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HANNAH'S ADVERSITY AND PENINNAH'S REDEMPTION

Loren Spendlove

Abstract: *Most biblical students are familiar with the story of Hannah, who after years of barrenness, finally gave birth to the prophet Samuel. Some will remember her adversary, Peninnah, who allegedly tormented Hannah to tears. My objective in this article is to reclaim Peninnah's good name by reinterpreting the passage found in 1 Samuel 1:6.*

Imagine you are scrolling through Netflix and spot a movie that looks interesting, so you decide to watch it. When it ends you feel moved by its message. Interested in how others reacted, you get on your laptop and go to the movie's website. While reading comments left by other viewers, you notice that almost everyone is talking about one particular scene. The odd thing is that you don't remember that scene at all. Here is how one viewer summarized the scene:

Ken and Anna are sitting at a booth in a local diner. A young waitress, Pearl, approaches, hands them menus, and says something offensive to Anna, but Ken doesn't seem to notice. Anna, however, heard it and internalized it. When Pearl comes back to take their orders, she also takes the opportunity to get in another jab at Anna. When she brings the food to the table, she piles on yet more insults. Ken seems oblivious, but Anna is deeply hurt. She abruptly gets up from the booth and runs toward the front door, with Ken close behind. They both stop just outside the door of the diner and Ken embraces her. Unaware, he asks: "Anna, what's wrong? Why are you crying, and why won't you eat the meal we just ordered? Just then the door of the diner opens and out steps Pearl. She glances at the couple, gives Anna a nasty look, and then walks away.

When you finish reading this comment, the scene sounds even less familiar. You remember Ken and Anna standing outside of a building and hugging while she cried — it could have been a diner, you guess — but that is all you remember. So, you go back to Netflix, reload the movie, and skip to that scene. But, in your version of the movie, nothing comes before their embrace at the front door; Ken and Anna don't sit at a booth inside the building, and Pearl never talks to them. As you keep watching, a woman walks through the front door, glances at the couple, and walks off screen. Did she throw a “nasty” look at Anna? You don't think she did, but maybe you missed something. You rewind the scene and watch it again. This time you pause as the other woman looks over at Anna, and you notice that she is wearing a restaurant uniform, and she has a badge with the name *Pearl* on it. Those are details you never would have seen had you not paused the film. But does her glance appear mean-spirited? Not that you can tell. It seems more like just a curious look. And then the young woman walks away. After you turn off the TV, you sit and wonder if everyone else watched the director's cut while you saw an edited version of the movie. You even wonder if the other viewers were under some kind of mass hallucination. Either way, the whole situation leaves you puzzled and confused.

Does this sound far-fetched? Welcome to the story of Elkanah (Ken), Hannah (Anna), and Peninnah (Pearl). While most are familiar with the Old Testament story of Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, few would be able to recall much, if anything, about Peninnah. Together they are the polygynous wives of Elkanah (אֵלְקָנָה), an Israelite from the tribe of Levi.¹ In this biblical narrative Hannah is portrayed as the humble victim of Peninnah's continual taunting and verbal abuse. Additionally, nearly every commentary about this passage of scripture portrays Hannah as the protagonist and Peninnah as the antagonist, Hannah's rival.

Peninnah's name has even been used by some as an offensive epithet, much like calling someone a “Judas”:

In short who is a Peninah [sic]? A Peninah is an adversary. One who rejoices at the misfortune of others and provokes with spiteful and disdain[ful] words. The spirit of Peninah is that spirit of rejoicing at the misfortune of others. It's easy to have the spirit of Peninah especially when the misfortune of others has a tendency to make us look better.²

My objective in this article is to reevaluate the circumstances surrounding Hannah's childlessness and to attempt to rescue Peninnah

from the slander to which she has been subjected — undeservedly in my opinion — throughout the centuries.

Hannah, Samuel, and Peninnah

After years of childlessness Hannah made a vow to the Lord and was blessed with the birth of a son, Samuel. Due to that vow, once Samuel was weaned — probably around the age of two or three — Hannah left him in the care of Eli, the High Priest at the sanctuary. Below is the KJV translation of the events that led up to the birth of Samuel:

Now there was a certain man ... and his name was Elkanah ... and he had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah: and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. ... He loved Hannah: but the Lord had shut up her womb. And her adversary also provoked her sore, for to make her fret, because the Lord had shut up her womb.

And as he did so year by year, when she went up to the house of the Lord, so she provoked her; therefore she wept, and did not eat. Then said Elkanah her husband to her, Hannah, why weepest thou? and why eatest thou not? and why is thy heart grieved? am not I better to thee than ten sons? ...

Now Eli the priest sat upon a seat by a post of the temple of the Lord. And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the Lord, and wept sore. And she vowed a vow, and said, O Lord of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the Lord all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head.

And it came to pass, as she continued praying before the Lord, that Eli marked her mouth. Now Hannah, she spake in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard: therefore Eli thought she had been drunken. And Eli said unto her, How long wilt thou be drunken? put away thy wine from thee. And Hannah answered and said, No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but have poured out my soul before the Lord. Count not thine handmaid for a daughter of Belial:³ for out of the abundance of my complaint and grief have I spoken

hitherto. Then Eli answered and said, Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of him. And she said, Let thine handmaid find grace in thy sight. So the woman went her way, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad.⁴

And they rose up in the morning early, and worshipped before the Lord, and returned, and came to their house to Ramah: and Elkanah knew Hannah his wife; and the Lord remembered her. Wherefore it came to pass, when the time was come about after Hannah had conceived, that she bare a son, and called his name Samuel, saying, Because I have asked him of the Lord. (1 Samuel 1:1–20 KJV)

Hannah was beset with sadness and grief to the point that she cried frequently and even went for periods of time without eating. The KJV translation also adds another element that seems to have compounded her grief: an adversary who “provoked her sore” (1 Samuel 1:6). While unnamed in the Hebrew text, some English translations and most biblical commentators have chosen Peninnah — Elkanah’s other wife — as Hannah’s tormentor. An analysis of 54 English translations of the Bible revealed 15 that identify Peninnah by name as the “adversary.” For example, *The Voice* rendering of 1 Samuel 1:6 reads: “Peninnah used to infuriate Hannah until Hannah trembled with irritation because the Eternal had not given Hannah children.” In addition, most Christian theologians seem to have arrived at the same conclusion. Chuck Smith, a contemporary Christian pastor, opined on the opening chapter of 1 Samuel:

So the scene is set the man living in polygamy, two wives. One he loved more than the other. One had many children, but the one he really loved could not have any children. ... That is Hannah’s adversary, or *the other wife*. So there was friction in the house between the two wives as they [bid] for the attention and the love of the one man. As I said this morning, any man’s a fool who thinks that he can satisfy all of the needs of two women. You’re bound to have problems. So they did [emphasis mine].⁵

Adam Clarke, an early 19th century Methodist theologian, also expressed his opinion on the identity of Hannah’s “adversary.”

Verse 6. **And her adversary]** That is, Peninnah.

Provoked her sore] Was constantly striving to irritate and vex her, to make her fret-to make her discontented with her lot, because the Lord had denied her children.

Verse 7. **And as he did so year by year]** As the whole family went up to Shiloh to the annual festivals, Peninnah had both *sons* and *daughters* to accompany her, [1 Samuel 1:4], but Hannah had none; and Peninnah took this opportunity particularly to twit Hannah with her barrenness, by making an ostentatious exhibition of her children.⁶ [*emphasis original*]

Like Chuck Smith and Adam Clarke, early 18th century minister Matthew Henry also identified Peninnah, the other wife, as the “adversary.” Henry, however, went even further; he seems to have created his own midrash on 1 Samuel. Henry wrote:

Peninnah was *extremely peevish and provoking*. [1.] She *upbraided* Hannah with her affliction, *despised* her because she was barren, and *gave her taunting language*, as one whom Heaven did not favour. [2.] She *envied* the interest she had in the love of Elkanah, and the more kind he was to her, the more was she *exasperated against her*; which was all over *base and barbarous*. [3.] She did this most when they went up to the house of the Lord, perhaps, because then they were more together than at other times, or because then Elkanah showed his affection most to Hannah. But it was very sinful at such a time to show her *malice*, when pure hands were to be lifted up at God’s altar without wrath and quarrelling. It was likewise very *unkind* at that time to *vex* Hannah, not only because then they were in company, and others would take notice of it, but then Hannah was to mind her devotions, and desired to be most calm and composed, and free from disturbance. The *great adversary* to our purity and peace is then most industrious to ruffle us, when we should be most composed. When the sons of God come to present themselves before the Lord, *Satan* will be sure to come among them, Job 1. 6. [4.] She continued to do this from year to year, not once or twice, but it was her *constant practice*; neither deference to her husband nor compassion to Hannah, could break her of it; and Lastly, That which she designed, was, to *make her fret*; perhaps in hopes to *break her heart*, that she might possess her husband’s heart solely. Or, because she *took a pleasure in*

her uneasiness: nor could Hannah gratify her more than by fretting.⁷

Not only did Henry paint Peninnah in a very negative light, he even compared the actions and attitudes that *he attributed to her* with those of the “great adversary,” even Satan. While most of what Henry ascribed to Peninnah cannot be found in the KJV text itself, his opinion seems to reflect that of the majority of Christian commentators: as Hannah’s oppressor and adversary, Peninnah was a small, spiteful, jealous rival who enjoyed tormenting Hannah. In fact, 1 Samuel 1:2 can even be interpreted as setting up the confrontation between the two women with a chiasm:

A	the name of the one was Hannah,
B	and the name of the [second] Peninnah:
B’	and Peninnah had children,
A’	but Hannah had no children.

Latter-day Saint teachings about Hannah also identify Peninnah as her tormentor. While not portraying Peninnah with the same strong language used by Henry, some Latter-day Saint publications recognize Hannah as the victim of Peninnah’s spiteful provocation:

Hannah’s sorrows were further magnified by the reproaches of Elkanah’s other wife, Peninnah, who had borne him many children (see 1 Samuel 1:4). Certainly each child Peninnah bore would have deepened Hannah’s anguish over her own apparent barrenness. To make matters worse, Peninnah ‘provoked her sore’ for being barren (see 1 Samuel 1:6).⁸

Notice the phrase “her adversary also provoked her sore, for to make her fret” in 1 Samuel 1:6. This phrase means that someone, possibly Peninnah, was striving to upset Hannah because of Hannah’s inability to have children.⁹

Was Peninnah Hannah’s Adversary?

If we rely solely on English translations of the Bible, the commentaries of theologians, and religious instructional materials it seems apparent that Peninnah was indeed Hannah’s adversary and tormentor. However, a study of the Hebrew text possibly reveals a more plausible answer. Focusing only on verses 6 and 7 from 1 Samuel, we read:

And her adversary [צרתה *tsaratah*] also provoked her sore [וכעסתה צרתה גם-כעס] *ve'khiasattah tsaratah gam-kaas*], for to make her fret [הרעמה *ha'reimah*], because the Lord had shut up her womb. And as he did so year by year, when she went up to the house of the Lord so she provoked her [תכעסנה *takhisennah*]; therefore she wept, and did not eat.

Twice in these two verses the KJV renders the Hebrew verbs derived from the root כ-ע-ס (*k-'a-s*) as *provoked*. However, Koehler and Baumgartner (hereafter HALOT) inform us that a more appropriate translation for כ-ע-ס (*k-'a-s*) in these verses would be to *grieve*.¹⁰ So, rather than *provoking* Hannah, her “adversary” caused her to *grieve*. The action of *provoking* someone seems to imply intentional malice. On the other hand, it is altogether possible to be the cause of someone’s grief without any malicious intent.

In addition, the KJV renders the verb הרעמה (*ha'reimah*) — from the root ר-ע-מ (*r-'a-m*) — as *to make her fret*. Again, HALOT provides a different understanding with regard to the verb’s usage in 1 Samuel 1:6. In this verse, the verb is expressed in the Hiphil form, and can be understood as either causative or transitive.¹¹ Based on context, it is most likely that the verb should be understood as causative. Given these two verbal modifications, verse 6 could be reworked as: “And her adversary also *grieved her much, causing her to be depressed*, because the Lord had shut up her womb.”

But, we are not done with our analysis of the Hebrew in this passage; one more KJV word choice needs to be reconsidered: *her adversary*. The Hebrew word for *her adversary* in this verse is צרתה (*tsaratah*), which is derived from the noun צרה (*tsarah*). This noun is used quite frequently in the Hebrew Bible (73 times) and is translated as follows in the KJV:

Table 1

Translation	Qty
Trouble	44
Distress	8
Affliction	7
Adversity	5
Anguish	5
Tribulation	3
Adversary	1
Total	73

As shown in Table 1, with the exception of its usage in 1 Samuel 1:6, the KJV always translates the noun צרה (*tsarah*) as one of the following synonyms or near-synonyms: *trouble*, *distress*, *affliction*, *adversity*, *anguish*, or *tribulation*. It is important to point out that none of these 73 usages, with the possible exception of 1 Samuel 1:6, refers to a person. Rather, these verses in question always reference a situation, period of time, or emotional state in which people in the Hebrew Bible find themselves. For example: “I will make there an altar unto God, who answered me in the day of *my distress* [צרתִי *tsarati*]” (Genesis 35:3); “and cry unto thee *in our affliction* [מצרתנו *mi’tsaratenu*]” (2 Chronicles 20:9); or, “O the hope of Israel, the saviour thereof in time of *trouble* [צרה *tsarah*]” (Jeremiah 14:8). As such, the KJV’s word choice in 1 Samuel 1:6 — *adversary* — seems out of harmony with all other translations of the noun צרה (*tsarah*). Why, then, does the KJV translate this noun in 1 Samuel 1:6 as *adversary* when in all other instances it renders it as *trouble* or one of its near-synonyms? This is an important question, and the key to reclaiming Peninnah. Rather than *adversary*, if we choose one of the other words in Table 1 — I have chosen *adversity* due to its shared linguistic derivation with *adversary* — we can more fully rework this passage. In Table 2, I contrast 1 Samuel 1:6–7 from the KJV, Young’s Literal Translation (YLT), and the reworked passage:

Table 2

KJV	YLT	Reworked
And <i>her adversary</i> also provoked her sore, for to make her fret, because the Lord had shut up her womb. And as he did so year by year, when she went up to the house of the Lord, so she provoked her; therefore she wept, and did not eat.	And <i>her adversity</i> hath also provoked her greatly, so as to make her tremble, for Jehovah hath shut up her womb. And so he doth year by year, from the time of her going up into the house of Jehovah, so it ¹² provoketh her, and she weepeth, and doth not eat.	And <i>her adversity</i> also grieved her much, causing her to be depressed, because the Lord had shut up her womb. And as he did so year by year, when she went up to the house of the Lord, so it grieved her; therefore she wept, and did not eat.

Like the reworked passage, YLT renders צרתה (*tsaratah*) as *her adversity* rather than *her adversary*. Of the 54 English translations that I studied, YLT was the only one to render this word as *her adversity*. All other translations followed the KJV by identifying צרתה (*tsaratah*) as a person rather than as *trouble* or one of its synonymous terms (see Table 3 below):

Table 3

Translation	Qty
Rival	34
Peninnah	15
Adversary	7
Rival wife	2
Enemy	1
Adversity	1
Total ¹³	60

However, reinterpreting 1 Samuel 1:6–7 as shown in the reworked passage in Table 2 above yields several favorable outcomes. First, the interpretation of the noun צָרָתָה (*tsaratah*) as *her adversity* (or another near-synonym) aligns with the overall meaning of the word in the Hebrew Bible. On the other hand, *her adversary* requires a special understanding of the word for this single verse. Second, by adding the final line of verse 5 to verse 6 an elegant chiasmic structure is revealed (see Table 4 below):

Table 4

	KJV	Reworked
A	but the Lord had shut up her womb.	And the Lord had shut her womb.
B ₁	And <i>her adversary</i>	And <i>her adversity</i>
B ₂	also provoked her sore,	also grieved her much,
B ₃	for to make her fret,	causing her to be depressed,
A'	because the Lord had shut up her womb.	because the Lord had shut her womb.

While both the KJV and the reworked passage can be expressed as chiasms, the reworked passage seems to present a better symmetry. In the reworked passage, Hannah's adversity — a metonym for her closed womb — is parallel with the grief and depression that she feels, and adversity, grief, and depression can be described as synonymous terms. In addition, this passage steers our attention away from an alleged adversary and redirects it to the real source of Hannah's grief, her *closed womb*. On the other hand, in the KJV passage *her adversary* is not truly parallel with lines B₂ or B₃.

Finally, rather than *her adversary* — Peninnah — *provoking* her, the idea that Hannah's *adversity* (her barrenness) caused her to grieve is a better fit with 1 Samuel 1:10–11. From this verse it seems reasonable to conclude that Hannah's affliction — her barrenness — was the cause of her *bitterness of soul*:

And she was in bitterness of soul [מרת נפש *marat nafesh*], and prayed unto the Lord, and wept sore. And she vowed a vow, and said, O Lord of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look *on the affliction* [בעני *ba'oni*] of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child

In this passage Hannah prays for the thing that truly afflicts her, her inability to have a son. So, why has Peninnah been scapegoated for so long and by so many? To answer that question we need to dive into the early Jewish texts (the Septuagint, Jewish historians, and rabbinic sages) and into the early Christian texts (the early church fathers and the Latin Vulgate).

Early Jewish Writings

Septuagint — circa 200 BCE, and approximately 900 years after Hannah and Peninnah

The Greek Septuagint translation (hereafter LXX) of 1 Samuel 1 renders these verses in a very similar way to our reworked passage. For comparison, I show the KJV, LXX, and reworked passages in Table 5.

Table 5

Verse	KJV	LXX	Reworked
5	... but the LORD had shut up her womb.	... and the Lord had shut up her womb.	... and the LORD had shut her womb.
6	And <i>her adversary</i> also <i>provoked</i> her sore, for to <i>make her fret</i> , because the LORD had shut up her womb.	For the Lord gave her no child in <i>her affliction</i> , and according to the <i>despondency of her affliction</i> ; and she was <i>dispirited</i> on this account, that the Lord shut up her womb so as not to give her a child.	And <i>her adversity</i> also <i>grieved her much</i> , <i>causing her to be depressed</i> , because the LORD had shut her womb.
7	And as he did so year by year, when she went up to the house of the LORD, so <i>she provoked her</i> ; therefore she wept, and did not eat.	So she did year by year, in going up to the house of the Lord; and <i>she was dispirited</i> , and wept, and did not eat.	And as he did so year by year, when she went up to the house of the LORD, so <i>it grieved her</i> ; therefore she wept, and did not eat.

As the earliest known interpretation of the Hebrew text, the LXX translation of this verse supports the rendering of the reworked passage.

Without any mention of an adversary, the LXX links the idea that “the Lord gave her no child” with “her affliction.” This affliction, in turn, caused Hannah to become despondent and dispirited. Since the LXX was the source document for the translation of the Old Latin texts (*Vetus Latinae*), the LXX’s understanding of these passages would have been taught among Christian churches until the Latin Vulgate eventually replaced both the LXX and the *Vetus Latinae*, becoming the dominant textual tradition in the church.

Josephus — circa 100 CE, and approximately 1,200 years after Hannah and Peninnah

The earliest written commentary that mentions Peninnah comes from the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. With regard to 1 Samuel 1:1–20, Josephus wrote the following in his work *Antiquities of the Jews*, which he finished toward the end of the 1st century CE:

Elcanah, a Levite, one of a middle condition among his fellow citizens, and one that dwelt at Ramathaim, a city of the tribe of Ephraim, married two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. He had children by the latter; but he loved the other best, although she was barren. Now Elcanah came with his wives to the city Shiloh to sacrifice, for there it was that the tabernacle of God was fixed, as we have formerly said. Now when, after he had sacrificed, he distributed at that festival portions of the flesh to his wives and children, *and when Hannah saw the other wife’s children sitting round about their mother, she fell into tears, and lamented herself on account of her barrenness and lonesomeness; and suffering her grief to prevail over her husband’s consolations to her, she went to the tabernacle to beseech God to give her seed, and to make her a mother; and to vow to consecrate the first son she should bear to the service of God, and this in such a way, that his manner of living should not be like that of ordinary men. And as she continued at her prayers a long time, Eli, the high priest, for he sat there before the tabernacle, bid her go away, thinking she had been disordered with wine; but when she said she had drunk water, but was in sorrow for want of children, and was beseeching God for them, he bid her be of good cheer, and told her that God would send her children. So she came to her husband full of hope, and ate her meal with gladness. And when they had returned to their own country she found*

herself with child, and they had a son born to them, to whom they gave the name of Samuel, which may be styled one that was asked of God [emphasis mine].¹⁴

Absent from Josephus' commentary is any idea that Penninah was an "adversary" to Hannah. In fact, he specifically states that "when Hannah saw the other wife's children sitting round about their mother, she fell into tears, and lamented herself on account of her barrenness and lonesomeness." Again, when Hannah was in the tabernacle praying, Josephus affirms that she "was in sorrow for want of children." This retelling of the story harmonizes well with the reworked passage and with the LXX. According to Josephus, it was Hannah's *adversity* — *her barrenness and lonesomeness* — that grieved her, not Peninnah. Rather than portraying her as Hannah's adversary, Josephus casts Peninnah in a passive role, as a mother merely sitting with her children. Camille Fronk Olson added:

Of importance, neither the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), nor Josephus the Jewish historian makes any mention of Peninnah taunting Hannah to tears. More specifically, the parallel Septuagint passage of verses 6–7 reads: "For the Lord gave her no child in her affliction, and according to the despondency of her affliction; and she was dispirited on this account, that the Lord shut up her womb so as not to give her a child. So she did year by year, in going up to the house of the Lord; and she was dispirited, and wept, and did not eat." According to this account, Hannah was not vexed by Peninnah, but depressed by her empty life. She had plenty of heartache because the Lord had closed up her womb without considering Peninnah as a source of conflict. The narrative provided by the Septuagint is a hopeful clarification to the traditional interpretation of the relationship between Peninnah and Hannah.¹⁵

Pseudo Philo¹⁶ — date uncertain

Dates for the authorship of *Biblical Antiquities* range anywhere from the early 1st century CE to the 4th century CE, a broad window. Of interest to our study is the midrashic commentary about Peninnah found in this book. In it our previously mute Peninnah suddenly develops a voice, and a savage one at that:

Now [whereas] Elchana had two wives, the name of the one was Anna and the name of the other Phenenna. And because Phenenna had sons, and Anna had none, Phenenna reproached her, saying: What profiteth it thee that Elchana thine husband loveth thee? but thou art a dry tree. I know moreover that he will love me, because he delighteth to see my sons standing about him like the planting of an oliveyard. And so it was, when she reproached her every day, and Anna was very sore at heart, and she feared God from her youth, it came to pass when the good day of the passover drew on, and her husband went up to do sacrifice, that Phenenna reviled Anna saying: A woman is not *indeed* beloved even if her husband love her or her beauty. Let not Anna therefore boast herself of her beauty, but he that boasteth let him boast when he seeth his seed before his face; and when it is not so among women, even the fruit of their womb, then shall love become of no account. For what profit was it unto Rachel that Jacob loved her? except there had been given her the fruit of her womb, *surely* his love would have been to no purpose? And when Anna heard that, her soul was melted within her and *her eyes* ran down with tears. And her husband saw her and said: *Wherefore art thou sad, and eatest not, and why is thy heart within thee cast down?* Is not thy behaviour better than the ten sons of Phenenna?... And Anna prayed and said: Hast not thou, O Lord, examined the heart of all generations before thou formedst the world? But what is the womb that is born open, or what one that is shut up dieth, except thou will it? And now let my prayer go up before thee this day, lest I go down hence empty, for thou knowest my heart, how I have walked before thee from the days of my youth. And Anna would not pray aloud as do all men, for she took thought at that time saying: Lest perchance I be not worthy to be heard, and it shall be that Phenenna will envy me yet more and reproach me as she daily saith: Where is thy God in whom thou trustest? And I know that it is not she that hath many sons that is enriched, neither she that lacketh them is poor, but whoso aboundeth in the will of God, she is enriched. For they that know for what I have prayed, if they perceive that I am not heard in my prayer, will blaspheme. And I shall not only have a witness in mine

own soul, for my tears also are handmaidens of my prayers
[emphasis original].¹⁷

This midrash from Pseudo-Philo is a vast departure from the LXX and Josephus. In fact, its style and content are reflective of the passages from the Bava Batra and the Pesikta Rabbati that follow.

Bava Batra — circa 500 CE, and approximately 1,600 years after Hannah and Peninnah

Tractate Bava Batra in the Babylonian Talmud tells us the following:

Rabbi Levi says: Both Satan, who brought accusations against Job, and *Peninnah*, who tormented *Hannah*, mother of Samuel the prophet, acted with intent that was for the sake of Heaven. As for Satan, when he saw that the Holy One, Blessed be He, inclined to favor Job and praised him, he said: Heaven forbid that He should forget the love of Abraham. With regard to *Peninnah*, as it is written: “And her rival wife also provoked her sore, to make her fret” (I Samuel 1:6), i.e., *Peninnah* upset *Hannah* in order to motivate her to pray [emphasis mine].¹⁸

In this passage in the Bava Batra, as in Pseudo-Philo, *Peninnah* has become *Hannah*’s tormentor. However, the Bava Batra also states that *Peninnah*’s intentions were good; she merely wanted to motivate *Hannah* to pray so that God could bless her with a child. So, this portrayal of *Peninnah* depicts her as more of a *misguided ally* than a true *adversary*.

Pesikta Rabbati — circa 850 CE, and approximately 1,950 years after Hannah and Peninnah

The *Pesikta Rabbati* is a collection of aggadic¹⁹ midrashim, or homilies. The following midrash about *Elkanah*, *Hannah*, and *Peninnah* begins by explaining why and when *Elkanah* married *Peninnah*:

Ten years she [*Hannah*] lived with him and did not give birth, and he took *Peninnah* who gave him ten sons which is why *Elkanah* said to *Hannah*: Am I not better to thee than ten sons?²⁰

This short passage attempts to provide answers to a few questions left unanswered in the text of 1 Samuel, namely: 1. Why was *Elkanah* married to two wives at the same time? 2. When did he marry *Peninnah*? and, 3. Why did *Elkanah* tell *Hannah* that he was better to her than ten sons? The midrash explained that *Elkanah* only married *Peninnah*

after Hannah was unable to bare children during their first ten years of marriage. This seems to be an attempt to align his motives with the following teaching from the Mishnah:

If a man married a woman and stayed with her for ten years and she did not give birth, he is no longer permitted to neglect the mitzva [commandment] to be fruitful and multiply. Consequently, he must either divorce her and marry someone else, or take another wife while still married to her.²¹

So, following this teaching from the Mishnah, Elkanah would have been required to take a second wife due to Hannah's barrenness. This effort to exculpate Elkanah for his polygynous marriage to Peninnah is laudable, but most likely anachronistic. While the Mishnah was completed in the early 3rd century CE, the marriage of Peninnah to Elkanah would have preceded it by approximately 1,300 years, and a millennia before the halakha (rabbinic laws and decrees) could have been codified.

In addition, the midrash creates some chronological issues based on the delay of marrying Peninnah, her giving birth to ten children, and Hannah's conception of Samuel. If we assume that Hannah was fifteen years old when she married Elkanah, she would have been twenty-five when he married Peninnah. If Peninnah gave birth to ten sons — perhaps more properly ten children — before Hannah conceived Samuel, and assuming that these births were spaced two years apart, then another twenty-one years, at a minimum, would have passed before Hannah became pregnant with Samuel. This means that Hannah would have been around 46 when she conceived Samuel and perhaps 47 when he was born. When Hannah left him with Eli, Samuel most likely would have been at least two years old (1 Samuel 1:24), making Hannah at least 49. In 1 Samuel 2:21 we learn that Hannah went on to give birth to three more sons and two daughters. Again, if we space these births two years apart Hannah would have been nearing 60 by the time her last child was born. At such an advanced age, this seems improbable. A far more likely scenario is that Hannah and Peninnah were married to Elkanah within a few years of each other, and that Peninnah only had a handful of children when Hannah became pregnant with Samuel.²²

In this next passage from the *Pesikta Rabbati* we continue to see the formation of current Jewish views on Peninnah. While the LXX and Josephus cast Peninnah in a passive role, the *Bava Batra* depicts her as a supportive but misguided ally to Hannah. On the other hand, the

Pesikta Rabbati, more in line with *Biblical Antiquities*, frames Peninnah as the jealous, petty, and vindictive person that we know today:

Rabbi Nachman Bar Abba said that Peninah would rise early in the morning and say to Hannah: Are you not preparing to wash the faces of your children so they can go to school? And six hours later she would say to her: Hannah, are you not preparing to receive your children who come home from school?²³

In this passage we are introduced to the injurious words that Peninnah allegedly spoke to Hannah to provoke her to despair. Clearly, this recreated monologue could not have survived for 1,900 years without entering the realm of legend. Like the first midrash from the Pesikta Rabbati, this midrash also seems to contain an anachronism. It is not likely that formal schools (בתי ספר *betei sefer*) even existed in pre-monarchic Israel. Scholars presuppose “the presence of schools for scribes linked to the crown by David’s time. By the seventh century literacy is assumed for the general populace.”²⁴ In other words, almost certainly schools for children would not have existed in Israel around 1,100 BCE. Louis Ginzberg aptly noted:

It has been held by some that the Haggadah²⁵ contains no popular legends, that it is wholly a factitious, academic product. A cursory glance at the pseudepigraphic literature of the Jews, which is older than the Haggadah literature by several centuries, shows how untenable this view is.²⁶

In other words, midrashim are ripe with legends and folklore, and these midrashim under study here are no different. All cultures, in fact, are infused with folkloric traditions, but rarely are these traditions believed to be historically true. For example, we are not expected to uncritically accept the historicity of Paul Bunyan or Robin Hood. These midrashim composed nearly 2,000 years after the fact are no different.

The Pesikta Rabbati contributes one final midrash to our story of Hannah and Peninnah:

Hannah would give birth to one child, and Peninnah would bury two; Hannah bore four, and Peninnah buried eight. When Hannah was pregnant with her fifth child, Peninnah feared that now she would bury her last two children. What did she do? She went to Hannah and told her: “I know that I have sinned against you. I beg you, pray for me, so that my

two remaining sons will live.” Hannah prayed to God, and said: “Please, leave her the two sons and let them live.” God responded: “By your life, they deserve to die, but since you have prayed that they live, I will call them by your name.”²⁷

As a punishment for tormenting Hannah, every time that Hannah gave birth to a child two of Peninnah's children would die. When only two of Peninnah's ten children were left alive Hannah interceded for them. According to the midrash, God spared their lives and, taking them from Peninnah, gave them to Hannah. This midrash seems to provide a solution for a verse in Hannah's song: “They that were full have hired out themselves for bread; and they that were hungry ceased: so that the barren hath born seven; and she that hath many children is waxed feeble” (1 Samuel 2:5).

Again, how seriously should we take this midrash? Does it accurately represent an actual event, or is it more likely the imaginative deliberations of rabbis trying to make sense of the sacred text? Ginzberg again responded:

The teachers of the Haggadah, called Rabbanan d'Aggadta in the Talmud, were no folklorists, from whom a faithful reproduction of legendary material may be expected. Primarily they were homilists, who used legends for didactic purposes, and their main object was to establish a close connection between the Scripture and the creations of the popular fancy, to give the latter a firm basis and secure a long term of life for them.²⁸

Rashi — circa 1,100 CE, and approximately 2,200 years after Hannah and Peninnah

Shlomo Yitzchaki, commonly known as Rashi, was an eminent medieval rabbi who wrote extensively on the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud. Regarding Peninnah, Rashi primarily synthesized the writings of earlier rabbis. Below is his commentary for the verses from 1 Samuel 1:

Verse 6:

Her rival. Her husband's other wife, Peninnah.

Frequently anger. Anger after anger, i.e., always.' Therefore it is written 'also anger.' She would say to her, “Did you buy your older son a cloak today, or your younger son, a shirt?”

In order that she should complain. In order to make her

complain. Our Rabbis explain, ‘in order to make her storm,’ that she pray. Peninnah had good intentions.²⁹

Verse 7:

Year after year. He would give her a choice portion to demonstrate to her that he loved her; and her rival, according to the affection which her husband demonstrated to her, would anger her more and more.³⁰

Verse 8:

Than ten sons. That Peninnah has borne to me.³¹

Verse 16:

Do not deliver your maidservant. Because she had spoken harshly to him, she tried to appease him, so that he deliver her not, unprotected and disgraced, to her rival, the wicked woman.³²

By Rashi’s time the mold was set; even though she may have had good intentions, Peninnah was the “*rival, the wicked woman,*” and there would be no redeeming her from her misdirected motives. The question we need to ask is why Peninnah morphed from her passive role as the other wife of Elkanah to this active role as tormentor and adversary to Hannah? One possible answer can be found in the stories of the ancient matriarchs Sarah and Rachel. Like Hannah, both of these women were barren; both had to endure their infertility while their rivals — Hagar and Leah — had children; and both eventually gave birth to a special son. It is possible that the rabbis desired to elevate Hannah — the mother of Samuel, one of the greatest prophets in Israel — to a status on par with these ancient matriarchs. However, to truly belong in their company she needed an appropriate rival, and Peninnah was an easy, voiceless target.

Early Christian Writings and a Bridge to Christianity

These beliefs regarding Peninnah seem to have spread from the world of Rabbinic Judaism and into Christian belief, but how? As previously mentioned, Matthew Henry, the early 18th century Christian minister, lambasted Peninnah in his commentary on 1 Samuel. We also know that Henry was acutely aware of Jewish traditions concerning her. Referencing Hannah’s song, Henry wrote:

The barren hath borne seven, while, on the other hand, she that hath many children, has waxed feeble, and hath left bearing; she says no more, Peninnah is now mortified and crest-fallen.

The tradition of the Jews, is, that when Hannah bore one child Peninnah buried two.³³

Not only does Henry's comment about "the tradition of the Jews" show awareness of their beliefs about Peninnah, it also seems to endorse them. But, how did these rabbinic ideas about Peninnah spread to Christianity?

Cyprian

Writing in the middle of the 3rd century, one of the earliest church fathers to write about Peninnah was Cyprian. Like the LXX and Josephus, Cyprian casts her in a neutral light; Peninnah is present in Hannah's story, but nothing more:

And in the first of Kings it is said that Elkanah had two wives: Peninnah, with her sons; and Hannah, barren, from whom is born Samuel, not according to the order of generation, but according to the mercy and promise of God, when she had prayed in the temple; and Samuel being born, was a type of Christ.³⁴

Gregory Nazianzen

As the Archbishop of Constantinople during the latter part of the 4th century, Gregory Nazianzen wrote about Peninnah's and Hannah's children, but not about any conflict between the two women. As a pre-Latin Vulgate theologian, Nazianzen seems to be unaware of any adversarial relationship:

Peninnah who had "many" children is called Imperfect in her children, because Many is an indefinite word; where Hannah's one child Samuel was so perfect a man that he was as it were seven to his mother. For Seven is mystically, as Six or Ten is arithmetically, the perfect number.³⁵

Augustine

While Augustine makes no direct references to Peninnah, he does comment on Hannah's (Anna) barrenness on several occasions. For example:³⁶

Two women of the name of Anna are honourably named there — the one, Elkanah's wife, who was the mother of holy Samuel; the other, the widow who recognized the Most Holy

One when He was yet a babe. The former, though married, prayed with sorrow of mind and brokenness of heart because she had no sons; and she obtained Samuel, and dedicated him to the Lord, because she vowed to do so when she prayed for him.³⁷

Peninnah's absence in Augustine's commentary is significant. Not proficient in Greek, Augustine used various translations of the old Latin texts of the Bible — the *Vetus Latinae* — in his writing and preaching. Since these texts were translated from the LXX they undoubtedly portrayed Peninnah as a passive participant in Hannah's story. Even though he was a Latin church father, Augustine did not use or approve of Jerome's Latin Vulgate translation which relied on the Hebrew text for its source of translation for the Old Testament. In one of his letters to Jerome, Augustine wrote:

But I beseech you not to devote your labour to the work of translating into Latin the sacred canonical books, unless you follow the method in which you have translated Job, viz. with the addition of notes, to let it be seen plainly what differences there are between this version of yours and that of the LXX, whose authority is worthy of highest esteem. For my own part, I cannot sufficiently express my wonder that anything should at this date be found in the Hebrew mss. which escaped so many translators perfectly acquainted with the language.³⁸

Perhaps unaware that the Jerome's Latin Vulgate had recast Peninnah as Hannah's rival and adversary (see below) in accordance with rabbinic tradition, Augustine did not cast Peninnah in that role.

Jerome and the Latin Vulgate

Tasked with the responsibility of creating a new Latin translation of the Bible, Jerome relocated to Bethlehem in approximately 388 CE. Believing the Hebrew Bible to be superior to the various Latin texts of the Bible and to the Greek LXX, he began his new Latin translation — known as the Latin Vulgate — around 390 CE. While skilled in both Latin and Greek, Jerome lacked sufficient knowledge of Hebrew to adequately translate the text, so he surrounded himself with Hebrew teachers that assisted him. By 392 CE Jerome had finished his translation of the book of Samuel.³⁹ His translation of 1 Samuel 1:6 from Hebrew into Latin (with English below) reads:

Affligebat quoque eam æmula eius, et vehementer angebat, in tantum, ut exprobraret quod Dominus conclusisset vulvam eius.

Her *rival/enemy* [æmula] also *afflicted* [affligebat] her, and *troubled* [angebat] her exceedingly, insomuch that she *upbraided* [exprobraret] her, that the Lord had shut up her womb.

The key word in Jerome's Latin translation is *æmula*, a noun derived from *æmulus*. According to Harper's Latin dictionary, *æmulus* can be defined as "a rival," or as it applies specifically to 1 Samuel 1:6, "an enemy."⁴⁰ Rather than following the LXX translation of צרתה (*tsaratah*) as "her adversity," Jerome chose a different path and rendered the Hebrew word צרתה (*tsaratah*) as "her rival/enemy" in Latin. But why? What could have influenced Jerome to translate this one word in a way that so dramatically altered our understanding of the verse and of the dynamics related to Hannah and Peninnah? In short, rabbinic influence; Jerome's teachers instructed him in the Hebrew language and in the rabbinic exegesis of the biblical text. Dominik Markl observed:

Jerome not only attempted to engage with the towering teachers of the Bible past and present and to visit the most famous centres of learning, he also explored atypical paths of research. He frequently interacted with Jews, not only to study Hebrew, but also to benefit from their knowledge of the Rabbinic tradition of biblical interpretation.⁴¹

Jerome's teachers were proficient in biblical Hebrew and in the rabbinic interpretation of the text, and they passed along that interpretation to Jerome. Megan Hale Williams adds:

Jerome, alone among non-Jewish writers of Late Antiquity whose works survive intact, makes abundant and well-informed reference to Jews, to Jewish custom, and above all to Jewish biblical interpretation. He attributes this knowledge not to Jewish literary sources but to oral instruction from Jewish informants, whom he repeatedly describes as Jews recognized as authorities among their own people. Contrary to what has sometimes been claimed, Jerome's information about Jewish matters is generally good. Many of the interpretations he cites as Jewish are paralleled in Jewish literature from antiquity; others exhibit the distinctive traits of the Jewish exegesis we know from those literary sources. We have no reason not to

believe Jerome when he claims to have made strenuous efforts to learn as much as he could of Jewish biblical interpretation, nor to doubt his ultimate success.⁴²

According to Benjamin Kedar-Kopfstein, Jerome was often guided in his translation of the Hebrew text, and therefore in its exegesis, by his Hebrew guides:

The stock example is, of course, the verse in the denunciation of Shebna (Isa. 22.15–19) in which Jerome substitutes Latin *gallus gallinaceus*, ‘a poultry-cock’, for Hebrew גבר, ‘man’, because that is what his Hebrew teacher had instructed him to do (cf. Rashi and Kimchi) in accordance with postbiblical Hebrew.⁴³

A phrase that Jerome used quite frequently in his writings was *Hebraica veritas*. By the use of this term he appears to be describing the Hebrew text of the Bible coupled with the rabbinic interpretation of the text. Michael Graves commented:

Jerome seems to have used rabbinic traditions and the direct study of the Hebrew text (the two being closely associated in Jerome’s mind) as a means to interpret and correct his Greek sources, intending thereby to obtain a more accurate understanding of the *Hebraica veritas* than his Greek and Latin predecessors.⁴⁴

Kedar-Kopfstein noted that Jerome also appears to have referenced rabbinic midrashim while translating the Hebrew text into Latin:

When Jerome deems a phrase incomplete he may add some explanatory words; more often than not these reflect some midrash. The question איה שקל, ‘where is he that weighs’ (Isaiah 33.18) sounds somewhat perplexing in its Hebrew terseness. The Vulgate has *ubi legis verba ponderans*, ‘where is he who weighs the words of the law’; this corresponds exactly to the Talmudic explanation שהיו שוקלין קלין וחמרוין שבתורה (Hag. 15b.), ‘they used to weigh the easier matters as well as the grave ones in the Torah’.⁴⁵

Jerome himself provided a methodology of his translation in his commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes:

In the preface to his commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes, Jerome states that he first turned to the Hebrew text, and discerned its meaning. He then compared his results with

the Rabbinical interpretation. After, Jerome considered the Septuagint and used it whenever it did not stray from the original, consulted the later Greek translators, especially Symmachus, and finally tried to leave intact as much of the Old Latin version as possible.⁴⁶

So, Jerome placed rabbinic interpretation of the biblical text high on his list of translation methodologies, even above the LXX. Finally, Jerome considered the Hebrew text together with the rabbinic understanding of the text to be the “wellspring of truth.” On the other hand, he labeled the Greek and Latin translations and the Christian understanding of those texts to be merely the “rivulets of opinion:”

Access to the “wellspring of truth”—the Hebrew text and the learning of the Jews—was what distinguished Jerome’s scriptural learning from that of other Latin exegetes, who were limited to the “rivulets of opinion,” the Greek and Latin translations and the scholarly traditions that used them. For Jerome always associated the image of the source or spring with Jewish learning and the Hebrew text, even before the phrase *Hebraica veritas* became part of his vocabulary. In his later work, where it is common, the phrase itself almost always refers to the Hebrew text of the Bible as transmitted among the Jews. The image of the source, however, and the sphere of Jewish learning that Jerome considered authoritative had far wider implications. Nor have these entirely escaped notice. Adam Kamesar suggested that the phrase *Hebraica veritas* might include the full range of what he termed Jerome’s “*rabbinic-recentiores* philology.” Both conceptually and in practice, Jerome’s biblical scholarship brought together a disparate assortment of material, which he represented as the biblical learning of the Jews [emphasis original].⁴⁷

Jerome’s teachers were deeply indoctrinated in the rabbinic interpretation of the biblical text, and this resulted in Jerome being heavily influenced by this interpretation while creating the Latin Vulgate. Since language and culture are intimately connected with each other, it was inevitable that rabbinic influence spilled over into Jerome’s translation. Guessabi wrote:

A particular language points to the culture of a particular social group. Learning a language, therefore, is not only learning the alphabet, the meaning, the grammar rules and

the arrangement of words, but it is also learning the behavior of the society and its cultural customs. ... Language and culture have a complex, homologous relationship. Language is complexly intertwined with culture (they have evolved together, influencing one another in the process).⁴⁸

The great issue that Jerome faced, and one of which he does not appear to have considered, is that 1,500 years had transpired from the time of Hannah and Peninnah to Jerome's own time. Rabbinic Jewish culture was far removed from that of pre-monarchic Israel. Ancient Hebrew culture and 4th century rabbinic culture shared few linguistic or even religious commonalities.

Eberhard Werner argued that there are at least three cultures/languages involved in any translation: 1. the source text culture/language; 2. the translator's culture/language; and, 3. the recipient's culture/language. He added, "a successful meeting of these cultures only occurs when the translator as cultural mediator is informed as well as possible about its DNA, i.e. the crucial make-up of geography, social and political history."⁴⁹ In other words, unless the translator is well-entrenched in the culture/language of the source text, as well as the culture and language of the intended audience, the translation undoubtedly will be flawed. In Jerome's case, while he was instructed in the culture and language of late 4th century CE rabbinic Judaism, a large gap existed between that and the culture and language of ancient Israel, inevitably resulting in flawed interpretations of the text.

So, when Jerome translated 1 Samuel 1:6, he chose the rabbinic interpretation rather than that of the LXX. He naturally assumed that the Hebrew text in front of him, and the rabbinic interpretation of that text, were superior to the translation rendered in the LXX by its Jewish translators 600 years earlier. It probably never occurred to Jerome that the textual and exegetical traditions of the LXX translators were different from the rabbinical tradition during his time. Jerome, perhaps naively, seems to assume that the textual interpretation during his time, and even the Hebrew text itself, were unaltered over the centuries.⁵⁰

Even though the Bava Batra had not yet been recorded as part of the Babylonian Talmud during Jerome's lifetime, the rabbinic traditions behind these teachings were being disseminated through oral tradition. These oral traditions would have been well known by Jerome's Hebrew teachers. In turn, these teachers passed along this exegetical tradition to Jerome. The result of all this is that Hannah's *adversity* from the LXX morphed into Hannah's *adversary*, following rabbinic tradition. Graves

provides us with an encapsulation of these observations about Jerome's translation process:

Having studied the alphabet and sounds, Jerome seems to have learned to read the Hebrew Bible along standard lines: reading with a teacher, who translated for him, and also reading along with a translation (in Jerome's case, Greek). What was deficient in Jerome's Hebrew, by the standards of his time, was his lack of immersion in a culture of Hebrew language usage, as he had experienced with Greek. Such an immersion experience would only have been possible within the environment of Rabbinic Judaism. While reading with one of his Hebrew instructors, Jerome would have learned the meaning of the text as his teacher translated for him. In Jerome's mind, this was the most reliable source for the proper interpretation of the text.⁵¹

John Chrysostom

John Chrysostom served as the Archbishop of Constantinople at the close of the 4th century and beginning of the 5th. While serving in that position he preached many sermons, or homilies, which were written down by his parishioners sometime after his exile or death. His homilies on Ephesians were preached around 400 CE, or nearly a decade after Jerome had completed his translation of 1 Samuel.⁵² In one of these sermons, Chrysostom was the first early church father to adopt the rabbinic idea, first introduced by Jerome in his translation of the Vulgate, of Peninnah as Hannah's rival:

When therefore ye hear the Scripture saying, that "the Lord had shut up her womb" (verses 5, 6.), and that, "her rival provoked her sore"; consider that it is His intention to prove the woman's seriousness. For, mark, she had a husband devoted to her, for he said (verse 8.), "Am I not better to thee than ten sons?" "And her rival," it saith, "provoked her sore," that is, reproached her, insulted over her. And yet did she never once retaliate, nor utter imprecation against her, nor say, "Avenge me, for my rival reviles me." The other had children, but this woman had her husband's love to make amends. With this at least he even consoled her, saying, "Am not I better to thee than ten sons?"

But let us look, again, at the deep wisdom of this woman. “And Eli,” it says, “thought she had been drunken.” (verse 13.) Yet observe what she says to him also, “Nay, count not thine handmaid for a daughter of Belial, for out of the abundance of my complaint and my provocation have I spoken hitherto.” (verse 16.) Here is truly the proof of a contrite heart, when we are not angry with those that revile us, when we are not indignant against them, when we reply but in self-defense.⁵³

The Vulgate’s Influence on English Translations of the Bible

With the broader acceptance of Jerome’s Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible, this idea that Hannah had a rival or enemy, and that it must be Peninnah, became ubiquitous within the Christian church. When John Wycliffe produced his English Bible translation from the Latin Vulgate in 1395 he faithfully followed its translation, rendering 1 Samuel 1: 6 as follows:

And hir enemy turmentide hir, and angwischide greetly, in so myche that sche vpbreidide, that the Lord hadde closid hir wombe.

William Tyndale’s translation of 1 Samuel 1:6 — first printed in John Roger’s *Matthew Bible* in 1537 — was purported to be a translation from the Hebrew rather than from the Latin. However, Tyndale went beyond the Vulgate and even the Hebrew text by identifying Peninnah by name as Hannah’s enemy:

And thereto her enemye Phenennah vexed her a good in casting her in the tethe how the Lord had made her barren.

Rather than a translation from the Hebrew, Tyndale’s rendering of this verse is actually a paraphrase, an exegesis based on neither the Hebrew nor the Latin texts. In addition, the phrase “casting her in the tethe” is not found in the Latin nor in the Hebrew. Unfortunately, Tyndale’s translation of this verse helped cement the idea among English speakers that Peninnah was Hannah’s tormentor and enemy. The Great Bible, published in 1540, in addition to naming Peninnah as the enemy, seems even to add a rabbinic element to Tyndale’s paraphrase:

And her enemye (Phenennah) vexed her sore contynually, to move her, because the Lord had made her barren.

Like Tyndale, the Great Bible also names Peninnah as Hannah’s enemy, but parenthetically, acknowledging that her name is not actually

found in this verse in either the Hebrew or the Latin texts. In addition, the Great Bible's rendering seems to echo the Bava Batra. that Peninnah tormented Hannah "in order to motivate her to pray" when it used the phrase "to move her."

Summary and Conclusion

Nearly all English translations of the Bible, including the KJV, declare that Hannah had an *adversary* or *rival* who provoked her to tears. Some of these translations even name Peninnah as the one who tormented Hannah. This choice of *adversary* or *rival* is an unexpected and unparalleled interpretation of the Hebrew noun צרתה (*tsaratah*), derived from the word צרה (*tsarah*). Except for 1 Samuel 1:6, צרה (*tsarah*) is always translated as *trouble* or another close synonym in the KJV, which is why this passage stands out.

While the earliest Jewish writings on 1 Samuel 1:6 — LXX and Josephus — cast Peninnah in a passive familial role, later rabbinic interpretation seems to throw her under a bus, or under a chariot, by changing her into a spiteful and mean-spirited tormentor of Hannah. This may have been done in an attempt to elevate Hannah to the same status as the ancient matriarchs Sarah and Rachel.

This rabbinic interpretation about Hannah and Peninnah likely spread to Christianity through Jerome's Latin Vulgate translation. As many scholars have noted, Jerome was heavily influenced by rabbinic exegesis of the biblical text:

For Jerome, who had no access to any Hebraic exegetical tradition besides the rabbinic, scholarship on the Hebrew Bible required attention not only to the (unpointed) biblical text, but also to the tradition that accompanied it. Thus, Jerome used both contemporary Jewish traditions and the narratives of the Old Testament as *historia* within the framework of *grammatica*.⁵⁴

Once the rabbinic interpretation of 1 Samuel 1:6 was incorporated into the Vulgate — Hannah had an adversary, and that adversary was Peninnah — there was no stopping this idea from spreading throughout Christianity, and eventually showing up in English translations of the Bible. Lilian Klein observed:

Because the reader's sympathies are directed toward the childless Hannah, Peninnah comes across as a malicious woman. In fact, she is probably a literary convention, a foil for

the independence and goodness of Hannah, and should be regarded as such. The text does not suggest Peninnah has an independent personality in any way.⁵⁵

While I do not believe that Peninnah was only a “literary convention,” I do agree with Klein that the biblical text does not assign her “an independent personality in any way.” In the Hebrew text Peninnah is merely a side note, no one of consequence in Hannah’s melodrama. Peninnah and her children seem to play the role of counterweight to Hannah’s barrenness. Seeing Peninnah with her children every day must have been excruciating for Hannah in light of her inability to conceive. But, that is no reason to villainize Peninnah.

As explicated in the article, I believe that a better understanding of the Hebrew text of 1 Samuel 1:6 is that Hannah’s *adversity* (or *trouble*, *distress*, *affliction*, etc.) — her inability to bear children — caused her grief and depression. If we feel the need to point a finger of blame, then let us point at Hannah’s *closed womb*, her real source of depression and grief. And, just as this adversity caused her to grieve, it was news that she was going to bear a child that brought her eventual joy. It is time to rehabilitate Peninnah from the defamation to which she has been subjected for centuries!

Appendix: Augustine on Hannah’s Prayer

“They that were full of bread,” she says, “are diminished, and the hungry have gone beyond the earth.” Who are to be understood as full of bread except those same who were as if mighty, that is, the Israelites, to whom were committed the oracles of God? But among that people the children of the bond maid were diminished, — by which word *minus*, although it is Latin, the idea is well expressed that from being greater they were made less, — because, even in the very bread, that is, the divine oracles, which the Israelites alone of all nations have received, they savor earthly things. But the nations to whom that law was not given, after they have come through the New Testament to these oracles, by thirsting much have gone beyond the earth, because in them they have savored not earthly, but heavenly things. And the reason why this is done is as it were sought; “for the barren,” she says, “hath born seven, and she that hath many children is waxed feeble.” Here all that had been prophesied hath shone forth to those who understood the number seven, which signifies the perfection of the universal Church. For which reason also the Apostle John writes to the seven churches, showing in that way

that he writes to the totality of the one Church; and in the Proverbs of Solomon it is said aforetime, prefiguring this, "Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath strengthened her seven pillars." For the city of God was barren in all nations before that child arose whom we see. We also see that the temporal Jerusalem, who had many children, is now waxed feeble. Because, whoever in her were sons of the free woman were her strength; but now, forasmuch as the letter is there, and not the spirit, having lost her strength, she is waxed feeble.

"The Lord killeth and maketh alive:" He has killed her who had many children, and made this barren one alive, so that she has born seven. Although it may be more suitably understood that He has made those same alive whom He has killed. For she, as it were, repeats that by adding, "He bringeth down to hell, and bringeth up." To whom truly the apostle says, "If ye be dead with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God." Therefore they are killed by the Lord in a salutary way, so that he adds, "Savor things which are above, not things on the earth;" so that these are they who, hungering, have passed beyond the earth. "For ye are dead," he says: behold how God savingly kills! Then there follows, "And your life is hid with Christ in God:" behold how God makes the same alive! But does He bring them down to hell and bring them up again? It is without controversy among believers that we best see both parts of this work fulfilled in Him, to wit our Head, with whom the apostle has said our life is hid in God. "For when He spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all," in that way, certainly, He has killed Him. And forasmuch as He raised Him up again from the dead, He has made Him alive again. And since His voice is acknowledged in the prophecy, "Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell," He has brought Him down to hell and brought Him up again. By this poverty of His we are made rich; for "the Lord maketh poor and maketh rich." But that we may know what this is, let us hear what follows: "He bringeth low and lifteth up;" and truly He humbles the proud and exalts the humble. Which we also read elsewhere, "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble." This is the burden of the entire song of this woman whose name is interpreted "His grace."⁵⁶

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Endnotes

- 1 Although from the tribe of Levi, Elkanah is identified as an Ephramite (אֶפְרַתִּי *Ephrati*) in 1 Samuel 1:1.
- 2 Bopoto Gwinyai, “The Spirit of Peninah,” *Times of Swaziland*, October 18, 2019, <http://www.times.co.sz/letters/125648-the-spirit-of-peninah.html>.
- 3 בַּת־בְּלִיעַל (*bat-bliyaal*), meaning *worthless daughter*. Ironically, Eli’s own sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are called “sons of Belial,” or *worthless sons* in 1 Samuel 2:12.
- 4 The Hebrew text does not say that “her countenance was no more sad.” Rather, it states that “her face was no more.” It is only inferred that she was not sad anymore.
- 5 Charles Ward Smith, *Smith’s Bible Commentary*, (2014), https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/smith_chuck/c2000_1Sa/1Sa_001.cfm.
- 6 Adam Clarke, “The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments with a Commentary and Critical Notes” Vol. II (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1977), 207.
- 7 Matthew Henry, *Exposition of the Old and New Testament* (New York: Robert Carter, 1853), 227, emphasis added.
- 8 Linda M. Campbell, “Hannah: Devoted Handmaid of the Lord,” *Ensign*, March 1998, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1998/03/hannah-devoted-handmaid-of-the-lord>.
- 9 “Lesson 82: 1 Samuel 1—2,” *Old Testament Seminary Student Material*, (2018), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/old-testament-seminary-student-material-2018/1-samuel/lesson-82>.
- 10 “to grieve sorely 1 Samuel 1₆” and “to grieve (man) 1 Samuel 1₇.” Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, s.v. “כָּעַס.” (Leiden, NDL: Brill, 1995) 2:491.
- 11 “General remarks: the hif. is either causative or internally transitive,... to make oppressed, bring low,... to incite to anger;...

to appear depressed, show oneself oppressed.” *HALOT*, s.v. “רעם.” 3:1267.

- 12 As with Latin languages, Hebrew requires that pronouns agree with the gender of the noun that they represent. For example, consider the following question in Portuguese: *Onde está a mesa?* (Where is the table?). An appropriate answer would be: *Ela está na cozinha*. This can be translated into English as *she is in the kitchen*, but it would be more proper to render the pronoun *ela* as *it* since we are not referencing a person. So, *it is in the kitchen* would be more correct in English. The same rule applies to translation from Hebrew. The verb used in verse 7 — תכעסנה (*takhisennah*), and rendered *she provoked her* in the KJV — should be reworked as *it grieved her* if we are to understand צרתה (*tsaratah*) as *her adversity* rather than *her adversary*.
- 13 Note: The total does not add up to 54 because in some cases a given translation uses more than one of the terms in Table 3. For example, the Wycliffe Bible uses both *Peninnah* and *her enemy*.
- 14 Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 5, Chapter 10.
- 15 Camille Fronk Olson, *Women of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 134.
- 16 The *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo recounts biblical stories from Adam up to the death of King Saul. The author is named Pseudo-Philo because it was originally assumed that Philo of Alexandria was the book's author, a theory that has now been abandoned.
- 17 M. R. James, *The Biblical Antiquities of Philo* (London: Macmillan, 1917), 214–16.
- 18 Babylonian Talmud, Seder Nezikin, Bava Batra 16a, https://www.sefaria.org/Bava_Batra.16a.
- 19 Aggadah is a type of homily used by the rabbis to teach moral principles or to illustrate parts of the Torah.
- 20 Pesikta Rabbati 43, https://www.sefaria.org/Pesikta_Rabbati.43.1.
- 21 Mishnah Yevamot 6:6, https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Yevamot.6.6.
- 22 Some medieval Jewish scholars, like Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak), believed that Peninnah's ten sons spoken of in the Pesikta Rabbati were metaphorical rather than literal.

- 23 Pesikta Rabbati 43, https://www.sefaria.org/Pesikta_Rabbati.43.1
- 24 David W. Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools in Monarchic Judah: A Socio-Archeological Approach* (Sheffield: Almond, 1991), 12.
- 25 “Folklore, fairy tales, legends, and all forms of story telling akin to these are comprehended, in the terminology of the post-Biblical literature of the Jews, under the inclusive description Haggadah, a name that can be explained by a circumlocution, but cannot be translated. Whatever it is applied to is thereby characterized first as being derived from the Holy Scriptures, and then as being of the nature of a story.” Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), xxx.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Pesikta Rabbati 43, https://www.sefaria.org/Pesikta_Rabbati.43.1
- 28 Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, xxxi.
- 29 Rashi on 1 Samuel 1:6, https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_I_Samuel.1.6.
- 30 Rashi on 1 Samuel 1:7, https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_I_Samuel.1.7.
- 31 Rashi on 1 Samuel 1:8, https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_I_Samuel.1.8.
- 32 Rashi on 1 Samuel 1:16, https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_I_Samuel.1.16.
- 33 Henry, *Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, 233.
- 34 *Fathers of the Third Century: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix*, ed. Philip Schaff, (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2004), 898.
- 35 *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, series 2, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2007), 756.
- 36 For an interpretation of Hannah’s prayer by Augustine, see the Appendix.
- 37 *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, 1008.
- 38 Marcus Dods, ed., *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo: A New Translation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1872), 79–80.
- 39 “The first translations in the series, made in 391 and 392, included new versions of the Psalms and the book of Job, which Jerome had previously translated from the Septuagint, and of the Prophets

and the books of Samuel and Kings, which were fresh territory.” Megan Hale Williams, *The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 66.

- 40 “**æmulus**, *Subst.*, a rival = rivalis: mihi es aemula, *you are my rival* (i. e. *You have the same desire as I*), Plaut. Rud. 1, 4, 20; Ter. Eun. 4, 1, 9; cf. id. ib. 2, 1, 8: si non tamquam virum, at tamquam aemulum removisset, Cic. Verr. 2, 5, 31: et si nulla subest aemula, languet amor, Ov. A. A. 2, 436. — By meton. [metonymy] (eccl. [Scriptores Ecclesiastie]), *an enemy*: videbis aemulum tuum in templo, Vulg. 1 Reg. 2, 32: affligebat eam aemula, ib. 1, 6.” Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, *Harpers' Latin Dictionary: A New Latin Dictionary, Founded on the Translation of Freund's Latin-German Lexicon* (New York: American Book, 1879), c.f., æmulus.
- 41 Dominik Markl, “What Biblical Scholars Can Learn From Jerome: Sixteen Centuries After His Demise,” *Vulgata in Dialogue* 4 (2020), 38.
- 42 Megan Hale Williams, “Lessons from Jerome’s Jewish Teachers: Exegesis and Cultural Interaction in Late Antique Palestine,” in Natalie B. Dohrmann, David Stern, eds., *Jewish Biblical Interpretation and Cultural Exchange: Comparative Exegesis in Context* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 66.
- 43 Benjamin Kedar-Kopfstein, “Jewish Traditions in the Writings Of Jerome,” in D.R.G. Beattie, M.J. McNamara, eds., *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in their Historical Context* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 427.
- 44 Michael Graves, *Jerome's Hebrew Philology: A Study Based on his Commentary on Jeremiah* (Leiden, NDL: Brill, 2007), 9.
- 45 Benjamin Kedar-Kopfstein, “Jewish Traditions in the Writings Of Jerome,” in D.R.G. Beattie, M.J. McNamara, eds., *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in their Historical Context* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 430.
- 46 Megan Hale Williams, *The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 86n60.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 89–90.

- 48 Fatiha Guessabi, “Blurring the Line between Language and Culture,” *Language Magazine*, <https://www.languagemagazine.com/blurring-the-line-between-language-and-culture/>.
- 49 Eberhard Werner, *The Mandate for Bible Translation: Models of Communication and Translation in Theory and Practice in regard to the Science of Bible Translation* (2013), 149–50, <https://www.sil.org/resources/archives/51438>. This is an English translation of Eberhard Werner, *Bibelübersetzung in Theorie und Praxis: Eine Darstellung ihrer Interdisziplinarität anhand der Ausbildungspraxis* (Hamburg, DEU: Kovač, 2011).
- 50 Donald Parry compared the Hannah story in 1 Samuel 1 in the LXX, the Masoretic Text (MT) and the Qumran text (4QSam^a) and observed that “each of the three texts has distinguishable ideological or theological elements that are demonstrative of parallel editions.” Donald W. Parry, “Hannah in the Presence of the Lord,” in Philippe Hugo and Adrian Schenker, eds., *Archaeology of the Books of Samuel: The Entangling of the Textual and Literary History* (Leiden, NDL: Brill, 2010), 54.
- 51 Graves, *Jerome’s Hebrew Philology*, 126–27.
- 52 See general timeline at Christian History Timeline: John Chrysostom,” *Christian History Institute*, <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/john-chrysostom-timeline>.
- 53 *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, 3:756.
- 54 Graves, *Jerome’s Hebrew Philology*, 44.
- 55 Lillian Klein (Abensohn), “Peninnah: Bible,” *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/peninnah-bible>.
- 56 *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, 2:773–74.