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Between Lament and Doxology: 1 Samuel 2.1–10

MARK AND ANGELA MANASSEE

In many ways we live in a time of barrenness. Some people have seen their retirement savings cut in half (a common warning is not to open your IRA statements). Some people have seen their home equity drop to the point where they owe more than their home is worth. Over 10 percent of the population in the United States is unemployed. And in California, over 12 percent of the population faces unemployment.

Churches are also dealing with situations of barrenness. Many churches are seeing contributions decline alongside the decline in the economy. Church staffing is cut back and budgets are trimmed. Moreover, many churches are finding their membership in a state of decline.¹ Many churches are discovering that strategic planning and old modes of leadership are not bringing transformation. Leaders are learning that past successes do not guarantee future possibilities in this time of barrenness.

Moreover, there are personal times of barrenness that know no season. There is the barrenness of divorce. There is the barrenness of chronic illness. There is the barrenness of vocational dissatisfaction. There is the barrenness that comes from the fragmentation of modern life. And some people deal literally with barrenness—that is, infertility.

The song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2.1–10 comes out of the context of barrenness. Hannah’s joyful doxology can only be fully appreciated and reclaimed for contemporary life after her situation of barrenness is fully appreciated.

THE STRANGE, SAD WORLD OF BEGETTING AND BARRENNESS IN THE BIBLE²

Begetting is part of the creation story of Genesis 1. God offers promise and blessing upon the first couple when God says, “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1.28). As a result, children are seen as a blessing and gift of God. When God announces that the whole of creation is “very good” (Gen 1.31), this affirmation includes human sexuality and the promise of children.

However, the story does not end there, for human sin enters the stage in the relations between humanity and God, and between the first couple. The result of human sin is what we call “the curse” (Gen 3.16). And while the curse specifically mentions patriarchy and the pain of childbirth, the marks of the curse are many. Several stories in the Pentateuch make it clear that not only is the pain of childbirth a mark of the curse, but so also is barrenness.

Various measures are taken against barrenness in the Old Testament. We read of mandrakes, the plant that was regarded as an aphrodisiac and an aid to fertility (Gen 30.14–16). Female slaves could be treated as “animated tools,” or living receptacles to assist in reproduction (Gen 16.1–6; 30.1–13). Brothers could be under obligation to produce an heir for a deceased brother without child (Deut 25.5–10). As Verhey points out,

1. For Churches of Christ see “Church in America Marked by Decline,” *Christian Chronicle* (February 2009).

2. Allen Verhey, *Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2003), 254–262. We are indebted to Verhey for this section.

Patriarchy always risks reducing women to their reproductive capacities. And women in a patriarchal culture are not only at risk of both desperation about their barrenness and jealousy about a sister's fertility but also at risk of being co-opted into reducing other women to their reproductive capacities, to "animated tools" of their desire for children to call their own.³

Hannah finds herself in such a situation of barrenness. Her husband, Elkanah, has another wife, Peninnah, who had children but we are told Hannah "had no children" (1 Sam 1.2). Moreover, Peninnah "used to provoke her [Hannah] severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb" (1 Sam 1.6).

Elkanah's attempt at husbandly concern does not help the situation, "Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" (1 Sam 1.8). His insensitivity to her pain only furthers her shame. Hannah's barrenness not only causes her shame but despair. For no child means no son, which means no heir, which implies no future.

It is in this situation of barrenness that Hannah goes into the temple of YHWH in Shiloh to present herself before God. She is "deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly" (1 Sam 1.10). In her prayer she asks YHWH to look down upon her in her distress and remember her. If YHWH grants her a son she commits to dedicate him back to God as a nazirite.⁴ In the temple, the priest Eli overhears Hannah and assures her that her prayer will be heard and honored.

We are then concisely told, "Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel for she said, 'I have asked him of the LORD'" (1 Sam 1.19–20).

HANNAH'S SONG

It is in response to the God who has "remembered her" that Hannah breaks into doxology and prayer.

Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by his actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's, and on them he has set the world. He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed."⁵ (1 Sam 2.1–10)

3. Ibid., 260.

4. Nazarites are those men or women who entered a consecrated state through their own vow or the vow of their parents. There were three main requirements for a nazirite to remain in this consecrated condition: to refrain from drinking the fruit of the vine and other intoxicants, not to cut one's hair during one's term as a nazirite, and not to go near a dead body—even one's own parents (Num 6.1–21).

5. Most scholars believe this hymn did not originate with Hannah but rather comes from Israel's larger liturgical tradition. Similarities are especially noted with Psalm 113. See Bruce C. Birch., *The Books of 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Leander E. Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 980.

Hannah's song is voiced in the most personal of terms.⁶ She sings of "my heart," "my strength," "my God," and "my enemies" in verse 1. Yet her praise is focused on the God who is incomparable, "There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one beside you; there is no Rock like our God" (1 Sam 2.2). YHWH is unique in power and compassion and cannot be compared to any other deity. Both Israel and Hannah rejoice in the God who "remembers."

Hannah's song of doxology makes a turn in verse 3 with the word "for," which introduces the reason for Hannah and Israel's confidence in God. All of verses 3b–8 are formed by this "for" and provide an inventory of YHWH's wonders that result in self-abandoning praise.⁷ These wonders are characterized by surprising reversal brought by YHWH's power.

YHWH is at first implied in the passive reversal, not mentioned but surely present. The armament of the "mighty" is broken while the "feeble" are made strong. The "full" now go searching for bread while the "hungry" are made full. The "barren" is given children while the one with many is made "forlorn."

But then YHWH is directly mentioned as an actor in history as the LORD "kills" and "brings to life." The LORD "makes poor" and "makes rich," he brings "low" and also "exalts." He "raises up the poor" and "lifts the needy." He makes them "sit with princes" and "inherit a seat of honor."

YHWH can do all these things because "the pillars of the earth are the LORD's" and on these pillars "he has set the world." The creator God who has formed the earth is YHWH who has joined himself in covenant to Israel and to Hannah. As Birch has noted, "The poem confirms Hannah's experience, given emphasis in this recital of God's power to transform the customary human realities."⁸

This litany of reversals YHWH has brought is now concluded with moral implications coming from the recital. There is a difference between the "faithful" and the "wicked." The faithful trust God and God's power to transform and invert the social order. The wicked are those who trust in their own power, wealth and might. These differences will not be ignored, for "the LORD will judge the ends of the earth."

The key to Hannah's song comes in verse 9, "for not by might does one prevail." Birch again observes, "Human efforts to secure one's own destiny will not prevail apart from trust in what God is doing. In Hannah's song, all of the ways of human power can be reversed through the power of God: military might, wealth, family. It is God's power that endures."⁹

The song ends on a seemingly strange note, for "strength" to be given to the king, and in parallel fashion for God to "exalt the power of his anointed." This is a strange way to end the song given that kingship in Israel is still a generation away.¹⁰ Yet, placed here it alerts readers to the coming change in Israel's leadership and the role Hannah's son, Samuel, will play in it. Hannah thus becomes the first prophetic voice in the book and serves as a bridge between the judges and kings of Israel. In fact, Hannah's song is framed by the same Hebrew word for "strength" or "power"¹¹ in verse 1 when she "exalts in the LORD my strength" and in verse 10 when the LORD will "exalt the power of his anointed."

Thus, this song moves from Israel's song to Hannah's song back to Israel's, and eventually to Mary's song and to the church's song. It is a doxology of YHWH's amazing power to bring reversals to human situations that seem desperate, hopeless and barren. YHWH is a God who "remembers" those in covenant with him and acts in faithful and merciful ways, especially to those who are marginalized.

6. Thus Hannah joins other women of faith who sing of God's deliverance such as Miriam (Exod 15), Deborah (Judg 5) and of course Mary (Luke 1.46–55).

7. Walter Brueggemann, *Great Prayers of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 26.

8. Birch., *The Books of 1 & 2 Samuel*, 981.

9. *Ibid.*, 982.

10. For many scholars this is an indication that the hymn is not original to Hannah. See P. Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel: A New Translation*, 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 73.

11. The word literally means "horn" in Hebrew but connotes "power" or "strength."

MINISTRY BETWEEN LAMENT AND DOXOLOGY

As one considers the intersection between Hannah's song and ministry, several connections may be made and directions taken. Hannah's song reminds us of the God who intrudes, intervenes and inverts. In our secular society, it is easy for us to think we are the only actors on the stage, with God missing or absent. Whether our barrenness is personal, societal, or related to the church, our temptation is to think and feel that we can control and manage the outcome. We may strategize and plan for a desired outcome only to be despondent at the futility of human effort. The world may seem fixed, fated, or unchangeable.

Walter Brueggemann has correctly noted that Hannah's song is a doxology of God's new possibilities in the world. He writes, "If a son is given in the midst of barrenness, who knows what else may yet be given, perhaps even well-being in the midst of this troubled community! The birth is not a private wonder but a gift of possibility for all of Israel. Israel must sing with Hannah!"¹² God may provide possibilities not considered, options ignored, or newness not imagined.

We are invited to discern the places in our own lives and in our world where God is at work. This is not something we have been schooled in doing very well. All too often our notions of God are static rather than dynamic and we end up being functional "deists," believing in a distant and removed god rather than trusting in the God who intrudes, intervenes and inverts. We are hesitant or uncomfortable to name God's work in the church, let alone outside the walls of the church building.¹³ Hannah's song invites us to name the barren places, but also to name the places where God has birthed newness. And then we are invited to join in the doxology, to join in the praise.

Yet for those of us engaged in ministry, most of our work takes place in the precipice between lament and doxology. We often encounter the barren or wounded in the moments after their pain has begun and before they have come to a place where they can praise God. We come to them at times such as in 1 Samuel 1.7, where Hannah is still so much in her pain that she weeps and cannot eat. God delivered her from her painful barrenness to a place of rejoicing in motherhood. For Hannah this is a place of a promise fulfilled, this is her place of doxology. For others, their place of rejoicing may not come after a promise fulfilled. They may not have received the specific gift that inverts their particular barrenness. Their waiting has not brought gift to hopelessness: there is not birth to barrenness, praise to vexation, or worship to isolation. How do we come to them in their barrenness, which has not yet been inverted, and help them find the path to doxology? Truly, ". . . how is a new future possible amid the barrenness that renders us bitter, hopeless, and fruitless?"¹⁴

Perhaps our answer to the question before us begins in a quality that God possesses. Before Hannah receives her gift to barrenness, we see in 1 Samuel 1.19 that "the LORD remembered her." God did not leave her in her pain. We see "Yahweh is a powerful rememberer; and when Yahweh remembers the partner and the promise, newness becomes possible."¹⁵ When God remembers, hopelessness is given a future. For Hannah, this future indeed includes a son, but there is more. For Hannah, "barrenness ends, by the power of God, in glad, trustful, worship."¹⁶ Hannah's future is trust and worship. By the memory and fidelity of God, Hannah's future is now one of yielding praise to her Lord. Through Hannah's unyielding praise, the attention is turned from the event of the birth to the drama of the fidelity between Hannah and YHWH. The focus and accent is now on the giver rather than the gift.¹⁷ Hannah's experience of God here is now a part of her own memory of how God works. She now has a specific memory of God providing in her time of need. This has

12. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 1st ed., *Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 16.

13. For more help in this regard see Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

14. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 12–13.

15. *Ibid.*, 14.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 15, 16.

now become Israel's own memory of God working on the nation's behalf. God provides for and remembers not only Hannah, but also Israel.

As medical chaplains, we often sat beside those going through very difficult situations. These difficult times could vary from a new diagnosis and the beginning of a medical battle to the death of a loved one for whom the medical battle was over. Regardless of the particular situation, we often began in a similar fashion. We would sit with these people in their pain. No words necessary, just presence. An appeal to memory is often made in the midst of crisis. When sitting with someone in their intense pain, the question may be asked regarding how they got through difficult times in the past. As the person sits pondering the question, they would evoke their memory. In their memory they would begin to find their way through the present situation. For some this memory includes the fidelity of God and their corresponding fidelity. For others, it may be the beginning of an understanding of God's fidelity and their response to that revelation.

In a recent week of congregational ministry, one young couple faces a devastating medical diagnosis, a single woman between jobs is now homeless, and a man off drugs tries to rebuild his life and find housing and work. The question remains, "What of those for whom no inversion to their present situation has occurred?" What about those for whom doxology or praise is not possible, or not yet possible?

In Israel's repertoire of songs, doxology is not the only faithful response to God: lament is as well. It is often only in the experience of lament that inversion of one's situation takes place. Hence, almost all lament psalms end in a note of hope.¹⁸

Lament provides a language of languish, a vocabulary of vexation, and a grammar of grief. Lament offers our deep fears, our raw pain and our brutal shame before God for healing.¹⁹ Kathleen O'Connor notes, "Lamentation names what is wrong, what is out of order in God's world, what keeps human beings from thriving in all their creative potential. Simple acts of lament expose these conditions, name them, open them to grief and anger, and make them visible for remedy. In its complaint, anger, and grief, lamentation protests conditions that prevent human thriving, and this resistance may finally prepare the way for healing."²⁰

The continuum between lament and doxology is vast. The path from lament to doxology is never straight, always painful, and never assured. Christians pay attention to both signs of God's generous presence as well as humanity's deep need. We pay attention to both and embrace both because in faith, lament and doxology come together and lead to hope.

Rabbi Hugo Gryn was one of Great Britain's most respected rabbis. When he was a young boy his family was imprisoned at Auschwitz. As Orthodox Jews, Hugo's father insisted that they observe the Sabbath and festivals even at great risk to themselves. One poignant memory of Hugo's was a time when his father took a piece of string and put it in a bit of butter and lit it to make a *shabbat* candle. Hugo was furious and protested, "Father, that is all the butter we have!" His father replied, "Without food we can live for weeks. But we cannot live for a minute without hope."²¹

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18. The exception being psalm 88. But this psalm, in its own way, is a voice of hope because the lament is addressed to YHWH in the hope that YHWH will again intervene.

19. For resources on the use of lament see Michael C. Borger, "Bibliography of Biblical and Pastoral Resources on Lament," *Calvin Theological Journal* 38, no. 2 N (2003). See also Sally Brown and Patrick Miller, *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), Kathleen O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002).

20. Kathleen O'Connor, *The Book of Lamentations*, ed. Leander E. Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. VI (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 1034.

21. As told in Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 132.