

# Hannah

## Her story

Rachel Miller Jacobs

**Y**ou probably already know this story. It's an old one. A woman is loved by her husband but has no children. In that one sentence there is a whole lifetime of sorrow. Each time the story is told the names change, but the results are the same. Every month, hopes for a pregnancy build up and are dashed. Every year, empty arms cradle the air where a baby should have been.

I could picture my son in complete detail: fine, brown hair, like mine; Elkanah's nose, but smaller; my mother's eyes; tiny perfect fingers and toes; the sweet baby way the back of his neck would smell as I held him against my shoulder. But my son never lived

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Eventually, Elkanah took another wife. No one asked me what I thought. It wasn't for me to decide. Elkanah's new wife was pregnant within the year, and every couple of years after that. You can imagine what that was like: babies everywhere I turned, and none of them mine. It seemed like the whole world was pregnant. With each new baby, a little of my own life drained away. Many nights I cried myself into a restless sleep and got up in the morning more tired than I'd gone to bed.

And I couldn't help but hear what people called us, the nicknames they gave us. For me, *Hannah*, "charming, attractive." My beauty, such as it was, the only thing worth mentioning. For her, *Peninnah*, "fertile, prolific." Her childbearing the only important thing about her. It's a terrible thing to do to people, to make them nothing but one thing, as if charm or fertility defined us entirely. You see, I was a good weaver, and she could do

numbers in her head better than anyone else in the village. Between the two of us, we made our husband a wealthy man. But we lived like Rachel and Leah, each wanting what the other had, taking out on each other our grudges against God and our husband.

So our lives went, season after season. Babies for her, empty arms for me, work for both of us, each day the same as the one before. There was one high point in the year, though. Every spring, Elkanah took us all to sacrifice at the house of the Lord, at Shiloh. He liked to make a trip of it. I suppose it was both a sort of vacation and an opportunity to show off his children. It was a lot of work, though, getting ready. You know how that is. Even if you're looking forward to a trip, getting out the door is so tiring, you'd almost rather stay home.

The children whined about the walking, and feeding everyone took more time than usual, because we didn't know where to find water or firewood. Peninnah was usually pregnant or nursing, and she'd complain about how exhausted she was and leave most of the work to me. The people meeting us on the road would comment about all the children, repeating the same old saying about how good it is for a man to have a quiver full of arrows. The women would murmur to me, "How fortunate you are," and then, miraculously, Peninnah would be filled with energy and cut in, "But these are all mine. Hannah is barren." Everyone's eyes would get big to see so many children from one woman, and they would glance in my direction with pity, too embarrassed to say another word.

Even making the sacrifice at Shiloh pointed out my childlessness. Elkanah gave Peninnah a sacrifice portion for herself and one for each of her children, more portions every year. But I always received only one portion. So even in worship I was all alone. Peninnah would look at me pityingly and say, "Poor Hannah," not really meaning it.

One year it was too much. Each step bringing me closer to the shrine was harder than the last, until finally I could barely put one foot in front of the other. Peninnah was in a terrible mood. Her youngest was teething and she was pregnant again, and this time the pregnancy was eating her from the inside out. Her eyes were rimmed with dark circles, her hair dull, her ankles swollen, and

her back ached constantly. Everyone was giving her and her sharp tongue a wide berth.

As we were finishing the sacrifice, Peninnah sidled up to me. “You think you’re so perfect,” she hissed. “But it’s me that’s the real woman, me that’s the real wife. You’re just a plaything for Elkanah. What good is a woman who can’t bear children? It’s only because he’s got such a soft heart that he hasn’t divorced you.”

At her words, something inside me broke open. I started to cry, and it was as if every tear in the universe had somehow collected

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in my body and was rushing to get out. I cried until I thought it wasn’t possible to cry any more, and still tears ran down my cheeks. My voice got hoarse from wailing, my nose burned from wiping it on my sleeve. At the evening meal, I couldn’t even stand to look at food. “Baby,” Peninnah jeered, disgusted. “You’re just a big baby. I don’t know what he sees in you.”

Elkanah was no better. “Hannah,” he said, “why are you crying and not eating? Why are you so sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?” What I longed to hear was that I was

worth more to *him* than ten sons. But he’d had a long walk and was hungry, and he had the sons he wanted.

I left them both and ran back to the sanctuary, flinging myself to the floor. “How can you forget me, O Lord of Hosts? If you look on me, if you finally see my suffering and remember me, and if you give me a son, I will dedicate him to your service for his whole life.” No woman should have to bargain with God to become a mother. It is a terrible thing to plead for a child, to beg, to cry out like that. But I did it. I was desperate.

As I was praying, the priest, Eli, tried to hustle me out. “Stop making a drunken spectacle of yourself, woman! You should be ashamed of yourself for mocking the name of the Lord with your rantings!”

When I look back on it now, it amazes me that I could even answer him. Was everybody against me? “You’re wrong,” I said. “I’m not drunk. In fact, I’ve had nothing to drink. I’ve been *praying*—pouring out my heart to God.”

“Oh,” Eli said. I think he was embarrassed. When he actually looked at me, he could tell I was what I said, a righteous woman, come to the sanctuary to pray. “Then go in peace,” he said, “and may the God of Israel grant what you asked.”

So I left, and I broke my fast, and I waited to see what God would do. Something had changed inside me. I’d been honest with God, and God had received what I said. There was no miracle, no sudden lifting of depression, no heaven-sent joy. Just a kind of letting go. And I conceived.

Some will say I got pregnant because I relaxed, or because I gave God my problem, or because it wasn’t God’s will any more for me to be barren. And I’m telling you, none of it’s true. I still wanted a baby. It wasn’t a matter of relaxing. God didn’t love me any more after that trip than before I left home. And God could have done whatever God wanted to do without my becoming pregnant. This doesn’t mean, though, that God had nothing to do with what happened to me. It’s just that I don’t believe God was involved in any way you or I could imagine or explain. So I don’t try to explain any of it. I try to accept it.

My pregnancy was uneventful. Things went as smoothly for me as if I’d been young, and when my time came I gave birth to a healthy son. When the midwife lifted him up to me, and I held him for the first time, I wept for all the children that had never been, and for this little one who finally was. And I named him *Samuel*, because I asked God for him.

Samuel was born a couple months before our annual trip to Shiloh. Elkanah asked if I wanted to go along, but I said I was staying home. “I’m not taking the baby until he’s weaned, because once he’s been presented at the shrine, he’ll be staying there for good.” Elkanah agreed.

So I nursed my Samuel until he was fully weaned. And the year of his third birthday, he and I made our trip to Shiloh with the others. Along with our usual sacrifices, we took along three bulls, one ephah of flour, and a jar of wine. When we had slaughtered the bulls, Elkanah and I brought our son to Eli. And I said to the old man, “I’m the woman who stood here four years ago, the one you thought was drunk. It was this boy I prayed for, and God granted me what I asked. So I’m lending my son to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is lent to God.” And we bowed down very

low, our faces to the ground. Then we left our son, our Samuel, at the shrine at Shiloh. He was never really ours anyway. God lent him to us, and we lent him back. And we returned home.

Samuel is eleven now, and every year when we go to Shiloh, I bring him new clothes I've sewn for him, bigger each time. He's a handsome boy, and bright, too, but somehow distant from us. God's hand is on him, and it's as if there is a veil between us. He isn't like other boys. I know, because I've had three other sons, and two daughters, too, in the years since his birth. I only had to beg for my first child. The others have come to me easily, although living with them is another story. You know how that is. They are good children, and I'm glad they're mine. But I keep being surprised by how different it is to be a mother than to imagine being a mother. I learn something new every day.

Peninnah and I have made a sort of peace with each other. Having children loosened my hold on Elkanah, making some room for Peninnah in our household. I see more clearly now how much she too has suffered. But she is old before her time from so

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much child-bearing, and I am made young by my children, so the old jealousies die hard. It isn't easy to be a woman.

And I think a lot about what happened to me, turning it over and over in my mind, trying to make sense of it. How can I explain such sorrow, and such joy? But here's what I know. I know that God isn't just interested in famous men and important events. God's grace takes unlikely paths, catching us by surprise, using ordinary people like me to bring new things to birth. I think often of Sarah, whose son, born in her old age,

became the father of our people. Who would have guessed it, all those years ago, when it looked like she would die without descendants? That's how God is. God surprises us. We think we have it all figured out, but when it feels hopeless, when it seems like nothing can change or no good can come from a situation, God is there, making a difference.

And something else, too. It's not just that God likes to surprise us. It's that when God gets involved, everything turns upside

down. I, a barren woman, became a mother. And I'm not the exception, either. Look around you, and you'll see plenty of evidence that God is working in unlikely places and through unlikely people. I mentioned Sarah, who, like me, became a mother in her old age. There's also Miriam, Moses the stutterer's sister, who outwitted the Pharaoh to preserve her brother's life. And Deborah, the prophetess, who became one of the greatest judges in Israel, advising military rulers. And Ruth, the foreigner, who became one of the mothers of our people. The list goes on and on. We prevail not by our strength alone, but also by the power of God.

I look around at you, women of a time and place far from mine. I see that, like me, you will not arrive to old age strangers to grief or suffering. I know you will live long lives and remember times when you cried out to God in anguish. I look at you—you seem like ordinary women, too—and I wonder how God will use you to bring something new to birth. What will you plead with God for? What promises will you make? What surprises lie in store for you? I don't know the answers to these questions. But I do know that God is faithful, and my heart rejoices.

### **About the author**

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