

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: April 1st:

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Samuel 2:110: Hannah's Song

This is a useful example of the issue of how to handle Bible texts. On one approach, this is recorded in the Bible as Hannah's Song: so it must be a record of what Hannah sang: either recorded at the time or revealed later to the writer. The more convincing (?) approach is that (a) the books of Samuel were clearly put together long after the events described; (b) it is wildly unlikely that a shorthand writer was there to record exactly what was said a century or more before the writing down; (c) much of the song/psalm has little to do with Hannah, and is the song of a king to whom God has given victory – there were no kings in Israel in Hannah's time, and her son Samuel fought hard to avoid Israel having kings!; (d) Bible validity is about the truth of the message, not about the actual words used. Although Hannah was probably a real person, there is as little likelihood of her precise words having been recorded as the words of Eve.

There are a number of background points which might be useful. Hannah's husband had two wives. The other wife had become a mother, and the "barren" Hannah was going to feel the loser even if her "rival" didn't say anything to exacerbate the jealousy. In the culture of that time, having children (especially sons) was the only way to guarantee support in old age, and the only way to ensure "immortality" – no real belief in life after death. The name Samuel means something like "name of God", but the Hebrew word sounds a bit like the Hebrew for "ask": so Samuel is God's answer to Hannah's prayer.

The original Hebrew talks of "your" victory, not "my" victory: in other words, the king in the original psalm that the writer slotted in here is acknowledging that his victory was God's victory. The earth set on pillars reflects the Hebrew view of the world being created on pillars in a turbulent sea. (God gave the Bible writers the valid vision of a world dependent on God, not the scientific detail of what the universe is like.)

The theme of lifting up the under-dog and lifting down the mighty is mirrored in Mary's song. The theme has an interesting history. In Egypt, the Hebrews were very much the under-dogs, and the Egyptian Pharaoh and his court the top people. That thought of the Hebrews themselves being the under-dogs was carried into the later texts, including Hannah's song. (Just as a footnote, Joseph's reforms of the Egyptian economy, as the Bible describes them, meant that the Egyptian people themselves (other than the top people) were also serfs, with the Pharaoh owning all the land.) But God reminded the Hebrew people of their history in order to encourage them to look after both their own under-dogs and the alien widows, orphans, etc. All this has been very naturally seized upon by those emphasising Christian responsibility for those who can't necessarily fight their own battles successfully. For example in South America. At the same time, the church hierarchy in South America and elsewhere has tended to be tied in with the top people. So we have the Church standing with the mighty AND the Church standing with the lowly!

It can be quite hard to get the balance right, as Pope Francis has found to his cost. How can the Church (how can we) side with the poor and disadvantaged, but not reject the well educated folk with good jobs and good incomes and high status? After all, if we did replace the mighty with the under-dogs, the under-dogs them become the mighty! Sometimes the nouveaux riches are even more of a pain in the neck than the former aristocracy.