

Hannah, Peninnah, and Elkanah (1 Samuel 1–2¹)

Recent years have seen several literary readings of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1–2. Many of these readings, some of which I will interact with below,² seek to enlist this text in the important task of subverting contemporary interpretations that perpetuate dominant discourse and positions inimical to the interests of women. The interpretative approach taken in this chapter is literary in its concern with the *narrative qualities* of 1 Sam 1:1–2:21 in the Hebrew Bible version of story (the Septuagintal version differs in crucial respects),³ both on its own terms and also as inaugurating the larger narrative which is 1 and 2 Samuel. Mary Callaway and Carol Meyers have both persuasively argued for the importance of Hannah in the early sections of 1 Samuel,⁴ but even they have underestimated Hannah's significance. In particular, we will see that the fact that Hannah does not pass from the scene until 1 Sam 2:21, after the account of corrupt malpractice of the sons of the priest Eli in relation to sacrifices in vv. 12–17, is freighted with meaning for her role in the larger narrative of 1 Samuel in a manner that has not been appreciated hitherto. Additionally, in accordance with the broad approach of this volume,

1. This chapter originally appeared in a Festschrift in honor of Professor Wolfgang Stegemann.

2. See Amit, “Am I Not More Devoted?”; Klein, “Hannah”; and Meyers, “Hannah and Her Sacrifice.”

3. See Walters, “Hannah and Anna.”

4. See Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One*.

the literary dimensions of 1 Samuel 1–2 also subsist in the relationship of the story to similar plot patterns in other narratives. Once again the plot type that Christopher Booker calls “Rags to Riches” will provide a comparison with Hannah’s experience, although not with as many points of similarity as the story of Tamar in Genesis 38. The bulk of the interpretation offered in this chapter, however, will consist in reading the narrative in a manner that is closely related to the Israelite setting of its first audience by use of social-scientific ideas and perspectives.

UNDERSTANDING 1 SAMUEL 1:1—2:21

For this purpose, from a range of possible ethnography, including Haiti and Africa,⁵ I will draw upon the results of research conducted by Finnish anthropologist Hilma Granqvist, who conducted ethnographic research among certain Arab villagers in Palestine from 1925 to 1931 and later published a number of volumes detailing her research.⁶ Granqvist’s gender allowed her unusual access to Palestinian women. This ethnography is attractive because of the richness of the data, and because it concerns an agricultural and sedentary group (as opposed to a nomadic and pastoral one) and was written long before Western influences reached their current level.⁷ This was a population that also featured patrilineality, patrilocality, and polygyny and operated at the advanced agrarian stage of socioeconomic development. Clearly there are significant differences between this culture and that of Israel in the ancient period, but there are also similarities in social systems that meant these Palestinians were much closer culturally to ancient Israelites than are we who have been socialized into the cultures of northern Europe (and its colonial offshoots) and North America. I will deploy Granqvist’s ethnography in the interpretation of 1 Sam

5. See Leeb, “Polygyny in the Biblical World.” Also see Mbuwayesango, “Childlessness,” 27–28.

6. See Granqvist, *Marriage Conditions*, vol. 1; *Marriage Conditions*, vol. 2; Granqvist, *Birth and Childhood*; and Granqvist, *Child Problems*. I am indebted to Bruce Malina for bringing Granqvist’s under-appreciated work to my attention.

7. These three reasons make less applicable here the admittedly fine research represented in Abu-Lughod, “Polygyny.” On the pressures on Arabs of Bedouin origin to move towards an increasingly Westernized lifestyle in Lebanon, see Hamadeh, “The Values and Self-Identity of Bedouin and Urban Women.”

1:1—2:21 in the manner explained in chapter 2. I will begin by outlining relevant features of the Palestinian social system.

With this material providing comparative perspectives, I will then consider the text of 1 Sam 1:1—2:21 in some detail. During this phase of the argument I will frequently contrast the views I reach with those expressed in recent literary approaches (which often have the laudable aim of retrieving this passage from hegemonic, gendered readings)—not so much to criticize these views but rather to demonstrate how different is one's interpretation when the ancient cultural context of the narrative is given due prominence. Finally, I will offer some concluding observations that will include the resonances of Hannah's story with a wider range of narrative illustrating "Rags to Riches" plots.

A MODERN COMPARISON: PATRILINEALITY, PATRILOCALITY, AND POLYGyny AMONG PALESTINIAN ARABS IN THE 1920S AND 1930S

The distinctive pressures created by patrilineality were continually evident among the Palestinian Arabs with whom Granqvist lived. To see how this system worked, we should imagine a single male with property, who is determined to preserve that property among his male issue. The first step is to provide that his sons inherit. But what about the next generation? The best he can do to put his purpose into effect is to have the children of his sons marry one another; that is, to have his grandchildren marry their paternal cousins. On this matter Henry Rosenfeld, one of the Mediterranean ethnographers of the 1960s, has observed, "Both Granqvist and I interpret the existence of (patrilateral) parallel cousin marriages as a means of protecting property . . . I see no reason not to believe that this was the original function of parallel cousin marriage at the time when rural agriculturalists transformed into a peasantry."⁸

Granqvist noticed that the pressures created by this patrilineal system were particularly felt in the area of inheritance. A man with property (land being the main asset) was required to pass it on to his nearest male relatives. In first place were his sons, but if he had no sons, it would pass to his daughter, but she would then usually be married by a cousin. If a man died without any children, his brothers had first claim, and through them their sons.⁹ Here the principle behind these priorities

8. Rosenfeld, "The Contradictions," 250.

9. Granqvist, *Marriage Conditions*, 1:76.

of inheritance was clearly to preserve the property of a male among his male issue. Only if the deceased had no brothers, or if there were no sons of such brothers, could male relatives of his wife press a claim. A similar concern in ancient Israel to keep the inheritance in the family (and the tribe) was put into effect by the provisions of Num 27:1–11 and 36:1–9.

In relation to marriage partners, Granqvist observed that “today, as in former times, it seems that marriage with the father’s brother’s son (*ibn il-‘amm*) is preferred to any other marriage in order to prevent a stranger taking possession of the property and inheritance of the family.”¹⁰ The rationale for cousin-marriage of this type is, as just noted, that by this arrangement a man ensures that his male issue retains his property.

Marriages were arranged by the families of the man and the woman (the bride being often, in fact, a young girl). The usual pattern was that a father procured a bride for his son.¹¹ Some betrothals occurred long before the girl had even reached puberty. Usually a girl agreed with her father’s choice, although occasionally she resisted.¹² Upon marriage the bride left her father’s home to go to live with her husband, who was usually residing in his father’s house. This was the patrilocal dimension of this social system. Since the brides were often very young, and the transition could be quite traumatic, her father and brothers would console her with words to this effect: “We have not given you to any sort of people. We have given you to people upon whom we can depend.”¹³ This would especially be the case if she was marrying a cousin. One aspect of this patrilineal system was that it was usually the father who chose the name for a boy, and the mother who named a newborn girl. But this was not always the case; sometimes the procedure was reversed, or another close relative chose the name, or even an outsider.¹⁴ In such cases, the person taking the initiative to name a child usually had a good reason for doing so, as when a grandmother named her grandson after the name of her recently deceased husband.¹⁵

Yet even when the property passed to the son of a brother there were serious disadvantages for the surviving relatives of the deceased. In

10. Ibid, 77–78, and 66–98 for the general position of cousins.

11. Ibid, 46.

12. Ibid, 54.

13. Ibid, 53.

14. Granqvist, *Child Problems*, 11.

15. Ibid, 13.

the usual course, if the deceased had left a daughter, a cousin with the right to the property married her but without paying a bride price (for there was no male to whom it could be given). In this way the incoming cousin acquired the property of the deceased and of the deceased it was said, “the hereditary is lost.”¹⁶ Even apart from the question of property, the position of the surviving women could be quite catastrophic. Imagine a woman in her forties with a husband and children, including sons. If the husband died, she would grieve, but a son (with whom she would probably be on good terms) would inherit, and she would continue living in the family home in a position of love and respect. But if she had no son, she faced the arrival of cousin (marrying either her or one of her daughters), who may have had little time for her and who mainly wanted the estate. She faced marginalization at least, and possibly exclusion from the family home.¹⁷ Such exclusion usually would compel her to return to the house of her father. If the daughter was thought to be at fault for not bearing a son, her return home would be regarded as shameful for her and her family.¹⁸ If the woman’s father and brothers were dead, she would have no one to turn for help, and her position was truly deplorable.¹⁹

Granqvist discovered a close connection between this patrilineal system and some cases of polygyny. Her research was stimulated by meeting a woman who had insisted that her husband (over his initial objections) take a second wife because upon his death his relatives would take possession of the property and force her to leave. This was not the only reason for polygyny. Sometimes the husband simply wanted a younger wife, and sometimes a man married again because his home needed more female labor and it was not the custom to keep women servants.²⁰ Nevertheless, the problem of what would happen to the property

16. Granqvist, *Marriage Conditions*, 1:74–76.

17. Granqvist, *Marriage Conditions*, 2:212.

18. *Ibid.*, 248.

19. *Ibid.*, 251–52.

20. Granqvist, *Marriage Conditions*, 1:3. Also note *ibid.*, 2:211, where she reiterates two reasons that prompt one wife to disregard her dislike of having a co-wife: first, where the need for help in the house is so great and it is not the custom to use women servants; and, second, when she is childless or has only daughters.

if there were no sons to inherit constituted the most pressing reason for a man to take another wife.²¹

When lack of sons meant that a man was obliged to marry again, or when he did so for some other reason, the first wife had to adapt to a co-wife (*durra*) in her husband's house and possibly also to the second wife's children by her husband.²² Granqvist offers a rich stock of information about the experience of wives in a condition of polygyny.²³ The attitude of the first wife was largely dependent on the reason for the second marriage. She would be most unhappy if she had sons and her husband simply wished to have a more attractive wife; indeed such an event might drive her to despair and vexation.²⁴ But if she had no sons, his taking a second wife would be an unfortunate necessity.

Relations between co-wives were generally poor. They tended to regard each other as troublesome and bitter. Even when a woman considered her co-wife was agreeable personally, she was still her rival for the attention of the husband. Many proverbs and songs among the villagers reflected this bitter rivalry between the co-wives.²⁵ Sometimes the rivalry was so fierce that co-wives practiced magic against one another.²⁶

It was a custom among the Palestinian Arabs—a custom enforced locally by Islamic law—that a husband had to give his two wives a house or at least a room each. This increased the expense involved in taking on a second wife but no doubt did much to reduce the occasions of contention between them. A number of the songs brought out the poor position of an older, first wife in relation to a younger, second wife. Sometimes a new wife might displace the old to such an extent that she forced her husband to divorce the first wife.²⁷

Yet it was not always the case that the new wife ended up with control. Granqvist noted that the new wife was not always the more

21. Note that in a survey of polygyny across many cultures Jack Goody observes ("Polygyny," 177), "in Europe and Asia, polygyny is largely but not exclusively an heir-producing device; often it is a way of replacing a barren wife."

22. Granqvist, *Marriage Conditions* 2:167.

23. *Ibid.*, 2:174–217.

24. See the case discussed by Granqvist, *ibid.*, 2:174–85.

25. *Ibid.*, 186–87. Here is an example: "The co-wife (*durra*) is bitter even if she is only the handle of a water jar."

26. *Ibid.*, 198–99.

27. *Ibid.*, 190–91.

charming or the more adept at dealing with their joint husband. One first wife she knew greeted a second wife when she arrived at the house with a song that proclaimed, “Even if he takes a hundred wives, I am still the cover of the jar and all women are under my feet.”²⁸

As a general rule, the husband regarded one of the wives as the favorite, the “preferred one” (*il-mahdiyye*), the “beloved” (*il-mahbube*); and the other as the “not beloved” (*mus mahbube*), even the “hated” (*mabruda*). In addition, one of the co-wives usually had authority over the others; she was the “mistress” of the house, and any co-wife had to obey her. This was regarded as necessary for the proper running of the house.²⁹ Who filled this role seems to have depended on the respective strength of character of each of the co-wives.³⁰ A childless woman who was nevertheless the wife with authority even had the opportunity to win the affections of the children of her co-wife or co-wives.³¹ The natural thing, however, was that the children would take their own mother’s part against her co-wife (*durra*) so that in the latter, “her enemy,” they would see their own enemy.³²

If we ask what it was like to be a wife in this system who was incapable of producing children, who was “barren,” to use the English word that conveys something of the seriousness of her situation (just as the clinical expression “infertile” most certainly does not), it is clear that the character of the patrilineal system explained above provides most of the answers. At best one’s husband might have to marry a second wife, with all the potential for dissension and rivalry that would produce; while at worst the woman (without the sons needed to secure the inheritance and provide her with love and support) faced exclusion from her home.

Granqvist gathered some material directly on this issue. The value and status of a woman depended to a large extent upon her fruitfulness and the preservation of her children. Barrenness was considered a curse and a reproach.³³ It was regarded as good grounds for divorce or as necessitating the husband take a second wife. Barren women were

28. Ibid, 193.

29. Ibid, 194.

30. Ibid, 213–17.

31. Ibid, 214; see *ibid.*, 213, for an instance in which a childless first wife held complete sway over a second wife who had two sons and two daughters.

32. Ibid., 216.

33. Granqvist, *Child Problems*, 224–25.

extremely sensitive to their condition and were distressed whenever they heard someone was expecting a child. As noted above, in some cases the woman herself had insisted that her husband take a second wife lest he die without heirs and his portion of land go to others:

But in such cases the first wife must take the risk and danger that the new wife will be more than a substitute. How easily it may happen that he comes to love the other one and think more of her. Or, the second wife, having children, may look down upon her, like did the Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, upon her mistress Sarah. And when Sarah, contrary to all expectations bore a son, and drove Hagar away, it is possible that this was due to her fear lest the first-born son should set aside her own son, even it he was only the son of a handmaid.³⁴

Granqvist notes that there was always a certain glory around the wife whose son would succeed his father: “If a childless wife is to raise herself and her position in relation to such a dangerous rival it requires unusual personal wisdom and strength of character.”³⁵ And hers was always a fragile situation. Thus Granqvist noted one case of a husband with two wives, one with children and one without, but the barren wife was the “loved” one. As the barren wife had many attractive qualities, the husband generally said that he did not mind that she had no children. Yet there were also times when he became angry with her and said, “It is lawful to hew down a tree which does not bear fruit.”³⁶

Having set out this ethnographic material to provide a body of comparative material, we turn now to the narrative of 1 Sam 1:1—2:21.

INTERPRETING 1 SAMUEL 1:1—2:21

Setting the Scene: 1 Samuel 1:1–3

The first three verses of 1 Samuel 1, with the condensed quality typical of Old Testament narrative originating in a high-context culture, lay the foundations of a story brimming with drama and potential conflict at both the domestic and the social levels that will develop inexorably as the tale unfolds.

34. Ibid., 76–77.

35. Ibid., 77.

36. Ibid., 77–78.

The core of the situation described is that of two families, of different social levels and status and located in two locations, which are brought into proximity with one another once a year. First, there is Elkanah, an Ephrathite from Ramathaim-Zophim on Mount Ephraim, the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph (1 Sam 1:1). Elkanah has two wives: Hannah, who has no children; and his second wife, Peninnah, who does (1 Sam 1:2). Second, there is Eli, and his two sons, Hophi and Phineas, who are the priests of Yahweh at Shiloh (1 Sam 1:3). Carol Meyers wrongly states that the “cast of characters in 1 Samuel 1 includes five individuals: the Ephraimite Elkanah; his two wives, Hannah and Peninnah; the priest Eli; and the infant Samuel.”³⁷ By overlooking Eli’s sons she misses their malpractice in 1 Samuel 2 and Hannah’s role in condemning them, to which I will return below. Long ago Joseph Bourke astutely noticed that the theme of evil represented by Eli and his sons provided the contrasting refrain, the literary counterpoint, to the theme of good represented by Hannah and Samuel.³⁸

To grasp how an Israelite of the Persian period (and indeed of the whole period from 950 to 250 BCE) would have understood this opening passage we must adopt the approach set out above, by trying to clear our minds of modern assumptions about human behaviour and by adopting a set of scenarios appropriate to the context. To do this I will rely upon the material on the context, set out in chapter 2, especially on the views on societies at an advanced agrarian stage of development formulated by Gerhard and Jean Lenski and on the Palestinian ethnography just described.

The reference in v. 3 to Eli, and his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who were the priests of Yahweh at Shiloh, is vital for the development of the narrative. This is not just because we are introduced to these figures as the custodians of a shrine to which Elkanah used to go every year to sacrifice, an event that will soon feature in the narrative. In addition, the position of Hophni and Phinehas would have given them great power and social eminence (far beyond that of Elkanah, although he was a man of very respectable lineage and clearly of some means; otherwise he could not have afforded to support two wives), both in terms of status and wealth, from the control they exercised over the cult and the share they could take from the sacrifices. They constituted part of the

37. Meyers, “Hannah and Her Sacrifice,” 96.

38. Bourke, “Samuel and the Ark,” 82.

local elite. On the other hand, it is reasonable to designate the family of Elkanah as non-elite, since although Elkanah possessed a lineage and resources, he and his family (like all other Israelites in the area) were subject while visiting Shiloh to the power of Eli and his two sons, who we soon learn engaged in the oppressive practices typical of other ancient Near Eastern elites, discussed in chapter 2, with particular reference to Samuel's warning of what Israel could expect from a king (1 Sam 8:11–18). Any ancient Israelite audience, as soon as they heard this reference to the priestly family in control at Shiloh, would probably have begun to wonder whether Eli's sons were in the habit of abusing their position in the interests of their personal enrichment, in line with the behavior of other elites in their environment. This suspicion is amply confirmed in the text. David Jobling has aptly pointed to the fact that we learn from 1 Sam 2:13–14 that the sons of Eli misappropriated part of the sacrificial meat of *all* the Israelites who went there, including Elkanah, Hannah, and Peninnah. This information inevitably affects the way we read the mention of the two families in 1 Sam 1:1–3. Since the family had been coming up every year, it follows that on each visit “Hannah experienced the rottenness of the priestly regime.”³⁹ Early in the twentieth century Danish archaeologists confirmed there was a cultic site at Shiloh (a site lying between Bethel and Shechem).⁴⁰

In relation to the Palestinian position described above, we note, first of all, that the broad social system is patrilineal, since we find Elkanah being designated in relation to a lineage traced back through four generations of male ancestors. In other parts of the Old Testament we find evidence for the fact that the male heirs, sons especially, inherited from their fathers.⁴¹ As noted in chapter 2, however, the Old Testament assumes no notion of primogeniture, of the elder son taking all.⁴² Preference for cousin marriage, that we would consider possible from the Palestinian comparison to occur in such a setting, is not mentioned in 1 Sam 1:1—2:21. Nevertheless, elsewhere the Bible gives a number indications of the importance of marrying kinsfolk, and these

39. Jobling, “Hannah's Desire,” 134.

40. See Kjaer, *The Excavation of Shiloh*.

41. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together*.

42. Especially see Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together*, 54, with respect to Deut 21:15–18.

would often be cousins (see Gen 24:1–4; Num 36:6 [“they shall marry within the family of the tribe of their father,” RSV]).

An ancient Israelite would probably have regarded Elkanah as a man of some honor in this society, because of the length of his ancestry—“the sign of a noble and well-known family.”⁴³ Another sign of Elkanah’s being honorable is that he has the resources to support two wives, as already noted. From this detail, moreover, we learn that this is a social system where polygyny is practiced, and that it is patrilocal. There is evidence elsewhere for these customs having been features of the ancient Israelite social system (Gen 29:21–30; Deut 21:15), the presence of these features would have been recognized by any Israelite familiar with these texts.

As to the relationships between Elkanah, Hannah, and Peninnah, an ancient Israelite would probably have interpreted Hannah as Elkanah’s first wife. This inference would have conformed with the Israelite habit of mentioning a person who is senior in time first.⁴⁴ Several commentators take this view.⁴⁵ That Hannah had failed to produce children put her husband and herself in a difficult position. The overriding need to preserve the family property was thus imperiled. Elkanah would also have faced the shame involved in his paternal line of five generations, including himself, coming to an end. In the meantime, he would not have sons to help him with the work. Hannah would certainly have also suffered on her own account. There are other instances in the Hebrew Bible of the shame and distress suffered by women who are barren. Thus, in Gen 16:4 Sarah’s status in relation to Hagar is diminished when Hagar conceives, and in Gen 30:23 Rachel’s first words as a mother are “God has taken away my shame.”⁴⁶ Hannah’s value and honor as a married woman were closely tied up in producing children. Instead, she was experiencing the curse of barrenness.⁴⁷

43. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 22.

44. So elder sons are mentioned before younger ones—1 Sam 16:6–13.

45. See, as one example, Gordon (*1 & 2 Samuel*, 72), who says her being the first wife is “a fair inference.”

46. On the shame of barrenness, see Chertok, “Mothers, Sons and Infertility.” For a study of barrenness in relation to ecstatic states in the narratives of Sarah and Hannah, see Neufeld, “Barrenness.”

47. To have children was a sign of God’s blessing—see Exod 23:25–26 and Deut 7:14–15.

Under these circumstances, Elkanah had little choice but to take a second wife so he could father the sons that were necessary for the well-being of them all. The comparable material from Palestine invites us to imagine a woman in Hannah's situation seeing the wisdom in this and perhaps even pushing her husband to take such a step. This was, after all, similar to what Sarah said to Abraham when she had failed to produce children (Gen 16:1–4) and Rachel to Jacob (Gen 30:1–3), although in the second of these patriarchal examples any children of the maid were to be regarded as those of the wife.⁴⁸

Yet this procedure, while it would satisfy Elkanah's need to secure his property and provide male labor, would have entailed the extra expense of a second wife and also the prospect of rivalry between his two co-wives. From Hannah's point of view, it was a solution that improved the likelihood that she would not be displaced if Elkanah died. Nevertheless, it did nothing for the disgrace she experienced because of her barrenness, and it meant that she would be in the center of a possibly difficult relationship with Elkanah's second wife. Not just in Palestine in the 1920s, as we have seen, but also in ancient Israel, as with Sarah and her servant Hagar in Genesis 16, relations between co-wives were generally poor. This was an almost inevitable result of two women competing for the attention and favour of one man. This is not to suggest that co-wives can't sometimes have a positive relationship and cooperate in their own joint interest,⁴⁹ but such a happy picture is not what Granqvist found, or what we see in this narrative.

So Elkanah took Peninnah as a second wife, and she bore him children. The hopes that he and Hannah had no doubt entertained beforehand concerning this union were realized in the birth of the children, but the likely problems that they had probably feared also came to pass. This brings us to the next section of the narrative, 1 Sam 1:4–8.

Relations between Elkanah, Hannah, and Peninnah (1 Samuel 1:4–8)

The setting of v. 4ff. is the occasion of one of the annual visits that Elkanah and his family made to Shiloh to offer sacrifice to Yahweh mentioned at the start of v. 3. The occasion was apparently a yearly feast also men-

48. On this issue see Van Seters, "The Problem of Childlessness."

49. For evidence for cooperation among co-wives in Africa, see Madhavan, "Best of Friends and Worst of Enemies." But note this article also recognizes the reality of competition between co-wives.

tioned in Judg 21:19–21. The details are richly illuminating: “On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions (*manoth*) to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters. He would give Hannah one portion, (the portion) of the face,⁵⁰ for he loved Hannah, even though the Lord had shut her womb” (1 Sam 1:4–5).

The fact that Elkanah loved (*’aheb*) Hannah (although she was barren) sounds very similar to the phenomenon that Granqvist found to be common among Palestinian Arabs, whereby one wife was “loved” (*il-mahbube*) and the other was the “not beloved” (*mus mahbube*). While we are not told that Peninnah fell into this latter category, that seems a safe inference from the text. Indeed the Old Testament explicitly mentions this phenomenon. There is a close parallel in Gen 29:30–35, where we learn that Jacob loved Rachel but hated Leah, even though Rachel was barren. In Deut 21:15–17, a legal passage beginning with the words, “If a man has two wives, the one loved (*’ahubah*) and the other disliked (*senuah*), and they have both borne him children, both the loved and the disliked . . .” This passage differs from 1 Samuel 1 in that here both women have had children; nevertheless, that a law was needed to regulate the case of a man who loved one of two co-wives and disliked the other means this must have been a familiar feature of Israelite social life.

The fact that Elkanah loved Hannah lends support to the proposal advanced above that an ancient Israelite audience would have regarded Hannah as the first wife, and that Elkanah married Peninnah for the purpose of securing male heirs, possibly at her insistence and over his objections. It is also probable, given Hannah’s seniority in the house and the fact that she and not Peninnah was the object Elkanah’s love, that she was, similar to the custom of the Palestinian Arabs, the co-wife with authority in the household routines.

At this point we must consider the relationship between Hannah and Peninnah, especially in the presentation of Peninnah as Hannah’s “rival,” that we find in the next remarkable section of the narrative: “And her rival (*suratah*) used to provoke her sorely and to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as

50. The text is difficult: *papaya*, “nose,” “wrath,” or occasionally “face,” may mean a large portion: see Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 24. Bodner (1 Samuel, 15) is probably correct in suggesting the Elkanah only gave Hannah a single portion because she was barren and had no other mouths to feed.

she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her” (1 Sam 1:6–7, RSV).

I reiterate that I am concerned in this chapter only with the Masoretic Text, since the Septuagint lacks this element.⁵¹ Lillian Klein has suggested that “jealousy” is one of the chief transgressions projected upon women in the Hebrew Bible.⁵² She interprets Hannah as refusing to enter into jealous competition with Peninnah and as being marginalized in consequence.⁵³ Yet Hilma Granqvist observed that rivalry between co-wives in 1920s Palestine was routine. Does Hannah really stand apart from this form of interaction? With reference to the Palestinian comparison, we can envisage how an ancient Israelite audience would have made sense of the narrative, by imagining what it might have been like when, as a new bride, Peninnah arrived in Elkanah’s house. Relations between co-wives among the Palestinian Arabs were generally poor, and we have just seen good reason to think that things were no different among the Israelites. While barren Hannah would have agreed with the necessity of Elkanah’s second marriage, she could not have been happy at the prospect of sharing her husband with another woman, and she must also have been apprehensive that he might come to prefer Peninnah. Nor would she have relished giving up her position of authority in the house. Such apprehensions would probably ensure that she sought to keep Peninnah in her place, although this is not to suggest that she treated her harshly, for which there is no evidence. One can imagine courtesy and firmness on Hannah’s part, but not warmth. In the months immediately after Peninnah entered Elkanah’s house, she was in a very difficult position. Probably quite a young girl, she had suffered the trauma of separation from her father’s house. These feelings may have been somewhat attenuated if Elkanah was related to her. But she must have soon realized that Elkanah loved Hannah, and she was probably under Hannah’s authority. Until she produced a child, she had little honor in the house, and if she failed to bear one, she probably faced divorce. It is difficult to conceive that she got along well with Hannah.

The day Peninnah knew she was pregnant would have been a very happy one for her but would have fixed Hannah with ambivalent feel-

51. See the discussion on the difference between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint on this point in Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One*, 48–49.

52. Klein, “Hannah,” 78.

53. *Ibid.*, 82.

ings. Her happiness and Hannah's ambivalence reached a climax when Peninnah produced her first son. Now Peninnah had a place of honor in the house, especially in relation to her rival, Hannah. Even if Elkanah did not love her, it was she who had secured his inheritance and would provide him with much-needed male labor, and for these reasons she must have had his respect and gratitude. She would also be able to bask in the affections and enjoy the protection of her son and then other children in the years ahead. For Hannah, however, while Elkanah's property would safely flow to his male progeny, her barrenness was now exposed in all its desolation in contrast to Peninnah's fruitfulness. At least she had not lost Elkanah's love. In this situation it was possible and probably imperative for Hannah to insist on her authority in the household even as Peninnah's position became more and more secure. On the other hand, in spite of bearing him children Peninnah had still not won Elkanah's love, had still not been able to supplant Hannah in his affections; and this must have rankled.

Socially realistic scenarios of this sort help us understand the dramatic events in Shiloh. The venue is the trigger for what happens. The family has now left the comparative⁵⁴ privacy of their house (and no doubt farm) and come to the cultic shrine at Shiloh, a site open to Israelites where sacrifices are conducted in public. The sacrifice in view seems to be the "peace offering" (*zebah šelamim*) of Leviticus 3; this is the kind of sacrifice where the meat was eaten by the offerer and was often motivated by a sense of thanksgiving to the Lord.⁵⁵ Here the person making the sacrifice killed the animal, the priests threw its blood around the altar, while the fat was burnt on the altar as an offering to Yahweh (Leviticus 3). The sacrificer also brought cakes along with the sacrifice, one of which was supposed to go to the priest who sprinkled the blood, while the meat had to be eaten on the day of the sacrifice (Lev 7:11–21). From 1 Sam 2:13–14 the audience of this narrative would understand that the meat was cooked by boiling in a cauldron located in a public place in the precincts of the shrine.

To situate 1 Sam 1:4–7 within its ancient context, therefore, we must visualize Elkanah going through the sacrifice and then boiling the animal's flesh in a cauldron in some open space in the shrine. He then

54. "Comparative" because one must not underestimate the extent to which those living in preindustrial settings find it difficult to keep their affairs to themselves.

55. See Pagolu, *Religion of the Patriarchs*, 47.

handed out portions of the cooked meat to Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters, and a single, possibly generous, portion to Hannah. On such occasions Peninnah reacted in the way depicted in 1 Sam 1:6–7, publicly drawing attention to Hannah's barrenness in order to shame her. The result was that Hannah wept and did not eat (v. 7). To a modern reader unfamiliar with the personal politics of a patrilineal society (where honor is a primary value, and where people seek to avoid shame and the causes of shame), Peninnah's outburst and Hannah's response may come as a complete surprise. Yet the incident is explicable in light of Israelite culture as explained in chapter 2 and the interpretation of the narrative advanced so far. This biblical incident also corroborates the details of that interpretation.

First, we note that the text brings to the surface what we have argued, against the view of Lillian Klein, it implied all along by describing Peninnah as "her rival" (*śaratah*). Although this is the only instance of this noun in the Hebrew Bible, the cognate verb *śarar*, which generally means "to show hostility to," "to harass,"⁵⁶ is used to express the same idea in Lev 18:18, where a man is proscribed from taking as a "rival-wife" the sister of his existing wife in her lifetime.⁵⁷ When the use of the word "rival" is related to the reference to the loved and hated co-wives of Gen 29:30–35 and Deut 21:15–17, the resulting picture is very like that which prevailed among Granqvist's Palestinian Arabs.

But why does Peninnah choose the occasion of the distribution of the portions to provoke and vex Hannah? The answer to this question lies in the character of their relationship when back home and the nature of the social dynamic known as "challenge-and-response." As explained in chapter 2, this social dynamic was first described by anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu from his work among the Kabyle, a North African tribe, and subsequently systematized by Bruce Malina for application to biblical texts.⁵⁸ Challenge-and-response describes the principal way in which honor can be acquired in Mediterranean culture where it is a central, indeed often dominant, value. Normally such competition involved males of roughly equal status seeking to assert themselves and demonstrate

56. See, for example, Exod 23:22; Num 10:9; 25:17; and 33:55.

57. Words closely related to "rival" in 1 Sam 1:6 occur with the meaning "rival wife" in Syriac and Arabic—see Gordon, 1 & 2 *Samuel*, 74.

58. See Bourdieu, "The Sentiment of Honour"; and Malina, *New Testament World*, 3rd ed., 27–56.

their honor in the eyes of the local public in a variety of social arenas. Yet the same cultural patterns also applied to women, given a suitable setting, as Malina has noticed.⁵⁹ First Samuel 1 is a very rare instance in which we do have a situation in which women are involved in a dispute over honor; although the evidence does not usually reach into such a context, this is a precious case in which it does.

The process begins with one party issuing a challenge, a claim to enter the social space of the other, which can be negative or positive. A negative challenge (and most challenges are negative) usually consists of an insult. A positive challenge consists of a gift or a word of praise. In either case the person challenged has to respond in an appropriate way or will be shamed before the audience present. Sometimes the response will take the form of a counterchallenge, thus putting the onus back on the challenger. When Elkanah distributed the portions, Peninnah “grieved Hannah sorely,” which we could reasonably translate as “challenged” her in the sense just explained, in order to make her ashamed and despondent because the Lord had closed her womb. Peninnah was saying something like: “Look at how the Lord has blessed me with sons and daughters, while he has shut up your womb!” She did so in the shrine at Shiloh precisely because this was a public place. Unlike at the family house, here others would be present to see Peninnah compare her fruitfulness, which Elkanah must publicly acknowledge in the multiple portions that he provides to herself and her children, with the barrenness of Hannah, who received only one portion, generous or not. For Peninnah this was a glorious opportunity to take revenge for the fact that at home Hannah, in spite of her having no children, was the wife whom Elkanah loved and probably the wife with authority. When Hertzberg writes in relation to the portion Elkanah gives Hannah, “Hannah must have been treated by her husband in some special way to explain the taunts which Peninnah used to fling on such an occasion,”⁶⁰ he falls into the error of supposing that Peninnah’s reaction was motivated merely by the size or character of Hannah’s portion rather than by the whole course and nature of their relationship—the typically troubled one of co-wives in a patrilineal culture. Similarly, when Lillian Klein suggests that it is Elkanah who generates mimetic desire leading to jealousy between the

59. Malina, *New Testament World*, 3rd ed., 35: “Similarly, women among themselves compete in challenge-riposte interactions.”

60. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, 24.

two women by his practices with the portions,⁶¹ she overlooks the probability that the relationship between Hannah and Peninnah was hardly likely to have been a good one when they were back at home. Peninnah's response is of a piece with that of Hagar, who, when she learned that she had conceived, meaning that the balance of power between mistress and maid had now shifted decisively, "looked with contempt upon her mistress" (Gen 16:4).

To Peninnah's challenge Hannah had no response. The shame it occasioned her affected Hannah deeply. Not only did she weep; she even stopped eating. Carol Meyers mistakenly suggests that Hannah's weeping was occasioned by the share of the sacrifice allotted to her by Elkanah.⁶² The actual reason lay in her relationship with Peninnah. Hannah did not weep on these occasions because she was childless (which surely oppressed her just as much at home as in Shiloh), but because of the extra factor—that Peninnah used the occasions in the shrine to humiliate her publicly. Lillian Klein, on the other hand, has proposed that "nothing in the text suggests that Hannah wants a child because Peninnah has children or because Peninnah taunts her. Hannah's desire arises from within and is maintained as a personal, as yet unfulfilled wish."⁶³ Against this view, which might carry force in a modern Western context but is rather anachronistic when applied to ancient Israel, we have the consideration that Hannah's misery is triggered precisely by Peninnah's taunts, and that when she gives vent to her joy later in the text she indicates very clearly that she is intent on playing the same game as Peninnah, by deriding her enemies (1 Sam 2:1). Even more provocatively, Hannah observes that "the barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn" (1 Sam 2:5, RSV), which clearly reveals her glee at the reversal of roles that has occurred between herself and Peninnah.

At v. 8 begins an account of the last such occasion of misery and embarrassment for Hannah. Her husband is moved by her state to ask her why she weeps, why she does not eat, and why her heart is sad. Finally he asks, "Am I not better to you than ten sons?" He may have been motivated by kindness, but he was not particularly perceptive. Presumably he is aware of how Peninnah taunted Hannah each year in Shiloh. Perhaps for his peace of mind he has decided not to intervene

61. Klein, "Hannah," 84–85.

62. Meyers, "Hannah and Her Sacrifice," 94.

63. Klein, "Hannah," 83.

in the difficult relationship between his two co-wives. He expresses his concern for Hannah solely in relation to the fact that she has no sons, not in relation to the shame that this allows Peninnah to heap upon her head. He also seems to consider only the factors of the love and support Hannah would have from sons, which he himself can provide. He ignores Hannah's shame, which Peninnah can trumpet, arising from the Lord's cursing her with barrenness, while Peninnah herself delights in sons and daughters. Elkanah also fails to consider what will happen if he dies and Peninnah and her children turn on Hannah and throw her out.

In some recent feminist criticism Elkanah is judged very severely. Yairah Amit, for example, suggests that Hannah's silence, her failure to eat, and her departure were actually motivated by her pain at what her husband had said, not by Peninnah.⁶⁴ This interpretation is implausible both because Hannah has begun weeping and stopped eating before Elkanah asks her why she is distressed, and also because of the terms of Hannah's song in 1 Sam 2:1–10, especially when she derides her enemies, who plainly include Peninnah (1 Sam 2:1). Joan Cook aptly questions Amit's interpretation of Elkanah by suggesting that "it makes Hannah very male-dependent by suggesting that she suffered from Elkanah's insensitivity but not from Peninnah's obnoxiousness."⁶⁵ But Lillian Klein is even harder on Elkanah than is Yairah Amit. She regards Elkanah's questions as delivered under the "blamer mode," where the questioner is interested in throwing his weight around rather than finding out anything. She sees his questions as a form of disguised verbal abuse made by a man against the woman he loves, because she is barren.⁶⁶ Yet it is most unlikely that an ancient Israelite audience would have judged Elkanah with such severity, since not only has he not divorced his barren wife, as he was entitled to do, but because he still loves her in spite of her failing to produce a son. The Israelite audience would probably have regarded him as doing his best to balance the interests of two rival co-wives, no light task for any husband. Nevertheless, that Elkanah's response does nothing to assuage Hannah's pain becomes apparent in the next verse.

64. Amit, "Am I Not More Devoted," 74.

65. Cook, *Hannah's Desire*, 36.

66. Klein, "Hannah," 87–88.