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Why Did Hannah Ask for "Seed of Men"?

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What was Hannah praying for? More specifically, how are we to explain the phrase זרע אנשים in 1 Sam 1:11? In plain terms, we of course understand that Hannah was praying to have a child. Our text has set this up as the basic point on which the plot of the story turns. As soon as the main characters—Elkanah and his two wives, Hannah and Peninnah—are identified, we are informed (v. 2), "Peninnah had children, but Hannah did not."

The setting of the story is the family's annual visit to Shiloh for worship and sacrifice. There is no reason to assume that the trip was made on the occasion of a yearly pilgrimage festival. The phrase זבח הימים, "annual sacrifice" (v. 21), simply refers to the sacrifice made annually by Elkanah and his family, which provided the setting of the events of vv. 3–19. Indeed, the course of the story would seem to argue against a public festival. There is no one on the scene but Elkanah's family and the high priest, Eli, and the latter seems to have plenty of time on his hands. All we are told about him is that he is sitting on his priestly throne at the entrance to the shrine watching Hannah mutter to herself. This is not what we would expect the chief priest to be doing on the busiest weekend of the year. If the festival was indeed a public occasion, our chapter's narrow focus is all the more evident. For our story is about one thing and one thing only: Hannah wants a child.

But the phrase with which she makes her request falls into a little-discussed category of biblical texts: those in which the process of exegesis runs in reverse. We ordinarily must understand a writer's words in order to interpret his meaning, but we sometimes find ourselves with a sense of what the writer *must* mean, though it has not been clearly expressed. In such cases our task is to explain how the writer's unusual choice of words was indeed meant to convey the meaning that we somehow intuit. My instincts say that this category is larger than we would like to admit, and that by the nature of the beast there must be examples where what we all "know

it means" is actually wrong. I intend to suggest here that Hannah's request is one such case.

The difficulty arises because—if I may step for a moment into my role as a professor of Biblical Hebrew—the phrase זרע אנשים means, and can only mean, "human offspring."[1] Indeed, the medieval interpreter David Kimhi does offer as one of his comments on this phrase the suggestion that Hannah was praying for a child who would not resemble a monkey or a eunuch. But the story has provided no reason that Hannah should fear an outcome of this kind. Others of the medievals join Kimhi in a further suggestion that what Hannah wanted was a child who would be a real "man"—righteous (as אנשים are called in 1 Kgs 2:32), prominent (1 Sam 17:12), and wise (Deut 1:13). The common understanding of the phrase among modern interpreters—from Henry Preserved Smith in the ICC a century ago to Jan P. Fokkelman in 1993—is that Hannah wants a son.[2] Bible translations too, from "a man child" of the KJV to "male seed" of Robert Alter[3] make the same assumption. Certainly neither this nor the hope that her child would be a worthy man is an absurd request, but according to the logic of the story neither of these is the request that Hannah is making.

This is not to say, of course, that Hannah did not want a child who would grow up to be righteous, prominent, and wise. She might even, if pressed, have expressed a preference for a male child. Elkanah's rhetorical question, "Am I not better to you than ten sons?" (v. 8), could be interpreted as support for this (though it *need* not be).[4] But this says nothing about what Hannah herself wants, and the narrator (in vv. 2 and 4) has carefully avoided framing the child's sex as the focus of the story. What Hannah wants is a child, plain and simple.

The careful interweaving of two chains of consecutive verbs—one describing what happened every year when Elkanah and his brood went to Shiloh, and one

[1] Most of the examples in *CAD* Z, s.v. *zeru* 5a, sometimes cited in connection with this expression, seem to contrast it with the possibility of divine offspring, confirming this interpretation.

[2] Henry Preserved Smith notes that זרע אנשים "does not occur again" but adds, "That she means *a male child* is evident" (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Samuel* [ICC; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909], 10). J. P. Fokkelman calls it "a unique expression which is difficult to interpret in any other way than as referring to *abundant* male descendants" (*Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analyses,* vol. 4, *Vow and Desire (I Sam. 1–12)* [Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993], 37, emphasis added).

[3] Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 5.

[4] On Elkanah's question, see 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. Athalya Brenner; Feminist Companion to the Bible 5; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 68–76.

describing what happened on one particular occasion[5]—demonstrates that the action of our story begins where it does because Hannah has reached the end of her rope. That is, Hannah had in fact given up on having a child in the ordinary human manner, and—driven to distraction by Peninnah's taunting and by her own despair—she has finally determined to use the occasion of her annual visit to the shrine of God to ask for help.

Beyond the obvious presumption that God could be turned to as a last resort in any personal crisis, it is clear that this would be particularly so in the case of female barrenness. In Genesis 30, Rachel is in exactly the same case as Hannah in 1 Samuel 1. "She had not borne Jacob [any children]" (Gen 30:1), while his other wife, Leah, had done so. She says to him, "Give me sons! If you don't, I'm going to die!" (ibid.). He responds angrily, "Am I in place of God, who has prevented you from being fertile?" (v. 2). The narrator of the book of Ruth explains the sequence of events as it would naturally be presumed to occur: "Boaz took Ruth as his wife and had intercourse with her. The Lord granted her conception and she bore a son" (Ruth 4:13). The first birth of a human child, in Gen 4:1, establishes the pattern: "Now, the man was intimate with his wife Eve and she conceived and bore Cain. She said, 'I have created a son with the Lord.'" In all three of these examples, the clear understanding is that the birth of a child is the result of a combination of two factors, sexual intercourse and divine intervention.[6]

That Hannah too is requesting divine intervention to give her a child is obvious on the face of it. I am suggesting that what Hannah asked for in the original telling of this story was not זרע אנשים but זרע אלהים, a child that would be given her by God. The difficult phrase זרע אנשים is an artifact, placed in her mouth by a kind of Tiqqun Soferim, a reflexive correction of Hannah's request by a scribe who (perhaps) misunderstood it and (certainly) found it uncomfortable. Two comparable examples in the MT come instantly to mind.

The first is Deut 32:8, "When the Most High separated the peoples and gave the sons of Adam their territories, he fixed the boundaries of people in proportion to the number of the Israelites." It has long been understood that the expression "the Israelites" (בני ישראל) is a scribal revision of an earlier phrase, "the divine beings" (בני אלהים).[7] The second example, just a few pages along from our verse, is 1 Sam 3:13, where the punishment of Eli's family is predicated on the fact that "his sons cursed to them [להם] and he did not rebuke them." Here too the awkward,

[5] *IBHS* 33.2.1c (550); Amit, "'Am I Not More Devoted,'" 68 n. 2.

[6] On this sort of "divine intervention" within the ordinary course of conception and birth as "a 'natural' miracle," see Uriel Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives* (trans. Lenn J. Schramm; Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 279 n. 56.

[7] For detailed discussion, see Jeffrey Tigay, *Deuteronomy* דברים: *The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (JPS Torah Commentary 5; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 302–3 and 513–15.

even ungrammatical idiom of cursing "to" someone, found nowhere else in the biblical text, is an artifact of scribal correction. What the text originally said was that Eli's sons had cursed "God" (אלהים).[8]

I have found no textual remnants of such an original reading in our verse; 4QSam[a], tantalizingly, has only the final ם of the word. But the difficulties of the phrase זרע אנשים disappear if Hannah, too, was seeking זרע אלהים—not a child who would be a god, but a child given to her, through a "natural miracle," by the God of Israel. Eli appropriately replies to her, ואלהי ישראל יתן את־שלתך (v. 17). He clearly intends a pious wish, "May the God of Israel grant your request." But the author knows that we readers will realize that Eli's utterance, unwittingly, is prophetic, perhaps even performative: "The God of Israel *will* grant your request."[9]

Such divine intervention was indeed appropriate for the birth of the hero that Hannah's son was destined to become. Moreover, it would read quite naturally in the folktale genre to which the original version of this story belonged—or which, at least, the story is mimicking.[10] At some later stage, a tradent overread Hannah's request, (perhaps) misinterpreted it, and corrected it out of existence, leaving us with the absurd phrase זרע אנשים. Such verses as Gen 32:29; Judg 9:9, 13; and Isa 7:13 contrast אנשים with אלהים in a way that shows how natural such a change would be from a scribal perspective.

It has long been understood that this chapter's thematic use of the verb שאל points to Saul, not Samuel, as the child whom Hannah is to bear.[11] From a folktale perspective, the miraculous birth of a future king would seem to suggest that both Hannah's original request and that put in her mouth by the emendation (as later interpreted) were fulfilled.

[8] See the discussion in, e.g., P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *I Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* (AB 8; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 96. This example is noted in *Mek. Beshalach* 6 to Exod 15:7, "the oldest list" of such corrections; for fuller discussion, see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 66–77. (Fishbane does not discuss 1 Sam 1:11 in this context; his remark on p. 186 that "Samuel was not the first fruit of [Hannah's] womb" is puzzling.) 1 Samuel 1:11 is not in the lists of *tiqqunei soferim* in W. E. Barnes, "Ancient Corrections in the Text of the Old Testament (Tikkun Sopherim)," *JTS* 1 (1900): 387–414; or Carmel McCarthy, *The Tiqqune Sopherim: and the Other Theological Corrections in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament* (OBO 36; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981).

[9] Putting the subject first eliminated the need to attach the conjunction to the verb, which would have demanded either a converted perfect or ו + jussive, making the desired ambiguity impossible.

[10] Our story's beginning, "There once was a man" (1 Sam 1:1), in contrast to Josh 1:1; Judg 1:1; and 2 Sam 1:1, is clearly a folktale beginning. See Michael Carasik, "Three Biblical Beginnings," in *Beginning/Again: Toward a Hermeneutics of Jewish Texts* (ed. Aryeh Cohen and Shaul Magid; New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2002), 1–22, here 10. In Stith Thompson's categorization of folktales, this sort of story would fall under theme T540, "Miraculous birth"; the 540 number puts it in the 500–559 category of "Supernatural Helpers" (Thompson, *The Folktale* [New York: Dryden Press, 1946], 499, 483; see further 86 and 340).

[11] See Carasik, "Three Biblical Beginnings"; and the commentaries.