

I Samuel

Lesson 2 - Chapter 1

Today we start our study of 1st Samuel in earnest. We had an introduction last week and found that 1st Samuel is part of a 4-book set of Holy Scripture consisting of 1st and 2nd Samuel along with 1st and 2nd Kings that originally were but one large unified book. It was when the translation of the original Hebrew scriptural documents into Greek occurred that this process of dividing of the Hebrew book of Kingdoms (ultimately into 4) began. Do not think of this division process as negative, any more than the eventual division of books into chapters, and chapters into verses was a corruption. It was only for convenience sake, and for a means to better to communicate and study God's Word that these modifications were made and it caused no substantial harm.

The result of this Hebrew to Greek translation that took place in Alexandria, Egypt around 250 years before the birth of Christ was a work that came to be called the Septuagint, or the LXX for short. It was actually a pretty good and faithful translation; but as you have seen in our many Torah Class lessons of the earlier books of the Old Testament, there are always questionable choices that a translator necessarily must make when translating a document from one language to another. And much of the issue of inherent translation difficulty is based on the rather simple and self-evident reality that a culture and its accompanying native language are tightly woven together and inseparable. It is but historic fact that the leaders of conquering empires have generally moved rapidly to require that usage of their own native language be imposed upon the newly conquered peoples, because if you can destroy the national language you can disconnect the people from their national identity. Once you do that, the assimilation process is faster and easier, and in but one or two generations resistance to the new political reality is all but forgotten except among a few radicals.

The reason for this is easily seen: every culture develops traditions and recalls their own unique history by memorializing it and handing it down generation to generation. A few millennia ago this handing-down process was accomplished exclusively by word of mouth; later these traditions were handed down using alphabets and writing. Certain cultural and societal concepts were (and are) unique to that culture alone, and whatever the developed language used, words were invented to describe and communicate these concepts among themselves. For instance: the word and concept of democracy has one meaning in America, but quite another in England, yet another in France, and it is wholly different in modern Israel. Democracy in America has been historically and culturally based on intense individualism, but in France it is based on equally as intense collectivism. In modern Israel democracy is a unique blend of theocracy, socialism, communism, and representative government that has a strong authoritarian thread running all through it. Thus when we leave America and visit one of these other so-called democratic countries, we can be quite surprised at how different they comprehend democracy than we do.

So when we look at the Bible in English and read a word or phrase that is easily recognizable to us, while it may seem on the surface to be communicating the same concept in our modern Western society that the original Hebrew writer had in mind, often times it is not. This same problem arose when the **very first** translation of the Hebrew Bible to another language (Greek) was attempted, and I don't think it's very hard to imagine how some Hebrew cultural and traditional concepts weren't carried across the language barrier in their fullest or most accurate sense. But now complicate it further by taking the Greek and translating it to English, or taking the Greek and translating it to Latin and then the Latin to English and the problem of further losing the original biblical cultural perspective at every step, multiplies. Lose the original cultural perspective and the all-important meaning can get lost along with it.

That problem doesn't get any easier for us in studying these next 4 books of the Tanach. So we're going to perhaps look at more Hebrew words and their nuances than we ever have. We're going to look closer at the nuances of the words and how it every so slightly, but importantly, changes what we take from it. We're also going to put to work what we have learned thus far from the Torah, because as we move along through the Old Testament it is assumed that the reader knows what came before it, and is familiar with Israel's beginnings and history as well as God's Laws and commands that under girds it all. So here we go.

Israel is not a unified nation at the time of Samuel; in fact we can only speak of Israel as an entity in a very general sense, certainly not as a unified body. Rather Israel is now merely a loose conglomeration of tribes and their many clans, and warfare among these Israelite tribes and clans has become all too regular and common as they vie for territorial dominance, which is the norm for tribal societies but ought not be for God's set-apart people. Such instability means that neighboring nations have a much easier time in attacking various areas of the Promised Land because it is unlikely that unless a tribe that is currently at peace would see any self-interest in coming to the aid of a brother tribe that was under attack, why would they take the risk?

Many of the Canaanite peoples and nations (that were there when Joshua first led Israel into Canaan) are still there and as entrenched as ever. The Philistines are quite powerful at this time, but their influence is mostly in the southern and central regions of Canaan, and primarily concentrated along the Mediterranean Coast and the narrow coastal plain known as the Shefelah. Open warfare is not the norm between the southern Hebrew tribes and the Philistines, although skirmishes do break out from time to time; rather the political situation is that the Philistines are anything but brutish barbarians. They are quite sophisticated and use their power wisely. They prefer a kind of peaceful co-existence with the 3 or 4 southern/central Israelite tribes PROVIDED these Israelite tribes kowtow to Philistia and don't do things that they see as provocative or threatening. It is not at all that Israel was to declare downright allegiance to Philistia, only that they remained docile and accepted the Philistines' dominance of the region. And that Israel didn't defame the Philistines gods, but rather showed respect.

On the other hand Philistia certainly had in mind that within probably another generation or two, if they played their cards right, they would be the de-facto government over all of southern and central Canaan (including the Israelite tribes that lived there, of course), and the question of who was in charge would become a settled matter rather naturally and with limited

bloodshed.

So while the Lord had in the past sent a number of deliverers (called **Shofetim**, Judges) to the various tribes of Israel to save them from the outright attacks and vicious oppressions of various foreigners, Israel was even more fragmented and vulnerable now than when God gave them their first Judge, Othniel, some 300 years or so earlier. Even the special priesthood that God had established with Moses' own tribe, Levi, was entirely dysfunctional and barely operating. So into these dark circumstances God would send a new kind of savior to usher Israel into a new kind (at least for them) of rule. As always Yehoveh's purpose was demonstrate His marvelous mercy by rescuing His people from a predicament of their own making.

Let's read the opening chapter of the book of 1st Samuel.

READ 1ST SAMUEL CHAPTER 1 all

The story opens with identifying the region where our tale unfolds and of course names the family it would center on. The family is from a place called **Ramathaim-Zophim**, described as being located in the Hills of Ephraim. **Ramathaim** is a common place-name and it means "double heights", or "two hills". Thus it is further identified as **Zophim**, which denote a clan name, essentially giving us, "the place of two hills in the territory of **Zuph**". Later we will see that this same man is said to be from "**Ramah**", which is just of shortened version of **Ramathaim-Zophim**. **Ramah** is a known place today, and in fact you can go there and visit the tomb of the namesake of this book of the bible, Samuel (it's not far from Jerusalem).

The man from **Ramah** is the first character identified in this narrative and his name is Elkanah ("God created"). A short genealogy is given to help define his family but at the same time it also confuses the situation a bit because it says that the clan leader of Elkanah's family is an Ephrathite. A few lessons ago we learned that this term "Ephrathite" can denote a couple of different things depending on the context; it can be synonymous with Ephraimite (being of the tribe of Ephraim), or it can mean the person is from a village called **Ephrath** that is located just outside of Beit-Lechem, or it can also mean a person who is from a clan of abundance (because ephrath means fruitful). Or there is a 4th option in our case, that Elkanah was some combination of all the aforementioned possibilities. This is why, depending on the translator or teacher, you will hear that Samuel is a Levite (we'll get to that in a moment), or he was from the tribe of Ephraim, or he might have been from the tribe of Benjamin (since the village of **Ephrath** was located in Benjamite territory).

The genealogy given to us pretty well cements that Elkanah's father's family line was from the tribe of Levi so from that sense Samuel was for sure a Levite. In fact we can go to 1st Chronicles 6 and there we'll get a more complete family genealogy that connects Elkanah all the way back to Kohath, one of the sons of Levi. In addition we see that Elkanah was a customary name used within the **Kohathite** clan. Yet there is no denying that there is some additional family attachment to the tribes of Ephraim or Benjamin. It is possible that it is NOT a family attachment per se that is being communicated, but rather merely that this family of Levites resided in the territory of Benjamin or Ephraim because, after all, the Levites inherited

no territory for their own but rather were given cities to live in scattered throughout the 12 Israelite tribal territories.

Verse 2 explains that this man Elkanah had two wives, **P'ninah** and **Hannah** (pronounced not like ha-naw but more like cha-naw). This means that Elkanah was reasonably well to do; by this time in Hebrew history a man with more than one wife more often than not had two wives for as much as a status symbol as anything else. Since in the Middle East having an heir was critically important, a man might marry a second woman if his first wife couldn't seem to produce him a son quick enough, and indeed it was that **P'ninah** produced an heir for Elkanah when Hannah couldn't seem to.

The story set-up continues with the information that this pious family went up every year to Shiloh to observe some annual festival and to sacrifice. There is a great deal of conjecture as to just what that festival might have been; was it one of the 3 great pilgrimage festivals as ordained by God in Leviticus (Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot), or was it something else entirely? In fact the evidence is that there were traditional private family and/or clan festivals held at Shiloh that had nothing to do with these Levitical feast days, and that is very probably the case here.

Shiloh was the location of the Wilderness Tabernacle, and was about 20 miles north of Jerusalem. The Tent Shrine of the Israelites had been there since the days of Joshua and remained as the dwelling place of the Ark of the Covenant, thus the High Priest was also there. Eli was the High Priest at this time, and his two sons were undoubtedly the chief priests directly under him. It is interesting that **Phinehas** and **Hophni** are both Egyptian names and not Hebrew; however I doubt we should make too much out of this as it was traditional to name some of each succeeding generation after folks from the previous generation, and we read about a man named **Phinehas**, a Levite, during the days of Israel wandering in the wilderness; so I'm fairly certain no inference to Egyptian loyalties are intended.

We are told that Elkanah and his family went up to Shiloh annually to worship **Yehoveh Tzava'ot**, a phrase that is usually rendered in English as "the Lord of Hosts". This is a brand new title for the God of Israel, and the first time in the bible it is discovered. There is no evidence that before Samuel's time that it was in use. We'll find it employed in 3 different combinations from here forward in Holy Scripture: **Elohim Tzava'ot** (GOD of hosts), **Adonai Tzava'ot** (LORD of hosts), and **YHWH Tzava'ot** (YEHOVEH of hosts).

What does that title, Lord of Hosts, really mean? What is it trying to get across? Well in Genesis the term "hosts" is used in conjunction with two things: angels and stars. Notice in both cases **Tzava'ot** (hosts, plural) is speaking of heavenly hosts, or better, heavenly bodies. A "host" of something means it is a multitude, or it's a countless number (it is virtually synonymous with the biblical expression, 'as many as the sands of the sea'). So at times the bible will speak of a "host" of angels or a "host" of stars but when it does, the Hebrew word is not **tzava'ot** but rather **tzava**. Now this is technical but if you'll pay attention this will give you a little bible fact to impress and dazzle your friends with. When the bible uses the term **tzava**, it is used like an adjective; that is, a **tzava** (a host) of stars. But we'll also find the bible using a kind of shorthand form of the phrase that means the same thing. Rather than say, for instance,

tzava malachim (host of angels), at times the bible will just say **tzava'ot**, meaning “hosts” (plural). That is the word **tzava'ot** just stands by itself, and you won't see the entire phrase “host of angels”. So when we see the word “hosts” (plural) just used by itself (as the subject or noun), then it MEANS a huge army of stars or a huge army of angels (depending on the context). **Tzava** is an adjective that explains a noun (like stars or angels); **Tzava'ot** is a noun that is a shorthand meaning for host of stars or host of angels. Another common translation of **Tzava'ot** is “heavenly hosts” (and again, depending on the context, can be referring to angels, or stars, or both).

Thus when we see the 3 forms of **Elohim Tzava'ot**, **Adonai Tzava'ot**, or **YHWH Tzava'ot** they are all alluding to the God who is the God of BOTH the stars and the angels; each innumerable in quantity. And of course there is an interesting characteristic of stars and angels that we need to consider: stars are physical objects, while angels are spiritual beings. Stars are visible, angels are invisible. So this title for God that is expressed in 3 slightly different ways is a majestic expression meant to speak of the King and Master over all the seen and the unseen, and God's created creatures and God's created objects. There's a lot behind those small Hebrew words that is not so easy to bring across with a simple transliteration.

Verse 4 explains that Elkanah was up in Shiloh making his annual sacrifice, and he gave a portion of the sacrifice to his wife **P'ninah**, but he gave a “double” portion to his wife Hannah “because he loved her”. And the sense of this (at least in the English) is that he showed extra love to Hannah because she was unable to have children; that is, Elkanah felt sorry for her and his heart went out to her. Further, that it was the Lord who was KEEPING Hannah from having children. Interesting; more and more we're seeing that the mindset is that whatever happens (good or bad) to the worshipper of Yehoveh is of the Lord. The Hebrews (rightfully) had no problem with the idea that the Lord could send catastrophe or He could send blessing to one of His own according to His will. Thus it wasn't with a “blaming” attitude that Hannah was saying that God “shut up her womb”, it was just a matter of fact; it was with the simple understanding that nothing happens without the Lord's approval so at the very least God approved of her barrenness.

Now I made this last point (before we dissect the first part of this verse) because it is common Christian-eze to say that the Lord is in control of everything, and nothing happens without the Lord allowing it. On the other hand the rather standard evangelical doctrine is that nothing but good comes from the Lord, and He would never send something “bad” our way. So if something bad happens it's the devil. Therefore a lot of modern Believers paint a picture of God that has Him actively sending blessings, but passively standing aside and allowing calamities. The Hebrews sure don't see it that way, and this is because that is not what the bible says about God.

Here's how Hannah sees the nature of her problem (as most Hebrew women of her time would have, or should have, seen it): the Lord actively and purposely affected her body and thus made it so she could not have children. The reason for such a harsh choice might not have been known to Hannah, but she was perfectly comfortable that it God's unassailable right to do it. And by the way, do you recall that Na'omi, the aged and childless widow from the book of Ruth, made just such a statement expressing that same attitude that it was the LORD

who put her in such a bitter condition of poverty and hopelessness?

To Hannah's thinking there were two overriding reasons that might have accounted for her barren state: 1) she had sinned and this curse of childlessness was her punishment, or 2) she had NOT sinned but the Lord had His own undisclosed purpose for closing up her womb. While I can't be 100% sure of which it was (although there seems to be no hint that sin was involved), Hannah also seems to be uncertain and soon when we untangle a couple of more verses we'll see that Hannah suspects that she may have sinned and is being punished, but would like divine restoration if that is the case. I'm not sure I have the ability to paint the scope of the humiliation and pain for Hannah; not being able to give birth practically negated her role as a human female. She wasn't a whole woman. It was apparently the norm for the village women (at least some of them) in that era to poke fun, or make outright disparaging remarks, at a barren woman because she was unable to perform the very thing she was born to do, and that made her a lesser person. If that woman's husband wasn't wealthy enough to be able to marry a 2nd wife, then he wouldn't have an heir, which means that his life essence would end at the grave and his family line would cease. And to the ancient mind this was all the fault of the woman. These disastrous consequences lay solely at her feet. One can only imagine the terrible state of mind a woman like Hannah endured.

Now back to the top of verse 4 and the sacrifice Elkanah was making. It had to have been a specific class of sacrifice called a **Zevah Shelamim**, because it was one of the few kinds that a worshipper could eat a portion of it. In fact with this kind of sacrifice the Law gave the bulk of sacrificial animal to the worshipper for food. But it also means that this wasn't the ONLY kind of sacrifice that Elkanah performed. An '**Olah and Minchah** were required before a **Zevah Shelamim** could occur.

But there's some other interesting aspects of verse 5: where our bibles say that Elkanah gave Hannah the double portion "because he loved her", is not quite correct. Rather it should read, "It was Hannah whom he loved." That is quite different and it immediately says that he had love for Hannah and something less for **P'ninah** (which will explain what comes a bit later). Thus it is NOT that Elkanah felt sorry for Hannah and thus gave her an extra portion of meat from the sacrifice to make her feel better; rather it is that he had great love for Hannah, and little for **P'ninah**. It was outright favoritism and preference by Elkanah, much like we saw between Jacob and Rachel, versus Jacob and Leah. In nearly every situation we'll read about in Scripture where a man has more than one wife (or concubine) we find trouble, because it is simply not in the human nature of women to accept being but one of several in a man's household, and it is not in the human nature of men to love several women equally.

Verses 6 and 7 tell us that **P'ninah** taunted Hannah for not having children, and this made Hannah feel bad. And every year this whole nasty scene was replayed because they would all go up together to Shiloh for the family feast. Elkanah would sacrifice and give Hannah an extra portion, and then **P'ninah** would retaliate by slinging stinging words of derision towards Hannah for being childless. This particular year it so upset Hannah that she couldn't eat her festive meal and instead just wept and wept. It was a kind of an ironic situation that I'm sure **P'ninah** delighted in that Hannah couldn't enjoy the extra portion that her husband had given to her.

I can only imagine what a difficult living situation it must have been for those two women, both legal wives. It would have been natural for jealousy to be front and center at all times; and for them to spar over getting their share of their husbands attention and affections. Thus we see that verse 6 even calls **P'ninah** "Hannah's rival"; let's look at that for a moment.

To translate the first part of verse 6 as saying that **P'ninah** was Hannah's rival is on course, but stops short. The Hebrew word is **sara** and more recent understanding of the Ugarit language (an early Semitic cousin of Hebrew) shows us that this is actually an informal name for **a kind** of wife that was quite usual in ancient Middle Eastern society. It literally means "rival wife", or "co-wife". In a larger sense it can mean 2nd wife, but not in the sense that one of the 2 wives was first and the other the 2nd. In this usage both **P'ninah** and Hannah were **sara**; co-wives, legally equal wives, of Elkanah. So although on the surface it seems as though the English text is telling us that the taunting was occurring because they behaved as "rivals", in fact the Hebrew explains that it's more akin to merely saying, "the other wife" without characterizing her behavior or attitude as good or bad, thoughtful or thoughtless.

Elkanah because he greatly loved Hannah (but not so much **P'ninah**) tenderly tried to soothe Hannah and rhetorically asked her why she was crying (he knew full well the matter). So he tried to get her see the bright side that even though she could give him no sons he treated her as wonderfully as a man would have treated a wife that had given him ten sons (which of course is one reason **P'ninah** who had given Elkanah an heir was constantly miffed). Hannah was, of course, still despondent. But this time she was going to take matters into her own hands. She was going to seek out the One who was causing her grief and see if something couldn't be done about it.

So in verse 9, after the family finished their festive banquet meal, Hannah walks over to the Sanctuary Tent and confronts Yehoveh in prayer. Eli the High Priest was sitting in his chair at the front entrance to the Tabernacle and of course noticed her. A chair was an item of furniture reserved for those of higher ranking and it was considered a position of honor. A chair was not a usual piece of furniture, most people of that age merely sat on the ground or on a rock. Hannah is weeping and begins her praying in front of Eli. We're told that she made a sort of bargain with God that was in the form of a vow: IF God would relent and open her womb THEN she would return that child to God by means of dedicating him for Sanctuary work for his entire life.

Let's carefully examine just what it is that Hannah said to the Lord. First, we need to give much merit to Hannah for coming to the Lord for refuge in her affliction. Remember: she's not coming to YHWH asking that He override an accidental biological problem with her body or that the Lord overcome a malicious act by Satan. She's coming to Him asking Him to relent and to release her from a condition that the Lord has intentionally put upon her for some unknown reason. Second, the REASON for her requesting this favor from the Lord is to relieve her humiliation. In other words, this has nothing to do with anyone but herself. Her husband, Elkanah, has a vibrant bevy of children and at least 1 heir thanks to the fruitfulness of **P'ninah's** womb, so there is no family or inheritance problem that Hannah producing a child would solve. Rather it is as we discussed earlier: it was life's purpose for a female to give birth; thus to be barren brought a never-ending sense of guilt and worthlessness to Hannah

that no amount of “double portions” could replace.

Thus for Hannah it wasn't necessary that she raise this child, but merely to bring this new life into the world thereby fulfilling her womanly purpose and ending her humiliation. The bargain was that IF the Lord would do this, THEN she would give that child up to God as the One who gave this child to her; and not merely in a figurative and spiritual sense (as we do at baby dedications), but physically and literally she would remove the child from her motherly presence and give him over to the priesthood in service to YHWH, permanently.

Now I don't want to paint all vows as bargains; many were simply promises to the Father that asked nothing in return. But as we have seen many times, vows often were part and parcel with beseeching the Lord for a specific deliverance. Yet I also think we need to understand that a vow made to God even as a bargain is a serious matter, and Yeshua counsels against doing it NOT because it's sinful, but because there can be unintended consequences.

The vow that Hannah vowed was the vow of a Nazarite, and it was done in a similar mold as Samson's mother did to have her shut-up womb revitalized. Both Samson and Samuel would be lifelong Nazarites, which was a rather rare occurrence. A Nazarite vow was usually for a specific temporary time. Now some scholars say Samuel was NOT a Nazarite, and this was due to a couple of lines of thought. First, Hannah did NOT say Samuel would be a Nazarite, she only said his hair would not be cut. And second, it is questionable that a Levite would ever be a Nazarite. The whole idea of a Nazarite was that a member of the one of the 12 secular tribes (the other Israelite tribes) could assume a special status that enabled him to serve the Lord in a similar manner to the Levites. Levites were automatically born with the right and the requirement to serve God at the Tabernacle in one capacity or another. So it's kind of redundant (at the least) for Hannah to make a Nazarite vow on behalf of her Levite son-to-be, Samuel. However keep in mind that this was a very confused and dysfunctional era and we don't even see overt mention that Elkanah was a Levite. We also see no evidence of Elkanah performing some kind of sanctuary service at the Tabernacle in Shiloh, which all Levites were technically obligated to do. So again, using a baby dedication as an example, there is utterly no heavenly need for a parent to stand on a stage and have a Pastor give the baby's life to the Lord. Every Believing parent has the right to do that any time, anywhere, without a formal ceremony or a church authority to preside. But a lot of young Christian parents don't fully comprehend that so they go through the unneeded (but not at all wrong) step of participating in a formal baby dedication ceremony. Hannah may have been doing something similar by dedicating Samuel to the Lord, when in fact his Levite heritage already gave him that special holy status required for sanctuary service.

On the other hand, Levites were generally not required to begin their fulltime sanctuary service until they were 25 years old, and normally they were released from it by the age of 50. In our case with Samuel, he would be the Lord's property right away due to Hannah's vow, and Samuel would begin to serve even as a small child and would not be released until his death. Therefore I have no doubts that this was a Nazarite vow.

We'll continue with chapter 1 next week.