



Samuel's Preparation – Part 1 (1 Sam 2) *Commentary: Week Two*

New American Commentary¹

(3) Hannah Rejoices in the Lord [2:1–10](#)

This section, which contains Hannah's last recorded words and her longest quotation (112 words), provides a triumphant climax to the narrator's portrayal of the humble woman's faith. It is often considered to be a deliberate literary complement to [2 Samuel 22](#). Hannah's monologue is described as a prayer; it is cast as a poetic hymn or Psalm of Thanksgiving and is considered by many scholars to be among the earliest extant examples of Israelite poetry.

Hannah's prayerful song eloquently affirms core concepts of Israelite faith: the Lord is the great judge and overseer of human destinies and a rewarder of those who earnestly seek him (cf. [Heb 11:6](#)). He is the source of empowerment and victory for those who fear him, but for all others he is the overpowering authority who dispenses fearful judgment.

The prayer's emphasis on the Lord's exaltation of those devalued by others serves not only as a testimony of God's action in Hannah's own life. It also foreshadows the Lord's ways in the lives of Samuel, David, and the nation of Israel. Negatively, it also presages what the Lord would do in judgment against the house of Eli.

[2:1–2](#) Hannah's prayer begins on an exuberant and highly personal note, employing four first-person references that express unbridled delight in the Lord. Even as Peninnah had taunted Hannah, so now Hannah "boasts" (v. [1](#); lit., "my mouth is enlarged"; cf. also [Ps 35:21](#); [Isa 57:4](#)) over her enemies because of the Lord's "deliverance" (Hb. *yěšû 'â*, "salvation"). The object of Hannah's delight is neither herself—that she has overcome the disgrace of barrenness—nor her son; instead it is the Lord, who is the source of both her son and her happy circumstance.

Borrowing images and confessions from the Torah, Hannah affirms the Lord's supreme holiness (cf. [Lev 10:3](#); [11:44](#); [19:2](#); [20:26](#)) and uniqueness (cf. [Exod 15:11](#)), and calls him the "Rock" (v. [2](#); Hb. *šûr*, "bedrock"; cf. [Deut 32:4](#), [15](#), [18](#), [30](#), [31](#)).

[2:3–5](#) In her prayer, which apparently was uttered in a public forum where others could give consideration to her words (contrast with [1:13](#)), Hannah admonished all who would foolishly brag about or exalt themselves. Over them stands the Lord, who is aware of their thoughts and constantly evaluating their "deeds" (Hb. *'ălilâ*, "wanton conduct"). When warranted, the Lord will act as the great reverser of fortunes in matters of military force, food, and fertility. He can bring low, and he can exalt. Mighty soldiers can be rendered defenseless, while the weak may perform valiantly; those who once had a surplus may be reduced to destitute servitude, while the hungry may cease (Hb. *hādal*) to be so. Most relevantly for Hannah, a barren woman may, with the Lord's help, bear "seven children"—a number suggestive of completeness—while others who once had large families may end life bereft and mournful.

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 73-83.

2:6–10 This section, which is linguistically marked as the most important component of the prayer, contains an extended list of contrastive actions the Lord performs in his dealings with humans. The Lord’s actions can be extremely positive: he “makes alive” (v. [6](#)), “raises ... from the dust” (v. [8](#)), lifts ... from the ash heap” (v. [8](#)), “exalts” (v. [7](#)), causes people to “inherit a throne” (v. [8](#)), “seats” people “with princes” (v. [8](#)), “sends ... wealth” (v. [7](#)), “will guard” (v. [9](#)), “will give strength” (v. [10](#)), and “raises up” from “the grave” (v. [6](#)). In contrast, the Lord also “sends poverty” (v. [7](#)), “humbles” (v. [7](#)), “will thunder” (v. [10](#)), “will judge” (v. [10](#)), “brings death” (v. [6](#)), and “brings down to the grave” (v. [6](#)).

Yet the Lord does not perform these actions indiscriminately. As judge of “the ends of the earth” (v. [10](#)), he brings the worst against “those who oppose” him (v. [10](#)), while bestowing protection, strength, and exaltation to “his saints” (v. [9](#); Hb. *ḥāsīdīm*, “pious/godly”) and “his king”/“his anointed” (v. [10](#)).

Much scholarly discussion has centered around Hannah’s use of the terms “king” and “anointed” (Hb. *melek* and *mēšīah*) in her prayer. Many scholars judge these words to be anachronistic, since Israel obviously had no king at the time. However, it is possible that the words are (1) allusions to the office of kingship mentioned in the Torah (cf. [Deut 17:15](#)), (2) references to local Israelite rulers (cf. [Judg 9:6](#)), (3) prophetic of the Davidic dynasty (cf. [Gen 49:10–12](#)), or (4) references to an anticipated, eschatological figure. The close parallels between Hannah’s Prayer and Mary’s Song ([Luke 1:46–55](#)) suggest that the first-century Christian community considered the entire passage, and especially the phrases “his king” and “his anointed,” to be prophetic references to Jesus Christ and his ministry.

(4) Young Samuel Ministers Before the Lord [2:11](#)

This verse provides a transition between the story of Elkanah’s family and the story of Eli’s family. Responsibility for Samuel’s upbringing was now transferred from Elkanah to Eli as the youth was set apart as a lifelong attendant (Hb. *mēšārēt*) to the Lord. Samuel’s connections with Eli and the Lord would serve as both a link to and a contrast with Eli’s own sons.

2. The Lord Blesses Hannah’s Family, Judges Eli’s Family

This section contrasts the destinies of two families. The tragic story of Hophni and Phinehas, which is to be read in light of [Lev 10:1–11](#), demonstrates the seriousness with which God takes priestly misconduct. It affirms that relatedness to a high priest is no substitute for a relationship with God, that pedigree or social power is not an alternative to purity.

At the same time, the section demonstrates the Lord’s faithfulness in fulfilling Torah promises to bestow bounty on those who live lives of pious faith. Elkanah and Hannah received a priestly blessing from Eli ([2:20](#)) and abundant life from the Lord ([2:21](#); cf. [Lev 26:9](#); [Deut 28:4](#)) because of their righteous lives. By contrast, Hophni and Phinehas received a priestly rebuke ([2:23–25](#)) and a death sentence from the Lord ([2:25](#)).

(1) Eli's Sons Treat the Lord's Offerings with Contempt [2:12–17](#)

[2:12](#) This verse consists of two complementary evaluative comments: Eli's sons were “wicked” (lit., “sons of Belial”); they had “no regard for” (lit., “they did not know”) the Lord. The words cast an ominous pall over the passage and prepare the reader for the sequence of disasters that unfold in chap. [4](#).

The verbless clause in v. [12](#)—literally, “the sons of Eli, the sons of Belial”—serves as a sort of double entendre: besides indicating the perverse character of Eli's sons, the construction has the effect of equating Eli with Belial. Indeed, Eli was a Belial because he failed to give due respect to God and therefore threatened the sanctity of the Lord's name in the community of faith. This subtle indictment of Eli will become more apparent in v. [29](#).

Hophni, Phinehas, and Samuel were skillfully portrayed by the writer as being similar in the sense that at the beginning of the story none of them knew the Lord (cf. [2:12](#); [3:7](#)). Yet at the same time, differences and contrasts were also being established. While Hophni and Phinehas were despising the Lord, Samuel was serving him.

The evaluative comments in vv. [12](#) and [17](#) form an *inclusio* (i.e., an envelope structure); they have the effect of setting off and highlighting the disgusting actions of the priestly pair.

[2:13–14](#) The priestly practices customary at Shiloh in matters of sacrifice are unlike those mentioned anywhere else in the Old Testament and clearly differ from those prescribed in the Torah (cf. [Lev 10:14–15](#); [Num 18:18](#)). The writer described the strange traditions of the Shiloh priests in detail to clarify the need to destroy the Elide line and remove the central Israelite worship site from Shiloh.

[2:15–17](#) These verses focus on the climactic flaw in the priestly practices at Shiloh: Hophni and Phinehas were taking the priestly share of the fellowship offerings “before the fat was burned”—that is, before the Lord had been given his portion (cf. [Lev 3:3–5](#); [7:30](#)). Furthermore, the priests were consuming fat from the sacrificial animals, an act explicitly prohibited in the Torah (cf. [Lev 7:22–26](#)). In addition, they used the threat of violence to get their way. This blasphemous expression of self-interest and disregard for the law was a sin that “was very great in the LORD's sight” (v. [17](#); cf. [Lev 7:25](#)). Even the laypersons, who acceded to the wrongful demands placed on them, were more pious than the priests and their servants in that they tried to get the priests to give the Lord his portion first. The **MT** suggests that the priestly actions were causing the worshipers (*Hb.* *hā'ānāšîm*, “the men”) to look disrespectfully upon the freewill offerings made to the Lord. Priestly abuse was giving religion a bad name in Israel.

(2) Samuel Ministers Before the Lord as His Family Receives the Lord's Blessing [2:18–21](#)

Samuel's precocious childhood, one marked inwardly by his unique relationship with the Lord and outwardly by his priestly attire and his presence at Shiloh, contrasted sharply with that of Hophni and Phinehas. The final portrait of Elkanah's family, which is also presented in this section, contrasted just as vividly with the destiny of Eli's family. Elkanah's family was depicted in acts of exemplary piety; Eli's family will be depicted in acts of disgusting sacrilege. Elkanah's family received a blessing and fruitful multiplication; Eli's would receive a curse and desolation. The family portraits are studies in Torah blessings and curses (cf. [Lev 26](#); [Deut 28](#)).

2:18 Samuel's service before the Lord is rhetorically underlined through the repetition of the phrase "was ministering" (Hb. *hāyâ mēšārēt*) in vv. [11](#), [18](#). The verbal construction suggests an ongoing activity, something ingrained in Samuel's lifestyle. The placement of this phrase in v. [18](#) is doubly emphatic because of its juxtaposition with the description of Hophni and Phinehas.

In his service at Shiloh, Samuel wore the ephod, a sleeveless, hip-length garment that only members of the Levitical tribe were authorized to wear. The clear implication is that Samuel was a member of this tribe (cf. [1 Chr 6:22–28](#)). Samuel's youthful opportunity to wear garments of privilege and position are reminiscent of both Joseph ([Gen 37:3](#)) and David ([1 Sam 17:38–39](#)).

2:19 Samuel's mother annually brought Samuel a robe (*mē'îl*), a longer outer garment worn by members of the Levitical tribe involved in priestly service (cf. [Lev 8:7](#)). This thoughtful gift from Hannah suggests that although Samuel was gone from the household in Ramah, he was still very much in Hannah's heart (cf. [Prov 31:19–21](#)). Through the use of the clothing motif in portraying Samuel's career (cf. also [15:27](#)), the writer suggests that Samuel's life was the outcome of a splendid mother of faith.

2:20–21 Eli annually pronounced over Elkanah and Hannah a blessing calling for the Lord to compensate the couple for relinquishing Samuel.

Verse [21](#) answers the seemingly incongruous statements of [1:5–6](#). The Lord's harshness is only apparent. The Lord, who had commanded human fertility ([Gen 1:26–28](#)), had withheld it from a faithful servant. Yet in this case, the denial of offspring was only temporary and had the effect of multiplying blessings in Hannah's life. Ultimately God's gracious (Hb. *hēn*) nature (cf. [Exod 34:6](#)) was demonstrated as the Lord provided Hannah, the Woman of Grace, with five additional children—three sons and two daughters.

Samuel grew up "in the presence of the LORD," literally, "with Yahweh." This Hebrew phrase is used in the Torah to describe Moses' position when he received the Decalogue ([Exod 34:28](#)). In Psalms ([130:7](#)) "with Yahweh" is said to be a place of "unfailing love" and "full redemption." In the present context it seems to suggest that Samuel enjoyed a childhood marked by divine favor and a lifestyle evidencing a Moses-like relationship with the Lord.

(3) The Lord Determines to Kill Eli's Sons for Their Sin [2:22–25](#)

The elderly priest Eli is shown chiding his sons for their professional misconduct and threatening them with dire consequences for their sins. The warning was unheeded by Hophni and Phinehas, however.

In fact, the writer indicates that this was consistent with the Lord's desire "to put them to death." In keeping with his righteous and unchanging nature, the Lord takes pleasure in upholding the Torah. Here the Lord had already determined to destroy Hophni and Phinehas for their sin. During an earlier portion of the period of the Judges, God had previously sent an evil spirit against Abimelech, the wicked son of a good judge, for the purpose of bringing death to sinners ([Judg 9:23, 56–57](#)).

2:22–25 Eli's first recorded rebuke of his sons' misconduct came when he was "very old." The writer may be implying that Eli neglected his parental responsibilities earlier in life (cf. [Deut 6:7; 21:18–21](#)). Eli reprimanded them because he "heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel." To the previously reported offenses (cf. vv. [12–17](#)) a new charge was added—they were having sexual relations with "the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting." Perhaps these women were Nazirites involved in volunteer service at the worship site (cf. [Num 6:2; Exod 38:8](#)); alternatively they may have been cultic prostitutes. However, they were being treated as though they were pagan shrine prostitutes (cf. [Hos 4:14](#)).

Eli the judge used the imagery of a legal dispute in warning his sons. In a case pitting two people against each other, God could work either through his revealed law or through circumstances to exonerate the person charged with wrongdoing. However, if a person were pitted against the Lord in court, the human could expect only condemnation. Hophni and Phinehas, having committed capital offenses (cf. [Lev 7:25](#); [22:9](#)), could expect the Lord to bring the death penalty upon them.

The phrase “it was the LORD’s will” (v. [25](#)) also can be translated “the LORD was pleased.” Although it would be misleading to say that the Lord takes pleasure in killing people (cf. [Ezek 18:32](#); [33:11](#); [2 Pet 3:9](#)), it is certainly true that he delights in bringing justice to the world order. Justice is a central trait in God’s character (cf. [Exod 34:7](#); [2 Chr 12:6](#)), and the implementation of divine justice always brings satisfaction.

(4) Samuel Grows in Favor Before the Lord [2:26](#)

[2:26](#) The subject-first word order in the Hebrew text suggests that this verse was intended to present a contrast to v. [25](#). Samuel’s life certainly contrasted sharply with Eli’s sons. While the sins of Hophni and Phinehas were increasing in magnitude ([2:17](#)), Samuel’s stature and good standing were increasing. As God and society were condemning Hophni and Phinehas, Samuel was being commended. In Samuel God had preserved a remnant of faithful servanthood at Shiloh. The New Testament recognized in the precocious spirituality of the boy Samuel a foreshadowing of Jesus’ own boyhood development (cf. [Luke 2:52](#)).

(5) Judgment is Pronounced Against the House of Eli [2:27–36](#)

An unnamed prophet came to Eli and pronounced terrifying words of judgment against the priest and his descendants. After reciting the historical background of God’s dealings with Eli’s ancestors, the man of God presented a litany of crimes against the Lord committed by the house of Eli. In a climactic conclusion the prophet then announced the Lord’s punishment (vv. [30–36](#)).

The pronouncement of judgment simultaneously had the effect of promising an end to the dominance of the house of Eli in priestly matters in Israel and opening the way for Torah promises relating to the descendants of Eleazar (cf. [Num 25:12–13](#)) to be fulfilled.

[2:27–29](#) The unnamed individual who spoke in the Lord’s name to Eli is termed a “man of God” (v. [27](#)), the second most common designation for a prophet in the Old Testament (used seventy-one times). The man of God’s statement opened with the classic introduction to the body of a prophetic speech, “This is what the LORD says” (lit., “Thus said Yahweh”). “Your father’s house” and “your father” were references to Eli’s forebear Aaron (cf. [14:3](#); [1 Chr 24:3](#)), whom Yahweh “chose out of all the tribes of Israel” to perform the priestly functions (cf. [Exod 28:1](#)). These functions included going up to the altar in the tabernacle courtyard (cf. [Exod 20:24](#)) and burning incense in the holy place (cf. [Exod 30:7–9](#); [40:5](#)), as well as all other official priestly activities performed while wearing “an ephod” (cf. [Exod 28:1–6](#)).

As noted in v. [28](#), the Lord ordained that the sacrificial meat portions given to him by offerers were to be eaten by the priests (cf. [Lev 7:34](#); [10:14](#)). However, the priests were “fattening” themselves by eating the “choice parts of every offering” (lit., “the first of every freewill offering”), that is, the fatty portion that was to be burned in the fire (cf. [Lev 7:25](#)). The use of plural pronouns in the Hebrew of “you scorn” and “fattening yourselves” in v. [29](#) indicates that Eli was implicated in some sense in the sin, even if it was only in the sense that as the eldest priest at the sanctuary he bore ultimate responsibility for what occurred there. However, while condemning their sin, he may have been participating in it. This interpretation is reinforced by the narrator’s comment in [4:18](#), where it is noted that Eli was “heavy”—a condition that could have resulted from eating the forbidden food.

Though Eli’s sons committed grave sins, Eli did not bear responsibility for their misconduct. He was condemned for his own sin—honoring his sons more than the Lord. This sin amounted to a violation of the First Commandment ([Exod 20:2–3](#)).

[2:30–36](#) The sins of Eli and his sons represented a breach of contract with the Lord. Thus, the Lord was no longer bound by the terms of the agreement. God expressed the conditional nature of his dealings with humanity with the epigram, “Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained” (v. [30](#)).

As a result of the house of Eli’s sins, the Lord would “cut short” (v. [31](#); lit., “shatter the arms of”) their “strength.” The practical outworking of this judgment was twofold. First, the current generations of Eli’s family would suffer penalties: Eli himself would witness distress in the Lord’s dwelling (cf. [4:13](#)), and Eli’s sons Hophni and Phinehas would die on the same day (cf. [4:11](#)), a sign confirming the reality of God’s judgment.

Second, future generations of Eli’s family would suffer penalties. They would persistently experience untimely deaths (cf. [22:18–19](#)), so that males who lived to old age would not be found among Eli’s descendants. By being denied elders, the most socially powerful age group of individuals in clan-based societies, the line of Eli would be denied a significant form of power and influence in society. Eli’s descendants would be disqualified from cultic service as well. The Lord would raise up another family to perform the most weighty duties associated with Israelite sanctuary worship. This promise appears to have been fulfilled with the rise of Zadok, who displaced Abiathar as the high priest in Israel (cf. [1 Kgs 2:35](#); [1 Chr 29:22](#)). The priestly line of Eli would become so unimportant in the religious power structure of future generations that they would not even be eligible to receive payment for the services they rendered (v. [36](#)).

The story of the downfall of the house of Eli plays an important role in Hebrew narrative because it is the last non-Zadokite priestly family with an active role in Old Testament narrative. When the Lord cursed Eli’s line, the way was cleared for Eleazar’s descendants, the promised heirs to the high priesthood, to assume their proper position. The details would be worked out in good time.