Explore the Bible: Answered!

May 18, 2016

• *The Explore the Bible lesson for June 5 focuses on 1 Samuel 1.*

Beginning an epic

"Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy." "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit." "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times…" "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

These sentences are examples of how noted authors began their epics—in order, C.S. Lewis' The Chronicles of Narnia, J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit, Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities and Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. The anonymous narrator of the epic that makes up the Old Testament books of 1 and 2 Samuel—the two books were one scroll in ancient times—begins with "a certain man from Ramathaim," although the focus of the first chapter quickly will shift to his wife Hannah.

The narrator could have begun with a version of Tolstoy's line about unhappy families. In fact, the narrator could have begun a number of ways. Someone reading straight through Israel's history would just have come from the dark period at the end of Judges. God's people have been under constant threat, and their loose coalition of tribes has been stuck in a cycle of idolatry and deliverance, long tribulation and brief triumph. They are politically weak and religiously suspect. Bright spots like the redemptive story of Ruth stand out like points of light in a dark and dangerous time.

By the end of 2 Samuel, the lives of the Israelites will have changed drastically. The loose coalition of tribes will be united under the dynasty of David, a figure who receives the most extensive narrative in all of Scripture. The political and religious life of Israel will be focused on

Jerusalem, its king and its temple—or the lack of a temple—from the end of 2 Samuel on into the present day.

But the epic begins with an unhappy family and makes its dramatic turn with a heartfelt prayer.

Barren, bitter, bold

The circumstances of Hannah's story would seem familiar to readers of Israel's history so far. Its problem of barrenness echoes the patriarchal stories of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, as well as Jacob, Leah and Rachel. Tension builds between the wife with children and the wife without. Polygamous marriage strikes our society as strange in a way that it did not in tribal societies, then and now. It is interesting to note, however, that there is not one instance of polygamous marriage in Scripture that does not create major—and usually ongoing—trouble in the family.

The expression used of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:5, "the Lord had closed her womb," is an expression of the ancient narrators' belief that all events beyond the power of humans to control specifically were ordained by God. It is one perspective available to humans who faced questions for which they did not have an answer. No reason or motivation is given for this closing of the womb by God, and it would be irresponsible to guess at one—such as an unnamed sin of Hannah's—in this narrative. It also would be uncompassionate, to say the least, to guess at such reasons for others in similar situations today. All we know is what Hannah knew—she had a problem she could not solve on her own, and it grieved her greatly.

Her solution is prayer, and her prayer is direct. It takes the form of an "if … then" formula. If you, Yahweh—anytime "LORD" appears in an English translation with all capital letters, it is a translation of the name Yahweh—will look and remember, Hannah says, then her son will be dedicated to Yahweh's service for his life.

The Jewish scholar Robert Alter suggests in the relatively sparse narratives of Scripture, where only a few verses are used to represent very real and complex people, people's actions and their words are intended to carry a great deal of weight in revealing their character, especially their first actions and words. Hannah's first action is grief and fasting, while others are worshipping and feasting. Her first words are not to her husband or her rival, Peninah, in the face of her provocation, but directly to Yahweh. Her boldness is an act of trust—an act of faith.

Eli the priest is not especially helpful in this encounter. He takes her prayer to be drunkenness, and he does not inquire about her anguish and grief when he finds out the truth. The most he offers is his prayer for God to grant her request.

Heard by God

Yahweh answers her prayer, and Hannah in due course fulfills her vow. Hannah was faithful in the sense of trusting God with her grief and with her prayer. God was faithful in his answer, and Hannah then was faithful in keeping her promise. She—and not Elkanah, as would have been the normal convention—names her son Samuel, "God hears."

Two incidents highlight the challenge it must have been to Hannah to dedicate her child to God's service. She skips the annual pilgrimage to worship at Shiloh when Samuel is a newborn. She didn't miss this trip any of the years of her grief, but she misses in the year of her celebration and nursing her firstborn. After he is weaned, she and her husband make a special trip to Shiloh to worship and present Samuel to be raised in the tabernacle. The second incident actually is an ongoing habit recorded in 2 Samuel 2:19, in which we find out that each year during the annual trip, Hannah presents a new linen robe she had made for her son. No record of these reunions between Hannah and Samuel is recorded—we are left to imagine their greetings, their embraces, Hannah's "Look how big you've

gotten," and "Are you eating enough?," Samuel's emotions and questions, and her telling and re-telling the story each year to her son of how God answered her prayer and how she—and he—must be faithful to her vow.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes of this intimate beginning to the epic story of the rise of the kingdom of Israel: "The narrative of Elkanah-Hannah-Samuel stands as our entry point into Israel's astonished waiting. Chapter 1 functions as a paradigm for the entire drama: It begins in a problem and ends in a resolution of worship. That dramatic movement from hopelessness to gift has as its proper subjects those who are, like Hannah, barren and bereft. It has as its unmistakable agent Yahweh, the one who can turn barrenness to birth, vexation to praise, isolation to worship. This first chapter is a narrative of Yahweh's power and will to begin again, to create newness in history precisely out of despair."