses: “Moses had a deep sense of the personal presence of God. [...] God was real to him, ever present in his thoughts. [...] Moses was full of confidence in God because he had appropriating faith. He needed help, and he prayed for it, grasped it by faith, and wove into his experience the belief that God cared for him. [...] The presence of God was sufficient to carry him through the most trying situations in which a man could be placed [...]. This faith was to Moses no guesswork: it was a reality.” Ellen G. White, *Our Father Cares* (Hagerstown: Review & Herald, 1991), 176.

<sup>13</sup> Ellen White speaks eloquently of the necessity of prayer: “Prayer is the breath of the soul. It is the secret of spiritual power. No other means of grace can be substituted, and the health of the soul be preserved. Prayer brings the heart into immediate contact with the Well-spring of life, and strengthens the sinew and muscle of the religious experience. Neglect the exercise of prayer, or engage in prayer spasmodically, now and then, as seems convenient, and you lose your hold on God. The spiritual faculties lose their vitality, the religious experience lacks health and vigor.” Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1948), 254.

<sup>14</sup> Ellen White notes the many times in the Gospels where Jesus is described praying, and fills in the picture more fully. See Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Boise: Pacific Press, 1940), 111–13 (at his baptism), 379 (after feeding the five thousand), 419–20 (at his transfiguration), 686–93 (Gethsemane). She describes the fervency of Christ’s prayers with phrases such as “He pleads,” “In travail and conflict of soul he prayed for his disciples.” And “the Man of Sorrows pours out his supplications with strong crying and tears.” See also, “Jesus [...] frequently devoted the entire night to prayer just before he was called upon to work some mighty miracle [...] with strong crying and tears he poured forth the earnest petitions to God on behalf of humanity.” Ellen G. White, “Christ’s Example in Prayer,” *Signs of the Times* 19, no. 37 (24 July 1893), 6.

not just a warm, poetic metaphor. Rather, it is an arresting analogy. Having a desperate experience of gasping for air can assist us in grasping the meaning of this statement. As soon as we are born we need to start breathing immediately or we will die. Many parents recall the dramatic moment when their newborn infants take their first breath of air. They also recall checking on their newborn babies in their cribs to be sure they are breathing. It is absolutely essential for human beings to breathe constantly. Without regular breathing a human life ends abruptly in just a few minutes, though we can live days and even weeks without water and food. And through this stark comparison with our critical physical need for air, Ellen White instructs us concerning our spiritual need for prayer. The lives of Hannah and Jesus along with many others in Scripture exemplify for us this crucial deep breathing of the soul.

