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# “Unworthy to be Heard” (Lab 50.4)? Hannah’s Prayer and Anxiety for the Fate of Israel in the *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo

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## **Abstract**

This brief study exposes the ways that Hannah’s double prayer in LAB 50 participates in larger trajectories in the reception of 1 Sam 2, while putting special accent upon a messianic interest that makes good historical sense between the First and Second Jewish Revolts.

## **Keywords**

Hannah, Prayer, Messiah, “Psalmification”

In this brief paper, I would like to expose Hannah’s prayer in the *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* of Pseudo-Philo as a remarkable intersection of diverse Second Temple prayer traditions. A late example of the broad post-exilic trend to insert and expand prayers within the received biblical framework, Pseudo-Philo’s rewritten Bible has significantly reconfigured the preexisting prayer traditions in 1 Samuel 1-2. The choice to develop this particular material in a text written shortly after the destruction of

Herod’s Temple (as I would date *LAB*) was inspired, I’d say, if not in the strong theological sense, at least for the unique possibilities it afforded to Pseudo-Philo<sup>1</sup>. Two memorable, quite diverse and suggestive instances of Hannah’s prayer are provided for an exegetical makeover in 1 Samuel: the silent, plaintive petition muttered by a childless woman in distress and her subsequent jubilant hymn of thankful praise.

Already in the canonical version of 1 Samuel, one can observe what Hannes Bezzel calls the “psalmification” of the narrative in the basic arc of Hannah’s story, which neatly progresses from an individual lament, recalling the supplicant of the Psalter, to the completion of the vow of praise after the supplication has been heard<sup>2</sup>. The biblical Hannah emerges in this way as a comprehensive model of the successful *pray-er* and a living embodiment of the model prayers generically collected in the Psalms. At the same time, alongside this psalm-based shaping of Hannah’s tale, another redactional dimension must be highlighted in the biblical matter at Pseudo-Philo’s disposal; for numerous links have been observed binding Hannah’s hymn in 1 Samuel 2 to David’s Psalm at the very end of the Samuel scroll in 2 Samuel 22. For our purposes, the key effect of this redactional link, neatly bookending the beginning and the end of the whole two-volume work, is, to quote Bezzel once again, that “Even though the confident statement in 2, 10 that the Lord will raise the horn of his anointed (וְחִישָׁה וְרָקַק מְרִינֵי) in the context of the following stories seemingly refers to Saul, David makes it clear in 2 Sam 22, 51 that the word anointed refers to him alone: ‘He shows loving kindness to his anointed, to David and to his seed forever’<sup>3</sup>.

Both of these dynamics at work in the crafting of the original biblical story - the psalmification of Hannah’s person and the note of Davidic

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<sup>1</sup> For introductory matter on Pseudo-Philo, including a discussion of the date, and for the Latin text and commentary, see Howard JACOBSON, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo’s Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum: with Latin Text and English Translation*, Brill, AJEC 31, Leiden, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Hannes BEZZEL, “Hannah’s Prayer(s) in 1 Sam 1-2 and in Pseudo-Philo’s *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*”, in: Susanne Gillmayer-Bucher and Maria Häusel (eds.), *Prayers and the Construction of Israelite Identity, Ancient Israel and Its Literature*, SBL Press, Atlanta, 2019, pp. 147–64, esp. p. 152.

<sup>3</sup> H. BEZZEL, “Hannah’s Prayer(s)...”, p. 148.

messianism resonant in the final potent word of her canonical prayer, וְהִישָׁמ - find a sort of *Fortschreibung* and amplification in post-biblical traditions. It is the messianic trajectory that holds a very special interest for our purposes, however. The celebrated rendition of Hannah's hymn in Targum Jonathan, with all its huge theological expansions - a text that many will remember from their first semester of Targumic Aramaic - is a parade piece that leaves no room for any mistake: the strong stuff of Jewish national hope was discerned in Hannah's song. I quote a few lines from Harrington's translation.

“Concerning Sennacherib the king of Assyria - she [Hannah] prophesied and said that he and all his armies would come up against Jerusalem, and a great sign would be worked on him; there the corpses of his camp would fall...

Concerning Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon - she prophesied and said, «You Chaldeans and all the people who are to rule in Israel, so not have much to say! *Let not blasphemies go forth from your mouth...*»

Concerning the kingdoms of the Greeks - she prophesied and said: «The bows of the Greek warriors will be broken...»

Concerning the sons of Haman—she prophesied and said that they were filed up on bread and growing in wealth and abounding in money—they have become poor... So Jerusalem, which was like a barren woman, is to be filled with her exiled people. And Rome, which was filled with great numbers of people - her armies will cease to be; she will be desolate and destroyed...

*The Lord will shatter the enemies who rise up to do harm to his people. The Lord blasts down upon them from the heavens with a loud voice. He will exact vengeance from Gog and the army of the violent nations who come with him from the ends of the earth. And he will give power to his king and will magnify the kingdom of his anointed one*<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel J. HARRINGTON, “The Apocalypse of Hannah: Targum Jonathan of 1 Samuel 2:1-10”, in: David M. Golomb (ed.), “Working with No Data”: Semitic and Egyptian Studies Presented to Thomas O. Lambdin, Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, IN, 1987, pp. 147-152.

In this prophetic reconstruction, the original framework of Hannah's hymn as recorded in 1 Samuel 2 has receded so far that it has become nearly impossible to discern, in contrast to the flagrant eschatological scaffolding now supplied by the schema of Daniel's Four Kingdoms. A reading of the narrative in 1 Samuel is, nevertheless, clearly traceable here in the way that Peninnah's taunting of Hannah has been transformed into the bragging of the pagan nations brought to naught. Implicitly - the point is important - this interpretation of the story means that Hannah herself occupies the persona and place of Israel. The same prosopographic hermeneutic, I will contend, is at work in *LAB*. If the date of this greatly expanded Targumic version must, of course, in all likelihood be plotted on the far end of the trajectory initiated by the original biblical text, the messianic potential of the passage and the implicit hermeneutic connected with this were clearly grasped at an earlier date.

The Targum's complete transformation of Hannah's private hymn into a confident song about the glorious victory of David's kingdom over Israel's enemies provides an excellent point of comparison for understanding Pseudo-Philo. On the one hand, the Targum's triumphalism is unimaginable without certain interpretative assumptions first explicitly deployed and attested in *LAB*. At the same time, the Targum's version brims with an over-the-top confidence that is markedly dissonant with what we detect in Pseudo-Philo, where a much more uncertain mood prevails.

To see this more clearly and grasp how Hannah's prayer functions it is first necessary to apprehend her story in its narrative context in *LAB*. Specifically, it is essential to see how the account is deeply intertwined with a larger story about the fate of the entire nation. The unit opens with the appearance Elkanah in *LAB* 49, just after ascension of Phineas, as the people, now bereft of their leader, search for a new man to rule them, one who will, as they say, "free us from our distress, because it is not appropriate for the people to be without a ruler" (49, 1). The lot falls upon Elkanah, who, nevertheless, refuses to be the leader on account of his sins (49, 6), prompting the people to pray again to God in their double distress. God replies that the son of Elkanah shall rule; to which the people respond

that he since has ten sons, God must indicate which one. God answers that it is no son of Peninnah, but the one to be born of the sterile woman is chosen to be Israel's prophet. This whole extra-biblical prequel then gives way to the story recounted in 1 Samuel, as *LAB* picks up with 1 Sam 1, 2. The full interlacing of Hannah's personal prayer for a son with the people's public prayer for a leader is thus made manifest through the open convergence of Hannah's private story with Israel's national plotline.

The same convergence of public and private stories is later made explicit, moreover, in the words Eli speaks to Hannah after Samuel is conceived. The gift of the child prompts Hannah to say, "This is the desire I desired and *the request I have asked*", in *LAB*'s version of the famous pun of *Saul* in the Hebrew of 1 Sam 1, 25. Eli then replies: "You have not asked alone, but the people have prayed for this. This is not your request alone, but it was promised previously to the tribes" (51, 2).

A second, still more revealing expression of the overlay of Hannah's story with the story of Israel appears in a notion of unworthiness unique to *LAB*. In her prayer of distress, Hannah prays as follows:

"Did you not, O Lord, search out the heart of all generations before you formed the world? Now what womb is born open or dies closed unless you wish it? And now let my prayer ascend before you today, lest I go down from here empty, because you know my heart, how I have walked before you from the day of my youth" (50, 4).

Then, immediately expanding upon the biblical detail that she was moving her lips but making no noise, Pseudo-Philo adds a very important detail:

"And Hannah did not want to pray out loud as all people do. For she thought, saying, «Perhaps I am not worthy to be heard» (*Ne forte non sim digna exaudiri*), and Peninnah will then be even more eager to taunt me as she does daily when she says, «Where is your God in whom you trust?» ... For who may know what I

have prayed for? If they know that I am not heard in my prayer they will blaspheme" (50, 5).

Putting in Peninnah's mouth the taunting words of the scoffer of Psalm 42, 3 - "Where is your God?" - is an excellent example of the further "psalmification" of Hannah's story, already noted above, for it transforms Hannah directly into the harassed suppliant of that individual lament. An additional and connected example of this same process is evident in the immediate narrative context, moreover, for Peninnah's actual taunt was to call Hannah to a "dry tree" (probably alluding to Isa 56, 3), while presenting herself as the fruitful wife of Psalm 128, whose children are like shoots of the olive. In the view of Vincent Hirschi, this taunting evocation of Psalm 128 may be intended to present Hannah as specifically excluded not only from family joys, but the happiness of the nation. As he notes: "The psalm, functions not only as a blessing of the righteous man, but also an invitation to see the blessing of the individual as a specific instantiation of God's blessing of the whole nation. Verses 5 and 6 [of Psalm 128] move from the individual's flourishing to the prosperity of Jerusalem"<sup>5</sup>. Such a merging of personal and national motifs fits perfectly with what we have already observed.

Of more direct interest for us than this process of psalmification, however, is the explicit reason provided in *LAB* for Hannah's *unvoiced* prayer - a prayer that the reader alone is permitted to overhear. Hannah is anxious, we learn, that, although she has an upright heart, God might reject her as unworthy and not hear her prayer. To speak her prayer aloud, in the event that God in point of fact does not answer, would thus expose Hannah herself to the fate of still further humiliation and abuse. This is quite an interesting twist on the classic motif of appealing to God's own honor. The one praying here anticipates personally bearing the brunt of taunts made against Israel's Lord, while the threat of dishonor itself is never mobilized as a reason for God to act. No appeal is made to stir for the sake of his name. Instead, Hannah simply retreats into a remarkably uncertain posture

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<sup>5</sup> Vincent HIRSCHI, "The Literary Function of Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum 49 in Hannah's Story: Hannah and the People as Inverted Mirror Images", in: *Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha* 31 (2022), pp. 306–317, here p. 311.

of preemptive self-defense, as if she fully anticipates that her prayer will not be heard.

Even measured against the corpus of Second Temple penitential prayers, so preoccupied by a piercing awareness of corporate guilt and resigned to an acknowledgement of the justice of the Lord's chastisement, Hannah's anxiety about not being heard is exceptionally striking. Ezra's paradigmatic prayer of corporate confession in Nehemiah 9 reaches its morose terminus at the nadir of Israel's national life: "We are in great distress" is the prayer's final gloomy sentence. No petition is here made; thus no risk is here taken, and no preemptive strategy is thus required to shield Israel against new depths of shame. Hannah, by contrast, imagines sinking still lower. Other variants of penitential prayer show themselves more ready to lodge a request with God for a change in circumstances. The long prayer of confession recorded in Baruch 2, which transitions into the prayer in praise of God's wisdom in chapter 3, offers a fine example. Here the traditional appeal to the Lord's honor is repeatedly invoked: "Hear O Lord our prayer and our supplication, and for your own sake deliver us... that all the earth may know that you are the Lord our God, for Israel and his descendants are called by your name" (Bar 2, 14-15); "Remember not the iniquities of our fathers, but in this crisis remember your power and your name" (Bar 3, 5). The implicit confidence expressed in this prayer, though following a broad arc from distress to praise like Hannah's two prayers, contrasts still more than Nehemiah 9 with what we encounter in *LAB*.

Hannah's pessimistic, openly guarded posture of prayer is once again not only her own, of course. Like these penitential prayers, she gives voice to the prayer of the entire nation. Thus, in *LAB* 49.2, when, during the nation's search for a new leader, the first cast of the lots turns up nothing, we read that "the people were very sad and said, «The people were not worthy to be heard by the Lord» (*non fuit dignus populus exaudiri de Domino*). Therefore he did not answer us". The exact correspondence to Hannah's sentiment is patent.

Pseudo-Philo's narrative fusion of the story of Israel - destitute of a leader then granted a prophet - with the story of the Hannah - sterile but

made fruitful in the gift of a son - is confirmed again at this point. When in Hannah's hymn her situation is accordingly suddenly reversed, we must also understand this as a reversal of the nation's same condition. As might be anticipated, the messianic nature of the people's future reversal is apparent especially in the song's final line: "These words will endure until they give a horn to his anointed one and power be present at the throne of his king" (50, 6).

In 50, 6, in the middle of the prayer of praise, the motif of Hannah's silent manner of prayer is openly overruled: "Speak, speak, Hannah and do not be silent. Sing a hymn daughter of Batuel about the miracles that God has performed for you". This apostrophe is a curious self-address; in effect, it breaks the frame for a moment in the fashion of a chorus reflecting on the action. To this extent, the external, third-person voice encouraging Hannah's song coopts the prayer for itself, transforming Hannah's formerly hidden prayer into an object of public contemplation.

The dramatic swing from anxiety-ridden prayer, afraid even to speak, to this bold shouting of God's greatness, is predicated on a new experience of the *magnalia Dei*, the miracles that God has performed. If Pseudo-Philo can thus imagine this sort of divine intervention in the appearance of a chosen leader sent by the Lord, it would be misleading to overstate the author's confidence that such leaders are inevitably given to the people. Repeatedly, in story after story, this rewritten Bible betrays high anxiety about whether Israel itself stands on the brink of extinction - an idea that frequently finds formulation around the tenuous succession of Israel's leaders and the notion of the fertility and the multiplication of Israel's seed: two ideas that neatly intersect in Hannah's story.

For a variety of reasons, I would hazard the thesis - and I am not alone - that a muted but very real form of messianic hope animates the composition of *LAB*. The intentional conclusion of the book precisely at the moment of the death of Saul, for instance, is unambiguously suggestive and plainly oriented to David's coming reign. But other signs also exist. The point here is merely to say that behind the motif of Hannah's double register of prayer, first in distress and silence, then later shouting from the rooftops, we might perhaps imagine something like this.



Following the disaster of the First Jewish Revolt, the people found themselves in a state of desolation reminiscent of the ruin of Saul's kingdom: "«Behold you are blotting out the kingdom of Saul?» [Samuel said] and [God] said, «I am blotting it out»" (59, 1). Saul's demise is an event that resembled the national annihilation so feared by Pseudo-Philo. It is quite noteworthy in this connection that in *LAB*'s version, Saul dies not by his own hand, but at the hand of Edabus, prince of the Amelkites, namely by Israel's eternal enemy, for which we might here read Rome. An ongoing eager entertainment of Israel's future national hopes clearly became a troubled issue in this context. Enthusiastic interest in messianic leaders had just left the nation destitute and exposed to open shame. Imagine the folly, in the immediate wake of this catastrophe, of speaking boldly with triumphalist confidence about a coming ruler. After the Second Jewish Revolt and Bar Kochba's next failed movement, messianic excitement on the nationalist model of the so-called "Son of the Lie" had largely spent its force. Somewhere in between these two events, however, Pseudo-Philo formulated a mediating modality of prayer for the much-desired ruler of Israel to arise. Pray quietly, he intimates, that the Lord might grant the people a destined leader, entertaining the longing with an upright heart, but not presuming on any worthiness to be heard, and above all not letting an enemy (like Rome) overhear, exposing the people to the possibility of still greater blasphemy and shame. Instead, pray with quiet trembling, holding out a silent hope that you will later join in a song of messianic joy with Hannah.