



The Birth of Samuel and His Preparation (**1 Sam 1 & 2**)  
*Commentary: Weeks One & Two*

*\*\*Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.  
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between  
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

### **New American Commentary<sup>1</sup>**

#### **I. The Lord Raises Up Samuel and Deposits the House of Eli**

This introductory section of Samuel forms a semantically seamless narrative link with the conclusion of the Book of Judges, the book that immediately precedes 1 Samuel in the Hebrew Bible. Judges ends with stories of spiritual ineptitude among the Levites (cf. [Judg 17:1–18:31](#)), sexual misconduct in Shiloh ([Judg 21:15–24](#)), and Levitical involvement in tragic military encounters ([Judg 19:29–20:48](#)); 1 Samuel opens with all three: spiritually dull Eli and his corrupt sons operate the Shiloh sanctuary contrary to the Torah guidelines ([2:12–17](#)); Hophni and Phinehas abuse the women serving at the Tent of Meeting ([2:22](#)); and ultimately, Eli's sons die in a catastrophic battle with the Philistines ([4:10–11](#)). The Book of Judges concludes with a collection of stories that portray Levites guiding the tribes of Israel into sin—idolatry and fratricide. Samuel opens with sinful Levitical activity—forcing Israelite worshipers to offer unacceptable sacrificial portions to the Lord and playing a role in Israel's disastrous loss to the Philistines.

The opening seven chapters of 1 Samuel trace the rise of Samuel and the downfall of the house of Eli. In portraying the life of Samuel, the narrator—surprisingly—begins by focusing on Hannah, a married woman who was struggling with a divinely ordained condition of barrenness. The woman's struggle ends when, in response to a faith-filled vow, the Lord enables her to give birth to Samuel, a child who is given to God for a lifetime of service as a Nazirite. Samuel's youth and adulthood prove to be as marvelous as his birth; while still a child he becomes Israel's greatest judge, providing justice and deliverance from the Philistines, Israel's most strident enemy at this juncture in history.

The second narrative prong of this section provides details of the tragic downfall of Israel's most powerful priestly family in that day, the house of Eli. Their destruction comes from the Lord, the result of sinful conduct while administering over Israel's holiest shrine. As portrayed by the biblical writer, God used the occasion of a military encounter with the Philistines to bring deadly judgment on the Elides. As a result of the priests' sin, Israel was bereft of its leading priests and temporarily lost possession of the ark, the visible throne of God. Yet all was not lost; the Lord used this circumstance to humiliate the Philistine god Dagon and thus reaffirm to Israel and the world that his greatness could not be diminished either by a decadent priesthood or a menacing foreign power.

Two vital offices in Israel are highlighted in the opening section of Samuel, those of priest and prophet. On the one hand, the priesthood is portrayed as being in decline. Neglectful Eli, himself too old to participate actively in the priestly activities (cf. [Num 8:23–26](#)), allows the sanctuary ritual to run amok and his sons' abuses to go unchecked. On the other hand, the office of prophet is elevated to a height not reached since the days of Moses, as Samuel boldly declares the counsel of God from his youth onward.

---

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 56-72.

Key events related to the fulfillment of three Torah prophecies are presented in this section of Samuel. Narrative incidents in this passage relate to the elevation of the Eleazarite line to priestly preeminence (cf. [Num 25:6–13](#)), the selection of the site where the Lord would cause his name to dwell (cf. [Deut 12:5, 11, 21; 14:23–24; 16:2, 6, 11; 26:2](#)), and the appearance of the prophet who would be like Moses (cf. [Deut 18:15](#)).

The Eli stories bring to the surface a narrative thread stretching from Exodus through 2 Kings that portrays the emergence of the Zadokites from the family line of Eleazar ben Aaron to priestly preeminence in Israel. In anticipation of the Zadokites' selection as the sole legitimate priestly line in Jerusalem (cf. [1 Kgs 2:26–27, 35](#)), the house of Eli (primary representative of the family line of Ithamar ben Aaron) is prophetically disqualified from continuing service.

The theme of the divine selection of Jerusalem as the site where the Lord's name would dwell is intertwined with the theme of the ascent of the Eleazarite line. Just as the fall of the House of Eli was a necessary precursor to the emergence of the Zadokites, so Shiloh's loss of status (cf. [Ps 78:60; Jer 7:13–14](#)) was an essential precursor to the rise of Jerusalem. Jerusalem's selection as the site for the Lord's central sanctuary later will be interpreted by the narrator as the Lord's will ([1 Kgs 11:13, 32, 36](#)), even as the selection of the Zadokites was ([1 Sam 2:35–36](#)).

The Samuel stories portray him as the long-anticipated prophet who would be like Moses ([Deut 18:15](#)). Fascinating similarities exist between the portrayal of Samuel and Moses in the narrative accounts. Both had remarkable childhoods, being nurtured in their earliest years by mothers of faith (cf. [Exod 2:1–2, 9; 1 Sam 1:20, 28](#)) but raised during their formative years in environments other than their own homes (cf. [Exod 2:10; 1 Sam 1:24–25](#)). Both disavowed the corrupt elements of the environments in which they were raised (cf. [Exod 2:11–12; Heb 11:25; 1 Sam 2:22–26](#)). Both received their initial revelations from the Lord in the presence of an object that was burning but not consumed ([Exod 3:3–10; 1 Sam 3:3–14](#)). In both cases, the Lord's revelatory message was preceded by a double mention of the prophet's name (cf. [Exod 3:4; 1 Sam 3:10](#)). The two share the distinction of being the only prophets in Genesis–2 Kings to be called “faithful” (Hb. *ne'ēmān*; [Num 12:7; 1 Sam 3:20](#)). Both were commanded by the Lord to pronounce judgment against the leaders of the sinful regimes that oppressed Israel during the initial phase of their prophetic careers (cf. [Exod 7:14–18; 1 Sam 3:11–18](#)). Both killed an enemy of Israel with their own hands and immediately thereafter went into a period of self-imposed exile (cf. [Exod 3:12–15; 1 Sam 15:33](#)). Both wrote down regulations (*mišpātîm*) that were deposited before the Lord and used to guide the nation ([Lev 26:46; 31:9; 1 Sam 10:25](#)). Both functioned as judges (cf. [Exod 18:13; 1 Sam 7:6, 15–16](#)), and both were prophets (cf. [Deut 18:15; 34:10; 1 Sam 3:20](#)). Both built altars to the Lord (cf. [Exod 17:15; 24:4; 1 Sam 7:17](#)). Neither was ever called a priest, yet both were recorded as performing activities associated with the priesthood (cf. [Lev 8:14–29; 1 Sam 7:9](#)). Both functioned as transition figures, being responsible for major course changes in Israelite history. Though both had two sons (cf. [Exod 18:2–3; 1 Sam 8:2; 1 Chr 6:28; 23:15](#)), neither had offspring who were remembered as playing a significant role in later Israel. Instead, at the Lord's behest both set apart nonfamily members who led Israel to possess through conquest land the Lord promised to Abraham's descendants (cf. [Deut 34:9; 1 Sam 16:13](#)).

The sharp contrast between the decadence and incompetence of the genealogically designated spiritual leaders and the capable service of the Lord's true prophet in this section mirrors the experiences of Israel throughout its history and recorded in passages found elsewhere in Scripture ([Jer 20:1–6; Amos 7:10–17](#)). The events portrayed in these chapters are reminiscent of the Torah contrast between a decadent priesthood and a strong prophet—exemplified in Aaron and his sons (cf. [Exod 32:1–5, 25; Lev 10:1–2](#)) and Moses (cf. [Deut 34:10–12](#)).

Theologically, one of the central truths discernible in this passage is that everyone—even Levitical judges—must be subject to the requirements of the Torah. Judges, like kings of later generations who failed to follow the dictates of the Torah, would be judged and condemned, and their work would be destroyed. The judgment on the house of Eli is the judgment on all Israelite leadership that would fail in its commitment to obey the Lord’s revealed will.

A second key theological insight discernible in these chapters is that the Lord uses socially powerless individuals possessing profound faith in him (in this case a barren woman) to overturn and transform the social order. The Lord uses that which is not to negate that which is (cf. [1 Cor 1:28](#)).

A third major theological affirmation is that Yahweh’s kingship is absolute and extends to all lands and peoples. His power is not limited by national boundaries, nor is it diminished by Israel’s failures. As exemplified in his dealings with the Philistines and their god Dagon, Yahweh exercises unchallenged dominion over all peoples and all gods.

Consistent with his role as sovereign, the Lord is portrayed as the stern enforcer of the Sinai covenant. When Israel fails to live up to divinely mandated obligations, the Lord brings judgment to bear. Furthermore, he reserves the right to carry out personally the Torah commands that Israel fails to execute. Within these chapters he shatters a detestable idol in the Promised Land (cf. [Exod 23:24](#); [34:13](#); [Deut 12:3](#)).

Obedience to the Lord in fulfilling vows brings blessing both for the individual who fulfills them as well as for society as a whole. Hannah made a vow to God. By obediently fulfilling her vow, she built a family for herself and gave birth to a servant of giant proportions in the history of Israel.

## **1. The Lord Rewards Hannah’s Faith**

In this section the Lord demonstrates his absolute power over all human institutions by changing the course of Israel’s history through one of Israel’s weakest and least significant individuals—a rural, barren woman named Hannah. God’s action is triggered by Hannah’s remarkable faith in the very One who engineered the circumstances of her humiliation. Her trust in the Lord brings rewards that surpass the pain she experienced earlier in life and makes her an object lesson demonstrating the Lord’s awesome power to bless anyone who possesses tenacious, risk-taking faith in him.

### **(1) The Lord Opens Hannah’s Womb [1:1–20](#)**

Here the Lord gives barren and humiliated Hannah a son in answer to her prayer. The story of Hannah presents a sharp contrast with that of Deborah, another significant woman of Ephraim from the period of the Judges. Deborah’s career impacted Israelite society through political clout, judicial leadership, and prophetic activity; Hannah’s effect on Israelite society came through the gentle forces of faith and motherhood. Through Hannah the point is made that women of faith played a legitimate and even formative role in shaping Israel’s history. Hannah’s faith turned the tide of the period of the Judges by producing the transitional figure Samuel.

In this passage Israelite faith expresses its supreme paradox and boldest affirmation—the Lord may create social and natural tragedies in order to accomplish his purposes that far outweigh the calamity. The Lord sometimes engineers social tragedies, yet he carries them out “that the work of God might be displayed” ([John 9:3](#)). Accordingly, human tragedy can be properly evaluated and appreciated only when viewed with a consideration of the end results and ultimate purposes brought about by God.

This passage also teaches that true power is to be found not in one’s position in society but in one’s posture before God. Accordingly, the motif of appearance versus reality is prominent in this passage. Eli, who possessed “spiritual competence” because of his office, was in fact a spiritual bumbler; the spiritual powerhouse in this narrative was a socially impotent woman from the rural regions of Ephraim. Hannah alone understood the true power of undivided faith in the Lord.

Furthermore, this passage suggests that spiritual power triumphs over social power. Socially powerless individuals can transform social institutions through faith in the Lord and in the process can triumph over their own circumstances.

**1:1** The location of “Ramathaim” (lit., “Two Heights”) is disputed. Earlier suggestions included Beit Rima (thirteen miles northeast of Lydda), Ram Allah (nine miles north of Jerusalem), Er-Ram (five miles north of Jerusalem), and Neby-Samwil (four miles northwest of Jerusalem). More recent commentators equate it with New Testament Arimathea (cf. [Mark 15:43](#) and parallels) and, following an early Christian tradition, suggest Rentis (sixteen miles east of Tel Aviv) as the site. It is almost certainly the same as Ramah (cf. [1:19](#), etc.).

“Zuphite” (lit., “Zophim”), taken as part of a compound place name in some translational traditions (e.g., KJV), probably refers to the region settled by Elkanah’s ancestor Zuph (cf. [1 Sam 9:5](#)) and not to Elkanah’s tribal identity.

Following in the tradition of others who reject the historical veracity of this section of narrative, McCarter suggests that key aspects of this story in its original form related to the birth of Saul, not Samuel. Miller and Hayes present two reasons for their acceptance of this skeptical interpretation: “(1) The explanation of the child’s name in v. [20](#) corresponds to the name ‘Saul’ rather than ‘Samuel.’ (2) Saul is said to have been supported by the Elide priests of Shiloh in his later career ([1 Sam 14:3, 18](#)). Samuel, on the other hand, while he is connected with Shiloh in this story and its continuation in [1 Samuel 2–3](#), is never associated with Shiloh in other narratives.” Miller and Hayes’s suggestion is unconvincing for three reasons. First, it is rooted in an overzealous skepticism regarding the narrator’s concern for historical accuracy; second, it apparently is based on a misunderstanding of the etiological section of this chapter (cf. comment on v. [20](#)). Third, it fails to give adequate regard to Old Testament passages suggesting that Shiloh was destroyed in the Philistine onslaught (cf. [Ps 78:60](#); [Jer 7:12, 14](#); [26:6](#)).

Different explanations have been put forward in an attempt to harmonize biblical statements relating to Elkanah’s/Samuel’s family background. According to [1 Chr 6:22–28, 33–38](#), Samuel was born into the family line of Kohath in the tribe of Levi. Here Samuel’s father is said to be from Ephraim. It is possible that Elkanah was an Ephraimite who married Hannah, ostensibly a woman from the tribe of Levi. It also is possible that Samuel was adopted into the Levitical tribe after coming to Shiloh, and therefore his genealogical record was altered. However, both of these explanations are fraught with difficulties. An explanation that reduces tensions between portions of the biblical record suggests that Samuel was geographically an Ephraimite but genealogically a Levite. In support of this, [Josh 24:33](#) affirms that Levites lived in a hilly region of Ephraim. Thus, in the case of Samuel’s family both tribal relationships can be compatible. Samuel, like his Ephraimite Levitical predecessor Phinehas, would play a significant role in wars (cf. [Num 31:6](#); [Josh 22:13–32](#); [Judg 20:28](#)). Eli’s willingness to have Samuel perform a task reserved in the Torah for Levites also makes this solution more likely.

Elkanah's heritage is traced back four generations. The genealogical list found here differs in some details from its counterpart in [1 Chr 6:25–26](#). Differences between the two may be accounted for in several ways: (1) existence of alternate spellings for individuals' names (Zuph in [1 Sam 1:1](#) = Zophai in [1 Chr 6:26](#)); (2) existence of alternate names for the same individual (Elihu in [1 Sam 1:1](#) = Eliab in [1 Chr 6:26](#) = Eliel in [1 Chr 6:34](#); Tohu in [1 Sam 1:1](#) = Nahath in [1 Chr 6:26](#) = Toah in [1 Chr 6:34](#)); and (3) “gapped genealogies” that skip generations.

**1:2** Elkanah is introduced as having two wives, Hannah (“Gracious Woman”) and Peninnah (“Pearl”[?]). The order in which the wives are named suggests that Hannah was Elkanah's first wife. Elkanah's possession of two wives should not be taken as a disparagement of his character, even though his actions appear to violate the spirit of [Gen 2:24](#) and would be untenable for Christians (cf. [1 Tim 3:2, 12](#)). Though a king's taking of “many wives” was prohibited ([Deut 17:17](#)), bigamy was not condemned in Hebrew Scriptures and on one occasion was even encouraged by a pious priest ([2 Chr 24:3](#)). Elkanah is likely another example in Scripture of an individual whose first wife was (initially) infertile and who thus, perhaps lacking faith, took a second wife in order to produce an heir (cf. [Gen 16:2–3; 30:3–4, 9](#)). The circumstance of having a beloved wife who was incapable of bearing children links Elkanah with the Torah patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. To the reader familiar with the Torah the connection is a favorable one, for it suggests the possibility—later realized—that a child of great significance to God's kingdom may ultimately result.

**1:3, 21** Far from being yet another decadent Israelite in the period of the Judges, Elkanah is consistently portrayed as one who is devoted to the Lord. His piety is suggested first by the fact that “year after year” he “went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the LORD Almighty.” According to the Torah, every Israelite family was to make the journey to Israel's central Yahwistic worship center ([Deut 12:5–7](#)). By leading his family in annual trips to Shiloh, Elkanah is shown to be a man both submissive to the Torah and strong in his domestic leadership. His example contrasts sharply with Eli, another member of the tribe of Levi, who failed to provide proper leadership in either religious or family matters (cf. [2:29](#)).

Shiloh (modern Seilun, nine miles north of Bethel) had functioned as the early center of the Israelite worship of Yahweh since the days of Joshua. It was there that the Tent of Meeting (*'ōhel mō'ēd*) was set up ([Josh 18:1](#)), and covenant-related activities—for example, the determination of tribal allotments within the Promised Land, celebration of annual festivals, and calls to holy war—were carried out (cf. [Josh 18:8; 19:51; 21:1–2; 22:9, 12; Judg 18:31; 21:12, 19, 21](#)). Even in Eli's day the Tent of Meeting was still in use at Shiloh (cf. [2:22](#)), but it had been augmented by a more permanent architectural structure (cf. [1:7, 9; 3:15](#)) that served as the center of Yahwistic activity.

Verse **3** includes the first Old Testament use of the phrase “the LORD Almighty” (lit., “Yahweh of Armies/Hosts”). This phrase, which acclaims Yahweh's dominion over spiritual entities and thus his unmatched authority, is used elsewhere in the Old Testament primarily in the writings of the prophets, especially Isaiah (62x), Jeremiah (79x), Zechariah (53x), and Malachi (24x). Hophni and Phinehas, Eli's two sons, were the priests of the Lord at Shiloh. Eli is not here called the priest, probably because he was too old to serve actively in that capacity (cf. [4:15; Num 8:23–26](#)).

**1:4–6** A climactic event in Israel's religious celebrations was the slaying of sacrificial animals, followed by the consumption of a lavish meal. At religious festivals individuals were expected to present burnt offerings, grain offerings, drink offerings, and fellowship offerings ([Num 29:39](#)), though other offerings (e.g., sin, guilt, and vow) might also be given. Portions of the animals slain for fellowship offerings (*šēlāmîm*) and other voluntary offerings would have been consumed in the sanctuary area by one who presented the animal.



In this section Elkanah is shown equitably sharing with family members his portion of the meat from one of his offerings. Meat, a rarity in the typical Israelite diet of that day, was apportioned to each wife in proportion to the number of children she had produced so that she could share it with her children. The NIV's translation of the oblique Hebrew phrase "a portion of one pair of nostrils" (*mānā 'aḥat 'appāyīm*) as "a double portion" (v. 5) is a charitable attempt to portray Elkanah's sensitivity to Hannah. More likely it should be translated as "[only] one portion" in light of the cold reality—prominently highlighted in other ways elsewhere in the passage—that Hannah had no offspring. Thus, the rest of the verse should be translated, "For although Elkanah loved her, God had closed her womb."

The Lord had closed Hannah's womb. This surprising affirmation—without parallel in Hebrew narrative regarding the Lord's people (but see [Gen 18:20](#))—appears twice in these verses (vv. 5–6). Hannah's infertility was no accident of nature; it was the deliberate work of the Lord. There is an inescapable irony in these statements. The same God who in the Torah commanded humanity, and specifically Israel, to be fruitful and multiply ([Gen 1:28](#); [9:1](#); [35:11](#)) had made Hannah the Israelite incapable of fulfilling the divine command. The text's statement that it was God who closed Hannah's womb is significant here, for biblical narratives usually use God's personal name when they describe activities that are significant in Israel's covenantal relationship with God. Yet in this pair of statements lies a mystery: What good covenantal purposes can be accomplished through a woman's sterility?

Hannah's sterility made her vulnerable to ridicule. Her rival provoked her in order to (*ba'ābūr*) irritate her. Was this what the Lord had in mind when he closed Hannah's womb? The thoughtful reader recalls that in the Torah the people of Israel were forced to endure much torment before the Lord delivered them. Perhaps the portrayal of Hannah's affliction was meant to draw this parallel to mind, thus preparing them for an act of divine deliverance in Hannah's behalf.

**1:7** In spite of—or perhaps because of—her infertility, Hannah was a woman of faith. In fact, Hannah is portrayed as the most pious woman in the Old Testament. Here she is shown going up to the Lord's house; no other woman in the Old Testament is mentioned doing this. In addition, Hannah is the only woman shown making and fulfilling a vow to the Lord; she is also the only woman who is specifically said to pray (*Hb. pll*; [1:10](#), [12](#), [26–27](#); [2:1](#)); her prayer is also among the longest recorded in the Old Testament. Furthermore, her prayer includes the most recorded utterances of Yahweh's name by a woman (eighteen). She is shown avoiding the faults of the first infertile covenant woman by seeking help from Yahweh rather than pursuing crafty schemes (cf. [Gen 16:2](#)). She also avoided the fault of Jephthah, who likewise made a vow that separated him from his child; whereas Jephthah gave his daughter as a burnt offering, Hannah gave her child as a living sacrifice (cf. [Rom 12:1](#)).

Peninnah is called Hannah's "rival." The Hebrew term (*šārā*) suggests a woman who is a "troubler." The term is an apt one, considering her effect on Hannah; Hannah "wept" as a result of Peninnah's taunts. These insults appear to have been particularly poignant during the annual festival times at Shiloh because the family sacrificial meal that rewarded Peninnah's maternal blessings also insulted Hannah's unproductive womb. As a result, Hannah lost her desire to participate in the meal "and would not eat."

**1:8** Hannah's good-hearted but insensitive husband Elkanah attempted to console her, suggesting to her that he was better to her than "ten sons." The reference to "ten sons" suggests the ten sons born to Jacob during Rachel's period of barrenness (cf. [Gen 29:31–30:22](#)). The patriarchal allusion also suggests a parallel between Jacob's love for Rachel and Elkanah's for Hannah. At the same time it foreshadows a happy outcome from Hannah's plight.

**1:9** When Hannah left the family celebration, Eli was sitting on a chair— a sign of authority —at the doorposts of the sanctuary. Though too old to participate in the active leadership of the worship center (cf. [Num 8:23–26](#)), Eli was still able to sit at the entrance to the “holy place” (*hēkal*), much as elders would sit at the city gate in ancient Israel ([Deut 21:19](#); [22:15](#); [25:7](#); [Josh 20:4](#); [Ruth 4:2, 11](#); [Lam 5:14](#)). This position may have permitted him to act simultaneously as a judge (cf. [1 Sam 4:18](#)) and a protector of worship ([Deut 16:18](#)).

According to the text, Eli’s exact location was at the “doorpost of Yahweh’s Holy Place” (*mēzūzat hēkal yhwh*). This phrase suggests that the Shiloh worship center was a structure of some architectural permanence built in a traditional tripartite Semitic temple design (cf. also [Judg 18:31](#); [1 Sam 1:24](#)). Other Scriptures suggest that a tent was a central part of the worship site there ([Josh 18:1](#); [19:51](#); [2 Sam 7:2, 6](#); [Ps 78:60](#)). Perhaps the earlier tabernacle set up at Shiloh in Joshua’s day had been supplemented by a building during the days of the Judges; alternatively, a smaller ceremonial tent may have housed the ark within the holy of holies (e.g., *Hb. dēbîr*, “inner sanctuary,” in [1 Kgs 6:19–21](#)).

**1:10** Hannah wept and prayed to the Lord “in bitterness of soul,” a phrase used elsewhere to characterize the psychological pain experienced by one who has been deprived of a child through death (cf. [Ruth 1:13, 20](#); [2 Kgs 4:27](#); [Zech 12:10](#)) or who is experiencing great personal physical suffering (cf. [Job 3:20; 7:11; 10:1; Isa 38:15](#)). Relief from this sort of pain is never pictured in the Hebrew Bible as coming from a human being; in each case divine intervention was the only remedy. Wisely, Hannah also went to the Lord for help.

**1:11** Hannah’s prayer was specifically addressed to the omnipotent deliverer of those in distress, “the LORD Almighty” (cf. comment on [1:3](#)). Her pain had made her a theologian—no character in Scripture prior to Hannah had ever used this term to address the Lord. In her prayer she implicitly recognized that the Lord alone is the giver of life. She also understood that the proper position of a believer in relation to the Lord is that of absolute subjection; three times she referred to herself as “your servant” (*Hb. ’āmātekā*), a term used elsewhere to describe a female household slave. Furthermore, she recognized that a relationship with the Lord involves giving, not just taking. She made a vow— an act without parallel for women elsewhere in Hebrew narrative but conditionally permissible for a married woman (cf. [Num 30:6–8](#))—to “give [him] to the LORD for all the days of his life.”

Hannah was certainly portrayed as more intimate in her relationship with the Lord than Eli, the spiritual icon of his generation. Within her prayers in chap. [1](#) Hannah seven times used Yahweh’s name ([1:11, 15, 17, 26–28](#)), whereas Eli never used the term in this episode; he used the more distant phrase “God of Israel” instead.

As part of her vow, Hannah seems to have promised to give her son to the Lord as a lifelong Nazirite (cf. [Num 6:1–21](#)). The assumption is based on Hannah’s declaration that “no razor will ever be used on his head” (cf. [Num 6:5](#)), a general parallel to the prebirth circumstances of Samson (cf. [Judg 13:5–7](#)) and the support of at least one ancient textual tradition.

**1:12–18** Hannah’s lengthy silent prayer caught the watchful Eli’s attention and led him to an incorrect conclusion. On the one hand, Eli appeared to be doing his job, vigilantly guarding the sanctuary from possible desecration by Hannah (lit., “keeping watch over [Hannah’s] mouth”; cf. also [Ps 39:1](#); [Prov 21:23](#)); on the other hand, he was actually demonstrating his incompetence. Here, as elsewhere, Eli is portrayed as a man unable to distinguish appearance from reality, as a man who himself lacked substance. Though Eli was the high priest of Shiloh—and ostensibly a man of exceptional spiritual maturity, he is consistently depicted by the narrator as spiritually blind and inert. He was a man who watched lips instead of perceiving hearts, who judged profound spirituality to be profligate indulgence in spirits, who heard nothing when the Lord spoke ([1 Sam 3:4, 6](#)), and who criticized his sons for abusing the sacrificial system yet grew fat from their take ([2:22–24; 4:18](#)). Fittingly, in the end his

powerful career was surpassed by those who were “nothing”—a socially powerless rural woman and a child.

The fact that Hannah was portrayed as conversing with Yahweh suggests that Yahwism was not as “sexist” as some may portray it to be. A woman was not so unimportant in Israel as to be considered incapable of communicating with Israel’s God. Significantly, Yahweh was also portrayed as a deity who listened to a woman and answered her prayer.

Drinks made from fermented grain (“beer”; v. [15](#)) or fruit (“wine”) were an important part of the worship of the Lord since, as products issuing from the Lord’s bounty, they were used in the sacrificial ritual (cf. [Exod 29:40](#); [Lev 23:13](#); [Num 15:5–10](#); [28:14](#); [Deut 14:26](#); [32:38](#)). However, Eli’s rebuke of Hannah suggests that personal consumption resulting in alcohol abuse was a problem at the religious festivals held in Shiloh. Biblical evidence elsewhere suggests that drunkenness and immorality were not uncommon at Israelite religious centers (cf. [2:22](#); [Judg 9:27](#); [21:21–23](#); [Isa 28:7](#); perhaps also [Lev 10:1–11](#)).

Hannah asked that Eli not take her for a “wicked woman” (Hb. *bat bēlīyā’al* = “daughter of Belial”). The phrase suggests one who failed to give due respect to God or others and who therefore represented a threat to proper religious and societal order. Rather than showing disrespect for God, she was praying to him in a state of “great anguish and grief” (v. [16](#)) inflicted by Peninnah’s affronts. Hannah’s deep respect for authority is affirmed by her self-deprecating use of “your servant” in her response to Eli.

Eli proved quite capable of fulfilling his priestly role, even if he was spiritually dull. Learning the true nature of Hannah’s actions, he validated her prayer with a wish and a blessing. Hannah responded to Eli’s blessing with a winsome and gracious pun—the “Woman of Grace” (the Hb. meaning of Hannah’s name) expressed hope of finding grace (Hb. *hēn*) in Eli’s eyes.

Hannah’s departure from the sanctuary area was an example of faith triumphant. Though she had approached the Lord in the depths of despondency, she left the sanctuary elevated and transformed. Hannah’s spiritual victory, won through the labor of tearful prayers, enabled her to eat the festival meal in peace and hope.

[1:19–20](#) At the time of the daily morning sacrifice the next day, Elkanah and his family worshiped at the Lord’s house and then began their journey home (v. [19](#)). “Ramah,” previously identified by the alternate name Ramathaim (cf. [1:1](#)), is the more common name for the hometown of Elkanah’s clan.

In the context of the marital union between Elkanah and Hannah, “the LORD remembered” (*zākar*) Hannah. “Remembered” is a soteriological verb when used with the Lord as the subject and suggests the initiation of a major new activity by the covenant-making God (cf. [Gen 8:1](#); [Exod 2:24](#); cf. also [Gen 19:29](#); [30:22](#)). In most miracles touching human lives, the Lord chooses to achieve his desired ends with the assistance of people. Certainly this was true in Hannah’s case.

Not long afterward Hannah was found to be pregnant and in the course of time gave birth to a son. The child was given a name intended to memorialize Hannah’s bold faith and the Lord’s gracious response. That name—Samuel—has also created an etymological and interpretive puzzle for generations of European and American scholars. The majority of interpreters have rejected the etymological link suggested in the text (vv. [17](#), [20](#), [27–28](#); [2:20](#)) between the name *šēmû’ēl* and the verb “ask” (*šā’al*). However, consonantal and acrostic links do exist. Metathesizing (i.e., reversing) the first two letters of Samuel’s name (= *mēšû’al*) creates a word meaning “He who was asked for”; acrostically, the name may be derived from the Hebrew phrase meaning “asked from God” (= *šā’ûl min ’el*).



## **(2) Hannah Dedicates Samuel to the Lord's Service [1:21-28](#)**

In this section Hannah and Elkanah fulfill a vow and entrust Samuel to Eli's care at Shiloh for lifelong Nazirite service. As preparation for this event, Hannah devotedly nurtures the child at Ramah, then presents him before the Lord, accompanied by a lavish sacrifice.

The best model of vow fulfillment in the Old Testament is presented here, as both Elkanah and Hannah make commitments to the Lord and then fulfill them diligently (cf. [Ecc1 5:4-5](#)). Elkanah is particularly exemplary, in that he not only voluntarily made vows and then fulfilled them annually, but he also affirmed his wife's right to make commitments to God as well. Furthermore, the family's extreme generosity in their giving to God sets an example that is challenging for any person of faith.

[1:21-23](#) The passage stresses Elkanah's exemplary piety. He faithfully led his family to participate in annual Torah-prescribed pilgrimage festivals ([Deut 12:5-7](#)) and voluntarily made vows and then fulfilled them ([Num 30:2](#); [Deut 23:21](#)). Although the Torah explicitly gave him the right to nullify Hannah's vow regarding Samuel's service in the Shiloh sanctuary (cf. [Num 30:10-15](#)), he chose instead to confirm her vow to the Lord, even though it meant losing the firstborn son from his beloved wife's womb. This latter act places him in a category with Abraham, who gave over his son Isaac ([Gen 22](#); cf. also [Gen 37:34-35](#); [42:4](#), [36-38](#); [44:22-34](#)).

Though Elkanah and the remainder of the family made their annual pilgrimage to Shiloh, Hannah chose to remain at Ramah to care for the infant Samuel. She maintained this practice each year until the boy was weaned, perhaps a total of three years.

Hannah indicated that when the child appeared (literally) "before the face of Yahweh," he would "live there always" (v. [22](#)). The phrase "appear before the face of Yahweh" is found elsewhere only in the Torah ([Exod 34:24](#); [Deut 16:16](#); [31:11](#)) and refers there to annual sacrifice pilgrimage or solemn assembly meetings. Thus Hannah apparently was saying, "When he finally does go on the annual pilgrimage, he will never return home; he will stay at the pilgrimage site as long as he lives."

Perhaps the most prominent catchphrase in the story of Samuel is "before the Lord." Samuel was to live "before the Lord" always (cf. also [2:11](#), [18](#), [21](#)), and this he actually did (cf. [7:6](#); [10:19](#); [11:15](#); [12:3](#), [7](#); [15:33](#)). This presents a stark contrast with the life of Saul, who was "before the Lord" only during his anointing by Samuel. At the same time, this phrase strengthens the comparison of Samuel with Moses, of whom it was said that he spoke "face to face" with the Lord ([Exod 33:11](#); [Deut 34:10](#)). The "word" Elkanah prayerfully asked the Lord to "make good" (v. [23](#)) cannot be discerned from the text; perhaps it was an otherwise unknown divine promise made to Elkanah and Hannah when they made their vows. Going a different direction, the LXX and Dead Sea Scrolls indicate that Elkanah was asking the Lord to establish Hannah's words.

[1:24-28](#) In this passage Hannah is shown actively fulfilling her preconception promise to the Lord. According to the Torah, every firstborn male child belonged to the Lord (cf. [Exod 13:2](#), [13](#); [Num 3:47](#); [8:16-17](#); [18:15-16](#)) yet was to be redeemed at one month of age for the price of five shekels. As part of a vow, a male child could be given over to the Lord for a period of years, then presumably redeemed later (cf. [Lev 27:1-8](#)). However, Hannah chose instead to give Samuel to the Lord in permanent Nazirite service.

Though the entire family was involved in the journey to bring Samuel to Shiloh, only Hannah was the subject of the key verbs in the passage: she “took” (v. [24](#)) Samuel and a generous offering with her and “brought” him to the sanctuary complex; finally, she “said” the words that committed Samuel to Eli’s care. Significantly, however, Hannah was not the subject of the verbs describing the sacrificial event accompanying Samuel’s entrance into permanent service. Undoubtedly this is because females were not permitted to perform these actions.

The size of the offering that accompanied Hannah’s vow fulfillment is a point of scholarly debate. The NIV’s mention of “a three-year old bull” is based on readings found in the **LXX**, Dead Sea Scrolls, and Peshitta. However, the **MT**’s reading, “three bulls,” is to be preferred. According to the Torah ([Num 15:8–10](#)), when a bull was given as part of a vow offering, only three tenths of an ephah of flour and half a hin of wine were to accompany the offering. But Hannah brought one ephah and a whole skin of wine—just over three times the amount needed for one bull. These amounts would have been appropriate only if three animals were being sacrificed. Clearly, the writer expected the audience to be impressed with the extreme generosity represented by the gift and thus with the heart of faith that conceived it.

Hannah’s explanation of her acts were simple yet profound: “I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him” (v. [27](#)). Interwoven into her confession in vv. [27–28](#) is an artful wordplay involving four different forms of the Hebrew root *š’l*. Samuel’s name is an extension of the wordplay, combining the concept of “asking from” (*šā’altî mē’im*) God and being “given over” (*šā’ûl*). More than that, it is an expression of Hannah’s faith. As Payne notes: “God had given him; Hannah gave him back; and Samuel’s very name was a reminder of these things. We should not overlook the sacrifice made by Hannah; but her loss was to be Israel’s gain, and she felt amply compensated.”

The final statement that “he worshiped the LORD” is problematic and is dealt with differently by interpreters; 4QSam<sup>a</sup> indicates that Hannah is the one who worshiped Yahweh. Modern versions generally leave the verb with a masculine subject, though the referent is ambiguous, either Eli or Samuel. The sentence is found in [2:11](#) in the **LXX**. If Samuel is the referent, then this statement is a proleptic summary of the result of Hannah’s actions. In such a case, this notation, along with the one in [2:11](#), would serve as an *inclusio* (bracketing device) framing Hannah’s theologically rich prayer.