

St. Mary's Episcopal Church
Hannah's Story

Message by The Rev. Michael Burke
I Samuel 1:4-20



Not always, but *sometimes* in our sermons we take a deep dive into a portion of the Holy Scriptures, so we can better understand what is being said. Today is one of those times.

I had other things that I was going to do in the sermon this week, but t Hilma Granqvist important.

I ask that you bear with me. It's going to take a few minutes longer than usual, but I believe that it is critical for our entire understanding of scripture. For while much of the biblical narrative is contained in the stories of the men, it is the far-too infrequently preserved stories of Biblical women which hold the key that unlocks them all.

So...

I want to tell you a story.

I want to tell you a story about a young woman, by the name of Hannah.

And I want to set it in context, for this story, *without context*, is missing something essential, and feels a little like the words of Handel's Messiah, without music, lying flat upon the page.

But first, let's talk about another woman. Between 1925 and 1931, a Finnish anthropologist by the name of Hilma Granqvist studied traditional Arab villagers in Palestine in a small community just outside of Bethlehem.¹ She went seeking a deeper understanding into the lives and customs of biblical people like Hannah, and this search for knowledge took her to Artas, a place where things change very little despite the passage of centuries.

Living among the people there for seven years, Hilma carefully observed what is known as "patrilineal families." Over the course of her research, she came to



Hilma Granqvist

¹ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilma_Granqvist

believe that their traditional marriage practices originated in the retention of land in the family, that is, to protect a family's property, to keep it from falling into the hands of strangers and foreigners, and to keep it preserved for future generations.²

In ancient days, people died young, and a woman whose husband died without a male heir, was among the most vulnerable in a rural agricultural society. Polygyny, the taking of more than one wife, was seen as not only a means of increasing the likelihood of producing male offspring, but was also practiced in situations where a wife was unable to bear children at all. The preservation of the family wealth, consisting of land and livestock, was considered of primary importance.

The male head of the household's responsibility was to successfully enact this generational transfer, and the women's role was to produce male offspring to achieve this.

Now, these weren't the only reasons a man might take a second or third wife, sometimes it was simply because a male wanted a younger wife, or even that more female labor was needed in the household, particularly in kinship groups where it was not generally the custom to keep female servants.³

The taking of a second wife was a situation of great peril for the first wife. Granqvist's research documented that relations between first and second wives were generally poor. She reported that "they tended to regard each other as troublesome and bitter. Even when a woman considered her co-wife as agreeable personally, she was still her rival for status and the attention of her husband. Many proverbs and songs among the villagers reflected this bitter rivalry among the co-wives."⁴



Figure 15. Hilma Granqvist (1935). *Drawing Water*. Plate 104. By permission of the Palestine Exploration Fund, London.

Not always did the first wife come out on top in any potential conflict. It was the practice that one wife was usually "given charge" of the household, and often this depended on the strength of character of the two respective women. The most common outcome, Granqvist tells us, is that the children of the second

² See Hilma N. Granqvist, *Marriage Conditions in a Palestinian Village, Vol. 1 and 2*; Ams Pr Inc., Republished May 1977; ISBN-10 #0404574505. See also the work of Henry Rosenfeld, in *Perspectives on Israeli Anthropology (Raphael Patai Series in Jewish Folklore and Anthropology)*, Wayne State University Press, Nov. 1999. ISBN-10: 0814330509

³ Philip F. Esler, *Hannah, Peninnah, and Elkanah (1 Samuel 1-2)*, in *Sex, Wives, and Warriors: Reading Old Testament Narrative with its Ancient Audience*. P 115-118., by James Clarke & Co., Cambridge, 2012. ISBN #978-0-227-67991-3.

⁴ Granqvist, *Marriage Conditions*, Vol. 2, 174-185.

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wife would take their own mother's side on things, and the first wife was marginalized and often seen as the enemy.

Now, think for a moment of how absolutely untenable this situation would be for the first wife, such as Hannah, in this morning's first reading. If she and her husband were unable to produce children, it would be, in that time and culture, considered to be "her fault," and even the language of sowing seed and agricultural production was used against her in calling her "barren." Difficulties in conceiving a child were then understood to be always the woman's "fault," and was seen as a curse and a reproach. ⁵Male causes of infertility, and the modern sense that this is a painful situation best met by both partners together, was a world away.

There was always a great status conferred on the woman whose son would succeed his father. Granqvist notes, "If a childless wife is to raise herself and her position in relation to such a dangerous rival it requires unusual wisdom and strength of character." ⁶ Sometimes, the second wife even was able to "resolve" this unwinnable conflict by convincing her husband to divorce his first wife.

Of course, I have not even begun to tell the story from the perspective of the second wife. From her perspective, the social context is even more unjust and untenable.

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So, imagine such a state of social relations, and family structure, in the ancient near east about eight hundred years the birth of Jesus...

Into such a situation, fraught with drama and pressurized with pent-up conflict, comes Hannah, the central figure of our story. I'm going to retell the story today to include both Hannah and a bit of her husband, Elkanah.

Consider for a moment Elkanah. The book of I Samuel begins with establishing Elkanah's statute of long and respected lineage. Among rural people, he and his well-established family are a big deal.

And Elkanah, through Hannah, is unable to carry on the family lineage because he and Hannah cannot seem to have child together.

⁵ Ibid., p. 216.

⁶ Granqvist, *Child Problems Among The Arabs. Studies In A Muhammadan Village In Palestine*, Soderstrom, 1950.

The shame of Hannah's inability to bear a child would also to a much lesser extent, be Elkanah's shame, for now his long paternal line of ancestors would come to an end with him. It would be Elkanah and Hannah who had failed in their duties.

The Jewish midrash, a collection of commentaries on the biblical stories that date back to before the second century before Christ, (or "before the common era." as scholars appropriately refer to it) suggests that it was Hannah who proposed to Elkanah that he must take a second wife.

Three reasons are given: to preserve the family's land and livestock, to ensure the continuation of Elkanah's lineage, and the practical reason of needing young male hands to do the farming and herding as Elkanah advances in age. And, I would add: to remove the stigma and shame from the family.

So Elkanah takes a second wife; her name is Peninnah. Peninnah bore Elkanah the sons and daughters that he and Hannah could not conceive together. Although the biblical text itself does not tell the details, the Rabbis of old speculated how the hopes and dreams of Elkanah and Hannah, back when they were first married, dreams and hopes of a home with children and a family, came to pass, but *through Peninnah*. So too, speculated the rabbis, came all the drama and conflict, and problems that they both feared.

So while Peninnah bore Elkanah sons and daughters, Hannah bore much pain because of her lack of a child. The scriptures describe Peninnah as Hannah's rival and tormentor. So it went, year after year.

Particularly difficult were the yearly pilgrimages to Shiloh, which Peninnah used as an opportunity to bring shame and ridicule upon Hannah.

The text tells us that Elkanah loved Hannah very much, and that he favored her. Granqvist found in her research, that one wife, over time, came to be the favored one (il-mahbube), and the other the "not-favored" (mus mahbube). This situation was common enough that it is remarked upon in both the Book of Genesis (29:30-35) and in Deuteronomy (21:15-17).

But we must be careful here. Feminist scholars of the Scriptures have done some solid research about the ways in which "jealousy" is one of the chief transgressions projected onto the women of the Hebrew Scriptures. At the same time, we must consider that Granqvist repeatedly reports finding evidence of conflict between co-wives in her anthropological research in the 1920s and 1930s.

And what of Peninnah? In keeping with the customs of the time, she would have been "selected" and removed from her father's home, suffering the trauma of separation at an early age. The birth of her first son to Elkanah would have secured her a place of honor in Elkanah's household, because even if she did not have Elkanah's love and affection, she was the one who ensured the continuance of his lineage. It

would be *her* sons who would inherit Elkanah's land and livestock. For Hannah, such an occasion must have been filled with conflicting emotions.

And with every subsequent child Peninnah bore, the contrast of her fruitfulness with Hannah's situation must have been even more painfully on display, and the tension more untenable. Yet the one thing Peninnah might have longed for, the affections of Elkanah, was the one thing she could not attain.

So, all of that background, on which I have just barely touched (there really is much, much more, especially in midrash of the ancient rabbis) is pressure building over years, which at any moment might explode with power and force.

And the venue for this was the shrine at Shiloh, where the family was to worship and offer annual sacrifices and thanksgivings to God.

The sacrifice they came to offer there would have been the "peace-offering," ironically enough, as commanded in Leviticus 3. It would have been cooked out in the open over a communal fire, in the full public view of all the other pilgrims who had made their way to Shiloh for the festival.

Now, the next event requires some explanation of what we call the "the honor and shame culture" of the ancient near east. Biblical scholar Bruce Malina has done considerable work in showing how this "culture of honor and shame" can deepen our understanding of Biblical texts.⁷

Much of Malina's biblical research itself rests upon the work of the French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu, and it involves a social dynamic known as "challenge and response."

Challenge and response describes how honor and respect are acquired in a Mediterranean culture which values it very highly. In other places throughout the Scriptures, we see this dynamic repeatedly in the interactions between Jesus and his detractors, but here we might well have a rare example of it among *women* in the Scriptures. When Elkanah distributed the portions of the sacrificial meal, publicly, he gave portions to Peninnah and all of her sons and daughters. He then gave to Hannah a "double portion," upon which, the scripture tells us, Peninnah "grieved Hannah sorely."

The precise wording in the Hebrew leads some biblical scholars to speculate that Peninnah "challenged" Hannah in some way, perhaps in reference to Hannah's inability to bear Elkanah children. It has been suggested by some that the words exchanged might have been intended to hurt or humiliate Hannah, along the lines of "Look how the Lord has blessed me with sons and daughters, while he has shut up your womb."⁸ It was a direct challenge to Hannah's honor.

⁷ Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd edition, Westminster / John Knox Press, 2001. ISBN-10: 0664222951

⁸ Esler, p. 127.

Unlike in a private space at home, where Hannah could simply keep her silence and her dignity, here in the public square she either meets the challenge from her rival, or she takes the lower rank beneath Peninnah. (In reality, this challenge has little to do with the size of the portion Elkanah placed in Hannah's bowl, but in the entire way in which Hannah's relationship with Elkanah was so different from that between Elkanah and Peninnah.)

In modern-speak, Peninnah is "throwing down" on Hannah, right there, right then, in front of everyone.

In what happens next, hangs the whole balance of power, respect, and honor in the household.

And Hannah says... .. nothing. But you can just feel the eyes of the crowd upon her, the scorn, the ridicule circling her and closing in. The cultural shame seeks to drive all the way down into the deep marrow of her bones.

But Hannah will not play that game.

You see, Hannah's desire for a child is not primarily in response to the sons Peninnah has given her husband. She is not playing "one-upsmanship" with Peninnah. Hannah's desire for a child of her own and Elkanah's comes from deep within; it arises as a very personal, lifelong desire and longing they both share.

Elkanah tries to console her, "Am I not more to you than ten sons?" he asks. But Hannah weeps, and will not eat. One wonders why Elkanah has not intervened before this point. He seems to be paying attention only to the love and support that Hannah would have in bearing sons, and some recent feminist scholarship has judged him very harshly for that. Yairah Amit suggests that in Hannah's grief and tears, her response is more driven by what her husband has done or failed to do, than by anything Peninnah has just said.⁹

Hannah waits until the meal is finished by others, and then enters the temple.

She takes her plea, quietly and rather subversively, from her lips to God's ear.

From her lips to God's ear, whereupon she is abruptly challenged and rebuked by the priest Eli. Here Eli is acting out a whole other backstory about class standing, agricultural people, and priestly elites, but that is a story we must leave to tell another day. Eli sees Hannah's lips move, and calls her out for being a "drunken woman."

⁹ Yairah Amit, *Essays on Ancient Israel in its Near Eastern Context*, Eisenbrauns, 2007.

But Hannah is actually praying. And she is not *just* praying, but she is praying an *oath* to God. An oath, which she, as a woman, had no legal right to make in that culture, an oath, which she would be considered presumptuous to even claim the authority to utter.

An oath, which, in her day, could be undone and reversed by any male overhearing it, be it Eli or her husband. So she is whispering it, saying it in a way that only God can hear.

But this is not between Hannah and Eli, the priest.

And this is not between Hannah and her husband, Elkinah.

This is between Hannah and the Spirit. This, despite all the patriarchy of the ancient culture, all the social expectations, all the shame of the system that should render Hannah completely powerless. But instead – she persists - the **only** active parties, in this crucial moment, are Hannah and God.

Sometime later, upon the occasion of her son Samuel's birth, Hannah will pray what we have come to know as "The Song of Hannah," which ascribes this miraculous event to nothing less than the power of *and the character* of God.

In it, Hannah boldly proclaims something audacious for a woman of her time and place. She declares the "great reversal," in keeping with the ancient prophets before her. That central to the very being of God, the nature of God's own self, is that God is *not* foremost the God of the mighty and powerful, but rather that God is the God of the oppressed, the God of the downtrodden, the God of the poor and the lowly. And she sings what today we call "the Song of Hannah," which Luke, our choir director, masterfully arranged for us today.

Eight hundred years later, another young woman in Palestine, upon learning that she too is carrying a son, will add new words to Hannah's song, which we know as the Magnificat, the Song of Mary, and will sing it again to proclaim the birth of the savior of the world, and the beginning of a whole new order in which those whom the world has set first will become last, and those who are last will become first. If we are to understand the biblical witness at all, we must understand what has just happened, and what has been revealed by God through Hannah and through Mary.

To finish the portion of the story we have today, in due time, Hannah and Elkanah return to their home, and they have a child in the usual way.

The scripture simply records that: "the Lord remembered [Hannah]. And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, "I have asked for him from the LORD."

(There's more, but you'll have to find it in your Bibles, beginning in the Book of Samuel.)

The Reading

I Samuel 1-3 English Standard Version (ESV) The Birth of Samuel

1 There was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph, an Ephrathite. ²He had two wives. The name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other, Peninnah. And Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.

³Now this man used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the LORD. ⁴On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters. ⁵But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb.^[a]⁶And her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb.⁷So it went on year by year. As often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. ⁸And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

⁹After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. ¹⁰She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. ¹¹And she vowed a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head."

¹²As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³Hannah was speaking in her heart; only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli took her to be a drunken woman. ¹⁴And Eli said to her, "How long will you go on being drunk? Put your wine away from you."¹⁵But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. ¹⁶Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation."¹⁷Then Eli answered, "Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him."¹⁸And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your eyes." Then the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad.

¹⁹They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. ²⁰And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, "I have asked for him from the LORD."^[b]

Samuel Given to the LORD

²¹The man Elkanah and all his house went up to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and to pay his vow. ²²But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, "As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, so that he

may appear in the presence of the LORD and dwell there forever.”²³ Elkanah her husband said to her, “Do what seems best to you; wait until you have weaned him; only, may the LORD establish his word.” So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him.²⁴ And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull,^[a] an ephah^[a] of flour, and a skin of wine, and she brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh. And the child was young.²⁵ Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli.²⁶ And she said, “Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD.²⁷ For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition that I made to him.²⁸ Therefore I have lent him to the LORD. As long as he lives, he is lent to the LORD.”

And he worshiped the LORD there.

Hannah's Prayer

2 And Hannah prayed and said,

“My heart exults in the LORD;
my strength is exalted in the LORD.

My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in your salvation.

² “There is none holy like the LORD:
for there is none besides you;
there is no rock like our God.

³ Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the LORD is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.

⁴ The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble bind on strength.

⁵ Those who were full have hired themselves out for
bread,
but those who were hungry have ceased to
hunger.

The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn.

⁶ The LORD kills and brings to life;
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.

⁷ The LORD makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low and he exalts.

⁸ 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.

⁹ “He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness,
for not by might shall a man prevail.

¹⁰ The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to
pieces;
against them he will thunder in heaven.
The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;
he will give strength to his king
and exalt the horn of his anointed.”

Hannah's Prayer

(from *The Message* paraphrase by Eugene Petersen)

2 Hannah prayed:

I'm bursting with GOD-news!

I'm walking on air.

I'm laughing at my rivals.

I'm dancing my salvation.

²⁻⁵ Nothing and no one is holy like GOD,
no rock mountain like our God.

Don't dare talk pretentiously—

not a word of boasting, ever!

For GOD knows what's going on.

God takes the measure of everything that happens.

The weapons of the strong are smashed to pieces,

while the weak are infused with fresh strength.

The well-fed are out begging in the streets for crusts,

while the hungry are getting second helpings.

The barren woman has a houseful of children,

while the mother of many is bereft.

⁶⁻¹⁰ GOD brings death and GOD brings life,
brings down to the grave and raises up.

GOD brings poverty and GOD brings wealth;

God lowers, God also lifts up.

God puts poor people on their feet again;

God rekindles burned-out lives with fresh hope,

Restoring dignity and respect to their lives—
a place in the sun!

For the very structures of earth are GOD's;

God has laid out God's operations on a firm foundation.

God protectively cares for God's faithful friends,
step by step,

but leaves the wicked to stumble in the dark.

No one makes it in this life by sheer muscle!

GOD's enemies will be blasted out of the sky,
crashed in a heap and burned.

GOD will set things right all over the earth,

God will give strength to the king,

God will set God's anointed on top of the world!

An edited excerpt from Justo L. Gonzalez's commentary on Luke entitled "[The Story Luke Tells: Luke's Unique Witness to the Gospel](#)"

LUKE AND THE GREAT REVERSAL

God has brought down the powerful from their thrones. Luke 1: 52

One of the central themes in the Gospel of Luke is what interpreters have often called "the great reversal" — or perhaps in today's more common language we should call it "the world upside down." This theme appears in the very beginning of the Gospel, in the song of Mary that is usually known by the first word of its Latin translation, Magnificat. The canticle begins this way: Magnificat anima mea Dominum — "My soul magnifies the Lord." But in truth the theme is not just the praise of God, but rather the praise of the God who is the Lord of great upheavals. Mary praises God because "he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant" and because God "has done great things for me." And then she places her own exaltation in the context of a great upheaval:

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the
thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from
their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, in
remembrance of his mercy. . . . (Luke 1:
51-54)

As noted before, this hymn echoes Hannah's canticle in I Samuel. There we find the following lines:

My heart exults in the Lord; my strength
is exalted in my God.
My mouth derides my enemies, because I
rejoice in my victory.

. . .
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 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. (I Sam. 2: 1,
4-5, 7-8)

In her song, Hannah praises God for the great reversal that is taking place in her life. The book of Samuel begins by telling us about Elkanah and his two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Although Elkanah loved Hannah, Peninnah tormented her, for she had children and Hannah did not. Because that society prized fertility and child-bearing, Hannah was ashamed of her barrenness, and apparently her rival used this as an opportunity to goad and sadden her. The rest of the story is well-known. Hannah's prayers are answered, and finally the barren conceives.

In that context, Hannah praises God because, as she says, "My strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies." Hannah rejoices over what God has done in her, and from that point moves to a series of affirmations about how this action is a pattern for God's other actions — which leads us back to the theme of

typology and the patterns of divine action. Thus, Hannah sings not only because God has allowed her to conceive, but also because the God who has so blessed her is also the God who breaks the bows of the strong and gives strength to the weak; the God who makes the rich have to rent themselves out for bread, and gives food to the hungry.

Note that both the song of Hannah and the song of Mary begin with the exaltation of the one who sings, but then move on to a more general praise of the God who not only does mighty things, but also turns the world upside down, exalting the humble and bringing down the mighty from their thrones, feeding the hungry and making those who are overfed work for their bread, breaking the bows of the strong and giving strength to the weak. In other words, both women praise God for the great reversal that the divine intervention brings about, not only in their lives, but in society in general.

This great reversal that Luke introduces in the song of Mary appears throughout his writings, in both the Gospel and Acts. It would be a mistake to think that Luke is the only one who develops this theme, because it appears quite frequently in the Bible, and certainly is found in some of the parallel texts in Matthew and Mark. Furthermore, the explicit phrase “some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last” (Luke 13: 30), which appears only once in Luke, appears repeatedly in both Matthew and Mark. (See, for instance, Matt. 19: 30; 20: 16; 20: 17; Mark 9: 35; 10: 31; 10: 44.) But even though Luke employs that phrase only once, the theme to which that phrase points appears repeatedly and pointedly both in his Gospel and in Acts.

This great reversal is both religious and social. Even though such distinctions were not made then as they are now, it may be profitable for us to discuss them in order. The great religious upheaval appears early in the Gospel of Luke. In chapter 4, Luke tells us about the preaching of Jesus in a synagogue in his own land. Both Matthew and Mark say simply that Jesus taught in the synagogue, and that people marveled that Jesus, whom they all knew as a carpenter’s son, was able to teach in this manner. Apparently because of that familiarity, they disbelieved, and for this reason, Jesus did not perform many miracles in their midst. Related to this, in Matthew as well as in Mark, is Jesus’ comment that “prophets are not without honor except in their country and in their own house” (Matt. 13: 57; Mark 6: 14).

Luke gives more details. He tells us first of all that the text that Jesus read was taken from the prophet Isaiah, and he also tells us what it was that Jesus preached. The comment about a prophet not being honored in his own land does not appear at the end of the narrative, as in the other two Synoptic Gospels, but rather at the beginning, as an introduction to Jesus’ sermon. The sermon itself then becomes an illustration or explanation of this saying. Jesus tells his neighbors that in the time of the prophet Elijah, when there was a great famine, there were many needy widows in Israel. Yet Elijah did not go to any of them, but rather to a widow of Zarephath in Sidon — that is, a Gentile widow living in a city-state known for its enmity to Israel. And in the time of the next prophet, Elisha, there were many lepers in Israel, but Elisha did not heal any of them; instead, he healed Naaman, who was from Syria, the great enemy of Israel. Indeed, Jesus made a point of saying that these two great prophets did not show favor toward the

widows or lepers of Israel, but rather toward a Phoenician widow and a Syrian general.

When Jesus said this, “all in the synagogue were filled with rage” and sought to kill him. It is important to note that the people’s rage was not triggered, as we often think, by Jesus’ daring to claim that “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” On the contrary, even after Jesus said those words, Luke tells us, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth” (Luke 4: 22). The wrath of the congregation was aroused because Jesus told them through his stories about the prophets that, even though they were his neighbors, and even though they were children of Israel, this should not lead them to expect privileges from God.

Later on, in chapter 6, Luke tells us that those who came to listen to Jesus and to be healed by him came not only from all of Judea, but also “from the coast of Tyre and Sidon” (Luke 6: 17). In chapter 7 — in a passage that has a parallel in Matthew but not in Mark — Jesus says about a Roman centurion who is a pagan, “not even in Israel have I found such faith” (Luke 7: 9). In other words, when it comes to faith, this pagan has an advantage over even the most religious people in Israel. Shortly thereafter, Luke places in the mouth of Jesus words that do not appear in the other Gospels. Commenting on John the Baptist, Luke tells us that the common people heeded his words and even the tax collectors were baptized — that is, the most despised people in Israel, most despised because they not only were agents of the foreign invader, but also were in constant touch with the unclean and because they handled idolatrous coins. In contrast, we are told that “the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purposes for themselves” (Luke 7: 30).

And, still in chapter 7, Jesus defends the worth of a sinful woman to a Pharisee who has invited him to dinner.

In chapter 14, in a passage that has no parallel in the other Gospels, Jesus tells a parable about a man who prepared a great feast, but when the time came for the special meal, all his invitees offered excuses. At that point the man ordered his slave to go out into the streets and lanes of the town and invite any person in need to the great dinner. This included particularly “the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame” (Luke 14: 21) — that is, people who were often considered sinners and thought of as cursed by their sin. None of the religious people — those who were first given the invitation — enjoyed the banquet, while the guests of the last minute did. Since the parable begins with an allusion to the great banquet in the reign of God, it is clear that Jesus is telling those who boast that they were first to receive the word of God must not presume that for that reason they will enjoy the final banquet.

Very soon after that parable, in chapter 15, there is the parable of the lost sheep, which does have a parallel in Matthew 18. This is a well-known parable, for it gives us hope and consolation when we are like the lost sheep. But in Luke the parable is more biting, for Jesus is actually reprimanding the Pharisees and the scribes — the leaders in religious matters — who criticize him for eating with publicans and sinners. Within that context, what stands out is not only the value of the lost sheep, but also the point, seldom noticed today, that the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness. In a great reversal, the lost sheep is cared for while the ninety-nine who are already with the shepherd are simply left on their own.

Something similar may be said about the well-known parable of the prodigal son, which appears only in the Gospel of Luke. Once again, we imagine that the main character is the prodigal, and that the theme of the parable is the love of the father who receives the wayward son. But the parable does not end with the return of the prodigal, for there is another character who is equally important: his older brother. He has served his father faithfully in his brother's absence, obeying him in all things. And now that his younger brother returns and is received with a feast, he refuses to go in, because he is better than the one who has just returned from distant lands. Another great reversal!

After another series of parables — among them the one about the rich man and Lazarus, to which we shall return — the entire theme of the great reversal comes to a high point in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, in which the tax collector who confesses his sin is deemed more sincere than the Pharisee who declares himself religious, and Jesus ends by saying that “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 18: 14).

This great reversal that is central to the Gospel of Luke appears also in Acts, where the pagan Cornelius has a clearer vision than the apostle Peter, where the “Pharisee of Pharisees” who goes to Damascus in order to persecute the disciples of the Lord becomes one of the most faithful among those disciples, and where Paul and Barnabas repeatedly come face to face with the unbelief of those who should have believed (for they had the scriptures), contrasting with the openness of the Gentiles to the gospel.

This great religious reversal also has social dimensions. This appears most clearly in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus “longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table” (Luke 16: 21). But after both men die, Lazarus is in heaven by Abraham's side, and the rich man is in Hades. So in the end it is the rich man who begs Abraham to send Lazarus to “dip the tip of his finger and cool my tongue” (Luke 16: 24). The reversal takes place between the rich and the poor, between the poor one who would have been satisfied with scraps and the wealthy one who now begs for water.

The theme of the poor and their place in the kingdom appears in the Third Gospel much more often than in any of the others. The word poor or needy appears only five times in Matthew, and the same number of times in Mark. Two of those references occur in the context of the suggestion that the alabaster jar — filled with the precious ointment that Mary poured on Jesus' head — should have been sold in order to give the proceeds to the poor. In contrast, Luke is constantly speaking about the poor and the needy.

This can be seen at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, in the text he reads in the synagogue: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4: 18). This particular passage is important, because as we analyze the structure of Luke's writings, we note that in both the Gospel and Acts there is a text from the Old Testament that is quoted near the beginning of the book and that outlines an important theme that is to follow. In Acts, it is the text from Joel that Peter quotes on the day of Pentecost. In Luke, it is the passage from Isaiah that serves to frame the rest of the book. And in this passage

the very first thing that is said about the mission of Jesus is that he has been sent to bring “good news to the poor.” (However, one must not exaggerate the contrast among the Gospels on this particular point. Both in Matthew [11: 5] and in Luke [7: 23], when the disciples of John ask Jesus if he is the one who has been expected, among the signs that Jesus gives them is the fact that “the gospel is announced to the poor.”)

The Beatitudes are one of the many places where we see Luke’s emphasis on poverty and on the great reversal the believers are to expect. Many of us know by heart the First Beatitude according to Matthew: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5: 3). Although this probably does not mean a spiritual poverty in contrast to material riches, it certainly is possible to understand it as such. But Luke leaves no doubt about meaning when he says, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6: 20). Here there is no place for a “spiritual” poverty in contrast to a material one. It is also interesting to note that while Matthew’s beatitude refers to “the poor” in the third person, as if they were not present, Luke’s beatitude directly addresses the poor: “Blessed are you who are poor.” And to make matters clearer, Luke includes a series of woes that are the counterpart of the Beatitudes. In the case of the poor, the counterpart is “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Luke 6: 24). Furthermore, most of the Beatitudes in Luke have to do with the social and material conditions in which people live: “Blessed are you who are poor, . . . you who are hungry now, . . . you who weep now. . . .” And the reversal is underscored in the woes: “You who are rich, . . . you who are full now, . . . you who are laughing now. . . .”

The great reversal in the Gospel of Luke between the rich and the poor comes to a climax when Jesus, while a guest at the home of a Pharisee leader, dares to criticize his host’s guest list:

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. (Luke 14: 12-15)

Having noted this emphasis of the Gospel of Luke on the poor and the needy, we may at first be surprised that the theme does not appear in Acts beyond chapter 4, where Luke tells us that among the disciples of the Lord, no one was needy. But this should not surprise us if we remember what the presence of the needy implies among the people of God. In order to understand this, we may turn our attention to a passage that appears in Matthew and Mark, but not in Luke. It is these famous words of Jesus: “For you always have the poor with you” (Matt. 26: 11; Mark 14: 7). To this day, these words are often used in order to avoid paying too much attention to the needs of the poor. But in these passages Jesus is actually quoting Deuteronomy 15: 11, where, amid the regulations concerning the Year of Jubilee, when all property is to be restored to its former owners, the law commands that this regulation not be used as an excuse not to help the needy in the interim. As the people await the Jubilee, they must be liberal in their support of the needy.

Almost at the beginning of the Gospel, Luke tells us that in his first sermon Jesus declared that in him the promise of Isaiah was fulfilled, and part of his mission was “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” — that is, the Year of Jubilee. It is as a result of that preaching by Jesus, and of the gift of the Spirit in Acts, that the church is born. And Luke then tells us that, since the church lived in a constant jubilee, “there was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need” (Acts 4: 34-35). This is why, after this chapter, Luke no longer speaks of the needy. (However, we do know from the epistles of Paul that when there was a need in Jerusalem, the churches in other cities contributed to an offering for the poor in Jerusalem.) Apparently, Luke does not quote Jesus’ saying “For you always have the poor with you” because his vision of an ideal church is of a people of God that lives in a constant jubilee, and in which therefore there are no poor.

In summary, the theme of the great reversal, which is seen in religious terms in what Jesus says to the scribes, Pharisees, tax collectors, and sinners, may be seen also in economic and social terms in what he says about the poor and the rich, and in the result of the presence of the Spirit in the church, thanks to which there are no longer any needy.

The great reversal also takes place in other dimensions of social life. One of them is the matter of gender, which deserves particular attention in our study, and therefore will be reserved for the next chapter. Another of the social dimensions of the great reversal has to do with the ethnic and cultural divisions of the time. Once again, it is important to remember that the

distinction that we make today between such matters and religious issues did not exist in antiquity, and therefore prejudice and ethnic and racial divisions were based on religious matters.

Were we to draw a series of concentric circles, with Jerusalem and Judea at the center, we would see that the next circle of prejudice and exclusion was that of the Galileans. Galileans were Jews, but they did not live in Judea, for Samaria stood between Galilee and Judea. Also, Greeks, Romans, and other neighboring peoples had left their mark on Galilee, to the point that already in the time of Isaiah it was called “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Isa. 9: 1, quoted also in Matt. 4: 15). For the same reason, John tells us that Nathaniel asks, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1: 46). And later in the same Gospel the Pharisees declare that no prophet has ever come out of Galilee (John 7: 52). The Judean Jews — those from Judea — spoke the Aramaic of the region, and so did the Galileans. But the Judeans believed that the Galilean accent was inferior.

A bit further out from the center than the Galileans were the Hellenistic Jews, those in the Diaspora or Dispersion, who lived in distant lands and whose most common language was not Aramaic, but most often Greek. Hellenistic Jews were considered inferior by Jews in Palestine because they lived among pagans by whom they inevitably would be contaminated, and they did not attend the temple as frequently as the Judeans. For a long time after the conquests of Alexander, the Jews had struggled to keep their cultural and religious purity in the face of Hellenistic influx. Therefore, the Jews of the Diaspora, often called “Hellenists” or even “Greeks,” were not well regarded by the more conservative Jews in the Holy Land.

If we then continue with our series of concentric circles, we shall see that beyond the Galileans and the Hellenistic Jews were the Samaritans. Due to a complicated series of historical circumstances, the inhabitants of Samaria, who claimed to be descendants of Israel, followed a different version of the faith of Israel than that of the Jews. Their Pentateuch differed in some points from the Jewish Pentateuch, and they insisted that the proper place for God's temple was Mount Gerizim. For all these reasons, Jews, including Judeans as well as Galileans and even Hellenists, looked down on them and considered them infidels. This is the background of the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke as well as of the story of the woman by the well in John 4.

In the next concentric circle were those whom Jews called "God-fearers," who were Gentiles who believed in the God and the moral laws of Israel and sought to live according to them, but for some reason did not formally convert to Judaism. In the Lukan literature there are several examples and references to such people — for instance, the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius the centurion.

Finally, still further out were the pagans, who did not believe in the true God. Most of them were idolaters and polytheists. They were contaminated by eating all sorts of unclean animals and by practicing various sorts of impurity and impiety. What's more, since the Romans were among these Gentiles, the Jewish nation saw in them the invading enemy, the extortionist power that imposed onerous taxes, the pagans who dared bring their idolatrous eagles to Jerusalem itself, and the power of occupation that had grown in Caesarea, a city that was markedly Roman and pagan — and not too far from Jerusalem.

The great reversal in Luke affects each of these categories. To begin with, although Jesus is born in Bethlehem of Judea, his family is from Galilee, and he is raised in Galilee. It is there that he begins his public ministry, and it is from that area that he draws his closest disciples. When looked at from this perspective, the story of the long journey to Jerusalem that occupies a central portion in the Gospel of Luke but not in the other Gospels is a story in which the periphery marches toward the center, and the center resists to the point of crucifying Jesus. In Luke 13, some ask Jesus about certain Galileans whom Pilate had ordered killed, and Jesus comments that these Galileans were no worse sinners than the eighteen Judeans on whom the tower of Siloam had fallen. In the final instance, the entire process of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus includes a strong element of resistance on the part of the Judeans against this Galilean band and their leader, who seemed to have taken the city and the temple by storm.

As for the Samaritans, the prejudice against them on the part of the Jews may be seen in Luke 9: 52-53, when Jesus begins his final journey to Jerusalem. Since he has to go through Samaria, he sends messengers to prepare a place for him in a Samaritan village. But the villagers will not receive the messengers, for they know that Jesus is going to Jerusalem. Significantly, when the disciples want to have fire fall upon the village, Jesus tells them that he has not come to destroy...

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At The Well Project:

Woman-on-Woman

Bullying in The Story of Hannah

Joelle Abramowitz is a PhD economist with a passion for Jewish learning. In her spare time, she is an avid cyclist and bike commuter and also enjoys cooking, baking, hiking, and tangoing.



We read the story of Hannah each year as the *haftorah* for the first day of Rosh Hashanah; she faces infertility, she prays to God for a child, and in exchange for her prayers being answered, she commits to giving her child up after he is weaned.

But another look at the text could reveal a different story than the traditional narrative:

“One such day, Elkanah offered a sacrifice. He used to give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he would give one portion only — though Hannah was his favorite — for the LORD had closed her womb. Moreover, her rival, to make her miserable, would taunt her that the LORD had closed her womb. This happened year after year: Every time she went up to the House of the LORD, the other would taunt her, so that she

wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, ‘Hannah, why are you crying and why aren’t you eating? Why are you so sad? Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?’”

— I Samuel 1:4-8

While it is clear that Hannah is distraught, it is not clear to me that it is her infertility in itself that is the cause of her distress. In this passage, I am struck not by Hannah’s infertility, but by this bullying she encounters from her sister-wife.

Why Is Peninnah Taunting Hannah?

Was Hannah’s desire simply to have a child, or was it also to silence her sister-wife’s bullying? In a world where women are valued primarily for their fertility, taunting someone for their barrenness is the ultimate put-down.

Being married to the same man, Hannah would have had to see Peninnah, and live with this bullying, all the time.

I would go even further to say that it is not clear to me that Hannah even wants to be a mother. We only learn about her desire for a child in connection to how she is taunted. And ultimately, in exchange for the child, she commits him to a life of service to the temple.

While such a trade-off would seem illogical for a person who longed only to be a mother, it seems a perfectly logical solution for a person did not want to be a mother, but did want to silence her bully. The text does make clear that Hannah was the favorite wife, which means Peninnah was second-best...

Is Penninah Building Herself Up?

Did Penninah build herself up by cutting Hannah down as she was stuck in a relationship with a man with whom she felt less than, despite her best efforts?

And then we have Elkanah, Hannah's husband, who, despite his best intentions appears to be quite clueless as to what is going in between his two wives. He doesn't seem to see the bullying taking place, to understand why his relationship with Hannah isn't enough for her.

In this text, we are left to imagine Hannah's response to such a question from her husband. The situation seems similar to that in the selection of Torah we read just before this passage on Rosh Hashanah, of the struggles of Sarah and Abraham with infertility, and with the taunting that Hagar, Sarah's handmaid, inflicts upon her.

On that text, in which Sarah explicitly tells Abraham about this interaction, Rashi, the medieval Torah commentator, speculates Sarah explaining to Abraham:

"You deprive me of your protecting words since you hear how I am despised and yet you keep silent"
— Genesis Rabbah 45:5

I believe the same could be said for Elkanah.

The way we've told the story, there is a problem that only G-d can fix, and it is only through heartfelt prayer that G-d is willing to intervene. But I think this alternative telling brings us to a different conclusion: Hannah (and Sarah) must turn to G-d because there is no place for their voices to be heard among the people in their lives and the structures in their world.

Likewise, it does not appear that there is anyone to hear Peninnah's pain of being stuck in a bad relationship (or Hagar's pain of being forced to live her life as a handmaid), and this leads them to putting down the other women in their lives and further isolating themselves. Meanwhile, we celebrate the men in these stories for their accomplishments in other domains, but let them off the hook when they let down their wives in important ways.

We've all been a Hannah - the subject of uninvited ridicule about topics that may or may not actually be important to us, but that serve to cut us down regardless.

We've all been a Penninah - cutting down others to boost our own egos when we feel powerless.

And we've all been an Elkanah - letting our views on what is wrong in the lives of those around us prevent us from hearing them when they cry out to us.

Perhaps in our world, the lesson is as much about turning to each other as it is about turning to G-d. That we need to be better to each other - to hear each other and to empower each other - and we need to build communities and structures that embody these values. This High Holiday season, I hope we can reflect on the ways we've been hurt, the ways we've hurt others, and the ways we can be better.

Source:

<https://www.atthewellproject.com/blog/woman-on-woman-bullying-in-the-story-of-hannah>