## Closed Wombs and Failed Harvests

## John Goldingay

The opening chapters of 1Samuel relate how Yahweh closes a womb (רחם; 1:6). At a festival, in the context of the making and sharing of offerings, Hannah prays about her closed womb, Yahweh is mindful of her, she gets pregnant, and she has a son. A year or three later, again in the context of the making and sharing of offerings and thus presumably in the context of a festival, she gives thanks for the opening of her womb. “Yahweh gave me what I asked” (שׁאלתי; 1:27). In describing her son as the one “asked in connection with Yahweh” (שאול ליהוה, 1:28), she uses the passive participle of the verb in a unique way that makes the word’s form correspond to the name of Saul. The gift of a child initiates the process whereby Saul becomes king, when the people “ask” for a king (e.g., 8:10). Hannah goes on to praise Yahweh as the God who breaks the bows of the strong and gives strength to people who were falling, lets people who were full hire themselves out for food and ensures that hungry people are no longer hungry, and enables the infertile woman to give birth to seven בנים whereas the mother of many בנים is alone and vulnerable (2:4–5).

Near the end of 2Samuel, Israel experiences hunger/famine (רעב) as a consequence of Saul’s putting some Gibeonites to death and thus breaking the terms of Israel’s covenant with the Gibeonites. That wrongdoing issues in two women watching the death of seven בנים, the sons and grandsons of Saul, who pay the price specified by the Gibeonites for Saul’s wrongdoing (21:1–9), after which one of the women continues to protect her sons even after their death. David subsequently honors the bodies of Saul and Jonathan, after which Yahweh heeds supplication for Israel (21:10–14). Later, Yahweh again gets angry with Israel (24:1) and Gad announces Yahweh’s intention to chastise David with seven years of hunger/famine, military defeats, or epidemic. David chooses epidemic, as a direct action by Yahweh, because he knows that Yahweh is characterized by compassion (24:14). David’s word for compassion רחמים)) looks quite like a plural of the word for womb (רחם) and it might thus suggest that Yahweh has womb-like feelings and attitudes, the feelings a mother has for her children. Yahweh holds back from destroying Jerusalem and David offers burnt offerings and shared offerings (24:16, 25). Samuel closes by noting that Yahweh has heeded supplication for Israel (עתר niphal) and that the epidemic has thus held back from Israel (עצר niphal; 24:25).

## Intertexuality and Intratextuality

The opening and closing chapters of Samuel share the themes of fertility and food, praise and prayer, love and loss. These themes interweave in both contexts, which stimulates reflection on their fundamental place in the life of human beings and on the varying interrelation between the themes. I do not infer that an author deliberately compiled Samuel so that these two sets of narratives formed a pair to frame the work as a whole. Inferring the aim of an author is a hazardous proceeding, and in this case one might have expected more concrete verbal links between narratives. But common themes and verbal links issue an invitation to readers to ask how they illumine each other.

The relationship between the two sections of Samuel might count as an example of intratextuality rather than intertextuality, though with either framework of interpretation the dynamics and fruitfulness of the comparison are similar. But in any case, the historical or literary interrelationship of the sections is more complex than a contrast between intertextuality and intratextuality implies. Second Samuel 21–24 has commonly been seen as an appendix added to an earlier form of the text in which 2Samuel 20 led straight into 1Kings 1–2. Questions about the development of 1Samuel 1–2 (specifically, the relationship of Hannah’s song of praise to the story in which it appears) also complicate understandings of the literary and historical relationship between the two sections. It’s possible, then, that some parts of Samuel directly allude to other parts, or that the links between our two sections are the chance result of the process whereby the text developed.

Another point can be made. Most readers read the Hannah story next to the Ruth story, following the order of the books in the Septuagint and thus in most modern Bibles, rather than the order in the Masoretic Text of the Scriptures, where Ruth appears elsewhere (though the Septuagint order may be as old a tradition as the Masoretic one). And famine/hunger is where the Ruth story begins. It is followed by the death of a woman’s husband and sons and thus by the death of three women’s husbands, which leaves them alone and vulnerable. Pregnancy is then where the story almost ends. And as Yahweh’s response to Hannah issues in the birth of someone whom she can describe as שאול, Ruth’s pregnancy issues in the birth of Saul’s successor as king, David’s grandfather. Further, as Hannah closes her song of praise with a declaration about Yahweh giving strength to his king and exalting the power of his anointed, in the Masoretic order, Judges also anticipates the transition to monarchy, with its closing comment about Israel having no king and everyone doing what it right in their own eyes, the grim preceding story relating a more disturbing occasion when Israelites celebrated the festival at Shiloh in a way that offers an unpleasant anticipatory contrast to the Hannah story. For Israel, neither Ruth’s baby nor Hannah’s baby is just any baby.

Some of the commonality between the beginning and ending of Samuel and Ruth extends to other narratives. On only one other occasion does Yahweh engage in womb-closing, in the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Abimelech and his womenfolk, though the verb in Gen 20:18 is עצר rather than סגר. In both passages the statement is made in a way that conveys some emphasis. In Gen 20:18 the verb is repeated, with the infinitive preceding the qatal, suggesting “totally held back,” and in 1Sam 1:5–6 the verb “closed” gets repeated. Both verbs are followed by the prepositional expression בעד, so that one suggests “bound up” and the other “closed up.” Elsewhere, Sarah herself uses the verb עצר without referring to her womb, in averring that “Yahweh has held me back from having children” (Gen 16:2). Further, womb-opening features in Gen 29:31 and 30:22, and only there in the Tanak, while hunger/famine is also a recurrent motif in the Genesis stories.

Perhaps, then, the questions about the relationship of the beginning and final chapters of Samuel and about the relationship of Samuel to Genesis and Ruth are not so different. Who knows whether the author(s) of the Samuel chapters worked in light of the Genesis chapters, or vice versa? It may seem a more sure assumption that the author of Ruth would have known Samuel, and the Masoretic order of the books will imply that people would read them in that order, though it remains interesting that the Greek Scriptures put Ruth ahead of Samuel. But intertextual thinking does not need to know the answer to questions about which came first or what an author intended. Genesis, Ruth, and Samuel sit among a collection of writings that invites readers to interrelate them, and it is illuminating to ask how different parts of these writings stimulate questions about other parts.

## 2. Hannah and David

In 1Samuel 1–2 it is in the context of a regular festival at Shiloh that Hannah and Elqanah come before Yahweh with their offerings and Hannah prays. The same will likely be true of her praising. She misses the next festival, but the occasion when she takes her weaned son to Shiloh seems likely to be the festival the following year or the year after that.

In 2Samuel 24, David apparently does his first praying in the palace. He does his second praying and his praising in the context of a once-off worship event out in the open country, though in a place that will turn out to be the location of the temple that he will commission. It is in the midst of his praise there that he makes his confession of Yahweh’s רחמים.

Setting the two stories alongside each other suggests the insight that making offerings is integral to people’s relationship with Yahweh. This is true of an ordinary family and of a king, and it is true in connection with regular community worship and with an occasional event. But the interrelationship of these two acts of worship is the opposite to the interrelationship one might have expected. There is no king leading festival worship in 1Samuel 1–2, or even taking part in it, as the story is the preamble to there being a king who might do so, with Hannah unwittingly using his name and referring to him anticipatorily). Festival worship is an ordinary people’s affair. In contrast, it is not ordinary people who take part in the event in 2Samuel 24, yet even a king (especially a king) comes before Yahweh with his personal prayer, as Hannah does. His prayer does relate to his people’s need; Yahweh is angry with Israel (24:1). But its background lies in his personal (though kingly) wrongdoing.

Both stories imply that worship costs. David insists on paying Araunah for the threshing floor, the sacrificial animals, and the wherewithal to make a sacrificial fire: “I will not offer up burnt offerings to Yahweh my God at no cost (חנם).” More paradoxically, Hannah goes to worship with the hope that she may get something out of it, and she does, but the worship and the gift are costly in the end, as she comes back to worship and gives over to Yahweh the child who had been the gift of worship. In the Hannah story, further, prayer and praise are sequential. In the David story they are interwoven. Both stories compare with ways in which prayer and praise interrelate in the Psalms.

The account of David’s choice (2Sam 24:12), which eventually issues in his act of worship, begins, “Yahweh’s anger again flared against Israel.” The “again” suggests a link with the famine in 2Samuel 21, though the text did not refer to Yahweh’s anger there. Anyway, the flaring issues in David’s taking a census. Why does Yahweh get angry?

The obvious sequential interpretation of the story is that there is no answer to that question. Yahweh simply did get angry. Sometimes children experience parents getting angry with them and lashing out at them, and the children may allow for the possibility that there is a reason, but may not know what it is. The passage may imply something similar about Israel and Yahweh. Sometimes a calamity without evident reason happens. On this occasion, David makes a stupid decision that has terrible consequences. If Yahweh is in control of David’s destiny and Israel’s destiny, however, Yahweh’s action or inaction must lie behind the calamity. He must have been angry. Generally, the Tanak does imply that Yahweh’s anger has reason behind it, and 2Samuel 24 may make this assumption. It just doesn’t know what the reason is.

There is another possible understanding of the chapter. Some stories in the Tanak unfold in a dramatic rather than a chronological order, like movies. Events in 2Samuel 24—calamity, prayer, holding back, worship—may follow more a dramatic sequence than a chronological one. The reference to womb-closing in Gen 20:18 comes only at the end of its story. And the Tanak sometimes begins with a headline summarizing the story that follows; 2Samuel 24 might do so. The flaring of Yahweh’s anger is then the result of David taking the census, not its cause. Yet this does not make Yahweh explicable. It simply pushes the question of Yahweh’s explicability down the line, because it also raises the question why “Yahweh incited David” against Israel. The verb (סות) is an striking one to use of Yahweh, especially as this occurrence follows on David’s similar use of the verb in 1Sam 26:19 (2Chron 18: 31 is the only other occurrence). It compare with Gen 22:1, where Yahweh “tested” Abraham (נסה: KJV has “tempt”). Whatever is the right way of reading the comment on Yahweh’s anger, his inciting David is a testing of David, and a test that David fails. The story’s dynamics thus also compare with Genesis 3, where in effect Yahweh tests Adam and Eve by putting them in the company of a tree that could enable them to make decisions about what is good and what is bad, and tells them to leave it alone.

Even when the Tanak provides an explanation for Yahweh’s anger, the explanation may seem as perplexing as clarifying. On one other occasion in Samuel does Yahweh’s anger flare, when Uzzah grasped the covenant chest as it threatened to fall to the ground and Yahweh “struck him down for his שׁל” (2Sam 6:7). The noun is a hapax, but the clue to its meaning might be the Aramaic word שלו (e.g., Ezra 4:22; 6:9), “remissness” or “error.” Yet if that is so, it doesn’t help a great deal to make intelligible the shocking nature of Yahweh’s action against Uzzah. Indeed, the enigmatic nature of the word של constitutes a parable of the enigmatic nature of the event. All of which fits with the enigmatic nature of the sequence of events in 2Samuel 24, where the rationale is inclined to leave readers still puzzled and dissatisfied (modern Western readers, anyway).

David, then, decides to take a census, Joab (of all people?) advises against it, but after the census David admits to himself that it was a bad idea: “David’s mind struck him down.” He acknowledges to Yahweh that he has committed a grievous offense (חטאתי מאד), and asks Yahweh to make his waywardness pass away or to remit it (עבר hiphil). The two Hebrew verbs are the ones that featured in the Bathsheba-Uriah story (2Sam 12:13). To judge from what follows in 2Samuel 12 and 24, making offenses pass way or remitting them has less cash value than “carrying” them or “pardoning” them (נשׂא, סלח) (עבר hiphil otherwise applies to wrongdoing only in Zech 3:4 and Job 7:21, where it has more positive implications). Indeed, after his experience in 2Samuel 12 and the chapters that follow, one might have thought that David would realize he needed to seek carrying or pardoning rather than making pass away or remitting. While this last verb might imply he saves his life, it need not mean he escapes paying a price for his waywardness. Reading 2Samuel 24 in light of 2Samuel 12 reminds one of a troublesome but realistic fact about wrongdoing and its consequences: acknowledging and getting away with wrongdoing does not mean it has no aftermath. The aftermath of David’s action does not make Yahweh’s action as intelligible as one might like, but it exactly corresponds to how things are in human experience. We may not lose our lives for our wrongdoing, but we may still pay a price for them.

Whereas in 2Samuel 12, Yahweh affirms that he has made David’s wrongdoing pass, in 2Samuel 24 David asks for that to happen. Yahweh does not reply, but instead declares that David can choose between famine, defeat, or epidemic, and David chooses epidemic as a direct action from Yahweh, “because his רחמים is great” (24:14). The collocation of famine/hunger (רעב) and the word רחמים with its similarity to the word for the womb makes one return to 1Samuel 1–2.

## Mystery

Following on Yahweh’s reversing of her inability to get pregnant, Hannah avers:

People who were full—they hire themselves out for food,

and hungry people (רעבים) cease [or get fat].[[1]](#footnote-1)

While the infertile woman gives birth to seven,

one who has many children is alone.

The infertile woman, she gives birth to seven,

and the woman with many children, she is forlorn.

Yahweh puts to death and gives life,

sends down to Sheol and brings up. (1Sam 2:5–6).

It’s a big generalization from one big event: Yahweh imposes loss, bereavement, and early death on people who deserve it, and acts faithfully with his own people, enables them to flourish, gives life, and rescues from early death. I take the qatal verbs in these lines as gnomic, but such gnomic statements, like the ones in Proverbs, do not declare invariable truth. Sometimes Yahweh’s action works for the benefit of hungry or infertile people, yet things had not worked that way for Hannah initially, or for Israel or the mothers in 2Samuel 21. Sometimes Yahweh’s action works to make people hungry, as it did in 2Samuel 21. There and in 2Samuel 24, the people are the victims of Yahweh’s action against their kings, as on other occasions they are the beneficiaries of his action on the kings’ behalf. In Israel’s world, as in the Western world, people are the victims and the beneficiaries of their leaders’ actions.

In effect, 2Samuel 21 makes its own related point about wombs, when it has mothers watching the fruit of their wombs die. In MT, Michal is one of the two mothers who has to do so, while in LXX, it is Merab. In Michal’s story, the mystery of a womb that does not open already found expression in 2Sam 6:23. After a spat between David and Michal, “Michal had no child, until the day of her death.” Was it because Yahweh closed her womb? The story doesn’t say so, as it did with Hannah. Was it because David never came near her? Was it because she didn’t wish to go near David? Given that 2Sam 21:8 MT refers to Michal having had five sons by Adriel, does 2Sam 6:23 refer only to children by David? Read in light of 2Sam 21 LXX, the statement in 6:23 becomes more provocative. There is another astonishing feature of the story of the mothers, and another puzzle. Two of the victims are the sons of Saul’s daughter Rizpah. While the story does not mention her womb, these are the sons of Rizpah’s רחם, and she is clearly a woman of רחמים. She cannot stop David having her sons slaughtered, but she can keep watch over their bodies to prevent the vultures and or wild animals consuming them, so that their bodies to be given decent burial.

First Samuel 1 illustrates how the closing and opening of wombs is a mysterious business. “Elqanah had sex with Hannah his wife, Yahweh was mindful of her, and Hannah got pregnant and had a son” (1Sam 1:19–20). There had been no previous pregnancy when Elqanah and Hannah had sex, but now there was no pregnancy without Elqanah and Hannah having sex. There had been no pregnancy when Yahweh closed Hannah’s womb, which implies he was mindful of her in a negative way. Now he is mindful of her in a positive way, and her womb opens.

The references to Yahweh closing Hannah’s womb and getting angry with Israel open up the mystery of Yahweh’s offensives. First Samuel offers no answer to the question why Yahweh closed Hannah’s womb (if narrators were omniscient, they would be able to answer such questions). Hannah and Abimelech’s womenfolk are the only people whose wombs Yahweh closes in the Tanak. The Tanak does not suggest that Yahweh’s action always lies behind inability to get pregnant, or for that matter that his action always lies behind the ability to get pregnant. In a sense every pregnancy requires Yahweh to open a womb, and every inability to conceive implies that Yahweh has closed the womb in question. As Hannah puts it, Yahweh puts to death and Yahweh makes alive (1Sam 2:6). Yet the Tanak does not speak that way. It uses the language of closing and opening only when Yahweh acts with particular deliberation.

While Ruth’s getting pregnant might have been just an ordinary “natural event,” within a few lines her son has become the grandfather of David. Yahweh’s purposefulness is surely involved. And if readers were not sure whether to hear the name of Saul when Hannah gives her son to Yahweh and uses the phrase within which people listening to the story could hear the name of Saul as she describes him as “asked for in connection with Yahweh” שאול ליהוה (1:28), then Hannah’s subsequent song of praise about Yahweh would encourage them to do so: “he will give strength to his king, and elevate the horn of his anointed one,” which is another way of making the same point (2:10). No, closing Hannah’s womb and then enabling her to get pregnant were not just examples of what Yahweh is regularly doing when someone cannot have a baby or has her first baby. They are example of things Yahweh does rarely, actions that count as signs and marvels.

The conviction that Yahweh has closed a womb, like the conviction that Yahweh’s anger has flared, is an inference from something that has actually happened or not happened. In Genesis as in Samuel, the motif of the open and closed womb features suggestively in exploring the relationship between Yahweh’s deliberate activity and things that just happen. Yahweh closes wombs in Egypt “because of Sarah” (Gen 20:18)—there is more than one way of reading the “because,” but the event involved deliberate action on Yahweh’s part that had a rationale behind it. And when Abimelech sorts things out and Abraham prays (פלל hitpalel, as in 1Sam 1:10, 12, 26, 27; 2:1), his womenfolk are able to get pregnant. Subsequently, Yahweh opens Leah’s womb when he sees that she is disliked (Gen 29:31), though Genesis doesn’t say that her womb had been closed. Likewise, when Rachel couldn’t get pregnant, Genesis doesn’t say that this reflected a deliberate action of closing on Yahweh’s part, but eventually, “God was mindful of Rachel and he listened to her” (30:22). We have not been told that she prayed, but she has said a number of things in connection with the situation that God might have been listening to. “And he opened her womb.” In connection with Jacob’s wives, Genesis more often uses the language of “getting pregnant” (הרה; e.g., 29:32; 30:23) than of opening wombs, as do 1Sam 1:20; 2:21. And without using the language of womb-opening, in the Ruth story and on the page preceding Hannah’s story in the Greek order of the Scriptures, Yahweh “gave her pregnancy” (הריון; Ruth 4:13). Which in turn resonates with Yahweh’s words to Eve, that he will “make very great the your pain [or toil or effort] and your pregnancy” (עצבונך והרנך; Gen 3:16). This expression is traditionally understood to refer to the pain of giving birth, but the hardness of motherhood that Eve soon experiences is something else, a little like that of the women in 2Samuel 21 (Gen 4:8). So is the difficulty that can be involved in getting pregnant at all.

The closing and opening of wombs, then, relates to Yahweh’s broad purpose with Israel. When the equivalent mystery at the end of 2Samuel begins with a famine (2Sam 21:1), the story doesn’t quite say that Yahweh caused it, but Yahweh does have an explanation for it (he is closer to being omniscient than narrators are). Something similar is true about the fertility or barrenness of land as is true of the fertility or barrenness of wombs. In general Yahweh may lie behind both. Sometimes there is a reason for famine in connection with Israel’s faithfulness or waywardness. Jeremiah and Ezekiel especially makes that connection in their day, and 2Sam 21:1 and 24:13 make the connection with famines and with the actions of Israel’s first two kings. Sometimes famines just happen, which might be true of the famines in Genesis and Ruth. Those narratives contain no suggestion that Yahweh causes them or that they relate to anyone’s faithlessness. In the Greek Bible’s order, the story in 1Samuel 1–2 of womb closing and pregnancy, and the affirmation about Yahweh’s ending hunger, follows that story in Ruth of hunger, pregnancy, and the birth of a son. There is no implication that Elimelech and Naomi do the wrong thing in moving to Moab when there was a famine, where there apparently was food, any more than is the case when Abraham and Sarah do so or when Isaac and Rebekah do so (in the latter case, Yahweh tells them not to go to Egypt, but it seems fine for them to move to Gerar). Yet in each case, problems follow. Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Rebekah, get in trouble with their host kings. Naomi loses her husband and her sons. It makes for further troublesome resonance with Hannah’s confession in 1Sam 2:5–6.

If we set 1Samuel 1–2 and 2Samuel 21–24 alongside each other, the reference to Yahweh’s רחמים does resonate with the reference to Hannah’s רחם and invite readers to infer that רחמים suggests womb-like feelings. Yes, Samuel as a whole indicates that Hannah would have been justified in thinking that it might work to appeal about her רחם to Yahweh as one characterized by רחמים. And the narrator was justified in hinting at this assumption and in making the almost unprecedented reference to Yahweh’s closing a womb. Yahweh and wombs, רؘؙחם and רחמים, are indeed related. Conversely, David can indeed take the risk of falling into Yahweh’s hand, because Samuel hints at a link between Yahweh, wombs, and compassion.

On the other hand, the concrete references to famine or hunger (רעב) in 2Sam 21:1 and 24:13 resonate more troublesomely with Hannah’s general declarations about hungry people (רעבים) in 1Sam 2:5. If Hannah’s confession is true, how does Israel come to experience three years of hunger? In effect, that is David’s question (2Sam 21:1). His question sends one back again to Hannah. Why didn’t she ask why Yahweh had closed her womb? That single other reference to Yahweh closing wombs might have made the question natural, given that Yahweh is not a regular womb-closer. Nor did Abimelech and his womenfolk ask the question, as far as we know. Perhaps being unable to get pregnant was a common enough experience, and the question hardly seemed worth asking. Further, if they had asked it, what would they have made of the reply? “We can’t get pregnant because that Hebrew told our chief a half-truth about his wife that led him to add her to his harem?” And perhaps the answer David received made him wish he hadn’t asked, or at least makes readers wish they hadn’t asked (as may also be the case with the Abimelech story). It issued from a covenant failure on the part of Saul, who had apparently slaughtered some Gibeonites, perhaps not wanting to get in trouble for letting them live in the way he had the Amalekites. But he had so acted notwithstanding the covenant commitment into which the Gibeonites had maneuvered Joshua by means of a cunning less-than-half truth. So there hangs over Israel unresolved bloodguilt (דמים, blood, bloodshed).

That in itself wouldn’t be too much of a problem. There are ways of resolving the stain brought by bloodshed. The problem is that David asks the Gibeonites what would resolve the offense for them, their response is “the blood of seven of Saul’s sons,” and David agrees to supply it. Is David doing as Yahweh would wish? Might he have consulted Yahweh about what to do? Anyway, he supplies it, and subsequently goes on to get Saul and Jonathan’s remains from Yabesh-gilead and give proper burial to them and to the seven men whose bodies have been impaled. It is then that Yahweh heeds supplication for the country. The logic is both more horrifying and more murky than the logic in Genesis 21 or in 1Samuel 1. Given the collocation of reference to רחם in 1Samuel 1 and רחמים in 2Samuel 24, with a protagonist praying and Yahweh answering in both chapters, dynamically the rationale of the chapters compares, but in 2Samuel 24, too, Yahweh causes loss in a way that receives some explanation but remains somewhat mysterious,

There is mystery about Yahweh’s closing and his opening, about his flaring and his compassion, about his discipline and his graces. It is, however, only a semi-mystery. In these stories, the actions are not only deliberate, but also also strategic. The stories show that the events they relate link with the broader mystery of Yahweh’s purpose with Israel (they compare with the idea of the acts of God). Their mystery is a cross between a רז (the word that recurs in Dan 2) and a μυστήριον (the Septuagint’s translation of רז, and Paul’s word in passages such as Rom 11:25). They presuppose that Yahweh is involved with Israel on a long-term basis and is pursuing his purpose for Israel, but that he is doing so in a way that is often bewildering. The famines and the pregnancies in Genesis, the famine, the losses, and the pregnancy in Ruth, the closing and the opening of Hannah’s womb, the flaring of Yahweh and his compassion, all play a part in the story running from Genesis through Kings and beyond. The suffering that Yahweh brought to Hannah and then the grace that he showed her relate to Hannah herself, but they more crucially relate to Israel and to the transition from everyone doing what is right in their own eyes to the introduction of kingship (the same applies to the suffering and the grace of Naomi and Ruth, and their menfolk). The actions that Yahweh takes towards David may relate to him personally, but they chiefly relate to his purpose for Israel: Yahweh’s flaring against Israel issues in David’s acquiring the site for building the temple and the making of offerings on an ongoing basis there.

1. If there are two verbs hadal (so *HALOT*), readers might take Hannah’s confession either way; it would be a neat paronomasia. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)