

Birth and Calling of the Prophet Samuel

A Literary Reading of the Biblical Text

Steven L. Olsen

Chapters 1–3 of 1 Samuel¹ describe the miraculous origins and auspicious upbringing of the first major Hebrew prophet since Joshua, who by all measures lived centuries before Samuel.² The biblical account of Samuel’s beginnings forecasts the exceptional ministry of the man who served as Israel’s last complete sovereign. By faithfully filling the crucial roles of prophet, priest, and judge, Samuel helped to transform the House of Israel from a collection of weak and often warring tribes to a relatively permanent and somewhat stable nation in the contentious ancient Middle East. Thus, Samuel is rightly considered to be one of the preeminent personalities of the Hebrew Bible, and his remarkable

1. Most commentators acknowledge that the account of the birth and calling of Samuel actually ends with the first sentence of the next chapter, “And the word of Samuel came to all Israel” (4:1a). I accept the claim and will incorporate this additional sentence into this analysis, as appropriate. See Robert Alter, *Ancient Israel: The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 257; Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History, Part Two: 1 Samuel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 19–54; Uriel Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, trans. Lenn J. Schramm (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 51–72.

2. Several difficulties in reconstructing the era of the Judges, including its chronology, during what archaeologists call Iron Age I, are identified in Jo Ann Hackett, “‘There Was No King in Israel:’ The Era of the Judges,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 132–64.

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My fascination with the literary craftsmanship of sacred texts dates to the first day of my LDS mission to Paris, France, in the fall of 1970. In the anteroom of my mission president's office awaiting the first of many interviews, I began casually reading Mormon's abridgment of Alma's account of the Zoramite mission (Alma 31–35) and was struck by what seemed to be a high degree of rhetorical intentionality. Several years later the Association for Mormon Letters invited me to share my matured thoughts on the matter and then generously published my findings.



This budding curiosity was nurtured by BYU professors Arthur Henry King, Merlin Myers, Thomas Mackay, Karen Lynn, Nan Grass, and Mae Blanche. In graduate school, I encountered the relevant scholarship of anthropologists Claude Levi-Strauss and Edmund Leach and humanist James Redfield. Their work impelled me to examine the literary craftsmanship of the 1838 Joseph Smith story (JS–H) for my master's thesis at the University of Chicago. Quite by accident, I eventually became acquainted with the biblical scholarship of Erich Auerbach, Meir Sternberg, and Robert Alter, which gave me analytical tools to plumb the depths of the scriptures as no previous interpretive approach.

Although I have published studies of other LDS scriptures from a literary perspective, this article is my first serious attempt to illuminate the Hebrew Bible accordingly. The germ of its perspective came in an Old Testament religion class at BYU. Forty years later, Dr. Taylor Halvorsen of BYU facilitated the first public presentation of these ideas at the 2014 conference of the Society for Biblical Literature. Being the most recent product of this intellectual and spiritual odyssey, it will not likely be the last.

ministry makes the brief narrative of his birth, childhood, and divine calling worthy of serious examination.³

The present study argues that the literary craftsmanship of the text is as expressive of its meaning as are its descriptive contents. Indeed, its author's⁴ meaningful intentions may be revealed more in the account's rhetorical and poetic than in its documentary qualities. In short, this study adopts the perspective of the eminent historian Alan Heimert: "To discover the meaning of any utterance demands what is in substance a continuing act of literary interpretation, for the language with which an idea is presented, and the imaginative universe by which it is surrounded, often tell us more of an author's meaning and intention than his declarative propositions."⁵ While it may not be possible to determine with complete certainty the author's specific purposes for crafting this account, there is great value in making an attempt.⁶ To this end, the

3. P. Kyle McCarter Jr., *I Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*, Anchor Bible series, ed. William F. Albright and David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 63–66.

4. The prevailing view of biblical scholars is that the account of Samuel's life and ministry took final shape centuries after the events it depicts and was likely the work of more than one author/editor/redactor. See, for example, McCarter, *I Samuel*, 12–14; Richard R. Losch, *All the People in the Bible: An A–Z Guide to the Saints, Scoundrels, and Other Characters in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 368–70. The present study acknowledges but does not address the numerous historiographical issues related to 1 Samuel 1–3. Hence, references in this article to an "author" (singular) of the text are for heuristic, not documentary or analytical purposes.

5. Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 11.

6. While I accept the perspective attributed to Gregory the Great, "Scripture grows with its readers," cited by Andre LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur, I contend that the authors' first corollary of this position—"the abandonment of the concern . . . to recover the author's intentions and to set them up as governing all interpretation"—suffers from the logical fallacy of the excluded middle. Andre LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), xi. Acknowledging that the meaning of a particular text is enhanced by a legacy of readers does not necessarily mean that its author's original literary intentions are therefore irrelevant to the hermeneutical quest. In his masterful study of *The Iliad*, the great classical scholar James M. Redfield offers an alternate perspective that is central to the present inquiry: "Homer does not speak to us when we assign our meanings to his words or when we allow ourselves to be guided by our immediate response to his scenes." James M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in The Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), x.

present literary analysis of 1 Samuel 1–3 is based on the following general premises.⁷

1. All authors, even documentary historians, exercise considerable latitude in crafting their literary creations.
2. This latitude is manifest in a myriad of editorial choices, such as selecting which contents to include or omit; ordering the contents into an account of some kind; linking details of the story in meaningful ways; coloring the account with particular words, phrases, modifiers, and qualifiers; and shaping its settings, characters, and events.
3. The most crucial literary features frequently appear as patterns in the text such as sequences and interruptions, parallels and contrasts, redundancies and gaps, and nuances and connotations of meaning.
4. Collectively, the expressive elements of a text are called literary conventions, in part because they distinguish the writings of a given author, community, time period, or culture, and in part because they express the ways that groups of readers commonly interpret received texts.
5. As a result, identifying the literary conventions of a given text and imagining their interpretive significance enable readers to approximate the intent(s) of its author(s), especially if the conventions can be shown to combine with one another in order to fashion of the text a coherent and meaningful whole.⁸

7. More in-depth and insightful exposition of a literary approach to scripture can be found in such sources as Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 3–23; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 3–22; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 1–57; Jason P. Rosenblatt and Joseph C. Sitterson Jr., eds. *“Not in Heaven”: Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); and Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), ix–xlvi, among many others. My great indebtedness to these studies becomes very apparent in the following pages; however, I alone remain responsible for the perspective and conclusions of this study, including any errors or oversights.

8. While widely appreciated by biblical scholars, a literary approach to the scriptures is not common among Latter-day Saints, who tend to prefer approaches that are more contextual than textual in nature. Contextual studies focus on the historical accuracy or the doctrinal relevance of the scriptures in

The present study focuses on several recurrent literary conventions that so thoroughly unite the biblical account of Samuel's birth and divine calling that its craftsmanship aptly serves as a vehicle of its meaning. This study claims that the significance of the story cannot be fully apprehended without an in-depth understanding of the expressive qualities of the text. Recurrent literary conventions that form the interpretive fabric of this account include parallelism,⁹ characterization,¹⁰ key words

an attempt to address the questions, "Where did they come from?" and "What do they mean *to me*?" The present approach does not disparage a contextual approach to the scriptures. Rather it introduces readers to an approach that privileges the integrity of the received text. In essence, it addresses the question, "What meanings did the original author(s) intend to communicate in crafting the text in this manner?"

9. Parallelism is a general literary convention that links together different parts of the biblical text in a variety of customary and meaningful ways. James Limburg, "Psalms, Book of," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:528–29. While some linkages may be incidental, most scholars recognize that an author's intentional linkages create a phenomenon that Adele Berlin, following Paul Werth, calls "poetic effect," which she defines as "the result of an interaction between verbal form and meaning." Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 10. The Hebrew Bible exemplifies many different types of parallelism—too numerous and complex to summarize here. Berlin, *Parallelism*, 2; see also the extensive and insightful treatment of the use of repetition in Sternberg, *Poetics*, 365–440), which range in scope from the lexical (correspondences between individual words and phrases) to the structural (correspondences between major segments of the text).

10. Literary scholars generally recognize that biblical writers developed their characters in fundamentally different ways than most modern writers. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 1–18; Alter, *Art*, 114–30; Sternberg, *Poetics*, 321–64. Humanistic conventions mandate that characters be developed largely as unique individuals, complete with their own distinctive personalities, backgrounds, interests, appearances, and motivations. By contrast, characters in the Hebrew Bible are crafted primarily to serve the text's central ideological purposes. This contrast does not mean that biblical characters are shallow. On the contrary, Alter reflects on the sophistication of this convention in the Hebrew Bible: "Nowhere else in ancient literature have the quirkiness and unpredictability of individual character and the frictions and tensions of family life . . . been registered with such subtlety and insight." Alter, *Moses*, xii. Reflecting on this complex and somewhat foreign (to modern readers) convention, Sternberg recognizes the challenge: "Reading a character becomes a process of discovery, attended by all the biblical hallmarks: progressive reconstruction, tentative closure of discontinuities, frequent and sometimes painful reshaping in the face of the unexpected, and intractable pockets of darkness to the very end." Sternberg,



God Appears in a Night Vision to the Boy Prophet Samuel, by Grant Romney Clawson, reversed. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Poetics, 323–24. Alter observes that biblical narrators develop in-depth characterization through the use of a complex array of literary tools: “Through the report of actions; through appearance, gestures, posture, costume; through one character’s comments on another; through direct speech by the character; through inward speech, either summarized or quoted as interior monologue; or through statements by the narrator about the attitudes and intentions of the personages, which may come as flat assertions or motivated explanations.” Alter, *Art*, 116–17.

This perspective does acknowledge, however, that biblical portraits are focused, even in their depth and complexity, and include few extraneous details. A literary pattern that assists readers in this “process of discovery” involves a character’s first speech and first action. Often, though not always, these “firsts” reveal essential character traits and roles. See Alter, *Moses*, 77 n. 2; 131 nn. 30, 31; 158 n. 1; 207 n. 6. However, Sternberg, *Poetics*, 325–28, eloquently qualifies Alter’s perspective. Moreover, Polzin acknowledges the complementarity of all direct speeches in a particular story, regardless of the identity of the speaker. Polzin, *Samuel*, 19. The present study emphasizes how the narrator crafts individual characters primarily in terms of their social roles in the story, in particular how they complement and contrast with other, related characters.

(*Leitwörter*),¹¹ type scenes,¹² patterns of customary behavior,¹³ and

11. Certain words appear in the text in complementary or contrastive parallel throughout the Hebrew Bible in order to comment on the broader interpretive significance of the narrative. These are known by the technical German term *Leitwort*. See Alter, *Art*, 88–113, for an insightful discussion of *Leitwörter*. Throughout this study, unless otherwise noted, I have relied on the following standard sources for the meaning of individual Hebrew words and phrases: James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1890, 1973 printing); and Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996).

12. Scholars recognize that many scenes in the narrative portions of the Hebrew Bible were likely crafted in part to help readers infer connections with other exemplary biblical characters, settings, or events in order to enhance the significance of the related stories, called type scenes. Thus, Alter observes, “There is a series of recurrent narrative episodes attached to the careers of biblical heroes that . . . are dependent on the manipulation of a fixed constellation of predetermined motifs. Since biblical narrative characteristically catches its protagonists only at the critical and revealing points in their lives, the biblical type-scene occurs not in the rituals of daily existence, but at the crucial junctures in the lives of the heroes, from conception and birth to betrothal to deathbed.” Alter, *Art*, 51; see also Alter, *Moses*, 64 n. 10; 118–19 n. 11; 315 n. 16.

While we cannot be sure that the author crafted the Samuel story with such comparisons consciously in mind, the repeated inferred connections with other exemplary vignettes increase the probability of their intentionality. If the author of 1 Samuel 1–3 drew conscious connections with the stories of holy men and women of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, then he must have had prior knowledge of and access to them. A precise chronology of the writing and redacting of the Hebrew Bible is uncertain, and the account of Samuel’s birth and calling certainly took shape before the writing of the Christian Gospels. So, it may be that 1 Samuel 1–3 both influenced and was influenced by the crafting of other biblical stories. The key points relevant to the present study are that (1) type scenes are a common literary convention of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, (2) 1 Samuel 1–3 shows abundant evidence of the likely intentional use of this convention, and (3) type scenes enhance considerably the spiritual significance of the Samuel account.

13. As with the development of individual characters, so too are human actions carefully crafted in the biblical narrative for ideological purposes. That the narrator of 1 Samuel 1–3 instructively employs this convention is evident from the paired customary behaviors of eating/drinking and fasting, on the one hand, and hearing and seeing, on the other. Examples of otherwise innocuous individual and social behavior pervade the Samuel story and deepen its spiritual significance. For example, Alter (*Art*, 84) and Simon (*Prophetic Narratives*, 15) offer astute comments on eating and drinking in 1 Samuel 1.

structuring devices like Sternberg's "play of perspective."¹⁴ The dynamic and complementary interplay of these conventions throughout the text increases the drama, engagement, meaning, and pleasure of the reading experience.

The central thesis of this study is that the literary craftsmanship of this account focuses the reader's attention on JHWH's abiding covenant with biblical Israel. The concept of covenant not only unifies this brief but auspicious narrative but also positions it centrally within the larger epic of God's ancient covenant people in the holy land.

ANALYSIS

Introduction

Now there was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim, of mount Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah, the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephrathite: And he 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. And this man went up out of his city yearly to worship and to sacrifice unto the Lord of hosts in Shiloh. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, the priests of the Lord, were there. And when the time was that Elkanah offered, he gave to Peninnah his wife, and to all her sons and her daughters, portions: But unto Hannah he gave a worthy portion; for he loved Hannah: but the Lord had shut up her womb. And her adversary also provoked her sore, for to make her fret, because the Lord had shut up her womb. And as he did so year by year, when she went up to the house of the Lord, so she provoked her; therefore she wept, and did not eat. Then said Elkanah her husband to her, Hannah, why weepest thou? and

14. Sternberg recognizes that biblical narratives are distinguished by the dynamic interplay of competing and complementary perspectives: "Insofar as the Bible has a poetics as well as a genesis of composition, it establishes a set of norms by which we not only interpret the action but also evaluate the actors by reference to the narrator's perspective as artist." Sternberg, *Poetics*, 155. Risking an overly simplistic introduction of this convention, the present study recognizes two general perspectives in the Hebrew Bible, contrasted by scope. Broad perspectives, which Alter collectively calls "narration," provide the author's commentary and exposition—introduce spatial, social, and temporal contexts and detail the relationship of the particular story to the larger narrative of biblical Israel. On the other hand, focused perspectives, which Alter collectively calls "dialogue," reveal individual character, illustrate social roles and relationships, and detail specific events and their meaningful consequences. See Alter, *Art*, 63–87.

why eatest thou not? and why is thy heart grieved? am I not better to thee than ten sons? (1:1–8)

Structuring Devices: Exposition. The first seven verses of the introduction consist of what Alter calls “narrative”—descriptive details that locate the story within the broader temporal, spatial, social, and spiritual context of biblical Israel. However, nearly every specific detail of introduction is marginal to the larger history of Israel in the Holy Land. Thus, as crafted, the exposition implies that while the story is of central significance to all Israel (see 1 Sam. 3:21), it begins in virtual obscurity, making its outcome all the more miraculous.

Genealogy.¹⁵ Consistent with the convention of genealogies throughout the Hebrew Bible, the brief genealogy that launches the story of Samuel’s birth identifies Samuel’s ancestors as Ephraimites,¹⁶ distinguishes the account from the long but unremarkable reign of the judges, and introduces the auspicious but problematic reign of the kings in ancient Israel. Contributing to the disjunctive role of genealogies in the biblical narrative, McCarter observes that the opening phrase, translated from the Hebrew as *Now there was a certain man*, signals “the inauguration of an entirely new narrative.”¹⁷

In addition, while modern readers may interpret the opening phrase as focusing the story on the man Elkanah, the narrative unfolds in such a way that Hannah’s husband plays at best a supportive and largely contrasting role in the Samuel story. The patriarchal focus of the introduction is really a Hebrew convention that gives the larger account of Samuel a measure of cultural legitimacy.¹⁸

Together, these structural and rhetorical conventions of exposition provide evidence of the “independence of the prophetic history of the rise of kingship that begins with the story of Samuel.”¹⁹ They also signal

15. Scholars recognize that genealogies perform at least three complementary roles in the Hebrew Bible: (1) introducing and declaring the identity of a distinctive group or individual, (2) demarcating one significant narrative from others in the larger text, and (3) “schematizing complex historical evolution.” Alter, *Moses*, 34n; 53 nn. 28–29; 54n; 60 nn. 10–26; 112 nn. 20–24; 127 n. 1; 199–200nn; 342 n. 14.

16. 1 Chronicles 6:27 identifies Jeroham, Samuel’s paternal grandfather, as a Levite. Thus, Samuel’s dual descent may have qualified him, in terms of his lineage, to serve as priest as well as prophet and judge during his ministry.

17. McCarter, *I Samuel*, 51 n. 1.

18. Alter, *Art*, 82.

19. McCarter, *I Samuel*, 51 n. 1.

that the remarkable outcome of the story could have been orchestrated by no one but JHWH.

Type Scene: Barren Wife. Once additional characters enter the story, readers become aware of its first type scene: the barren wife. While Hannah is identified as the preferred of Elkanah's two wives, the account repeats three times that she has no children, a major source of shame for women in biblical Israel.²⁰ This characterization also identifies the account's first dramatic tension: that between Elkanah's preferred but barren wife and her co-wife Peninnah, who had given Elkanah multiple sons and daughters. Because of the cultural significance of their contrast in maternal status, Peninnah had become Hannah's "adversary" and persistently "provoked her sore." These details—the preferred but barren wife and her jealous sister wife—evoke positive comparisons between Hannah and Israel's grand matriarchs Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel.²¹ This type scene also encourages attentive readers to anticipate that Hannah, like her matriarchal models, will also eventually conceive and bear a remarkable child through the miraculous intervention of God.

Characterization: Father and Sons. The exposition also identifies the ritual officials at the temple of the Lord at Shiloh but in a casual, even offhand manner: "And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, the priests of the Lord, were there." While this simple declarative sentence names the personnel with the greatest spiritual status at Shiloh, its specific language implies two concerns. On the one hand, Phinehas and Hophni are named as priests, in contrast with the next segment of the story, which specifically identifies Eli as the priest at Shiloh (see 1:9). While more than one priest could easily officiate at the temple, the fact that the story initially identifies Eli's sons as "priests of the Lord" creates dramatic tensions that become central to the unfolding of the Samuel story. For example, is Eli, the father, the chief priest in the hereditary office? If so, why is he not introduced as such at the outset and why does

20. Repetitions of this kind, especially in the unusually truncated narrative of the Hebrew Bible, focus readers' attention on details of great significance to the overall story.

21. Genesis 16:5; 18:9–15; 21:1–5; 25:21; 29:31. Alter, *Ancient Prophets*, 241 n. 2; Alter, *Art*, 82–83. Simon, *Prophetic Narratives*, 36–37, 43, systematically compares the miraculous birth narratives of the Hebrew Bible and summarizes this biblical scene type. Regarding Sarah, the paragon in this set of related character types, Alter, *Moses*, 101 n. 18, explicates the exquisite craftsmanship of the relevant passage in Genesis that immediately precedes Isaac's birth.

he play such a passive role in the services at Shiloh? On the other hand, the language of the sons' introduction bestows no honor or dignity to their priestly office. The phrase "were there" identifies only that they are present at the temple, not that they are functioning worthily. Thus, the ambivalent and matter-of-fact introduction of the priests at Shiloh implies that while central to the story of Samuel's beginnings, Eli and his sons will play roles that are marginal to or destructive of their high ritual status.

Customary Behavior: Eating/Drinking and Fasting. The first specific action in the Samuel story has Elkanah sharing with Hannah a "worthy portion" of the offering. This ostensibly generous offer from a loving husband introduces other dramatic tensions of the story. On the one hand, Hannah can neither eat the "worthy portion" herself (because she is fasting "in bitterness of soul," see 1:10) nor share it with her children (of which she has none, which is precisely the cause of her grief and the central spiritual crisis of the story). Therefore, while intended as an expression of generosity, the offering reveals Elkanah's insensitivity, at the very least, to the story's central crisis and may actually be insulting to Hannah. The narrative does not indicate, however, that she takes offense at her husband's gesture. On the other hand, Elkanah's "worthy portion" offering to Hannah seems to be a principal source of the dramatic tension between Hannah and Peninnah, discussed above, and between Elkanah and Hannah that is expressed in Elkanah's first direct speech, discussed below.

Characterization: Husband and Wife. According to the account, Elkanah loves Hannah, favors her with a "worthy portion" of the ceremonial offering, and is her partner in the conception of Samuel; nevertheless, he leads out in and is concerned with no other family roles than performing the annual ceremonial requirements of the Mosaic law and providing for the family's material support. Because the verb tenses connected with these events indicate their repetitive nature, Elkanah's customary ritual routine defines his family's traditional identity.

The narrative, as crafted, implies that Elkanah is either unaware or dismissive of Hannah's emotional needs and performs little or no nurturing role vis-à-vis their firstborn or any of their other children. The text never has him interact directly with any of Hannah's children, and he speaks with Hannah only when her devotional actions disrupt his traditional ritual routine. Elkanah has only two direct speeches in the entire story. The first consists of a set of rapid-fire rhetorical questions ostensibly intended to comfort his then-barren and bereft wife, "Why weepest thou? and why

eatest thou not? and why is thy heart grieved? am I not better to thee than ten sons?” Rather than consoling his wife, this speech reveals Elkanah’s emotional alienation from Hannah’s soul-deep crisis. As portrayed in the text, Elkanah believes that Hannah should be more consoled by his “worthy portion” than had she born him “ten sons.”

Insensitive as it may be, Elkanah’s first direct speech shifts the discourse of the story from “narrative” to “dialogue,” in keeping with the biblical convention. As will be seen, the rest of the Samuel story is retold largely in dialogue because “spoken language is the substratum of everything human and divine that transpires in the Bible, and the Hebrew tendency to transpose what is preverbal or nonverbal into speech is finally a technique for getting at the essence of things, for obtruding their substratum.”²² Elkanah’s first direct speech also motivates the story’s central action: Hannah’s sacred vow and the Lord’s favorable response.

Hannah Vows and the Lord Remembers

So Hannah rose up after they had eaten in Shiloh, and after they had drunk. Now Eli the priest sat upon a seat by a post of the temple of the Lord. And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the Lord, and wept sore. And she vowed a vow, and said, O Lord of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the Lord all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head. And it came to pass, as she continued praying before the Lord, that Eli marked her mouth. Now Hannah, she spake in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard: therefore Eli thought she had been drunken. And Eli said unto her, How long wilt thou be drunken? put away thy wine from thee. And Hannah answered and said, No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but have poured out my soul before the Lord. Count not thine handmaid for a daughter of Belial: for out of the abundance of my complaint and grief have I spoken hitherto. Then Eli answered and said, Go in peace: and the Lord God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of him. And she said, Let thy handmaid find grace in thy sight. So the woman went her way, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad. And they rose up in the morning early, and worshipped before the

22. Alter, *Art*, 70.

Lord, and returned, and came to their house to Ramah: and Elkanah knew Hannah his wife; and the Lord remembered her. (1:9–19)

Structuring Devices: “Play of Perspectives.” The next eleven verses define the story’s dramatic focus: Hannah pleads in desperation for a son, and the Lord blesses her accordingly. In contrast with the introduction, which consists almost entirely of expository narrative, the second segment is filled almost entirely with “dialogue.”²³

Characterization: Husband and Wife. Despite his emotional distance from Hannah, Elkanah regularly and routinely worships at Shiloh in a manner that is consistent with the prescriptions of the Mosaic law. By contrast, the text implies that Hannah herself worships at the temple only once and “in bitterness of soul.” The story implies that both types of devotion are effective. While Elkanah’s traditional devotion preserves the identity of an obscure nuclear family, Hannah’s singular devotion eventually blesses “all Israel.” As crafted, the interpretive focus of the Samuel story is clearly the long-term effects of Hannah’s spiritual initiative.

Type Scene: Female Spiritual Initiative. Despite Hannah’s concern for personal legitimacy, her family’s status before the Lord is assured by Elkanah’s annual devotionals at Shiloh and the resulting devotional lifestyle that is implied by his faithfulness to this ritual obligation. Nevertheless, Hannah is not satisfied: she wants a son for herself, but not for selfish reasons. As crafted, the story focuses on Hannah’s compelling spiritual need, which drives her to the temple, fasting “in bitterness of soul.” In her private devotion, Hannah neither undercuts her husband’s patriarchal authority nor repudiates his ritual status in the family. While unusual, even extraordinary, Hannah’s initiative at the temple to plead directly with JHWH for a “man child” is neither unprecedented nor countercultural. In fact, it places her within a small but crucial cadre of women—most notably Rebekah, Tamar, and Ruth—whose own unprecedented spiritual initiatives eventually and distinctively transform biblical Israel.²⁴ Traditional readers of the Samuel story would

23. “The biblical scene . . . is conceived almost entirely as verbal intercourse, with the assumption that what is significant about a character, at least for a particular narrative juncture, can be manifested almost entirely in the character’s speech.” Alter, *Art*, 88.

24. Genesis 24–28, 38; Ruth 1–4. Insightful analyses of the lives of these three exemplary women are found in Sternberg, *Poetics*, 131–52 (Rebekah); and Alter, *Art*, 5–12 (Tamar) and 58–60 (Ruth).

have recognized the intended craftsmanship of the text for this exceptional interpretive purpose.

Characterization: Priest and Suppliant. Eli possesses great spiritual status, being the ritual official of the temple at Shiloh, a hereditary position that his family had held for generations (see 2:27–28). Nevertheless, his casual observance of the priestly office is made apparent by his first appearance in the narrative: “Now Eli the priest sat upon a seat by a post of the temple of the Lord.”²⁵ Adding to his position of spiritual ambivalence is Eli’s first specific action—a gross miscalculation of Hannah’s spiritual motivations—and his first direct speech, a wildly false assessment of her character. Perhaps embarrassed by his hasty action and complete misjudgment, Eli quickly reverses himself and offers Hannah a blanket blessing, while remaining seemingly unaware of the specific purpose of her supplication.²⁶

By stark contrast, Hannah has neither formal status nor ritual position in the worship of JHWH. She is merely the barren co-wife of an obscure Ephraimite. Nevertheless, everything that she says and does—indeed, everything that she is in the story—manifests supreme devotion to her sacred roles of wife and mother and to her covenant relationship with the Lord. She fasts, she prays, she bears and nurtures, she sacrifices and gives thanks, she serves, and she remains faithful to her divine calling without any desire for personal position, recognition, or recompense.²⁷ As a result, the narrative portrays Hannah as worthy of becoming the mother of one of Israel’s greatest prophets and of serving as a paragon of holiness in the Hebrew Bible.

Characterization: Husband and Wife. While Elkanah focuses on outward and formal family concerns and is emotionally distant from

25. Alternatively, McCarter, *I Samuel*, 60 n. 9, suggests that the details of Eli’s first appearance may imply his watchful care over all temple matters. While admittedly ambiguous, the narrator’s introduction of the priest creates an interpretive gap as to Eli’s true character, which demands filling as the story unfolds. Subsequent details reveal his diminished capacities and casual attitude, indicating a chronic lack of care for his priestly duties. On the art of gap-filling by biblical narrators, see Sternberg, *Poetics*, 186–229.

26. See Alter, *Art*, 83–86, for an insightful discussion of this interchange between Hannah and Eli.

27. “When Hannah presents herself to Eli as a barren woman who has finally given birth because the Lord answered her prayer, she not only thanks the Lord for His favor to her, she also bears public witness to His mighty deeds, of which she has personal experience.” Simon, *Prophetic Narratives*, 28.

everyone in the narrative, including his wife and children, Hannah is consistently preoccupied with personal devotions to God and is emotionally connected with everyone around her, regardless of their attitude toward her. Her first direct speech, for example, expresses her private but poignant vow to God, which defines her life's purpose and sacred identity: "O Lord of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look upon the afflictions of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the Lord all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head."²⁸ All of her subsequent speeches and actions align with and strengthen her devotional character (see 1:20–28; 2:1–10, 19–21). In relation to other characters in the story, Hannah demonstrates her connectedness by:

- enduring patiently the persistent provocations of her sister wife and the insensitive entreaties of her husband (1:6–8, 21–23);
- consistently referring to herself in relation to others by the subordinate term *'amah*, translated *handmaid* (1:11, 16, 18);²⁹
- responding directly but respectfully to Eli's false accusations and later reminding him of who she is when she comes to make good on her vow (1:12–16, 26–28); and
- continuing to nurture her firstborn throughout his youth, even though she sees him but once a year (2:18–19).

Leitwörter: remembered and visited. The catalytic event of this narrative—Hannah's vow and the Lord's favorable response—begins and ends with the verb *zakhor*, translated *remember*. *Zakhor* carries strong connotations of spiritual identity and covenant commitment, not simply cognitive awareness.³⁰ Thus, when Hannah pleads to the Lord, "remember

28. Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 242 n. 8.

29. Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 246 n. 26; Simon, *Prophetic Narratives*, 18.

30. "The fundamental bond of mutual remembrance that united God and man leads further to the observation that the covenant idea is obviously also important in this context:" G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. David E. Green, 15 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), 4:70, hereafter *TDOT*. See also Allen Verhey, "Remember, Remembrance," in Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 5:667–69; McCarter, *I Samuel*, 62 n. 19; Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 5–26; and Alter, *Moses*, 385 n. 3.

me,” and the narrator acknowledges that the Lord indeed “remembered her,” the resulting blessing of a “man child” becomes not only the sign of a divine covenant with an individual Hebrew woman but also a source of spiritual development and deliverance for “all Israel.”³¹

Leitwörter: give and lend. As part of her poignant vow, Hannah promises that if the Lord will “give” her a “man child,” then she will “give him unto the Lord all the days of his life.” In both instances, the verb *give* is translated from the Hebrew *nathan*. While this verb has several different connotations in biblical Hebrew, the most general is, “‘extend the hand’ in order to place an object at a specific place or to give it over to another person, with or without compensation, as a possession. The result of the action is usually considered enduring and definitive.”³² In short, the text projects that her vow to the Lord will be unequivocal and permanent.

Type Scene: Chosen Judge. Hannah’s promise to God that “there shall no razor come upon [her son’s] head” draws an explicit parallel with Samson, Israel’s most noteworthy judge (Judg. 13–16, especially 13:5; 16:16–20). Samson’s and Samuel’s Nazerite consecrations effectively bring their respective ministries into sharp contrast: Samson turns from his sacred vow, resulting in much destruction among the covenant people; however, through his own faithful ministry, Samuel strengthens and unifies “all Israel.”³³

Customary Behavior: Seeing and Hearing, Eating and Drinking, and Fasting. Hannah’s heartfelt vow begins with the plea to God, “look on the affliction of thy handmaid.” Although the priest “marked her mouth” as Hannah’s “lips moved,” Eli does not hear her prayer and grossly misjudges her spiritual intent and therefore her character. He accuses her of wanton drunkenness, a false assertion that she directly but respectfully corrects. Attempting to cover his error of judgment, Eli offers a hastily constructed blessing for her to receive her petition, to which she simply responds, “Let thine handmaid find grace in thy sight.” The text then observes that Hannah “went her way, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad.”

31. “Divine remembrance of the despondent barren woman by virtue of her prayer and vow is a classic example, not only of the Lord’s power over nature, society, and history, but also of His justice.” Simon, *Prophetic Narratives*, 33.

32. *TDOT*, 10:90–91.

33. Polzin, *Samuel*, 24.

Structuring Devices: Conjunctions. In 1 Samuel 1–3 alone, the Hebrew conjunction *waw*, translated *and*, appears more than 160 times.³⁴ The pattern and frequency of use of this conjunction imply that the narrator consciously employs it to integrate a series of increasingly significant, forward-moving events. Of particular interest is the sequence of events that culminates in God’s initial fulfillment of Hannah’s vow: “And they rose up in the morning early, and worshipped before the Lord, and returned, and came to their house to Ramah: and Elkanah knew Hannah his wife; and the Lord remembered her.”³⁵ In these thirty-three English words, *and* appears six times. Few individual verses in the entire Hebrew Bible use *waw* more frequently.³⁶ Based on its construction, this verse properly reads as a compounding sequence of increasingly significant events, culminating in God’s *remembering* Hannah, in the covenant sense described above.

Leitwörter: know and lie with. The Hebrew verb describing the union that results in Hannah’s miraculous conception is *yada*, translated *knew*. This verb connotes not just physical intimacy but also sexual relations between legitimate partners.³⁷ In the Hebrew Bible, *yada* frequently connotes a special kind of covenant relationship, not just a familiar one, especially where the knowledge of God is concerned.³⁸ Thus, the union that produces Samuel is doubly blessed: by the enduring bond between worthy and faithful partners and by the sacred vow between a devoted Hebrew woman and the Lord.

34. Strong, *Exhaustive Concordance*, 1228. In stark contrast with modern English usage, which limits conjunctions to a bare minimum, biblical narrators seem to use them incessantly, especially *waw*. While the abundant use of this tiny word in the Hebrew Bible may cause some readers to infer a lack of literary sophistication, Alter observes that biblical narrators used *waw* to great rhetorical effect: “[Biblical] narratives were composed to be *heard*, not merely to be decoded by a reader’s eye. The reiterated ‘and,’ then, plays an important role in creating the rhythm of the story, in phonetically punctuating the forward driving movement of the prose. . . . The parallel syntax and barrage of ‘and’s,’ far from being the reflex of a ‘primitive’ language, are as artfully effective in furthering the ends of the narrative as any device one could find in a sophisticated modern novelist.” Alter, *Moses*, xxvii–xxviii, emphasis in original.

35. 1 Samuel 1:19. See Genesis 30:22–24 for a similarly structured sequence of events regarding childbirth.

36. Strong, *Exhaustive Concordance*, 1225–33.

37. Alter, *Moses*, 29 n. 1.

38. *TDOT*, 5:468–72.

Samuel Is Born and Lent to the Lord

Wherefore it came to pass, when the time was come about after Hannah had conceived, that she bare a son, and called his name Samuel, saying, Because I have asked him of the Lord. And the man Elkanah, and all his house, went up to offer unto the Lord the yearly sacrifice, and his vow. But Hannah went not up; for she said unto her husband, I will not go up until the child is weaned, and then I will bring him, that he may appear before the Lord, and there abide for ever. And Elkanah her husband said unto her, Do what seemeth thee good; tarry until thou hast weaned him; only the Lord establish his word. So the woman abode, and gave her son suck until she weaned him. And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with three bullocks, and one ephah of flour, and a bottle of wine, and brought him unto the house of the Lord in Shiloh: and the child was young. And they slew a bullock, and brought the child to Eli. And she said, O my lord, as thy soul liveth, my lord, I am the woman that stood by thee here, praying unto the Lord. For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of him: Therefore also I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord. And he worshipped the Lord there. (1:20–28)

Structuring Devices: “Play of Perspectives.” The dynamic interplay in the biblical text between narrow and broad perspectives (“narrative” and “dialogue” in Alter’s terms) comes into focus in the third segment of the Samuel story. The segment opens with a brief narrative of Samuel’s birth and the continuation of the annual devotional at Ramah, punctuated by Hannah’s reflection on the child’s naming, which is expressed as direct speech.³⁹ The rest of the segment consists of dialogues between Hannah and Elkanah (1:22–23) and between Hannah and Eli (1:26–28), with a brief narrative bridge uniting the two scenes (1:24–25).

Customary Behavior: Eating, Drinking, and Fasting. Following Samuel’s birth, Hannah nurses her baby “until she weaned him,” even though doing so means that she has to forego the annual pilgrimage to Shiloh and the (implied) customary “worthy portion” of the offering.⁴⁰ When Hannah resumes the annual pilgrimage and prepares to lend her firstborn to the Lord, she takes “three bullocks, and one ephah of flour,

39. “The biblical preference for direct discourse is so pronounced that thought is almost invariably rendered as actual speech.” Alter, *Art*, 67.

40. Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 244 n. 21: “Everything is different now that Hannah has borne a son, and she herself introduces a change in the repeated pattern.”

and a bottle of wine” as her own alimentary offering, a portion of which would be customarily consumed by the priest and his family.⁴¹

Characterization: Husband and Wife. Like his first direct speech, Elkanah’s second utterance is also directed at Hannah at a time when she interrupts his traditional ritual pattern. Also like the first, Elkanah’s second speech at once reinforces his traditional familial roles and acknowledges his emotional distance from his wife. After Samuel is born but before he is weaned, Elkanah invites Hannah to accompany him to Shiloh for the annual observance. Hannah declines, preferring instead to attend to her son’s continuing needs. Elkanah’s response, “Do what seemeth thee good,” dismissively concedes her commitment to care for her firstborn. Rather than accepting her husband’s invitation that she privilege her spousal role and enjoy its intended personal benefits (the “worthy portion”), Hannah chooses instead to focus on her maternal role: nurturing Samuel at home while he remains dependent on her for life and sustenance. In short, while Elkanah’s invitation is intended to strengthen his preferred wife’s status within his family, her own priority is to guarantee the survival of her firstborn, which eventually benefits “all Israel.”

Leitwörter: give and lend. Prior to Samuel’s birth, Hannah promises to *give* him to the Lord (1:11). Following his birth, when time comes to make good on her vow, the account consistently shifts the verb from *nathan* (*give*) to *sha’el*, translated *lend* (1:20, 27–28; 2:20). In biblical Hebrew, *sha’el* has a double meaning: to request and to lend. In the present context, the term defines the enduring relationship that Hannah now has with her “man child” and signals the special nature of their mother-child bond vis-à-vis the Lord.⁴²

The lexical shift from *give* to *lend* does not indicate a change of heart on Hannah’s part. She neither retreats from nor attempts to renegotiate the terms of her sacred vow. Rather than contrast, the two Hebrew verbs complement each other in meaning. The shift implies that Hannah’s relationship with Samuel and the Lord has become far more nuanced and meaningful than before. Her initial vow is made when motherhood is a worthy but still unrealized aspiration. Once Hannah becomes a mother in fact, her role vis-à-vis Samuel is considerably more profound. Regardless of her initial vow, following his birth she cannot *not* be his

41. Simon, *Prophetic Narratives*, 26.

42. *TDOT*, 14:261–62.

mother; that is, she cannot *give* him up in the usual senses of the verb.⁴³ Attempting to do so would be a repudiation of her sacred maternal role. The text expresses this commitment in two complementary ways. For one, “A full gift of her son means not conveying him to the House of the Lord while he still requires his mother, lest he be a burden there; and perfect fulfillment [of her vow] implies not bringing him to the sanctuary so long as it is impossible to leave him there forever, lest she appear to be violating her vow.”⁴⁴ Therefore, the narrator’s insertion of the seemingly innocuous exchange between Samuel’s parents in verses 22–23. Following Samuel’s birth, Hannah nurtures him as only a mother can and thereafter entrusts him to JHWH’s priest. The second way that Hannah continues to nurture her firstborn is mentioned below in the discussion of 1 Samuel 2:19.

Hannah Rejoices in the Initial Fulfillment of Her Vow

My heart rejoiceth in the Lord,
mine horn is exalted in the Lord:

my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies;
because I rejoice in thy salvation.

There is none holy as the Lord:
for there is none beside thee:
neither is there any rock like our God.

Talk no more so exceeding proudly;
let not arrogancy come out of your mouth:

for the Lord is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.

The bows of the mighty men are broken,
and they that stumbled are girded with strength.

They that were full have hired out themselves for bread;
and they that were hungry ceased:

so that the barren hath born seven;
and she that hath many children is waxed feeble.

The Lord killeth, and maketh alive:
he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up.

43. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), s.v. “Give,” 183–90.

44. Simon, *Prophetic Narratives*, 24.

The Lord maketh poor, and maketh rich:
he bringeth low, and lifteth up.
He raiseth up the poor out of the dust,
and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill,
to set them among the princes,
and to make them inherit the throne of glory:
for the pillars of the earth are the Lord's,
and he hath set the world upon them.
He will keep the feet of his saints,
and the wicked shall be silent in darkness;
for by strength shall no man prevail.
The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces;
out of heaven shall he thunder upon them:
the Lord shall judge the ends of the earth;
and he shall give strength unto his king,
and exalt the horn of his anointed. (2:1–10)

Parallelism. While fascinating in their own right, the historiography and aesthetics of Hannah's song do not concern the present study; rather, my interest is in the song's extensive use of poetic couplets⁴⁵ and its interpretive role in the structure of the larger narrative. Throughout her victory song, no phrase is independent of another: all combine into either couplets or triads, creating a complex and meaningful unity of the whole and distinguishing the song from the surrounding prose narrative.⁴⁶

Structuring Devices: Narrative Bridge. From a structural perspective, the song is not only an appropriate expression of personal gratitude for Hannah's heavenly blessing but also a crucial narrative bridge between the initial fulfillment of her vow and the Lord's repeated faithful

45. Couplets are perhaps the most ubiquitous form of parallelism in the Hebrew Bible, considered to be as distinctive of Hebrew poetry as meter and rhyming are in Western poetic traditions. Berlin, *Parallelism*, 7, speaks for many in observing that "biblical poetry is characterized by a high incidence of terse, balanced parallelism." While 1 Samuel 1–3 is structured mostly as a prose narrative, Hannah's song (2:1–10) is organized as a series of couplets, with a few triads added for aesthetic interest and interpretive emphasis. One of many studies of this genre in the Hebrew Bible is Steven Weitzman, *Song and Story in Biblical Narrative: The History of a Literary Convention in Ancient Israel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); see also Alter, *Moses*, 397 n. 1. Regarding the poetic qualities of Hannah's song, see McCarter, *I Samuel*, 67–76.

46. McCarter, *I Samuel*, 60–61 n. 11, points out the poetic qualities of Hannah's prayer.

response. To this end, the following phrases from the song comment on key personalities, events, and circumstances of the larger story of which it is a part.⁴⁷

- *Mine horn is exalted in the Lord* (2:1). “Horn” is used metaphorically in Hebrew poetry as a distinctive feature of humans and other animals, especially one that is “enlarged” because the Lord has blessed it. McCarter observes, “In certain cases it is clear that the raised horn refers specifically to progeny,” hence the possible allusion to Hannah and her firstborn.⁴⁸
- *They that were full have hired out themselves for bread* (2:5) anticipates God’s curse of Eli’s house, discussed below, in part because Eli’s sons and perhaps Eli himself had abused the sacrificial offering to satisfy their gluttony. As a result, Eli’s extended family are cursed to beg for their sustenance in the future (2:12–17, 36).
- *The barren hath born seven and she that hath many children is waxed feeble* (2:5) alludes to the contrast between Hannah, who miraculously bore Samuel and several other children, and her perpetual *provocateur* Peninnah, who “had children” but whose lineage is worthy of no further mention in the Hebrew Bible.⁴⁹
- *The Lord . . . bringeth low, and lifteth up* (2:7) reinforces the contrast between the house of Eli, which is rejected by the Lord despite its long-standing and prominent ritual status in Israel, and the previously obscure house of Elkanah, which is blessed by God to effect a substantial, enduring, beneficial transformation among “all Israel” (2:27–36; 3:11–14, 19–21).

Type Scene: Victory Song. Hannah’s song of exultation on an auspicious occasion elicits positive comparison with Moses, Miriam, and David in the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 15, Deuteronomy 31–32, 2 Samuel 22) and Zacharias, Mary, and Simeon in the Christian Bible (Luke 1–2).⁵⁰

47. Possible extrinsic reasons for the placement of Hannah’s song within the narrative are found in Weitzman, *Song*, 114–15.

48. McCarter, *I Samuel*, 71 n. 1.

49. Given the expressive nature of Hannah’s song, the number *seven* in this line likely implies *many*, as it does elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, thereby enhancing the parallelism with the following line and the implied application to Hannah’s situation. See McCarter, *I Samuel*, 72 n. 5; see also Alter, *Moses*, 269 n. 27; 307 n. 5.

50. Weitzman, *Song*, 66–67, and Polzin, *Samuel*, 33–34, respectively, compare the similarities of Hannah’s song with Mary’s *Magnificat* and David’s final

Old and New Priest

And Elkanah went to Ramah to his house. And the child did minister unto the Lord before Eli the priest. Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they knew not the Lord. And the priests' custom with the people was, that, when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant came, while the flesh was in seething, with a flesh-hook of three teeth in his hand; And he struck it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; all that the fleshhook brought up the priest took for himself. So they did in Shiloh unto all the Israelites that came thither. Also before they burnt the fat, the priest's servant came, and said to the man that sacrificed, Give flesh to roast for the priest; for he will not have sodden flesh of thee, but raw. And if any man said unto him, Let them not fail to burn the fat presently, and then take as much as thy soul desireth; then he would answer him, Nay; but thou shalt give it me now: and if not, I will take it by force. Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the Lord: for men abhorred the offering of the Lord. But Samuel ministered before the Lord, being a child, girded with a linen ephod. Moreover his mother made him a little coat, and brought it to him from year to year, when she came up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. And Eli blessed Elkanah and his wife, and said, The Lord give thee seed of this woman for the loan which is lent to the Lord. And they went unto their own home. And the Lord visited Hannah, so that she conceived, and bare three sons and two daughters. And the child Samuel grew before the Lord. Now Eli was very old, and heard all that his sons did unto all Israel; and how they lay with the women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. And he said unto them, Why do ye such things? for I hear of your evil dealings by all this people. Nay, my sons; for it is no good report that I hear: ye make the Lord's people to transgress. If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge him: but if a man sin against the Lord, who shall entreat for him? Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, because the Lord would slay them. And the child Samuel grew on, and was in favour both with the Lord, and also with men. (2:11–26)

Structuring Devices: “Play of Perspectives.” Prior sections of the Samuel story are devoted to contents that are primarily narrative or primarily dialogue. Verses 11–26 in 1 Samuel provide a more dynamic interplay of these two literary conventions as the text presents three vignettes that condemn the gluttony of Eli's sons (2:12–17), illustrate Hannah's

hymn. Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 247 n. 0 suggests that Hannah's song and David's victory psalm “echo each other and act as formal ‘bookends’ to the extended narrative sequence that includes the stories of Samuel, Saul, and David.”

continued devotion to her firstborn and Eli's blessing to Samuel's parents (2:19–21a), and condemn the promiscuity of Eli's sons (2:22–25). To keep readers focused on the story's central purpose, the narrator adds a bit of narrative commentary on Samuel's faithful service before and after each vignette (2:11b, 18, 21b, 26).

Characterization: Priest and Suppliant. The intentionality of the narrator's contrast between Eli and Hannah, introduced earlier, is further developed in the pejorative allusions to *Belial*⁵¹ and the editorial comment employing the verb *yada* (*knew*). In their first encounter, Eli accuses Hannah of wanton drunkenness, which she respectfully denies with the plea, "Count not thine handmaid for a daughter of Belial" (1:16). Following Hannah's song, the narrator begins his detailed condemnation of Eli's sons with the epithet: "Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial," implying a scathing equivalence of Eli and Belial.⁵² Further, the narrator observes with biting irony that Eli's sons "knew not the Lord," even though they are introduced as "priests of the Lord" (1:3). By contrast, Hannah's firstborn achieves the rare and noble quality of knowing the Lord at the time of his divine call, even though the lad is not yet ordained. The story of Samuel's birth and calling concludes with a general reference to his continuing growth in the knowledge of God (see 3:7, 21).

Characterization: Parents and Children. Eli and sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are mentioned in the initial exposition of the story (1:3), signaling that they will play a key but as yet undefined role in the account of Samuel's succession.⁵³ As the drama unfolds, the serious abuses of their priestly position—gluttony of the ritual offering and sexual immorality—become the efficient cause of the Lord's rejection of Eli's house.

51. Theodore J. Lewis, "Belial," in Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1:654–56; Bible Dictionary, LDS edition of the Bible (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), s.v. "Belial."

52. Polzin, *Samuel*, 39, contrasts the rather neutral narrative language of the beginning of the Samuel story with the highly judgmental language on this middle portion, preparing readers for the curse of the house of Eli and corresponding rise of Samuel.

53. McCarter, *I Samuel*, 59 n. 3, mentions that both sons' names are Egyptian in origin and that Eli's lineage traced its right to the priesthood back to Moses. These details may explain why the "man of God" specifically refers to "Pharaoh's house" in his condemnation of the house of Eli (2:27). On the use of exposition as a literary convention, see Meir Sternberg, *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

In stark contrast with Eli's general neglect of his sons, in spite of their physical and functional proximity, the narrator specifically mentions Hannah's continued watch care over her first born, in spite of their physical and functional distance.⁵⁴ Punctuating the vignettes that contrast the faithfulness of Eli and Hannah, the narrator comments on Samuel's progressively auspicious service at the temple, reinforcing the intended contrast between old and new priest.⁵⁵ While not a prerequisite for Samuel's ascension, Eli's fall serves as a foil for it.⁵⁶

Leitwörter: give and lend. On the occasion of their final interaction, Eli blesses Samuel's parents—"the Lord give thee seed of this woman for the loan which is lent to the Lord"—using the same verbs, *nathan* (give) and *sha'el* (lend), which define Hannah's initial offering of Samuel to the Lord. As a result of the priest's blessing, Hannah bears additional children—"three sons and two daughters."

Customary Behavior: Hearing and Seeing. The narrator's repeated mention of Eli's diminished physical capacities symbolizes his advanced spiritual deficiencies. In this segment, the narrator reinforces Eli's neglect of his parental responsibilities with the repeated use of the verb *hear(d)*. This pattern indicates that Eli had become so disconnected from his sons' lives that he learns about their promiscuity only second-hand and then deals with it ineffectively: "Now Eli was very old, and heard all that his sons did unto all Israel. . . . And he said unto them, Why do ye such things? for I hear of your evil dealings by all this people. Nay, my sons; for it is no good report that I hear: ye make the Lord's people to transgress."⁵⁷

Leitwörter: know and lie with. Within the context of the Samuel narrative, these verbs repeatedly indict Eli's sons. Following mention of Hophni and Phinehas's high ritual status in the story's initial exposition

54. McCarter, *I Samuel*, 29.

55. Contrast 1 Samuel 2:11, 18, 21, 26 with 2:12–17, 22–25. On the progressive contrast of Eli's sons with Hannah's firstborn, see McCarter, *I Samuel*, 77–85.

56. Commenting on Eli's deficiencies, McCarter, *I Samuel*, 100, observes, "It is time for the apprentice to replace the master. Ancient Eli is almost a tragicomic figure. . . . There is no wickedness in this pitiable old man, but neither is there the strength to combat wickedness, and Yahweh has found himself a strong man to lead Israel aright."

57. On the complementarity of individuals' physical traits and spiritual qualities in the Hebrew Bible, see Alter, *Moses*, xix–xxiii. The traditional Hebrew proverb, "hearing is not the same as seeing," weighs heavily on the account of Eli's sensory deficiencies, cited in Alter, *Moses*, 497 n. 19.

(1:3), the narrator condemns them in his only detailed description of their character with the awful epithet: “Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they knew not the Lord.” More specifically, the verb that describes the promiscuous encounters between Eli’s sons and the “women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation” is not *yada* (*knew*), as in the virtuous union that produced Samuel, but *shakab*, translated *lie with*. *Shakab* contrasts dramatically with *yada* and connotes physical, temporary, and profane sexual liaisons, undertaken without spiritual purpose, covenant bond, or sacred devotion.⁵⁸

Leitwörter: remembered and visited. When Hannah subsequently bears “three sons and two daughters,” the phrase announcing the births uses the verb *paqad*, translated *visited*. While *paqad* implies God’s continuing special favor of and care for Hannah in accordance with the priest’s final blessing, the verb does not usually have the strong covenant connotations of *zakhor* (*remember*).⁵⁹

Divine Messengers

And there came a man of God unto Eli, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Did I plainly appear unto the house of thy father, when they were in Egypt in Pharaoh’s house? And did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to offer upon mine altar, to burn incense, to wear an ephod before me? and did I give unto the house of thy father all the offerings made by fire of the children of Israel? Wherefore kick ye at my sacrifice and at mine offering, which I have commanded in my habitation; and honourest thy sons above me, to make yourselves fat with the chiefest of all the offerings of Israel my people? Wherefore the Lord God of Israel saith, I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now the Lord saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed. Behold, the days come, that I will cut off thine arm, and the arm of thy father’s house, that there shall not be an old man in thine house. And thou shalt see an enemy in my

58. Alter, *Moses*, 96 n. 32, suggests the verb *shakab* approximates the meaning of “rape” when used in the context of sexual relations. Similar instances of this verb in the Hebrew Bible include Genesis 19:33–35; 34:2; 35:22; 39:12. However, in the Hebrew Bible, *lay/lie with* does not always connote illicit sexual relations, for example, Genesis 30:16, and *know* does not always imply legitimate and covenantal sexual relations, for example, Judges 19:25.

59. *TDOT*, 12:50–60. Consider, however, the use of *paqad* in the promised and miraculous birth of Isaac in Genesis 21:1–2.

habitation, in all the wealth which God shall give Israel: and there shall not be an old man in thine house for ever. And the man of thine, whom I shall cut not off from mine altar, shall be to consume thine eyes, and to grieve thine heart: and all the increase of thine house shall die in the flower of their age. And this shall be a sign unto thee, that shall come upon thy two sons, on Hophni and Phinehas; in one day they shall die both of them. And I will raise me up a faithful priest, that shall do according to that which is in mine heart and in my mind: and I will build him a sure house; and he shall walk before mine anointed for ever. And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left in thine house shall come and crouch to him for a piece of silver and a morsel of bread, and shall say, Put me, I pray thee, into one of the priests' offices, that I may eat a piece of bread. . . .

And the Lord said to Samuel, Behold, I will do a thing in Israel, at which both the ears of every one that heareth it shall tingle. In that day I will perform against Eli all things which I have spoken concerning his house: when I begin, I will also make an end. For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. And therefore I have sworn unto the house of Eli, that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering for ever. And Samuel lay until the morning, and opened the doors of the house of the Lord. And Samuel feared to shew Eli the vision. Then Eli called Samuel, and said Samuel, my son. And he answered, Here am I. And he said, What is the thing that the Lord hath said unto thee? I pray thee hide it not from me: God do so to thee, and more also, if thou hide any thing from me of all the things that he said unto thee. And Samuel told him every whit, and hid nothing from him. And he said, It is the Lord: let him do what seemeth him good. (2:27–36; 3:11–18)

Structuring Devices: “Play of Perspectives.” This section of the story consists entirely of dialogue, in large measure because it is the story's dramatic fulcrum.⁶⁰ While both messages condemn Eli in similar ways, they are not interchangeable. That Samuel's divine calling and first prophecy follow the blanket condemnation of Eli by the “man of God” (2:27–36) and the narrator's strong indictment of God's covenant people “in those days” (3:1) renders Samuel's ascendance all the more essential, dramatic, and spiritually significant to the larger story of covenant Israel.

60. “Direct speech is made the chief instrument for revealing the varied and at times nuanced relations of the personages to the actions in which they are implicated.” Alter, *Art*, 66.

Characterization: Messengers of God. The text expresses the respective dramatic contributions of these two messengers along four dimensions: message, role, impact, and visibility.

- *Message.* As crafted, Samuel's initial prophecy confirms the scathing condemnation of Eli by the "man of God" and inaugurates Samuel's own prophetic ministry. Samuel's prophecy reinforces much of what the "man of God" earlier says to Eli but does not repeat any of his specific words and phrases or hint at Samuel's awareness of his existence or message. Had Samuel's prophecy simply imitated the prior condemnation, he could be seen as more of a copycat than an authentic prophet.⁶¹
- *Role.* Despite the similarity of their messages, the text structures the two encounters inversely.

The man of God begins his condemnation with the terse authoritative declaration, "Thus saith the Lord." He then repeats verbatim every word of the divine message, including the repeated use of first person singular pronouns, as though he speaks precisely in the place of the Lord. While this curse represents the single most extended direct speech in 1 Samuel 1–3, the precise interaction between the "man of God" and his Master is completely omitted from the story. We learn of what God says to him only by what he, in turn, says to Eli. We are present only for his encounter with the priest.

By contrast, the story includes an extended verbatim recitation of the entire message that the Lord personally entrusts to Samuel, beginning with the authoritative declaration, "Behold I will do a thing in Israel" (3:11–14).⁶² This scene is structured so that we are witnesses of Samuel's encounter with the Lord. Besides Samuel's name, which the Lord utters four times during his calling (3:4, 6, 10), this message, which simultaneously calls Samuel and condemns Eli, constitutes the only words that God actually

61. Sternberg, *Poetics*, 129–52; and Alter, *Art*, 88–113, provide insightful and detailed analyses of the strategies of repetition in the Hebrew Bible.

62. "It is noteworthy that God's first message to Samuel is a prophecy of doom. Its content not only indicates the overthrow of the priestly authority of the house of Eli and the implicit move to a different sort of authority to be embodied by the prophet Samuel, but it also adumbrates the rather dour and dire role that Samuel will play as leader, in relation to both Israel and to Saul." Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 256 nn. 11–13.

speaks in the Samuel story, despite the fact that he is its principal protagonist.⁶³

Continuing the contrast with the ministry of the “man of God,” the text only alludes to Samuel’s subsequent communication with Eli—“And Samuel told him every whit.” It does not repeat one word of what the lad actually says to his mentor. In short, the narrative features the *delivery* of the word of God by the “man of God” to Eli but the *reception* by Samuel of the divine message directly from God. Recognizing this difference, Alter offers a crucial perspective on the complementary roles of the man of God and Samuel. “The ‘word of God’ is often a technical term referring to oracular message. Inquiring of the oracle would have been a priestly function, and so there is an intimation here of some sort of breakdown in the professional performance of the house of Eli. But the same phrase also is used to announce prophecy, and ‘vision’ is a prophetic term: the whole episode concerns the transition from priestly to prophetic authority.”⁶⁴ In short, Alter implies that the “man of God” acts as an oracle in relation to the priest, since the priest himself has lost the traditional gift of oracle through abuse and neglect. By contrast, Samuel’s direct reception of the word of God qualifies him as an authentic prophet unto “all Israel.” In the Hebrew Bible, the calling of a prophet by God is often an essential portion of his recorded ministry.⁶⁵

- *Impact.* While the biblical account is silent regarding Eli’s reaction to the man of God, it is structured explicitly so that the priest *must* accept Samuel’s dire prophecy. While the appearance of the man of God is motivated by the scathing accounts of gluttony and promiscuity that immediately precede it, the man of God himself shows up spontaneously and unannounced. Thus, while his sudden arrival is entirely motivated by events in the narrative, the narrative is silent regarding the messenger’s relationship with and impact upon Eli.

By contrast, on the night of Samuel’s divine call, Eli specifically and emphatically directs the lad on how to respond to the voice of the Lord, thus setting the expectation of a follow-up report to the

63. “Nothing is clearer in the final form of the text than Yahweh’s utter mastery of the situation, whatever it may be.” Polzin, *Samuel*, 4.

64. Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 254 n. 1.

65. For example, Exodus 3–4; Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1; Ezekiel 1–2.

priest. On cue the next morning, Eli repeatedly demands that his protégé share the details of his encounter with God. After receiving Samuel's prophecy, Eli has no recourse but to acknowledge, "It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good" (3:18).

- *Visibility.* While both messengers faithfully deliver their respective messages from the Lord, the "man of God" accomplishes his mission in total anonymity. The account gives no hint as to his identity and background, nor to his other qualities, roles, or missions. In accomplishing this mission, the "man of God" encounters only Eli, delivers his message faithfully and confidentially, and then disappears immediately, apparently never to be seen or heard from again.

By contrast, Samuel executes his mission completely in the public eye. During the indictment of Eli and his sons, the narrator sprinkles several asides on the lad's prodigious service at the temple (2:11, 18, 21, 26; 3:1a) and concludes this narrative with the categorical declaration of Samuel's remarkable long-term public ministry (3:19–4:1a).

Samuel Is Called and Established

And the child Samuel ministered unto the Lord before Eli. And the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision. And it came to pass at that time, when Eli was laid down in his place, and his eyes began to wax dim, that he could not see; And ere the lamp of God went out in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was, and Samuel was laid down to sleep; That the Lord called Samuel: and he answered, Here am I. And he ran unto Eli, and said, Here am I for thou calledst me. And he said, I called not; lie down again. And he went and lay down. And the Lord called yet again, Samuel. And Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou didst call me. And he answered, I called not, my son; lie down again. Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, neither was the word of the Lord revealed unto him. And the Lord called Samuel again the third time. And he rose and went to Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou didst call me. And Eli perceived that the Lord had called the child. Therefore Eli said unto Samuel, Go, lie down: and it shall be, if he call thee, that thou shalt say, Speak, Lord; for thy servant heareth. So Samuel went and lay down in his place. And the Lord came, and stood, and called as at other times, Samuel, Samuel. Then Samuel answered, Speak; for thy servant heareth. . . .

And Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him, and did let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan even to Beer-sheba

knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the Lord. And the Lord appeared again in Shiloh: for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the Lord. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. (3:1–10, 19–21; 4:1a)

Structuring Devices: “Play of Perspectives.” Reflecting the intimacy of Samuel’s first encounter with God and its profound effect, this segment of the story is recounted primarily as dialogue. Given the customary role for dialogue in biblical Hebrew, it is entirely appropriate that the second half of the Samuel story (2:27–4:1a) is recounted almost exclusively in dialogue. Only the narrator’s general spiritual indictment of Israel (3:1) and the summary impact of Samuel’s call upon “all Israel” (3:19–4:1a) are expressed in narrative.

Customary Behavior: Hearing and Seeing. While Eli properly identifies the source of Samuel’s call, he does not hear the voice himself; only the lad does. The narrator’s specific comment that the priest’s “eyes began to wax dim, that he could not see” follows immediately the narrator’s general spiritual indictment of Israel: “And the word of the Lord was precious [that is, rare] in those days; there was no open vision.”⁶⁶ In response to this array of sensory deficiencies, the Lord launches his first instruction to Samuel with the declaration, “Behold, I will do a thing in Israel, at which both the ears of every one that heareth it shall tingle” (3:11)

Following the reception of Samuel’s first prophecy, hearing and seeing figure prominently in the interchange between the priest and his protégé: “Samuel feared to shew Eli the vision. Then Eli called Samuel, and said, . . . What is the thing that the Lord hath said unto thee? I pray thee, hide it not from me: God do so to thee, and more also, if thou hide any thing from me of all the things he said unto thee. And Samuel told him every whit, and hid nothing from him” (3:15–17).

The account of Samuel’s divine calling concludes using hearing and seeing as metaphors of increased spiritual capacity: “And Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him, and did let none of his words fall to the ground. . . . And the Lord appeared again in Shiloh: for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the Lord.”

Type Scene: Obedience to God’s Call. Samuel repeatedly responds to God’s initial calling with “Here am I,” which are the first and only words, with slight variation, spoken directly by Samuel in the biblical

66. McCarter, *I Samuel*, 97 n. 1.

account before his calling as a prophet (3:4–16). This response is identical to Abraham’s willing acceptance of the Lord’s calling at the patriarch’s great test of faith.⁶⁷

Leitwörter: know and lie with. In contrast to the use of *shakab* (*lie with*) in the account of the promiscuity of Eli’s sons, discussed above, in the account of Samuel’s divine call, Eli instructs the lad repeatedly to *shakab* (*lie down*). This usage introduces another meaningful connotation of the verb, *shakab*, in relation to *yada* (*know*). In the context of Samuel’s calling, neither *yada* nor *shakab* have sexual connotations. *Shakab* implies that Samuel is simply lying prone in bed when the Lord first calls and eventually appears to him. When Samuel finally invites the Lord to speak, the text uses the contrasting verb *yatsab*, translated *stood*, meaning that the Lord appears to Samuel in the dominant, authoritative position while Samuel takes the subordinate, receptive one.

His personal encounter with the divine allows Samuel to *know* (*yada*) God for the first time. Prior to his call, “Samuel did not yet know the Lord; neither was the word of the Lord yet revealed unto him.”⁶⁸ The knowledge of God bestowed on this occasion is personal, powerful, and covenant-based, not familiar and sexual. The same verb also concludes the narrative, signaling the enduring covenant between Samuel and the Lord, on the one hand, and between Samuel and God’s covenant people, on the other: “And all Israel from Dan even to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the Lord. And the Lord appeared again in Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the Lord. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.”

67. 1 Samuel 3:4–16; Genesis 22:1. For comparable instances of this identical response elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, see Genesis 22:7; 27:1, 18; 31:11; 37:11; 46:2; Exodus 3:4. Simon, *Prophetic Narratives*, 51–61, makes the case that Samuel’s divine call is part of a literary genre in the Hebrew Bible by illustrating numerous structural parallels with those of other Israelite prophets.

68. The contrast in meaning between the spiritual condition of the sons of Eli and that of Samuel in relation to this verb is revealed in the respective tenses. “Knew not” implies a defining and permanent condition for the sons of Eli; for Samuel, however, “did not yet know” implies a temporary and transitional condition that would soon be remedied. Subsequent events in the narrative bear out this contrast: the sons of Eli abuse the ritual offering and are categorically rejected by the Lord, but the Lord appears to Samuel and gives him his first and subsequent prophecies.

Leitwörter: establish and cut off. In the Samuel story, the narrator uses the verb ‘*amen*, translated *establish*, in order to prefigure Samuel’s auspicious priestly career in the voice of his faithful father—“only the Lord establish his word” (1:23)—and to launch Samuel’s public ministry at the story’s climax: “And all Israel from Dan even to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the Lord.” The Hebrew verb has strong ritual, symbolic, and covenantal connotations, suggesting that:

- Samuel’s rise to prominence was anticipated and guided by the Lord,
- Samuel would be sustained by God in his challenging but crucial ministry, and
- “all Israel” would be divinely blessed for its faithful allegiance to Samuel’s prophetic direction.⁶⁹

Establish in these contexts provides a categorical contrast with verbs repeated by the “man of God” in his condemnation of the house of Eli. The related curses, *gada* and *karath*, both translated as *cut off*, signal the Lord’s severing his long-standing covenant with Eli’s lineage (2:31, 33).⁷⁰

Characterization: Prophet of God. As crafted, the account of Samuel’s calling corrects Israel’s general spiritual malaise (see 3:1), makes explicit Samuel’s newfound, firsthand knowledge of God (see 3:7), and

69. The same Hebrew root is translated “faithful” in the prophecy associated with God’s curse upon Eli’s house: “I will raise up a faithful priest, that shall do according to that which is in mine heart and in my mind” (2:35), suggesting that the author considers Samuel to be the promised priest, who “shall walk before mine anointed forever.” See also *TDOT*, 1:296.

70. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, *gada* is used in reference to felling trees, particularly groves devoted to the worship of pagan gods, or more generally to destroying anything of value as a consequence of wickedness and as a sign of God’s displeasure (for example, Deuteronomy 7:5; Judges 21:6; 2 Chronicles 14:3; 31:1; Psalms 75:10; 107:16; Isaiah 9:10; 14:12; 15:2; 22:25; 45:2; Jeremiah 48:25; 50:23; Ezekiel 6:6). *Karath* also connotes destruction but is more widely used in the Hebrew Bible with stronger and more explicit reference to breaking a covenant (for example, Genesis 9:11; Exodus 4:25; 12:15, 19; Leviticus 17:4–14; 20:3–18; Numbers 15:30–31). “In the majority of offenses, ‘cutting off’ means a ‘cutting out’ which leads to ‘banishment’ or ‘excommunication’ from the cultic community and the covenant people.” *TDOT*, 7:348.

establishes Samuel's role as "prophet of the Lord" among "all Israel" (3:20, 4:1a).

SYNTHESIS

In order to deliver on its analytical promise, this study must now demonstrate how the contents and literary conventions used to craft this brief narrative can be understood in terms of a unified interpretive whole. From the present perspective, 1 Samuel 1–3 is an account of more than the birth of a remarkable prophet and the beginning of a radical transformation of Israel's polity. It also serves the broader narrative as the renewal of an ancient and sacred covenant with God, with Samuel serving as its object and agent.⁷¹ Such a perspective allows readers to see 1 Samuel 1–3 as an integrated, focused, and crucial contribution to God's perpetual effort to fulfill sacred promises and renew an enduring relationship with his covenant people.

Structure of the Narrative

From the simplest and most direct perspective, the story of Samuel's birth and calling can be best understood in covenant terms. Hannah makes a solemn vow to God, and God and Hannah repeatedly and mutually fulfill the terms of their covenant. Hannah bears and nurtures Samuel, after which she "lends" him to God and continues to bless him, without any expectation of divine recompense. God, in turn, "gives" Hannah a "man child" according to her supplication, who then becomes a prophet unto "all Israel." Thus, God manifests his goodness by fulfilling Hannah's vow in ways that she could not possibly have imagined beforehand or accomplished herself.

God is the main character in the narrative, even though he personally appears briefly only once—to call Samuel and give him his first prophecy. All other crucial actions in the story—the emergence of Elkanah and Hannah into the epic Hebrew narrative from a position of complete obscurity, the miracles of Hannah's conception and Samuel's birth, the rise of Samuel and the fall of the house of Eli, and the establishment

71. McCarter, *I Samuel*, 86–93, identifies several literary features of the text which indicate that, as a result of Samuel's ministry, Israel's future as recounted in the Hebrew Bible will be considerably different than its past.

of Samuel as prophet to “all Israel”—are all orchestrated by God from “off stage.”

From a human perspective, the text features two complementary protagonists who come into focus in the principal vignettes of the story—Hannah and Samuel.⁷² Hannah’s key role in this social drama⁷³ is to make a solemn vow to God and fulfill its initial terms through the bearing and nurturing of her first born (1:1–2:10). Samuel’s principal role is to realize his divine destiny for “all Israel” (3:1–4:1a). Between these two vignettes a narrative transition (2:11–36) details the divine curse which comes upon Eli’s house, making way for Samuel’s auspicious ascendancy. While the transition details the woes of Eli’s house, it also contains five separate references to Samuel’s progressively faithful service to the Lord—at the beginning and end of the transition and periodically throughout (2:11, 18, 21, 26; 3:1a). This subtle literary convention repeatedly brings attentive readers back to the central focus of the larger narrative.

Poetics and Rhetoric

All other textual details and literary conventions of the account systematically support a covenant perspective in the following central ways.

- *Diction.* Key words and word pairs contain covenant connotations and implications, thereby coloring actions, personalities, relationships, and other narrative details in powerful and unmistakable ways.
- *Characterization.* The few defining details of character—behavior, actions, qualities, dialogue, and physical appearance that flesh out “proleptic portraits,”⁷⁴ whether individually or in pairs—reveal individuals’ varied relationships with one another and with God, as mediated by their sacred covenants. For example, Elkanah and Hannah keep their covenants, albeit in contrasting ways, and are

72. “Although [Hannah] is undoubtedly the heroine of our [birth] narrative, and even though Samuel’s role in it is secondary and passive, the story ultimately focuses not on her but on him.” Simon, *Prophetic Narratives*, 33.

73. The application of the anthropological concept of “social drama” to interpret literature, ritual, and other key cultural expressions is summarized in Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 23–59.

74. Sternberg, *Poetics*, 321–24.

thereby divinely blessed. By contrast, Eli and his sons turn from their covenant obligations in multiple ways and are consequently eternally cursed. Samuel is ever faithful to his consecrated responsibilities at Shiloh and eventually becomes one of Israel's greatest spiritual leaders.

- *Type scenes.* These scenes infer meaningful connections with other individuals and settings in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles that serve as positive and negative exemplars of God's enduring covenant with his children.

Metanarrative

The story of Samuel's birth and calling sheds significant light on the larger biblical narrative of covenant Israel. Although Polzin makes a strong case that the Samuel story is a parable on kingship in Israel, the present perspective suggests that particular social forms are not as central to the biblical narrative as what might be called the "order of God." From Genesis through Kings, JHWH seems willing and ready to accept and work with a wide variety of religious and political leaders—patriarchs, priests, prophets, judges, and kings—provided they remain faithful to his direction, counsel, and covenants. If they do so, they are strengthened, enlarged, blessed, and sustained. If not, they encounter a host of temporal and spiritual difficulties, including imprisonment, overthrow, civil unrest, dynastic collapse, divine rejection, and physical debility. Thus, faithfulness to God seems to be more central to the Bible's "theological interpretation of history"⁷⁵ than the particular political or social forms of human societies. While this general biblical pattern exhibits innumerable complexities, variations, nuances, and ambiguities, its consistency spans centuries of the recorded dealings of JHWH with covenant Israel.⁷⁶ A covenant focus thus seems to be

75. Polzin, *Samuel*, 7.

76. In general, I agree with Alter: "The story of Samuel, then, far from being a simple promotion of prophetic ideology, enormously complicates the notion of prophecy by concretely imagining what may become of the imperfect stuff of humanity when the mantle of prophecy is cast over it." *Ancient Prophets*, 230. Our differences are complementary, not contrastive in nature. While Alter focuses on human diversities within a general perspective of divine consistency, I emphasize the text's ideological consistency within the context of seemingly limitless social and political diversity. In his extended analysis of

essential to the “pious tradition”⁷⁷ that occupied biblical writers and commanded their literary craftsmanship. The story of Samuel’s birth and calling is one of many contributions to this core ideological focus of the Hebrew Bible.

While it is possible to read the narrative of Samuel’s birth in other ways, a covenant perspective allows readers to interpret many, perhaps most, of its details from a single, unified point of view, thus revealing great interpretive depth to the text. We may never know for sure whether a covenant perspective actually motivated those who crafted the inherited text over the centuries of its development. The possibility of a covenant perspective, however, cannot be denied and may be profoundly appreciated as we seek to plumb the depths of this remarkable text.

CONCLUSION

The present study illustrates the extent to which the authors, editors, and redactors of 1 Samuel 1–3 employed in a systematic and complementary manner a variety of literary conventions for a central ideological end—showing God’s commitment to preserve his ancient covenant with Israel, even at inopportune times and through obscure persons. Crafting this key story in an artful way enriches the reading experience and rewards attentive readers with nuances and levels of insight.

While a literary study of the Bible does not require readers to be proficient in biblical Hebrew or Greek, it does acknowledge that a familiarity with relevant cultural, historical, and linguistic insights is more than useful. Making sense of the rhetorical, poetic, and structural features of a scriptural text necessitates in-depth and attentive reading, the benefits of which can be enhanced by these additional interpretive skills. In a

the annunciation type scene in the Hebrew Bible, Simon, *Prophetic Narratives*, 49, acknowledges the persistent tension between pattern and variation: “The pattern that is common to all the stories that belong to a particular genre is sufficiently flexible and varied to allow both full development of the unique nature of every one-time human event as well as variegated rich development of the alternate possibilities latent in the common basic situation. The paradigm serves as a frame of reference that allows us to examine each component in the context of the expectations aroused by its parallels in the other stories. . . . These analogies and contrasts enrich and deepen the rhetorical possibilities and sharpen and intensify the meaning that can be extracted from each individual account and from all of them taken together.”

77. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 14.

literary approach to scripture, sacred texts are seen as a complex, intentional creation by whose patterns and intricacies readers gain insights into the “imaginative universe”⁷⁸ of the prophets, scribes, and other holy people who crafted them.

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78. Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*, 11.