Why Did Hannah Ask for “Seed of Men”?

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What was Hannah praying for? More specifically, how are we to explain the phrase מִנְיָן מִצְאָב in 1 Sam 1:11? In plain terms, we of course understand that Hannah was praying to have a child. Our text has set this up as the basic point on which the plot of the story turns. As soon as the main characters—Elkanah and his two wives, Hannah and Peninnah—are identified, we are informed (v. 2), “Peninnah had children, but Hannah did not.”

The setting of the story is the family’s annual visit to Shiloh for worship and sacrifice. There is no reason to assume that the trip was made on the occasion of a yearly pilgrimage festival. The phrase הדת הדת, “annual sacrifice” (v. 21), simply refers to the sacrifice made annually by Elkanah and his family, which provided the setting of the events of vv. 3–19. Indeed, the course of the story would seem to argue against a public festival. There is no one on the scene but Elkanah’s family and the high priest, Eli, and the latter seems to have plenty of time on his hands. All we are told about him is that he is sitting on his priestly throne at the entrance to the shrine watching Hannah mutter to herself. This is not what we would expect the chief priest to be doing on the busiest weekend of the year. If the festival was indeed a public occasion, our chapter’s narrow focus is all the more evident. For our story is about one thing and one thing only: Hannah wants a child.

But the phrase with which she makes her request falls into a little-discussed category of biblical texts: those in which the process of exegesis runs in reverse. We ordinarily must understand a writer’s words in order to interpret his meaning, but we sometimes find ourselves with a sense of what the writer must mean, though it has not been clearly expressed. In such cases our task is to explain how the writer’s unusual choice of words was indeed meant to convey the meaning that we somehow intuit. My instincts say that this category is larger than we would like to admit, and that by the nature of the beast there must be examples where what we all “know
it means" is actually wrong. I intend to suggest here that Hannah's request is one such case.

The difficulty arises because—if I may step for a moment into my role as a professor of Biblical Hebrew—the phrase מַגָּרֶן (rz means, and can only mean, "human offspring." Indeed, the medieval interpreter David Kimhi does offer as one of his comments on this phrase the suggestion that Hannah was praying for a child who would not resemble a monkey or a eunuch. But the story has provided no reason that Hannah should fear an outcome of this kind. Others of the medievals join Kimhi in a further suggestion that what Hannah wanted was a child who would be a real "man"—righteous (as רַבָּנָנוּ are called in 1 Kgs 2:32), prominent (1 Sam 17:12), and wise (Deut 1:13). The common understanding of the phrase among modern interpreters—from Henry Preserved Smith in the ICC a century ago to Jan P. Fokkelman in 1993—is that Hannah wants a son.2 Bible translations too, from "a man child" of the KJV to "male seed" of Robert Alter3 make the same assumption. Certainly neither this nor the hope that her child would be a worthy man is an absurd request, but according to the logic of the story neither of these is the request that Hannah is making.

This is not to say, of course, that Hannah did not want a child who would grow up to be righteous, prominent, and wise. She might even, if pressed, have expressed a preference for a male child. Elkanah's rhetorical question, "Am I not better to you than ten sons?" (v. 8), could be interpreted as support for this (though it need not be).4 But this says nothing about what Hannah herself wants, and the narrator (in vv. 2 and 4) has carefully avoided framing the child's sex as the focus of the story. What Hannah wants is a child, plain and simple.

The careful interweaving of two chains of consecutive verbs—one describing what happened every year when Elkanah and his brood went to Shiloh, and one

1 Most of the examples in CAD Z, s.v. zeru 5a, sometimes cited in connection with this expression, seem to contrast it with the possibility of divine offspring, confirming this interpretation.

2 Henry Preserved Smith notes that מַגָּרֶן "does not occur again" but adds, "That she means a male child is evident" (A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Samuel [ICC; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909], 10). J. P. Fokkelman calls it "a unique expression which is difficult to interpret in any other way than as referring to abundant male descendants" (Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analyses, vol. 4, Vow and Desire (1 Sam. 1–12) [Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993], 37, emphasis added).


describing what happened on one particular occasion—that demonstrates that the action of our story begins where it does because Hannah has reached the end of her rope. That is, Hannah had in fact given up on having a child in the ordinary human manner, and—driven to distraction by Peninnah’s taunting and by her own despair—she has finally determined to use the occasion of her annual visit to the shrine of God to ask for help.

Beyond the obvious presumption that God could be turned to as a last resort in any personal crisis, it is clear that this would be particularly so in the case of female barrenness. In Genesis 30, Rachel is in exactly the same case as Hannah in 1 Samuel 1. “She had not borne Jacob [any children]” (Gen 30:1), while his other wife, Leah, had done so. She says to him, “Give me sons! If you don’t, I’m going to die!” (ibid.). He responds angrily, “Am I in place of God, who has prevented you from being fertile?” (v. 2). The narrator of the book of Ruth explains the sequence of events as it would naturally be presumed to occur: “Boaz took Ruth as his wife and had intercourse with her. The Lord granted her conception and she bore a son” (Ruth 4:13). The first birth of a human child, in Gen 4:1, establishes the pattern: “Now, the man was intimate with his wife Eve and she conceived and bore Cain. She said, ‘I have created a son with the Lord.’” In all three of these examples, the clear understanding is that the birth of a child is the result of a combination of two factors, sexual intercourse and divine intervention.

That Hannah too is requesting divine intervention to give her a child is obvious on the face of it. I am suggesting that what Hannah asked for in the original telling of this story was not a child that would be given her by God. The difficult phrase is an artifact, placed in her mouth by a kind of Tiqqun Soferim, a reflexive correction of Hannah’s request by a scribe who (perhaps) misunderstood it and (certainly) found it uncomfortable. Two comparable examples in the MT come instantly to mind.

The first is Deut 32:8, “When the Most High separated the peoples and gave the sons of Adam their territories, he fixed the boundaries of people in proportion to the number of the Israelites.” It has long been understood that the expression “the Israelites” (בראשית לְאָדָם) is a scribal revision of an earlier phrase, “the divine beings” (בראשית נְאָדָם). The second example, just a few pages along from our verse, is 1 Sam 3:13, where the punishment of Eli’s family is predicated on the fact that “his sons cursed to them [לְאָדָם] and he did not rebuke them.” Here too the awkward,

5 IBHS 33.2.1c (550); Amit, “‘Am I Not More Devoted,’” 68 n. 2.

6 On this sort of “divine intervention” within the ordinary course of conception and birth as a ‘natural miracle,” see Uriel Simon, Reading Prophetic Narratives (trans. Lenn J. Schramm; Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 279 n. 56.

7 For detailed discussion, see Jeffrey Tigay, Deuteronomy: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation (JPS Torah Commentary 5; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 302–3 and 513–15.
even ungrammatical idiom of cursing "to" someone, found nowhere else in the bib-
lical text, is an artifact of scribal correction. What the text originally said was that
Eli’s sons had cursed "God" (אלד).8
I have found no textual remnants of such an original reading in our verse;
4QSam6, tantalizingly, has only the final ה of the word. But the difficulties of the phrase
 Assertions disappear if Hannah, too, was seeking— not a child who
would be a god, but a child given to her, through a “natural miracle,” by the
God of Israel. Eli appropriately replies to her, נא אלד והלב (v. 17). He
clearly intends a pious wish, "May the God of Israel grant your request.” But the
author knows that we readers will realize that Eli’s utterance, unwittingly, is
prophetic, perhaps even performative: "The God of Israel will grant your request."9
Such divine intervention was indeed appropriate for the birth of the hero that
Hannah’s son was destined to become. Moreover, it would read quite naturally in
the folktale genre to which the original version of this story belonged—or which,
at least, the story is mimicking.10 At some later stage, a tradent overread Hannah’s
request, (perhaps) misinterpreted it, and corrected it out of existence, leaving us
with the absurd phrase נא אלד. Such verses as Gen 32:29; Judg 9:9, 13; and Isa
7:13 contrast אלד with אלד in a way that shows how natural such a change
would be from a scribal perspective.
It has long been understood that this chapter’s thematic use of the verb נא
points to Saul, not Samuel, as the child whom Hannah is to bear.11 From a folktale
perspective, the miraculous birth of a future king would seem to suggest that both
Hannah’s original request and that put in her mouth by the emendation (as later
interpreted) were fulfilled.

8 See the discussion in, e.g., P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., I Samuel: A New Translation with Intro-
duction, Notes, and Commentary (AB 8; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 96. This example is
noted in Mek. Beshalach 6 to Exod 15:7, “the oldest list” of such corrections; for fuller discussion,
see Michael Fishbane, Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel (New York: Oxford University Press,
1985), 66–77. (Fishbane does not discuss 1 Sam 1:11 in this context; his remark on p. 186 that
“Samuel was not the first fruit of [Hannah’s] womb” is puzzling.) 1 Samuel 1:11 is not in the lists
of tiqqunei soferim in W. E. Barnes, “Ancient Corrections in the Text of the Old Testament (Tikkun
Sopherim),” JTS 1 (1900): 387–414; or Carmel McCarthy, The Tiqqune Sopherim: and the Other

9 Putting the subject first eliminated the need to attach the conjunction to the verb, which
would have demanded either a converted perfect or י + jussive, making the desired ambiguity
impossible.

10 Our story’s beginning. “There once was a man” (1 Sam 1:1), in contrast to Josh 1:1; Judg
1:1; and 2 Sam 1:1, is clearly a folktale beginning. See Michael Carasik, “Three Biblical Begin-
nings,” in Beginning/Again: Toward a Hermeneutics of Jewish Texts (ed. Aryeh Cohen and Shaul
Magid; New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2002), 1–22, here 10. In Stith Thompson’s categorization of
folktales, this sort of story would fall under theme T540, “Miraculous birth”; the §40 number
puts it in the 500–559 category of “Supernatural Helpers” (Thompson, The Folktale [New York:
Dryden Press, 1946], 499, 483; see further 86 and 340).