

TEXTS IN DIALOGUE

**HANNAH'S SONG (I SAM. 2:1-10):
A HISTORY OF RECEPTION IN *TEHILLIM* (PSALMS), *TARGUM YONATAN* (JONATHAN'S
TRANSLATION), AND *TALMUD BAVLI* (THE BABYLONIAN TALMUD)**

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Good afternoon. It is an honor to be invited to speak with you all today about a portion of the Hebrew Bible that is meaningful to me personally as a Jew, as well as memorable to me because of the two contexts in which I have previously studied it. I will return to these memories shortly. Now, our text, the prayer of Hannah or *Channa* in I Samuel 2, is situated as a song of praise to God on the occasions of Hannah's miraculous conception and delivery of her son Samuel, or Shmuel. Yet this song is more than an expression of thanks; it is also a remarkable declaration and articulation of a belief system, and as we will see, it has been cited by scholars as evidence for reconstructing the origins of certain Jewish theological beliefs, such as in the ultimate resurrection of the dead. Additionally, Channa's song or prayer has also been the source for varied and meaningful Jewish exegesis, as we shall see by exploring the reception of Channa's song in the Psalms, an ancient Aramaic translation of the song, and in the Babylonian Talmud. Literarily, this prayer and its Psalm-like features will raise textual and theological questions about the song's originality as well as its genre. In what follows, we will explore Channa's song, first on its own, and then in conversation with other biblical and rabbinic texts. My hope is that this will generate a great deal of concrete material as well as broader themes and questions for us to chew on and consider as we then move to discuss the text we've chosen to put this song in conversation with, Luke's Magnificat.

First, allow me to wax autobiographical. I mentioned my previous study of this song. I first studied this song in a proper classroom setting as an undergraduate at Yeshiva University, a Jewish university in New York City. In my class, I studied this song and its reception within its Aramaic "translation," (a notion I will touch upon later on), and this song became a point of great interest to me in what has become an area of some specialty for me: the history of biblical hermeneutics, or the ways in which the Bible has been interpreted over time. At that point in my career, I was laying a foundation for this area within Jewish hermeneutics, without knowledge of Jewish or Christian sources outside of a traditional Jewish canon.

A few years later, I revisited this song while getting my Master's degree in a class at the University of Chicago, taught by a well-known Lutheran theologian and scholar of the Septuagint, Professor Ralph Klein. Here, we examined both the song from Samuel as well as in Luke's Magnificat, and we compared our Samuel text to other ancient Jewish textual variants. This course introduced me to new avenues of study, and expanded my horizons within the field of hermeneutics, and seeing the ways in which texts interpret other texts. In particular, it demonstrated the need for Jews to see the reception history of Jewish texts in ancient Christianity, as this can provide a wellspring of

insight into first century Jewish hermeneutics. It is in the spirit of *both* my traditional Jewish education and my secular / Lutheran education that I wish to explore some of these findings and thoughts with you.

Now, the context of this song is the successful aftermath of Channa's desperate supplications to God to give her a child, as she had suffered perpetual barrenness while her husband's other wife, Peninah, had been able to conceive and deliver multiple children. Finally, she gives birth to Shmuel, or Samuel, who will be the final judge of Israel and the transitional prophetic figure from a system of judges to that of kings as the primary mode of Israelite leadership.

I want to turn now to some of the early Jewish interpretations of this song, which interestingly share the view that this prayer is poetic prophecy. The *Targum Yonatan*, an early Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible, "translates" the song as a detailed prophecy of positive and salvific events to be divinely bestowed upon Israel in Channa's descendants' lifetimes. To fully appreciate this "translation," we need to understand a series of hermeneutical practices being invoked, very traditional to ancient and medieval Jewish biblical exegesis. There is a notion of *atomistic* reading, or reading each word, in some cases even each *letter*, both with *and without* concern for its textual context. This means that a word or phrase can be a source of meaning that is detached from its immediate surroundings. This is different, but related, to a phenomenon carefully dubbed by Professor James Kugel *omnisignificance*, or the endless depth of meaning within a given letter, word, or phrase, a characteristic posture of ancient and medieval Jewish exegesis, and one that remains present in contemporary Jewish commentary, as well. This is my translation of an excerpt from the Aramaic *targum*:

And Channa prayed with the spirit of prophecy and she said, "Now Shmuel my son will in the future be a prophet for Israel; in his days, they will be saved from the hand of the Philistines, and by his hands they (ie the Philistines) shall be enslaved to them (ie Israel). Miracles and acts of victory thus strengthen my heart in the portion that the Lord has given to me. And even Heyman (mentioned in Psalms), son of Yoel the son of my son Samuel, will in the future arise, he and his 14 sons, to be the ones speaking in song, accompanied by flutes and lyres with their brothers the priests, as they give praise in the Holy Temple.

Here, we are struck by a number of things: for one, the prophetic nature of the song is made explicit; it is, indeed, founded on the language of "the anointed one" and the "horn" that has been raised, terms which will indeed be used in connection with later figures, and of David in particular. We should also note that this "translation" is a translation that goes well beyond a word-for-word translation and dives deep into interpretation. It connects the song of Channa to the Levites who will one day sing psalms in the temple, thus in some ways framing this song as perhaps the first psalm of its kind. This too might initially sound far-fetched, but might actually have a strong textual basis, as we will now discuss.

Hannah's song contains many parallels and verbatim repetitions throughout the Psalms. This song has striking parallels to psalm 113 in particular. Both these texts emphasize the incomparability of God to anything else, and the assertion of God's ability to control man and woman's fate, including the curing of barrenness, and the remedying of poverty.

Let us now consider the *Talmudic* reception of this song. The Talmud, a complex corpus comprising texts from as early as 200 CE (or earlier) to perhaps 800 CE, contains a number of references back to our biblical text within its myriad and varied discussions concerning a range of Jewish, often legal topics. One reference is found in the Tractate *Horayot*, in the context of discussing and comparing the ways in which the ancient kings and priests of Israel were anointed, respectively. Oil was used as the substance of choice, and it was often poured (or taken by fingers and placed, depending on various rabbinic understandings) upon the head of the priest or king being anointed. This was done first by containing the oil within a *keren*, a horn. Now, in our song, in I Samuel 2:1, Channa oddly says that "my horn is raised / exalted," and at the end of the song, that "And God shall raise the horn of his anointed one." The Talmud wisely sees this as prophetically describing the anointing oil of Hannah's descendants, particularly David and Solomon, both of whom were

anointed by oil *via a horn* in contrast to a jug, the latter of which was used in the anointing of such Israelite kings as Jehu and Saul. The Talmud therefore understands the significance of this *keren* to be an omen of sorts, for those anointed by a horn of oil instead of a jug were then promised an eternal kingdom, as God promises David in II Samuel 7. Thus, the Talmud sees the anointing by oil as a good omen for an eternal kingdom.

Another passage in the Talmud in *Sanhedrin* (92b) discusses the famous passage from the book of Ezekiel, chapter 38, in which Ezekiel sees the resurrection of the dead in the Valley of the Dry Bones. Note that already, even without mention of the song, we might already see how the song *could* be referenced here, as it mentions God's ability to make people live or die. After all, the Professor Jon Levenson has persuasively demonstrated that Channa's song is actually an important textual basis and indicator of ancient origins to the Jewish belief in the bodily resurrection of the dead. There is a tradition that these resurrected people in Ezekiel sang a song to rejoice in their newfound life, and the Talmud asks as to what song they sang. One opinion posed is that they sang verse 6 of Hannah's song: "The LORD killeth, and maketh alive; He bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up." This is a wonderful example of the kind of *intertextual* relationships that early rabbinic Midrash often establishes; in other words, a common hermeneutic is to solve an ambiguity found in one biblical text with another biblical text.

I'd like to close this survey of Jewish textual reception of Channa's song by returning to the song within the book of Samuel, and by resituating it within the ordered corpus of Jewish biblical texts. Hannah is the leading figure in the first chapter and a half of the book of Samuel, which, for Jews, comes immediately after the book of Judges. As the Jewish Studies teacher Yael Leibowitz has taught, Judges ends with the ultimate degradation of women: the concubine of Gibeah is raped and murdered, and all of Israel is in complete disarray. The book of Samuel begins with Channa, however, who restores the dignity of womankind. Even her very barrenness puts her on par with the other two righteous, barren women of *Tanakh*: Sarah and Rachel, the matriarchs. It is my hope that we all walk in Channa's righteous footsteps, always striving to give dignity to an ever-troubled world.

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