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## The Barren Wife

### First Samuel 1: 1-8

**The barren wife DIG:** In ancient times, how did the Jews view a barren wife? Why? How did Elkanah actually contribute to the conflict within his house? Why did Elkanah take his family up to Shiloh year after year? How did Hannah's barrenness seem to correspond to Isra'el's spiritual state at that time? How did ADONAI use Hannah's barrenness to bring Isra'el out of the dark era of the Judges?

**REFLECT:** Is there some way that your life is barren right now? What lesson does Hannah teach us about barrenness? What "unchangeable" situation have you grieved over as Hannah did? When has ADONAI led you into a time of disappointment before granting your heart's desire? What encouragement can you find in this passage? In God's faithfulness? What lessons can husbands learn from Elkanah?

**Peninnah had Elkanah's children, but Hannah had his heart.**

**Samuel** was born sometime around the year 1050 BC. The book of **Judges** sets the context: **In those days there was no king in Isra'el. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 2:10).** This was the condition of the nation at the time of **Samuel's** birth. **Isra'el** faced a leadership crisis that was accompanied by a spiritual crisis. Having entered the Promised Land in victory and strength, **the people of God** had lost **their** way spiritually, politically, and militarily. **Judges 2:10** explains why: After **Joshua** and **his** generation, **there arose another generation after them who did not know ADONAI.**

Forgetting **the LORD** is the greatest evil that can happen to any generation. Because **the Israelites** didn't rely on **God's** help, **they** failed to drive out the remnants of the Canaanites; but instead, began to follow in their pagan ways and to worship their unholy idols. In punishment, **Ha'Shem** (see the commentary on **Dani'el Ai - Ha'Shem**) gave **the Israelites** over into the hands of **their** enemies, periodically showing mercy by raising up **judges** to deliver **them** (see the

commentary on **Judges, to see link click At - The Twelve Cycles**). The book of **Judges** concludes with several accounts that show us the immoral setting in which **Samuel** was born and raised, including the spiritual corruption of **the priesthood**, the idolatry of **the people**, and the moral squalor of **their society** (see **Judges Bz - The Results of the Era of the Judges**).<sup>12</sup>

The birth of **Samuel** foreshadowed a new age. The Scriptures always take care to inform us of the birth and upbringing of its most important figures, and so it is here. Just as **Moses, Samson, John the Baptist, and Yeshua Messiah** were all born in times of distress to humble, godly parents, the book begins: **Now there was a man from Ramathaim-zophim, a Tzuphite, in the hills of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah the son of Jerocham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tochu, the son of Tzuf, an Ephraimite (1:1)**. The beginning of the description of **Samuel's father, Elkanah**, is identical to that of **Samson's father, Manoah**, in **Judges 13:2**. Each description begins with the statement, **"There was a man,"** followed by the name of **his** hometown, **his own name, the tribe he** came from or living with, and a reference to **his** marital status.

**Ramathaim-zophim** was a small town in the very heart of **Isra'el**, belonging to the territory allotted to **Ephraim**, not far from **its** border with **Judah**, about five miles north of what would later be the city of **Jerusalem**. There, **Samuel** was born, lived, and died. In **1:19a** it is simply called by the shorter form: **Ramah**, from the Hebrew verb *rum*, meaning *to be high* (no pun intended). Ancient towns in the vicinity were usually on hilltops. The form of the word **Ramathaim** (meaning *the two heights of the zophites*) suggests two adjacent summits on which the town was built. **Samuel** was a member of **the Kohathite clan of the tribe of Levi** (see the commentary on **Numbers At - The Clan of Kohath**), and an ancestor of the Tabernacle and Temple musicians (**First Chronicles 6:16, 22, and 31-33**). The reference to **Samuel's father as an Ephraimite**, then, relates to the territory where **he** lived rather than to **his tribe**. The name **Elkanah** means *"God has created [a son]"* and is tantalizingly prophetic of what would soon occur in **Hannah's** womb.<sup>13</sup>

**He had two wives, one named Hannah** (meaning *grace*) **and the other Peninnah** (meaning *pearl*). **Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children (1:2)**. **Barrenness** in ancient times was the ultimate disgrace for a married woman, since her husband's hopes and dreams depended on her providing him with a son to perpetuate his name and inherit his estate. The skillful way in which the two **wives** are introduced (**Hannah, Peninnah, Peninnah, Hannah**)

prepares the reader to expect that **the barren wife** will become the mother of a **son**. **Hannah was** being tested like the famous women before **her: Sarah (Genesis 11:30), Rebekah (Genesis 25:21), Rachel (Genesis 29:31), and the wife of Manoah (Judges 13:2)**. Apparently **Hannah** was **his first wife**, and when **she** proved **barren**, **he** married **Peninnah** so **he** could have a son. We don't know why **Elkanah** didn't wait on **the LORD** and trust **Him** to work out **His** plan, but even **Abraham** married **Hagar**, and **Jacob** ended up with four **wives!** While bigamy and divorce were not prohibited by the Torah (**Deuteronomy 21:15-17** and **24:1-4**), **ADONAI's** original plan was the one man be married to one woman for life (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ij - Is It Lawful for a Man to Divorce His Wife?**).<sup>14</sup>

**Hannah's barrenness** seems to correspond to **Isra'el's** spiritual state at that time. Women who suffer this condition often wonder how **God** is involved, but in **Hannah's** case we know, since the text informs us that **ADONAI had closed her womb (1:5)**. There are many reasons why **God** brings trials into the lives of **His** people, often to stimulate our faith, but in the case of the mother of such an important figure as **Samuel**, the point had not only to do with **Hannah**, but also with **Isra'el**. **The LORD closed Hannah's womb** to remind **Isra'el** that **He** had also caused **the people** to be spiritually **barren** because of **their** idolatry and unbelief. **Isra'el** was **God's barren wife**, having failed to give **Him the children** of faith **He** desired. As a nation, **Isra'el** demonstrated **her barrenness** in the lack of the strong leadership of a true king. The situation in **Elkanah's** family is intended as a parable of **Isra'el's** situation at that moment in history. **Hannah's** anxiety over having **no children**, even though **Elkanah loved her**, paralleled **Isra'el's** anxiety over having no king in spite of the care and **love** of **ADONAI**.

What **God** shows us through **Hannah** is relevant for every believer whose faith seems **barren**. It is true for **barren** churches, as the Church in the West, including America, can largely be considered today, bearing very little of the harvest of holiness and zeal for truth that **YHVH** desires. As we continue in **Hannah's** story, **she** will model for us the **grace-seeking** prayer (see **Aj - Hannah's Prayer**) that we need to offer to **Ha'Shem**. But in these opening verses we see another essential point. For in a time when **Isra'el** as a whole had forgotten **the LORD**, **Elkanah went up from Ramah to Shiloh** (see **Ae - The Tabernacle at Shiloh**) **year after year** (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Db - The Three Pilgrimage Festivals**) **to worship and sacrifice to ADONAI-Tzva'ot, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of 'Eli, were priests of ADONAI (1:3)**. **Elkanah** did

not **go up** to **Shiloh** to see **'Eli** or **his sons**, but to come before **the Holy One** and renew **his** covenant faithfulness. **Elkanah** did what we must do: **he** prioritized the place of **God** in **his** life and focused on **Him**. **He** knew **he** was a sinner, and sought **God's grace** by means of the shed blood of **a sacrifice**.<sup>15</sup>



The family feast that followed **the sacrifice** was the culmination of the pilgrimage. Whereas no offeror ate the meat of his own purification offering (see the commentary on **Leviticus Ai - The Purification Offering: Purified by the Blood**), he was given back a substantial part of his own peace offering (see **Leviticus Ak - The Peace Offering: At Peace with God**). And this meat was enjoyed at the meal in celebration of **his** restored fellowship with **God**. On that occasion, **when Elkanah was sacrificing, he gave a portion of the sacrifice to his wife Peninnah and to each of her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he gave a double portion**, unwittingly contributing to the conflict within **his** house, **because he loved Hannah more . . . even though ADONAI had closed her womb. Her rival taunted her and made her feel bad, because ADONAI had kept her from having children, and Peninnah missed no opportunity to inflict misery on her. All this was Hannah's bitter portion, year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of ADONAI, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat (1:4-7)**.<sup>16</sup> In the very place where **she** should have found hope - in **the house of ADONAI** - **Hannah** experienced only agony. The congregations of **God** are sometimes a most depressing place for those who feel all alone in their trials, though it is also the place they most need to be. Realizing this, we need be aware of the afflictions of

others, to be careful about what we say and how we act while rejoicing in our own blessings and go out of our way to provide heartfelt sympathy and support to those who grieve.<sup>17</sup>

But even here at the beginning of **her** story, there are two signs of hope for **Hannah**. The first sign was the very statement about **God's** involvement: **He had closed her womb (1:5)**. **The LORD** does not seek to destroy us through our trials but to increase our faith. So, if **ADONAI** is **the One** who **closed her womb**, **she** could take heart, since **He** could also be **the One** to open **it**. Instead of resenting **Ha'Shem's** sovereignty in our trials, we should lift up our hearts. Our **God** has proved **His** faithfulness and **love** by sending **His one-and-only Son** to die for our sins. In **Hannah's** day, **He** was well known as the **God** who was faithful to deliver **Isra'el** from bondage in Egypt, and who was mighty in securing the Promised Land for **them**. Rather than assuming some unholy, spiteful, or condemning purpose in our trials, we need to remember that **YHVH** is holy, so all **His** deeds are holy. **God** is good, so **He** intends our sorrows for good, and **the Holy One** is filled with mercy. For **ADONAI is close to the brokenhearted and saves those whose spirit is crushed (Psalm 34;18)**.

In **Hannah's** case, **Ha'Shem** was using **her** plight to bring about **Isra'el's** deliverance from the dark era of the **Judges**. This was a cause dear to **Hannah's** heart, as we know from the song that **she** later lifted up to praise **God** (see [Ao - Hannah's Song](#)). We may never know how **ADONAI** has worked through our most bitter trials to bring others to salvation, or to equip us with the sensitivity in ministry to others. But we do know that we can have confidence in **God's** purpose in our lives (see [Romans Cl - Our Bodies and Redemption](#)).

A famous example from church history is the tearful experience of Monica, the mother of the early Church's greatest theologian, Augustine of Hippo. As a devoted believer, Monica was grieved by her brilliant son's disdain for the Gospel, and even more so for the sexually immoral life that he was leading. Night after night she pleaded with **the Lord** for Augustine. One night was especially trying, for the next morning her son planned to board a ship bound for Rome, where there would be plenty of sin to be found by a young man. All night she prayed, and when Monica arose in the morning to find her son gone, she wept bitterly before **God**. Little did she know that in Italy her son would come under the influence of the famous preacher Ambrose of Milan, and that during his stay there he would declare his faith in **Jesus Christ** as his **Lord** and **Savior**! Moreover, the very debauchery over which that faithful mother grieved provided Augustine with a keen appreciation for **God's**

**grace.** His teaching of salvation by **grace** alone would have a profound influence on generations to come, including a direct influence on the men used by **God** to lead the Protestant Reformation.

The second cause for **Hannah's** hope was the tender **love** displayed by **her husband Elkanah.** He said to her, “**Hannah, why are you crying, and why aren't you eating? Why be so sad? Am I not better to you than ten sons**” (1:8)? As a typical man (who is often clueless concerning their wife's heart), **Elkanah's** words are not above criticism, and might even be considered self-centered. Notice that **he** asked **her**, “**Am I not better to you than ten sons?**” rather than telling **her**, “**You** are worth more **than ten sons** to me!” So it will often be that the most well-meaning friends may not know what to say, and they may say it imperfectly (or worse). But there is **One** whose comfort does not fail and whose remedy never fails. The ultimate cause for **Hannah's** hope lay in **the LORD** and in the reality that **she** had not, in fact, given up **her** faith in **Him.** As great as **Elkanah's love** for **Hannah** was, there was a far greater **love** than his, and a **Comforter** who could do what **her husband** never could, **One** who could answer **Hannah's** plea and grant the desire of **her** heart.

The prevalence of **barren wombs** among women most blessed by **God** may have caught **Hannah's** attention, and if so, **she** may have realized that a son whom **she** should bear could be of special importance to **ADONAI.** This idea is suggested by the prayer that **Hannah** sings at the beginning of **Chapter 2.** The biblical theme of **God's** blessing on **the barren womb** makes the important point that **He** saves not by human capability, human achievement, or human deeds. **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).** **YHVH** causes **the barren womb** to bear **children,** just as **He** responds to the faith of a **barren** heart. Thus, **the Lord** calls us not to trust human wisdom or human effort, and not to despair in the face of human failure; but to trust **ADONAI,** who gives life to the dead and salvation to those who seek **Him.** **Hannah's** affliction, like ours, was therefore a call to faith in **the Holy One.** **Her** weakness was a call of reliance on **God's** power. **Her** failure was a call to believe in **God's** faithfulness. And **her** grief was a call for **her** to seek **God's** grace.

Grateful though **Hannah** might have been for **her husband's love,** **her** true hope lay in a greater **love** than **his.** **Her** hope lay in **the LORD,** whose whole record of dealing with **Isra'el** was one of faithfulness, power, and **grace.** Our true hope, in all our trials, and especially in the burden of guilt for sin, is that same **God, the God**

**of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**, who has revealed **His love** forever by sending **His** own **Son** to redeem us by **His** blood. Indeed, when the time came for our **Savior** to be born, **He** was conceived by **the Ruach Ha’Kodesh** not in a **barren womb** like **Hannah’s**, but in **the virgin womb** of **Miryam**, proving that nothing is impossible for our **God**. When we are without strength, without resources, without hope, and without human gimmicks – then **the Creator of the universe** loves to stretch out **His** hand from heaven. King David once asked himself: **Why are you downcast, O my soul, and why are you so disturbed within me? His** answer? It is the answer that we will see revealed through the faith of **Hannah**, an answer that all who know **the Lord** can come to embrace in every trial: **Put your hope in ADONAI, for I will again praise Him, my Savior and my God (Psalm 43:5).**<sup>18</sup>

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, **You** are always so wonderful and loving! **You** care about each of **Your** children and tenderly guide our lives. Through **Hannah’s bareness**, **she** had great pain at first, she was blessed later when **You** opened **her womb**. Though in the midst of trials there are hurts and pains, but whenever **You** rescue **Your** children **Lord**, there is a greater joy. In the same way that **Hannah** cried in **her bareness** then later rejoiced in **Your** blessing **her** with **a child**, so also **Your** children cry now in trials, but rejoice when **You** deliver us. **Even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials. These trials are so that the true metal of your faith (far more valuable than gold, which perishes though refined by fire) may come to light in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Messiah Yeshua (First Peter 1:6b-7).** Life’s trials will soon be over, but the lessons we learn from them will last thru all eternity! For **I consider the sufferings of this present time not worthy to be compared with the coming glory to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18).** In **Messiah Yeshua’s** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*