

1 SAMUEL

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SERIES PREFACE

Near the beginning of his treatise against Gnostic interpretations of the Bible, *Against the Heresies*, Irenaeus observes that Scripture is like a great mosaic depicting a handsome king. It is as if we were owners of a villa in Gaul who had ordered a mosaic from Rome. It arrives, and the beautifully colored tiles need to be taken out of their packaging and put into proper order according to the plan of the artist. The difficulty, of course, is that Scripture provides us with the individual pieces, but the order and sequence of various elements are not obvious. The Bible does not come with instructions that would allow interpreters to simply place verses, episodes, images, and parables in order as a worker might follow a schematic drawing in assembling the pieces to depict the handsome king. The mosaic must be puzzled out. This is precisely the work of scriptural interpretation.

Origen has his own image to express the difficulty of working out the proper approach to reading the Bible. When preparing to offer a commentary on the Psalms he tells of a tradition handed down to him by his Hebrew teacher:

The Hebrew said that the whole divinely inspired Scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in our house. By each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open. We therefore know the Scriptures that are obscure only by taking the points of departure for understanding them from another place because they have their interpretive principle scattered among them.¹

1. Fragment from the preface to *Commentary on Psalms 1–25*, preserved in the *Philokalia* (trans. Joseph W. Trigg; London: Routledge, 1998), 70–71.

As is the case for Irenaeus, scriptural interpretation is not purely local. The key in Genesis may best fit the door of Isaiah, which in turn opens up the meaning of Matthew. The mosaic must be put together with an eye toward the overall plan.

Irenaeus, Origen, and the great cloud of premodern biblical interpreters assumed that puzzling out the mosaic of Scripture must be a communal project. The Bible is vast, heterogeneous, full of confusing passages and obscure words, and difficult to understand. Only a fool would imagine that he or she could work out solutions alone. The way forward must rely upon a tradition of reading that Irenaeus reports has been passed on as the rule or canon of truth that functions as a confession of faith. “Anyone,” he says, “who keeps unchangeable in himself the rule of truth received through baptism will recognize the names and sayings and parables of the scriptures.”² Modern scholars debate the content of the rule on which Irenaeus relies and commends, not the least because the terms and formulations Irenaeus himself uses shift and slide. Nonetheless, Irenaeus assumes that there is a body of apostolic doctrine sustained by a tradition of teaching in the church. This doctrine provides the clarifying principles that guide exegetical judgment toward a coherent overall reading of Scripture as a unified witness. Doctrine, then, is the schematic drawing that will allow the reader to organize the vast heterogeneity of the words, images, and stories of the Bible into a readable, coherent whole. It is the rule that guides us toward the proper matching of keys to doors.

If self-consciousness about the role of history in shaping human consciousness makes modern historical-critical study critical, then what makes modern study of the Bible modern is the consensus that classical Christian doctrine distorts interpretive understanding. Benjamin Jowett, the influential nineteenth-century English classical scholar, is representative. In his programmatic essay “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” he exhorts the biblical reader to disengage from doctrine and break its hold over the interpretive imagination. “The simple words of that book,” writes Jowett of the modern reader, “he tries to preserve absolutely pure from the refinements or distinctions of later times.” The modern interpreter wishes to “clear away the remains of dogmas, systems, controversies, which are encrusted upon” the words of Scripture. The disciplines of close philological analysis “would enable us to separate the elements of doctrine and tradition with which the meaning of Scripture is encumbered in our own day.”³ The lens of understanding must be wiped clear of the hazy and distorting film of doctrine.

Postmodernity, in turn, has encouraged us to criticize the critics. Jowett imagined that when he wiped away doctrine he would encounter the biblical text in its purity and uncover what he called “the original spirit and intention of the authors.”⁴ We are not now so sanguine, and the postmodern mind thinks

2. *Against the Heretics* 9.4.

3. Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), 338–39.

4. *Ibid.*, 340.

interpretive frameworks inevitable. Nonetheless, we tend to remain modern in at least one sense. We read Athanasius and think him stage-managing the diversity of Scripture to support his positions against the Arians. We read Bernard of Clairvaux and assume that his monastic ideals structure his reading of the Song of Songs. In the wake of the Reformation, we can see how the doctrinal divisions of the time shaped biblical interpretation. Luther famously described the Epistle of James as a “strawy letter,” for, as he said, “it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.”⁵ In these and many other instances, often written in the heat of ecclesiastical controversy or out of the passion of ascetic commitment, we tend to think Jowett correct: doctrine is a distorting film on the lens of understanding.

However, is what we commonly think actually the case? Are readers naturally perceptive? Do we have an unblemished, reliable aptitude for the divine? Have we no need for disciplines of vision? Do our attention and judgment need to be trained, especially as we seek to read Scripture as the living word of God? According to Augustine, we all struggle to journey toward God, who is our rest and peace. Yet our vision is darkened and the fetters of worldly habit corrupt our judgment. We need training and instruction in order to cleanse our minds so that we might find our way toward God.⁶ To this end, “the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine Providence for our salvation.”⁷ The covenant with Israel, the coming of Christ, the gathering of the nations into the church—all these things are gathered up into the rule of faith, and they guide the vision and form of the soul toward the end of fellowship with God. In Augustine’s view, the reading of Scripture both contributes to and benefits from this divine pedagogy. With countless variations in both exegetical conclusions and theological frameworks, the same pedagogy of a doctrinally ruled reading of Scripture characterizes the broad sweep of the Christian tradition from Gregory the Great through Bernard and Bonaventure, continuing across Reformation differences in both John Calvin and Cornelius Lapide, Patrick Henry and Bishop Bossuet, and on to more recent figures such as Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Is doctrine, then, not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the Bible, but instead a clarifying agent, an enduring tradition of theological judgments that amplifies the living voice of Scripture? And what of the scholarly dispassion advocated by Jowett? Is a noncommitted reading, an interpretation unprejudiced, the way toward objectivity, or does it simply invite the languid intellectual apathy that stands aside to make room for the false truism and easy answers of the age?

This series of biblical commentaries was born out of the conviction that dogma clarifies rather than obscures. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible advances upon the assumption that the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and

5. *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35 (ed. E. Theodore Bachmann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 362.

6. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.10.

7. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.35.

controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian Scripture. God the Father Almighty, who sends his only begotten Son to die for us and for our salvation and who raises the crucified Son in the power of the Holy Spirit so that the baptized may be joined in one body—faith in *this* God with *this* vocation of love for the world is the lens through which to view the heterogeneity and particularity of the biblical texts. Doctrine, then, is not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the meaning of the Bible. It is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds fogged by self-deceptions, a challenge to our languid intellectual apathy that will too often rest in false truisms and the easy spiritual nostrums of the present age rather than search more deeply and widely for the dispersed keys to the many doors of Scripture.

For this reason, the commentators in this series have not been chosen because of their historical or philological expertise. In the main, they are not biblical scholars in the conventional, modern sense of the term. Instead, the commentators were chosen because of their knowledge of and expertise in using the Christian doctrinal tradition. They are qualified by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits, for it is the conceit of this series of biblical commentaries that theological training in the Nicene tradition prepares one for biblical interpretation, and thus it is to theologians and not biblical scholars that we have turned. “War is too important,” it has been said, “to leave to the generals.”

We do hope, however, that readers do not draw the wrong impression. The Nicene tradition does not provide a set formula for the solution of exegetical problems. The great tradition of Christian doctrine was not transcribed, bound in folio, and issued in an official, critical edition. We have the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, used for centuries in many traditions of Christian worship. We have ancient baptismal affirmations of faith. The Chalcedonian definition and the creeds and canons of other church councils have their places in official church documents. Yet the rule of faith cannot be limited to a specific set of words, sentences, and creeds. It is instead a pervasive habit of thought, the animating culture of the church in its intellectual aspect. As Augustine observed, commenting on Jeremiah 31:33, “The creed is learned by listening; it is written, not on stone tablets nor on any material, but on the heart.”⁸ This is why Irenaeus is able to appeal to the rule of faith more than a century before the first ecumenical council, and this is why we need not itemize the contents of the Nicene tradition in order to appeal to its potency and role in the work of interpretation.

Because doctrine is intrinsically fluid on the margins and most powerful as a habit of mind rather than a list of propositions, this commentary series cannot settle difficult questions of method and content at the outset. The editors of the series impose no particular method of doctrinal interpretation. We cannot say in advance how doctrine helps the Christian reader assemble the mosaic of Scripture. We have no clear answer to the question of whether exegesis guided by

8. *Sermon* 212.2.

doctrine is antithetical to or compatible with the now-old modern methods of historical-critical inquiry. Truth—historical, mathematical, or doctrinal—knows no contradiction. But method is a discipline of vision and judgment, and we cannot know in advance what aspects of historical-critical inquiry are functions of modernism that shape the soul to be at odds with Christian discipline. Still further, the editors do not hold the commentators to any particular hermeneutical theory that specifies how to define the plain sense of Scripture—or the role this plain sense should play in interpretation. Here the commentary series is tentative and exploratory.

Can we proceed in any other way? European and North American intellectual culture has been de-Christianized. The effect has not been a cessation of Christian activity. Theological work continues. Sermons are preached. Biblical scholars turn out monographs. Church leaders have meetings. But each dimension of a formerly unified Christian practice now tends to function independently. It is as if a weakened army had been fragmented, and various corps had retreated to isolated fortresses in order to survive. Theology has lost its competence in exegesis. Scripture scholars function with minimal theological training. Each decade finds new theories of preaching to cover the nakedness of seminary training that provides theology without exegesis and exegesis without theology.

Not the least of the causes of the fragmentation of Christian intellectual practice has been the divisions of the church. Since the Reformation, the role of the rule of faith in interpretation has been obscured by polemics and counterpolemics about *sola scriptura* and the necessity of a magisterial teaching authority. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series is deliberately ecumenical in scope, because the editors are convinced that early church fathers were correct: church doctrine does not compete with Scripture in a limited economy of epistemic authority. We wish to encourage unashamedly dogmatic interpretation of Scripture, confident that the concrete consequences of such a reading will cast far more light on the great divisive questions of the Reformation than either reengaging in old theological polemics or chasing the fantasy of a pure exegesis that will somehow adjudicate between competing theological positions. You shall know the truth of doctrine by its interpretive fruits, and therefore in hopes of contributing to the unity of the church, we have deliberately chosen a wide range of theologians whose commitment to doctrine will allow readers to see real interpretive consequences rather than the shadow boxing of theological concepts.

Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible has no dog in the current translation fights, and we endorse a textual ecumenism that parallels our diversity of ecclesial backgrounds. We do not impose the thankfully modest inclusive-language agenda of the New Revised Standard Version, nor do we insist upon the glories of the Authorized Version, nor do we require our commentators to create a new translation. In our communal worship, in our private devotions, in our theological scholarship, we use a range of scriptural translations. Precisely as Scripture—a living, functioning text in the present life of faith—the Bible is not semantically

fixed. Only a modernist, literalist hermeneutic could imagine that this modest fluidity is a liability. Philological precision and stability is a consequence of, not a basis for, exegesis. Judgments about the meaning of a text fix its literal sense, not the other way around. As a result, readers should expect an eclectic use of biblical translations, both across the different volumes of the series and within individual commentaries.

We cannot speak for contemporary biblical scholars, but as theologians we know that we have long been trained to defend our fortresses of theological concepts and formulations. And we have forgotten the skills of interpretation. Like stroke victims, we must rehabilitate our exegetical imaginations, and there are likely to be different strategies of recovery. Readers should expect this reconstructive—not reactionary—series to provide them with experiments in postcritical doctrinal interpretation, not commentaries written according to the settled principles of a well-functioning tradition. Some commentators will follow classical typological and allegorical readings from the premodern tradition; others will draw on contemporary historical study. Some will comment verse by verse; others will highlight passages, even single words that trigger theological analysis of Scripture. No reading strategies are proscribed, no interpretive methods foresworn. The central premise in this commentary series is that doctrine provides structure and cogency to scriptural interpretation. We trust in this premise with the hope that the Nicene tradition can guide us, however imperfectly, diversely, and haltingly, toward a reading of Scripture in which the right keys open the right doors.

R. R. Reno

INTRODUCTION

First and Second Samuel were originally a single book. It was cut in twain by the exigencies of scroll length when it was translated into Greek, for the Septuagint. Chronicles, written perhaps around 400 BC, calls 1–2 Samuel and 1–2 Kings “the book of the kings of Israel and Judah” (2 Chr. 35:27) (Toorn 2007: 33). In the Septuagint, 1–2 Samuel and 1–2 Kings are treated as a single four-part treatise called *Biblia Basileion* (“The Books of Kingdoms”). Samuel is the first half of the “Book of Reigns,” and Kings the second.¹ Since Samuel and Kings were each divided in half, the group was termed 1–4 Regnorum (“Kingdoms” or “Reigns”). The historical writings, or “Former Prophets”—Judges, Ruth, Samuel, and Kings—are arranged in Greek Bibles as a long continuum. Septuagintal differences from the Hebrew text of the Old Testament are especially prominent in Judges, Samuel, and Kings.² Pre-Vulgate, Old Latin translations of this writing call it *Regnorum* (“Kingdoms”) and preserve the four-part division. The church fathers down to Augustine often depend on one of the Greek versions of 1 Samuel or on an Old Latin translation from these Greek texts, containing phrases that are otherwise unknown to us. Those who rendered the treatise into Latin often selected the Greek renditions over the Hebrew, in what becomes the normal text of scripture of the Middle Ages. When Jerome created the Latin Vulgate Bible, he retained the Greek division of 1 Samuel–2 Kings into four books, but changed the title to Regum. Hence, the medievals call 1 Samuel by the name 1 Regum, which creates confusion when this book is referred to as 1 Kings. The Hebrew text of 1 Samuel–2 Kings was first divided in four in the 1516–17 Bomberg edition of the Masoretic Text. This edition named the books 1–2 Samuel and 1–2 Kings. Protestant exegetes adopted this nomenclature, followed eventually by Roman

1. Jennifer M. Dines, *The Septuagint* (London: Clark, 2004), 12.

2. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

Catholics. Even before that, some Vulgate copies had 1–2 Samuelis: since the Hebrew edition was definitive for them, Protestants selected this title.

We are only beginning to realize now how much the historical and textual exegesis of the Bible that began in the seventeenth century is dependent on the material circumstances of book production in that era and the images of “editors,” “correct editions,” and “authors” upon which it focused scholarly attention. Van Seters argues that “the early modern practice of publishing ancient texts and the development of the book trade and of printing changed the way in which ‘editing’ was understood. It is in the critical reproduction of the classics and sacred texts that the one responsible for producing a text for public reading, an *edition*, became an *editor* distinct from the author himself.” Since in antiquity, Van Seters says, “editing” meant “putting on a public performance,” “the specialization of the verb ‘to edit,’ its product, ‘edition,’ and the one producing an edition, the ‘editor’ . . . should not be anachronistically read back into antiquity” (2006: 18, 14, emphasis original). That means that the idea of 1 Samuel as a compilation issuing from the scholarly editing of earlier archival documents is anachronistic. Rather than thinking of 1 Samuel as the effect of the kind of editorial oversight of which the Bomberg edition of the Hebrew Bible is an example, we should, Van Seters argues, conceive it as the deliberate product of an author. Toorn goes further in his quest to excise “anachronism” from our perception of the Old Testament. Claiming that thinking of the scriptures as books written by single authors does not make sense, he worries that “generations of Bible students have been raised on the notion that the books of the Bible should be read and interpreted *e mente auctoris*. The *e mente auctoris* maxim was first formulated in the seventeenth century.” But “the notion of the author that it implies” is, he says, “an invention of the early modern era.” Rather, Toorn believes, we should imagine the Bible as the work of collections of scribes. The author would then be, not so much a “romantic,” individual artist, but “a craftsman” and “the individuality of the author . . . is . . . reflected in . . . the skill to perfect conventional forms.” None of the Regum texts name its author: “If the author is a representative of the scribal craft, anonymity is a fitting phenomenon. To us, . . . only those who write for a firm or an advertising agency, as a clerk or copy writer, write anonymously. This modern practice . . . matches the process of producing texts in antiquity” (2007: 29, 27, 47). When one of the scriptwriters on *Kings*, a television series dramatizing the story of 1–2 Regum in modern dress, read Toorn’s book, he thought his idea of the “scribal studio” matched the collective craftsmanship involved in producing film scripts. It helped us to recognize once again the material culture behind the composition of the Bible when it reappeared among us once more.

We recognized it again, and this time articulately, for the medievals realized that its oral tradition mattered to the Bible. Toorn claims that a theological paradigm shift occurred when the Bible was first written down by the scribes. Before the Bible was written down, the source of religious authority was the human expert who passed on the oral tradition, whereas once it became a written text “revelation

denotes a product rather than an interaction.” In the oral tradition, the individual human act of communing with the deity was the anchor of theological authority. With the coming of the Bible as a book, those individuals, who had taken “their legitimacy from the revelation they possessed in person,” had to refer and defer to “the sum of knowledge laid down in a body of texts” (2007: 206–7). Both Orthodox Judaism and Orthodox and Catholic Christianity have sought to preserve the event or act quality of revelation, and its anchorage in persons as well as in texts, by their commitment to revelation in oral as well as written tradition.

Medieval cathedrals, built by teams of craftsmen, were overseen by master builders, and some, like Saint Denis in Paris, owe their integrated esthetic conception to a single individual, like Abbot Suger. The best television series have as their executive director a mastermind, like David Simon. The director gives the series an overall moral vision. Commitment to a traditional, theological reading of 1 Samuel has the advantage that the Judeo-Christian imagination senses the significance of the moral personality, as the creative author of great historical events and artifacts. This is because the figure of the prophet looms large within it. Augustine gave a cue to this way of imagining when he conceived Regum not only as a history of the Israelite monarchy, but also as a prophecy of the kingdom of God. We will term the anonymous script writer of 1 Samuel its “author” because the term retains the shadow of the prophet and his mantle.

A prophetic interpretation of 1 Samuel is in line with the traditional understanding of its authorship, for it’s not quite true that the romantics first found the idea of its individual authorship significant. The Talmud assigns the whole of 1 Regum to the prophet Samuel. This takes something of a leap of faith, since Samuel dies in 25:1, but Gregory the Great is said to have taken wing, claiming that 1 Sam. 25–31 is literally prophetic. Others keep their feet on the ground and note that the parallel history in Chronicles has something to say on the matter: “As for the events of King David’s reign, from beginning to end, they are written in the records of Samuel the seer, the records of Nathan the prophet and the records of Gad the seer, together with the details of his reign and power, and the circumstances that surrounded him and Israel and the kingdoms of all the other lands” (1 Chr. 29:29–30 NIV). Until the early nineteenth century, most readers assumed that Samuel wrote 1 Sam. 1–24 and that Nathan and Gad wrote 1 Sam. 25–31 and 2 Samuel. So they recognized 1–2 Regum as both prophetic and the integrated work that only a mastermind can produce.

One scholar complains that the Vulgate created by Jerome “was primarily a liturgic and literary work and not meant to be a literal or scientific translation” of the biblical Hebrew.³ The Christian Bible is not a Bible of autonomous scholars, but of the deposit of scholarship and worship that is the tradition of the church. Because the Christian’s original means of encountering the Old Testament is public worship, the Vulgate and its vernacular successors are primarily liturgical

3. Avrom Saltman, ed., *Pseudo-Jerome: Questions on the Book of Samuel* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 8.

documents. The author of 1 Samuel was not only an independent historian, but also a writer who put his historical gifts at the service of the church. Independent but not autonomous, he wrote as one responsible for a religious community. His task was more like that of a bishop writing a pastoral letter or like that of a prophet, than that of a scholarly historian. For an individual scholar, history is a piece of the past about which he writes, perhaps imposing a philosophy of history upon it. For a people, on the other hand, “history is the remembered past,” the past as it belongs to us.⁴ One overdramatizes the contrast if one says that the author of 1 Regum was a liturgist not a historian: and yet, there is something in it, since our “prophet” was sowing the seeds of a communal memory.

⁴ John Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness; or, The Remembered Past*, new ed. (New York: Schocken, 1985), 152.

SERIES ONE

GRACE AND NATURE

1 Samuel 1–3

Israel first enters history not as a place but as a people. It is pictured alongside Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yanoam on a late-thirteenth-century BC Egyptian stele as one of four entities defeated in battle by Pharaoh Merneptah. While the other three are depicted as hilltop cities, the image for Israel is “open country.” The Merneptah Stele indicates that in the Late Bronze Age Israel signified a people, not a specific territory with a capital city. Capital cities are the seats of kings. Israel had none (Hackett 1998: 196).

“Jacob and Sons,” from *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, presents the biblical idea of Israel as a collection of tribes, each named after one of Joseph’s sons (Gen. 29–30). Historians draw on anthropological models from other tribal societies to interpret the cultural and political implications of Israel’s tribalism. A tribal society differs from a centralized political system in that each tribe is politically independent. The tribes of Israel were perceived by observers like Egypt’s Pharaoh Merneptah as a unitary entity, perhaps even a confederacy,¹ without having a unitary political center of authority. Sahlin’s classical anthropological study shows that a tribal society differs from a political culture by having no “sovereign governing authority”: a tribal society is not equivalent to a territory. This is what we see in the Merneptah Stele. Just as the development from a tribal

1. The question of whether a confederacy or a tribal league existed in premonarchic Israel is an old chestnut that has yet to be cracked. For sane observations on the matter, see Halpern 1981: 177–82.

to a political society in France can be epitomized as “from the Merovingian ‘king of the Franks’ to the Capetian ‘king of France,’” so Israel evolves from Samuel as leader of the Israelites to David as king of Israel (1968: vii–viii, 6). This is what happens in 1–2 Samuel.

Although one can speak metaphorically of “tribal politics” in the same way that one refers to “office politics,” tribes are literally prepolitical, because their mechanisms for providing social order are nonpolitical institutions like the moral authority of heads of families. First Samuel is the historical and spiritual drama of a transition from a prepolitical to a political world. Because its focus is families that are as yet nested in a tribal culture, the patriarchal world of the premonarchic Old Testament still feels of “immediate relevance” to “new Christian societies, above all in Africa.” According to sociologist Philip Jenkins, because the “first books of the Bible show us a world based on patriarchal clans that practice polygamy,” they make such good sense in the global south that African Christianity has developed “beliefs and practices that look Jewish rather than Christian” to modern Western Christians.² First Samuel is about the development, under God’s providence, of a tribal brotherhood into a state. It is a work of political theology. A Christian political theology is not a compromise between the tribal and the political. “Behold, I make all things new,” says Christ in Rev. 21:15: the tribes of humanity come into their own in the city of God, because they are made new by Christ.

The culture depicted in Judges and 1 Samuel was what anthropologists call a “segmentary tribal society.” In such a society, ties of political and social allegiance are to close kinship groups. In a segmentary, as opposed to a unilinear, tribal society, kinship lineages include horizontal networks of brothers, as well as vertical lines of descent from father to son. The cultural foci of Israel’s segmentary tribal society were domestic groups. Most legal and moral arbitration took place within the family: “the nuclear family, the extended family (Hebrew *bet ab*), the clan (Hebrew *mishpaha*), and the tribe (Hebrew *shebet* or *matteh*).” When they come under threat, “segmentary societies tend to rely on charismatic leaders” like the “nonpermanent, ad hoc leaders” in the book of Judges (Hackett 1998: 191, 195–97). Within a segmentary tribal society, the clan is the elemental group and understood as a “descent unit,” welded together by ties of “patrilineal or matrilineal descent.” Because the society’s ethical and legal governance was kin based, authority was transmitted from father to son. The economics, politics, and religion of segmentary tribal culture “are not conducted by different institutions specially designed for the purpose, but coincidentally by the same kinship and local groups: the lineage and clan segments of the tribe, the households and villages” (Sahlins 1968: 23, viii). This is the world of Judges and 1 Samuel.

The Israelite leaders we see in the book of Judges are people who took charge during military emergencies. The charisma of some earned them an enduring,

2. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 131.

though local, role, as arbitrators of the law. But this was sporadic: the judges were military heroes first and foremost, and only secondarily were they “administrative or governing leaders as well” (Hackett 1998: 178). Othniel, Gideon, Deborah, Samson, and Jephthah were fighting judge-prophets. They were given the Spirit of the Lord to defend the people’s place in the land. In Judg. 11 Jephthah is offered military chieftainship by the Gileadite elders on the pragmatic condition of defeating the Ammonites: “The exercise of civil authority depended upon success in the field.” In peacetime, a few of Israel’s judges arbitrated justice at a local level. The judge operated in tandem with the village elders. In Ruth 4:4 Boaz requires “the presence of the elders of my people” (NIV) to initiate the legal procedure by which he buys Ruth’s lands and marries her. The author of Ruth follows the legal etiquette set out in Deut. 25:5–10 and probably captures “the actual functioning of the assembly in local jurisprudence.” Such local gatherings of “the people” consisted of representative elders, the fathers at the head of each family (Halpern 1981: 113, 199). As was natural in a household-based culture, many expected that the office of judge could be passed from father to son. So too, the various branches of the Levite priesthood, as with Eli’s family at Shiloh, passed the “clerical collar” from father to son.

The first four chapters of 1 Samuel are set in Shiloh. The twelfth and eleventh centuries BC were a time of “vastly increased settlement in the northern hill country (around Shechem and Shiloh), with an increase also in the southern hills,” around Hebron. The household-based colonies in which these tribal peoples lived were “small, usually unfortified agricultural-pastoral villages. The regions of intensive settlement expanded throughout the premonarchic era” (Hackett 1998: 193). Population growth led Israel beyond a segmentary tribal society to a centralized state.

First Samuel takes up the story from Judges and Ruth. Israel is on the threshold, between semiheditary, semicharismatic acephalous leadership and a centralized state with a hereditary monarchy. As in Judges, a central question is who will represent Israel in its military struggle, who will maintain the law, who will judge Israel? The political interest is focused not on the construction of the centralized state itself, but on the persons who bring it about: Samuel, a judge-prophet; Saul, the first designated to judge or rule Israel as “king”; and David. Saul never achieves what we would recognize as the political level of kingship. As described in 1 Samuel, Saul represents a first step toward political government, the “big man.” The big man is still an essentially tribal figure, and thus Saul’s social, affective, and religious world is prepolitical. Government by big men is often a prelude to chieftainship. David is what social anthropologists call a chieftain. He crosses the threshold into politics proper. The historical and cultural differences between Saul and David set the context for the varied theological judgments made upon them.

The book begins with a childless woman in a tribal society, in which contempt is heaped on women who do not deliver population growth. The first role that it addresses is motherhood. In Israel’s polygamous society, Hannah is one

of Elkanah's two wives, the barren one. Because nature has not taken its course in her marriage to Elkanah, Hannah asks God for a son. Antiochene theologian Saint John Chrysostom contrasts her tiny request with more worldly demands: politically ambitious men who are "suing and grasping for a kingdom" should be "ashamed" to remember Hannah, "praying and weeping for a little child" (*Homilies on Ephesians* 24, in Franke 2005: 196). Literary critics of the Hebrew Bible have taught us to see the barren woman's request for fertility as a "type scene," a model story that is repeated across scripture, so that when we meet a barren woman, we can expect that pretty soon she will be mother to a hero-child (Alter 1981: 51). Ancient Christian commentators found theological types in scripture. Here the type of the barren-woman-turned-mother represents the theological truth that God assigns spiritual gifts. Hannah's pregnancy is not strictly miraculous, since she is not evidently incapable of childbearing, not too old like Sarah, for instance. Hannah's fertility is not miraculous but providential, the hand of God working unseen within nature and history. For Chrysostom, the moral of the story is patience and providence: "Let us not take this" story "with a grain of salt," he says, but "even" when some "disaster" seems "insupportable to us, let us . . . wait on God's providence" (2003: 74–75). This typical episode sets the history that 1 Samuel recounts rolling because the book is about God's providential dealing out of roles.

On the family's annual pilgrimage to Shiloh, Hannah makes a bargain: if the Lord gives her a son, she will give him back, dedicating him to God. Hannah meets the terms of her prayer: as soon as he is "weaned," Samuel is handed over to Eli, priest of the temple at Shiloh. First Sam. 2 shows the failure of the hereditary priesthood: the adopted son, Samuel, is a worthier successor to Eli than his own sons. An oracle of doom is delivered against Eli's dynasty. In 1 Sam. 3, in a classic "prophetic call narrative," Samuel is given the word of the Lord for Eli's house. Samuel will not be one more Shiloh priest. His role in the emergence of Israel's monarchy is to be the word bearer of the Lord, Israel's true judge.

In this period, Israelite religiosity was not monotheistic. Israel's empirical religion was syncretistic, offering worship to both Yahweh and Asherah (Dever 2002: 186). Sometimes pictured as Yahweh's consort, Asherah was a fertility goddess. In 1 Sam. 1 Elkanah's earth-mother/wife Peninnah taunts Hannah for her childlessness. The popular religion with which the author was familiar, the "religion of hearth and home" that "fell mainly to women in Israel" (Dever 2002: 193–94), dealt with conception, childbirth, and lactation: the key elements of this female popular religion included rituals for childbirth, sacred *marzeah* feasts, pilgrimages, saints days, baking cakes for Asherah the "Queen of Heaven" to ensure fertility.

The scene of Hannah's annual humiliation is a pilgrimage to Shiloh in which—here the text becomes unclear—Hannah seems to be given a smaller portion of the sacrificial offering because "the LORD had shut up her womb." Diggings at Israelite settlements have turned up several thousand pottery female figures, little Peninnahs, with classic "Elizabeth Taylor" mammaries and childbearing hips. These

were offerings or “invocations to Asherah,” which archeologist Ziony Zevit calls “prayers in clay.” Hannah’s silent faith, in turning not to Asherah but to the LORD for the gift of a child, was isolated. The author intends this sketch of worship at Shiloh and Hannah’s prayer of thanksgiving, in which fertility is stripped from the earth-mothers and bursts from the barren, to show that childbearing, popularly conceived as the gift of “Asherah, the Great Lady herself” (cited in Dever 2002: 196, 193), is dealt out by Yahweh alone. Set in the context of a cult presided over by a priestly family that has outlived its fruitfulness, the birth of a prophet-son to the barren Hannah represents Yahwistic as against Asheristic fertility.

That the postexilic copyists of the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint translators don’t seem to know what to make of the rituals in these chapters may indicate that the author is describing folk practices that had died out within Diaspora Judaism, after 586 BC. One translation of the Hebrew of 1:5 says Elkanah “gave to Hannah a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb”—whereas the Septuagint reads: “And, although he loved Hannah, he would give Hannah only one portion, because the Lord had closed her womb.” Did custom dictate that an infertile woman was given more of the sacrificial meats or less of them? We do not know.

The earliest Christian commentary on 1 Samuel had no standard text on which to draw. The church of the first four centuries preferred Greek Septuagint texts of the Old Testament to the Hebrew Bible. Christian commentators drew from more than one Septuagint version, and sometimes they created their own translation. When Origen the Great preached on 1 Samuel in Jerusalem in the early 240s, the congregation heard one text read from the lectionary, while the Alexandrian scholar preached on a somewhat different text, adjusted against his own translation of the Hebrew text and the Septuagint. The text that Origen’s audience heard was the “common and familiar [version] that was regarded [as] the sacred text” by ordinary Christians, because that was the one they heard in church (Van Seters 2006: 85). Origen was the author of the Hexapla, a multicolumn compilation of two Hebrew and three Greek versions of the Old Testament. This scholar both regarded it as a necessity to get at the right reading of the original and appreciated that he had no authority to impose his academic findings on a familiar lectionary. Bishop Alexander had invited Origen to preach in Jerusalem. And yet, preaching on 1 Sam. 1–2, in front of the bishop of Jerusalem, Origen clearly “commented on a slightly different text” from the Septuagintal or *koine* version than the congregation had just heard, “corrected after the Hebrew or after other Greek translations of the Bible made by Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotus,” and “Bishop Alexander had no . . . objections” (Origen 1986: 68). No single rendition of the sacred text was sacred.

In his sermon the Alexandrian biblical scholar seems to allegorize the figures of Elkanah, Hannah, Peninnah, and Eli. Origen makes Hannah stand for grace, and Peninnah for conversion. Many still retain the impression that Origen inherited this allegorical reading of the Old Testament from the Jewish Platonist Philo.

Philo sought to make the Hebrew stories palatable to his Greek contemporaries by treating the historical figures, stories, and rituals of the Pentateuch as allegories for Platonic archetypes. For Philo, the scriptures are accidentally historically and essentially philosophical. The antiliteralist Philo was no philologist. But Origen, author of the Hexapla, was a text critic. If we picture Origen's exegesis as an inheritance from Philo's Platonizing, then his exhaustive, literal-minded work as a philologist and translator of the Hebrew Bible becomes inexplicable: why would someone whose exegetical principles replaced the letter with allegories go to such lengths to discern the precise meaning of the letter? For those who envisage Origen as a Christian epigone of Philo, his combination of text criticism and allegorical exegesis remains a circle that cannot be squared (Van Seters 2006: 93–94). In fact, it gives a false impression to describe Origen as a Platonizing or allegorizing exegete.

For Origen, “canon” in reference to the Old Testament did not mean a list of books but a way of interpreting scripture, that is, through Christ. “Canonical” meant a criterion by which to unlock scripture before it meant a criterion for inclusion in scripture—because reference to Christ was the criterion for inclusion. When Origen uses the “canon of faith” in relation to the Old Testament, it “does not function to decide which book is or is not suitable for inclusion, because the Hebrew Scriptures were long since inherited from Judaism as sacred. Instead, *canon* here functions as the mode or norm of interpretation” (Van Seters 2006: 359). Origen's preaching on 1 Samuel exhibits the canon of faith by being christological. Origen's rationale for including Hebrew texts within the Christian scripture and for interpreting them is not a rule of allegory, but the rule of Christ. The “one who is God the Word,” said Origen, “has the key of David’ (Rev. 3:7)”: “When the Word became flesh, he opened up with this key the scriptures which were closed before his coming.”³ For Origen, Hannah represents grace. What is Platonist about grace?

Episode One: Two Wives (1 Sam. 1:1–10)

When he preached on 1 Sam. 1–2 in 241, Origen evidently thought that the first question that would strike his audience was how come the “righteous Elkanah” was a polygamist (1986: 104). Someone who wished to take that literally and follow suit could use Elkanah as an example of an Old Testament saint who practices polygamy. Polygamy is still a live issue in some non-Western cultures. Living at a greater distance from the original situation of the text, the immediate object of modern Western readers' attention will be, not Elkanah's marital status, but the psychology of the situation. The situation evokes our emotional sympathy. We

3. Origen, *Scholia in Apocalypsen* 20, cited in Origen, *Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings*, ed. Hans Urs von Balthasar, trans. Robert J. Daly (Edinburgh: Clark, 1984), §130.

hear the voices of the different characters (Polzin 1989: 19). The modern reader hears Peninnah cruelly teasing Hannah for her childlessness, and Elkanah, stuck in the middle, treating Hannah as a childlike, daughter figure. In this vein, Peninnah is the stereotype of the catty woman, and Elkanah the stereotype of the father-husband. Far from spontaneously assuming, with Origen, that because Elkanah is in scripture, he must be a “righteous man,” we may wonder whether his question, “Am I not more to you than ten sons?” (1:8 NRSV), is not unimaginative and selfish. Elkanah becomes the stereotypical smug husband who believes that he is all the world to his wife.⁴

One problem with reading the story as a conflict of psychological stereotypes is that Westerners can easily slide into making their own psychology the criterion for understanding the story, substituting their affective reaction to Hannah’s humiliation and initiative for the scriptural text. In our identification with the heroine Hannah, we picture ourselves as the heroines of the story, initially crushed, but triumphing over our detractors by the end. In fact, though, the story does not use its voices to convey a drama of subjective psychology. The drama is about the role of motherhood, awarded as a consequence of single-minded dedication to God. Origen brings this out, when, following a Septuagint version, he comments that “whereas Peninnah is said to have many sons and to have received many ‘portions,’” Hannah, “because she is just one person, received ‘one single portion,’ and she weeps over her barrenness” (1986: 104). Origen supposes, that is, that each wife was given a portion of the sacrifice proportionate to the quantity needed to share with her offspring, and Hannah has none: her single portion marks her isolation. As we mentioned, 1:5 is difficult to translate: one Greek version, like the one Origen selected, renders this as a “single portion,” whereas the Masoretic Text (the Hebrew version from the sixteenth century) gives us an untranslatable phrase, which McCarter renders by the conjectural “a single portion equal to theirs”—on the basis that the equality of Hannah’s portion to Peninnah’s gives the second wife a psychological motive for taunting the first wife (jealousy).⁵ The question is whether to interpret and translate the text on the basis of the presumed psychology of the characters. In the polygamous societies of precolonial Africa, honor was not a psychological matter, but a socially objective value. Women granted honored status to those who produced children, because they “prided themselves most on fertility—the body of a childless Igbo woman might be mutilated before burial” (Iliffe 2005: 116).

Hannah was isolated because she was a nongenerative member of a tribal society, whose basic social and political unit was the family. The Elkanahs are going up to Shiloh “to sacrifice” (1:3): Israel’s main sanctuary had shifted from Shechem to Bethel and thence to Shiloh as a result of the internecine tribal warfare described

4. Gabriel Josipovici, *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 155; cf. Polzin 1989: 22–23.

5. P. Kyle McCarter Jr., *1 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 8 (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 51–52.

in Judges (Boling 1975: 184). Archeologists infer that premonarchic Israel was governed locally by dominant families from the biblical place names, such as Ramathaim-zophim (1:1), named after Ephraim and literally meaning “high Ephraim, hill of Ephraim.” Human religiosity is often political at heart: a tribal political situation favors worship of the goddess of human fertility. Where the dominance of families is at stake, one worships the deities of child production, the deities believed to enlarge the tribe.

And yet, it is not Asherah, but “the LORD,” we are twice told (1:5–6), who has “shut up her womb,” and it is only the LORD who can open it. What Hannah wants and achieves is not psychological closure but open converse with the one God. The heart of the drama in this episode is interior, within the heart that Hannah opens to God the life-giver. It is a secret meeting between Hannah and the LORD that the “omniscient narrator” (Polzin 1989: 19) of 1 Samuel is making public. In this encounter, Hannah is given the social role for which she asks from God.

The lector at Jerusalem read a story that began, “There was a man of Ramathaim-zophim, of Mount Ephraim.” Origen’s sermon sets aside this translation, preferring Aquila’s more literal Greek translation of the Hebrew: “It does not escape me,” Origen said, “that some copies have ‘There was a man,’ but other copies which seem to be more correct have ‘There was one man’—on which the Jews themselves, with whom we otherwise disagree, agree with us.” Origen picks this out because he wishes to expand on this apparent polygamist’s singleness. Very few people, he says, are really “one alone”: rather, each of us is a multiple personality. We shift from one mood and role to another, adopting different personas and scripts as the situation dictates: “Look at how the face of this man is sometimes irritated, sometimes struck down, but just a little later, joyous, then newly troubled and then softened, at one moment preoccupied with divine things and acts which lead to eternal life, and a second later throwing itself into projects of concupiscence or of worldly vanity: you see how this man . . . is not ‘one’ but appears to have in him as many personalities as he does behaviors, for, according to the scriptures . . . , ‘a fool is changed as the moon’ [Sir. 27:11]. . . . We who are still ‘foolish’ and imperfect cannot be called ‘one,’ since we always change in our opinions and in our desires as in our thoughts.” Because most of us have not traveled far on the narrow path to sanctity, our personal identity reduces to a shifting series of public faces and voices. Our sense of what our role should be is created by and for other people, who too have fluctuating personas. On the other hand,

when it comes to the righteous, not only can one say of each of them that he is “one,” but even that it is suitable to say of all of them together that they are “one.” . . . Scripture depicts them as having “a single heart and a single mind” [Acts 4:32]. . . . They have the “same feelings, the same thoughts” [1 Cor. 1:10], they venerate “one single God, confessing one single Lord Jesus Christ” [1 Cor. 8:6]. . . . The righteous is one who truly imitates “one single God” for . . . that is also what the prophet says, “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one God” [Deut. 6:4]. . . . God is proclaimed “one” . . . because he can never be other than himself, that is to say because he never

changes himself, he never changes to another thing, as David attests in saying of him, “But thou art always the selfsame, and thy years shall not fail” [Ps. 101:28]. This phrase has the same meaning: “I am the Lord your God and I do not change” [Mal. 3:6]. Likewise the righteous, the “imitator of God” [Eph. 5:1], made “to his image” [Gen. 1:27], is called “one” when he arrives at perfection, because he too . . . does not change but remains always one; for as long as someone remains in vice, he is shared out between multiple things, dispersed between diverse things, and from the fact that he is taken with many types of vices, he cannot be called one. (Origen 1986: 106–9)

The single-mindedness and isolation of Hannah expresses the oneness of the God she worships. Origen’s concern about Elkanah’s polygamy takes him to the nub of the matter: the text is about polytheism versus monotheism, that is, in effect, about whether God exists. Without God, there is no single identity or role for the human person. The most elemental issue for the evolution of a tribal society into a political culture is the ascription of uniquely valuable and independent personhood to the members of the society. It is not possible for a society to fully achieve and sustain this transition without faith in the unity of God. That is, it is not possible without the conception of God put forward in the Old and New Testaments. Politics and social anthropology are far from Origen’s mind in his exegesis of 1 Sam. 1, but he sees what is going on here.

We may still want to ask whether Elkanah’s authentic oneness or Hannah’s singleness of purpose knots 1:1–20 together. Why does the sermon give us an encomium of the male in the story, not of Hannah herself? Origen honors the husband rather than the wife with this virtue because, otherwise, Elkanah would be righteous merely because he is a heroically ascetic contemplator of the One. His sermon is marking what made Elkanah different from those philosophers who trained in the celibate disciplines of self-formation in which the Greek schools of Origen’s time excelled. For Alexandrian Stoics, Epicureans, and Neoplatonists philosophy was a matter of practicing spiritual exercises. Plotinus’s “writings are full of passages describing such spiritual exercises, the goal of which was not merely to *know* the good, but to *become identical with it*, in a complete annihilation of individuality.” For Porphyry, diligent rehearsal of such techniques carried the expert to the grand finale of the soul’s “conversion toward the Intellect and the One.” Such spiritual exercises intend to achieve “a return to the self, in which the self is liberated from the state of alienation into which it has been plunged by worries, passions, and desires. The ‘self’ liberated in this way is no longer merely our egoistic, passionate individuality: it is our *moral* person, open to universality and objectivity, and participating in universal nature or thought.”⁶ The Alexandrian seeker strove to create a role or identity for himself.

6. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 60, 100–101, 103.

If Origen had made Hannah represent oneness-with-the-One, he would have assimilated her spiritual ascent to Greek meditation practice. In modern terms, we might think of the analogy to moralistic therapeutic theism, the religion of many of the empirical members of the Christian church. Like the Greek meditator, the therapeutic theist exercises mental muscles to improve his or her individual spiritual performance. Breaking with pagan individualism by staying close to the biblical story about a family, Origen represents Elkanah as being not only one or righteous, that is, one of the saints, on the ground that he is reliant on another, his wife, who is grace. Elkanah is righteous because he is wedded to grace.

Peninnah represents the first step, conversion. Grace and conversion are supposed to be the root meanings of the Hebrew names Hannah and Peninnah. Although they are “not without value nor completely alien to God,” “the sons of ‘conversion’ are not such that they can be near to God or fixed on him.” The fruits of conversion are merely good works: “The children engendered through the one who is grace . . . are brought near to God,” like Samuel. As Christians, Origen says, “we seek first to please through good works and then we procreate a son through ‘grace’ and through the ‘gift of the Spirit’” (1986: 113–15). Origen thus specifies the meaning of the role of motherhood for those who believe in a God who is both one and gracious. He does not disparage conversion, though he sets grace higher.

Origen conferred with scholars in the large Jewish community in his hometown of Caesarea and gathered his etymologies of Peninnah and Hannah “from a Jewish dictionary called *Translation of Hebrew Names* to which he often alludes” (1986: 73). In his day, catechumens who had been formally enrolled for entrance into the church were converts, awaiting the baptism of grace at Easter. Converts had been proven in the eyes of the faithful, by their knowledge of the creeds and by good living. In his Jerusalem congregation, converts and baptized would be mingled. Speaking of the practice of baptism in “the ‘golden age’ of Christian liturgy,” Alexander Schmemmann writes that “there is a difference . . . between the faith which *converts* an unbeliever . . . to Christ and the faith which constitutes the very life of the Church and of her members and which St. Paul defines as having in us Christ’s mind, i.e., his faith, his love, his desire. Both are gifts of God. But the former is a *response* to the call which the latter is the very *reality* of that to which the call summons. . . . It is his personal faith in Christ which brings the catechumen to the Church; it is the Church that will instruct him in and bestow upon him Christ’s faith by which she lives.”⁷ Both converts and the baptized had a designated role in the society of the church, and the merely converted were not walled off from the baptized. Converts too have been given a role, in the gift of the call to baptism: their vocation is to prove themselves in learning the faith and obeying its precepts. Origen’s faith enables him to see indirectly that the original

7. Alexander Schmemmann, *Of Water and the Spirit: A Liturgical Study of Baptism* (London: SPCK, 1976), 7, 67–68.

text does not characterize the two women in terms of contrasting psychological stereotypes, but situates them in terms of the roles a tribal society would give a fertile and a barren wife. By imaginatively assimilating Peninnah to the converts, moreover, he does not place this representative of empirical Israel beyond the pale, but rather includes her as a support player in the full drama.

Episode Two: The Political and the Personal (1 Sam. 1:11–20)

When Hannah silently offers to return the gift of a son to God, she says, “No razor shall touch his head” (1:11 NRSV). She is offering her son in advance as a Nazirite. The Nazirites were an Israelite order that, since the time of the judges, dedicated themselves to God by setting themselves apart from their culture. They indicated their self-separation from average practicing Yahwists by never cutting their hair or shaving their beard. A Nazirite “cut himself off from the normal ways of life by abstention.” Under the monarchy, this self-separation from Israel’s empirical religion(s) intensified, as a sign of “opposition to the Canaanisation of the cult of Jahweh” (von Rad 1962: 62–63). Just as, for instance, the early modern reforming Carmelites belonged to a medieval order, so the reforming Nazirite movement of monarchic times had its roots and exemplars in the older, tribal culture of the judges, in which the charismatic Samson was a legendary Nazirite. For anyone who read this during monarchic times, Samuel would appear to link the old times and his own, where Nazirism had come to represent a “no!” to the Israelite monarch’s diplomatic evenhandedness between Yahwism and the gods of their powerful neighbors. Nazirites foreswore alcohol: so it is striking that, while Hannah is silently offering a Nazirite vocation for her would-be son, Eli is inferring that this female mumbler must be under the influence.

To modern readers, Eli is reminiscent of those officious ecclesial functionaries who haunt the doorways of churches to police lay department within the house of God: “How long will you go on being drunk? Put your wine away from you” (ESV). Hannah’s response to this cutting rebuke is to tell Eli that, far from being a pitcher full of wine, “I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD” (1:15 ESV). So single-minded is Hannah about laying her plight before the Lord that she forgets her surroundings, forgets the public face of prayer, forgets what she looks like, and speaks her heart and her whole soul to the one God. She doesn’t worry that she is no one and God is, assuredly, someone. Her need is so pressing that it overwhelms public concerns, and under the impulse of desire, she addresses “the LORD of hosts” without ceremony, ignoring the Lord’s doorkeeper, Eli the priest. Picturing the scene as if it were set in the Constantinople of Theodosius and Eudoxia, John Chrysostom imagines the situation by analogy with the direct approach of a desperate widow to the emperor, bypassing his entourage and the mediation of a powerful patron: “Just as a widow who is destitute and all alone . . . will often not be alarmed at the imminent triumphal procession of emperor,

bodyguards, shield bearers, horses . . . but without the need of a patron will brush past them all and with great confidence accost the emperor . . . under pressure of her sense of need, so too this woman was not embarrassed, was not ashamed, though the priest was sitting there, to make her request in person and with great confidence approach the king” (2003: 76–77). If we surround the scene with the panoply of kingship and hierarchical priesthood, as existed in Chrysostom’s times, we may imagine that Eli speaks sharply to Hannah because, in her urgency, Hannah had importunately shunted aside his role of ensuring that communication between God and people transverses the official channels. Chrysostom’s image of the scene connects to what the author is doing with this piece of premonarchic history. Eli does have an official role.

The full story of Regum runs from the reign of Saul in ca. 1010 BC to 586 BC, when Judah was subjugated by the Babylonians and the royal family was taken into exile (2 Kgs. 25:30). For anyone who oversaw it all, the priestly house of Eli stands for the story of the rise and fall of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Eli looks rather regal: “Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD” (1:9 NRSV). The Hebrew for “sitting” shifts to the imperfect to emphasize that he is “beseated.” Anyone who has seen photos of Egyptian or Babylonian statues can picture him, knees straight, like a monarch. The priest sits on “the throne” (*al-hakkisse*). Eli isn’t just sitting around outside his temple: he is “beseated,” as one in the judgment seat (Polzin 1989: 23). Without being a capital city, the shrine at Shiloh, which housed the ark, had become a political focus, recognized by most of the Israelite tribes. Eli was at the apex of the network of local judges and assemblies, a “superjudge” (Ishida 1977: 32–33). Though it is not the only historical category, continuity is a basic element of public historical life. It is unlikely that Israel made a sudden leap from sporadic local rule by charismatic judges to installing Saul as leader of all Israel. It is more likely that initial steps were taken toward a political center, which all or many of the Israelite tribes acknowledged, even while their juridical structure continued to function locally. This text seems to be backhanded evidence that such a development had taken place and that weighty Eli combined political with clerical authority. Because of the continuous, small steps between Eli, Saul, David, and the later monarchs of Israel and Judah, and the absence of an absolute cultural or legal break between premonarchic and monarchic times, there is a similarity even between Eli and the last king of Israel. The reader of the whole sweep of 1 Samuel–2 Kings can look back, through this “remembered past”⁸ and say, “In my end is my beginning; in my beginning is my end.”

The Hebrew *heykal* can mean either a king’s “palace” or “temple.” The author is a realist, not a Manichean. His history is never crudely antimonarchic. He knows on the one hand that both temple and palace were magnets for syncretistic

8. John Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness; or, The Remembered Past*, new ed. (New York: Schocken, 1985), 9.

compromise, for worldly cynicism. Temple evokes palace in the flat-footed figure of Eli. He knows on the other hand that the grace that Hannah requests and represents is not only for herself, but a gift for all Israel. Eli and Hannah are the outer and the inner sides of the one Israel. The son for whom she bargains will have the role of anointer of kings.

On any literal reading of the scene between petitioner and priest, Eli initially misinterprets Hannah's act of private prayer as a drunkard's talking to herself; for the literal reader of this portion of scripture, Eli steps into the role of so many biblical characters who look at the externals, not at the heart. Cyprian of Carthage makes the literal-minded comment that Hannah "prays to God . . . silently and modestly within the very recesses of her heart. She spoke with a hidden prayer but with manifest faith. She did not speak with the voice but with the heart, because she knew that so the Lord hears, and she effectually obtained what she sought, because she asked with faith" (*The Lord's Prayer* 5, in Franke 2005: 199). Alexandrian theologian Clement observes that, as Hannah's example shows, "prayer is . . . a conversation with God . . . not opening the lips, we speak in silence, yet we cry inwardly. For God hears . . . the whole inward conversation" (*Stromateis* 7.7, in Franke 2005: 199). John Chrysostom adversely contrasts public, written works with Hannah's invisible prayer: "This is what prayers arising from the soul's pangs are like: her mind took the place of paper, her tongue a pen, and her tears ink; hence her appeal has lasted to this very day. Such letters, in fact, prove indelible, dipped as they are in that ink" (2003: 78).

Some modern scholars are almost as much taken aback by such literal readings of this scene as, according to Chrysostom, Eli was by Hannah's bypassing the network in which she should function as client and he as the patronal contact to the divine king. For many contemporary writers, what counts as real is public prayer, not silent inward cries and petitions. This is because they believe all human language, and thus all human religion, is public and not private. So, for instance, Josipovici notes that, though Hannah may have prayed silently, she still had to use words, the public language of her time: "Her lips move and she forms words. She speaks from the heart . . . but she speaks the language of men and women. . . . Prayer finds its forms in the forms of ordinary language and in the linguistic and social usages of the community to which the one who prays belongs. . . . Hannah moving her lips is crucial testimony to the fact that prayer . . . is an utterance, an *outering*."⁹ This is true insofar as it goes: Hannah's petition to God does not fly above ordinary thoughts and words. Rather, she is pictured "making a deal with God" and offering "the price from what is coming to her," since she has nothing else to bargain with (Chrysostom 2003: 78): "O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life" (1:11 ESV). Josipovici's description of Hannah's petitionary

9. Josipovici, *Book of God*, 160–62.

vow as an “outring” captures something of the down-to-earth quality of the peasant woman’s bargain.

But perhaps it does not capture all of it, for the inward character of Hannah’s prayer, its spirituality, mirrors that she is praying for something to happen inside her body—the conception of a child. Hannah’s silent tears and God’s response created an analogy between private intimacy with God and physical fertility that lasted in Christian spirituality down so far as the metaphysical poet George Herbert, who prayed, “Send water to my dry roots.” Herbert was likely recalling the psalmist, who affirmed that the believer is “like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season” (Ps. 1:3 NIV). Since its God is living (Exod. 3), scripture doesn’t cleanly separate life in the physical and spiritual senses: God is present in places where rivers flow (Eden, Zion, new Jerusalem), and Canaan is “a land . . . which drinks water by the rain from heaven” because it is “a land that the LORD your God cares for” (Deut. 11:11–12 ESV) (Martin-Achard 1960: 10–12). Chrysostom grasps the force of this metaphor of “going to ground interiorly,” asking God to act on us within and being rewarded with renewing rains: “Instead of saying anything at first, she began with wailing and shed warm floods of tears. And just as, when rain storms fall, even the harder ground is moistened . . . and easily bestirs itself to produce crops, so too did this happen in the case of this woman: as though softened by the flood of tears and warmed with the pangs, the womb began to stir in that wonderful fertility.” For Chrysostom, tracking the metaphorical link between silent inwardness and physical fruitfulness, the private prayer is the model of the true prayer: “I seek,” he says, “those tears which are shed not for display but in compunction; those which trickle down secretly and in closets and in sight of no person, softly and noiselessly; those which arise from a certain depth of mind, those shed in anguish and in sorrow, those which are for God alone. Such were Hannah’s, for ‘her lips moved,’ it is said, ‘but her voice was not heard.’ Her tears alone uttered a cry more clear than any trumpet. And because of this, God also opened her womb and made the hard rock a fruitful field” (*Homilies on Hannah* 1 and *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew* 6.8, in Franke 2005: 197–99).

When Hannah struck her bargain, there was no extant ceremonial or liturgical form of public language that we know of for making a Levite vow on behalf of a son as yet unborn: the terms of Hannah’s petitionary bargain were invented by her. She was not keeping to the known forms of prayer, but inventing her own and so provoking a clerical misapprehension. Hannah’s prayer was private because she was acting outside the rubrics. The offer that she makes to God is creative, going beyond even Abraham’s acquiescence in Isaac’s being taken from him, because she herself invents the terms, rather than having them imposed upon her. When Hannah vows, “I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life” (1:11 ESV), she speaks as an authentic daughter of Abraham, Chrysostom believes, because Abraham “gave when it was demanded of him” whereas Hannah “offers even before it is demanded” (*Homilies on Ephesians* 24, in Franke 2005: 197). In this episode,

which introduces the overall theme of Regum, the author goes to lengths to show the priority of the personal over the political, by contrasting Hannah's interior cries for help and Eli's narrow-sighted public gaze. The insistence of church fathers like Clement, Origen, and Chrysostom on inward faith is rooted as much in the Old Covenant as in the New. Literally and physically, as well as spiritually, this inward root was the womb of Samuel.

The separation that Hannah offers for her wished-for son by dedicating him as a Nazirite reflects her own isolation. It's partly for this reason that the efforts by public-language enthusiasts to avoid making the scene into a conflict between silent inward prayer and looking at the externals falls short of understanding it. If we consider the historical context, we can see that the privacy of Hannah's prayer is not just superimposed on it by the "platonizing" Clement and Origen. It is a feature of the period the author is describing, albeit such a novel one that Eli cannot compute it. Like our modern prayer-as-public-language advocates, Eli identifies prayer with a collective, publicly observable activity, exactly what it would be in a tribal culture. For the tribal religious sensibility, the feeling of group solidarity was deep and intense, and an "individual's life was enclosed in that of larger units superior to it—kindred and tribe. . . . There was no tension between inward and outward, between the 'I' and the world, since outside in every department of natural life the sacred regulations held sway which the cult exalted and into which man had to fit" (von Rad 1962: 37). This is how a tribesman such as Eli would have lived and thought. For such a one, seeing Hannah's lips moving but no coherent words emerging was cognitively dissonant. Eli's encounter with Hannah's silent prayer is reminiscent of Augustine's surprise at encountering Bishop Ambrose reading silently, something Augustine had never witnessed, in a culture in which reading was normally a public activity (*Confessions* 6.3). Since Eli lives in a culture in which individuals have a dense collective existence but no private life, he imagines that the outer invariably displays the inner world of persons. Hence, the silent movement of Hannah's lips must exhibit some publicly recognizable sign, and drunkenness is the only explanation that occurs to the fallible tribal priest.

Hannah is a pioneer, leading the religious spirit of her times into new territory. In the new political culture that has begun to appear by the end of the book, not only prayer but the action of God occurs silently and in a hidden manner. Apart from an outbreak of boisterously external miracles in 1 Sam. 6–7, there are few miracles in 1 Samuel. A novel conception of the divine guidance of history appears, and one that fits a political theology. From henceforth, God's action in history is largely, though not solely, presented as providential, working in cooperation with nature and human freedom, rather than in the overt supernatural interruptions of nature that we call the miraculous. The mistaken equation of the outer and the inner, the failure to appreciate that the outer and the inner can diverge, and that what really is and what seems to be can part company, becomes a signature of the book as a whole. It returns repeatedly, for instance when seven sons of Jesse are

paraded before Samuel, and he thinks each is suitable to be anointed king, until the Lord tells him to anoint the forgotten, youngest son, David. “Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature” (NKJV), Samuel is told, because “the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (16:7). The Spirit is staking his ground in the privacy of the hearts of men and women. In a political society, God’s ethical imperatives are discerned more by reflection on divine providence than by the outward display of miracles. In most of 1 Samuel, “the causal chain of events is closed without a break” because such is the terrain on which God’s political providence operates (von Rad 1962: 315–16). The story of Eli’s incomprehension of Hannah’s private prayer contains a recollection of a transition from a tribal to a political culture. Our author’s accuracy as a social anthropologist is largely inadvertent and backhanded, and all the more telling for that. In one sense, 1 Sam. 1–7 is a continuation of Judges and Ruth, presenting the same social world and religious sensibility as its predecessors. Samuel himself will become a judge, and one who wishes to uphold the tribal, familial order against incipient monarchism (1 Sam. 8). But in another way the rift between the tribal and the monarchic epochs begins with Samuel’s conception. Continuity and discontinuity, or analogy and anomaly, are the two elements of which history is made.

Philologists tell us that Samuel’s name is an echo of an earlier period in Israel’s development of doctrine, harking back to the times before El, the God of the fathers, had been identified with Yahweh the Lord. We read at the end of the story that, when “Hannah conceived and bore a son . . . she called his name Samuel, for she said, ‘I have asked for him from the LORD’” (1:20 ESV). Biblical philologists contend that the real meaning of Samuel is “his name is El,” that is, “he calls on El” in worship or “El is his God.”¹⁰ Nothing in Israel’s history is lost or remaindered. Every stage of the way from the patriarchs to the tribal culture of the conquest, to the monarchy and the prophets, is gathered up and made new in Christ.

Episode Three: Samuel Handed Over (1 Sam. 1:21–28)

On the Feast of the Holy Family, in the octave of Christmas, the lectionary lays this story about Hannah’s taking baby Samuel to the temple alongside Luke 2:41–52, in which Mary and Joseph lose the boy Jesus during their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem and find him in the temple: “And his mother said to him, ‘Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress’” (Luke 2:48 ESV). Both Hannah and Mary freely abandon their God-given son to God. Christian readers have always traced a thread from Samuel to Christ, seeing Samuel as a type of Christ. Both Samuel and Jesus find where they really belong in the temple. Their vocation and identity is wider than their original

10. McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 62.

families, in God: “And he said to them, ‘Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’ . . . And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:49, 51 ESV). Hannah’s sacrifice of her only son Samuel to the Lord is the sacrifice of the heart. This gives her sacrifice authentic freedom. Her gesture creates a space of freedom in which Samuel can become himself. Just as “Jesus . . . had to choose between his Father and his family: ‘Son, why have you treated us so?’ so the Christian will make the weighty decisions of his life from the perspective of Christ, that is, of faith.”¹¹

It is more helpful to consider lectionary pairings like Hannah/Samuel and Mary/Christ pictorially than to think about them chronologically. If one sets two pictures of the two mother/son narratives alongside one another, one can easily grasp the analogy. In medieval times, when most Christians were illiterate, they got their sense of scripture from the images on the walls of churches. In the seventh century Gregory the Great advised a bishop who looked askance on painting the scriptures, “What scripture presents to its readers, a picture presents to the gaze of the unlearned. For in it even the ignorant see what they ought to follow, in it the illiterate read” (Epistle to Bishop Serenus of Marseilles, *Registrum Epistoliarum*, Epistle 13). We tend to think of this way of appreciating scripture as *faute de mieux* and that we know it much better now that we *read* scripture rather than *looking* at it. Samuel is being apprenticed to the priesthood at Shiloh. His training by Eli may have included mastery of the scribal craft, since he will write up a “law of kingship” and deposit it in the Shiloh temple (1 Sam. 10:25). Toorn claims that in Babylon and Israel “the native verbs for ‘reading’ literally mean ‘to cry, to speak out loud.’ . . . These verbs reflect the way texts were used. Written documents were read aloud, either to an audience or to oneself. Silent reading was highly unusual. Even the student who read in solitude ‘muttered’ his text (Ps. 1:2; compare Acts 8:30). So when someone was urged to read something assiduously, the phrase was that he should not allow the text ‘to depart from his mouth’ (Josh. 1:8).” When, before the codex and the printed book, “texts were for the ears rather than the eyes,”¹² an audience had to be made to *see*, and thus remember, the narrative: the storybooks written with this intention indwelt the imagination before they were conceptualized. Hence, 1 Sam. 1:21–28 is perfectly visual: it doesn’t talk about the depth of Hannah’s sacrifice, it makes us see Hannah, weaning Samuel and taking him to the temple. It could have been written for preliterate people who will see it in their mental imagination rather than hearing it in their mind’s ear, as literate congregations may tend to do. Two pictures, Hannah and Mary, make congenial sense alongside one another; take away the image and conceptually audit the text as a time sequence, and Samuel and Christ are distanced. The medieval, largely

11. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Nine Propositions on Christian Ethics,” in *Principles of Christian Morality*, by Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph Ratzinger, and Heinz Schurmann; trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 77.

12. Toorn 2007: 87. 12. Toorn thinks that both 1 Sam. 1 and 10:25 are “retrojection[s] of later practice, Shiloh being a forerunner and cipher of the Jerusalem temple.”

illiterate, audience of the twin episodes and the largely preliterate audience of the first story had something in common that is theologically important: visual linkages mattered more to them than temporal ones.

The story pictures the “child” that Hannah is giving up as “young” (1:24), that is, that a hard maternal sacrifice is being offered. John Chrysostom calls Hannah “a priestess in her very being, imitating the patriarch Abraham and rivalling him for preeminence: whereas he took his son and descended, she let hers stay permanently in the temple” (2003: 102). The Shilonite priesthood seems to have acquired political authority. After the fall of Eli’s house, Samuel replaces him as Israel’s central judge, a premonarchic “king.” But Samuel is also a prophet, one who speaks directly with God: unlike Israel’s kings, who hear the word second-hand through the prophet, Samuel is addressed by God himself. Samuel is a living analogy to the prophet, priest, and king that Christ will be in the fullest sense. Of none of Israel’s kings can it be said with historical plausibility that he was prophet, priest, and king. It can credibly be said of only Samuel.