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Contrasting portrayals of children in 1 Samuel

By A. James Murphy

Scholars have developed a number of interpretive methods and approaches to the Bible over the last century. Perhaps the first new approach of the twenty-first century is child-centered, or childist interpretation. Child-centered critical readings are largely an outgrowth of feminist interpretation, which has illuminated biblical figures like Sarah, Esther, and Paul's writings on women in new ways for decades now. Unlike female interpreters, however, every one of us has been a child! Yet similarly, those of us who use this approach typically do so in conjunction with other lenses (e.g., archaeological, historical, literary, or rhetorical) with which to read the Bible. We begin by locating a child or children in a passage and making them the subject of our examination to see what new insights emerge.

Several scholars highlight children in the Bible to advocate for greater ethical treatment of children today. In 1989, the United Nations General Assembly passed the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC), and many people certainly believe the Bible is one source that can influence nations, organizations, and individuals to take children's issues more seriously, and to reassess our moral obligations to them (Bunge, et al., 2008). Responding partly to this interest, child-centered scholarship has produced several recent publications on the influence of the biblical tradition on the history of childhood in the Western world. Almost immediately however, a few scholars have also brought attention to passages in the Bible where there seems a stark moral difference between the treatment of some children versus the concerns we often express over children today. The Bible is by no means consistent on these issues. In fact, there are places where it seems to treat children very differently, often with different

rationales depending upon context or the theology of the writer. Here we examine two such contrasting portrayals.

The biblical figure Samuel links two stories that display markedly contrasting examples of God's treatment of children, 1 Samuel 2–3 and 15. Scholars widely agree that the stories in 1 and 2 Samuel are a patchwork fused together over time by one or more editors in antiquity. Today, scholars recognize them as part of a much larger edited narrative referred to as the Deuteronomistic History (DH), encompassing Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings. The storyline of these books ends with the destruction of Jerusalem and the southern kingdom, Judah, in 586 BCE, yet traces its beginning well before 1000 BCE. Our stories likely imply a time between 1125–1050 BCE, yet scribes may not have fully finalized the entire DH until the mid 500s BCE.

The story of the child Samuel begins in 1 Samuel 1–2. These chapters depict Samuel as a “miracle” baby. His mother, Hannah, was one of two wives of a very devout man named Elkanah. Yet, the Bible says that “the Lord had closed her womb” (1 Sam 1:5; NRSV). So, Hannah prayed and made a vow that if God would grant her a son, she would give him back to God to be his servant his entire life (1:11). Three things are worth noting about her vow. The vows to never let anyone cut his hair and that he would be the Lord's possession all his life suggest some contrasts with typically nazirite vows and the length of service by priests (see Num 6:1–21 and 8:23–26). Moreover, Samuel's birth seems in line with cultural practice regarding the firstborn males; they belong to God yet were to be redeemed (Exod 13:2, 12–13; 34:19–20). Samuel was not Elkanah's firstborn, but he was the first “to open the womb” of Hannah. This combination of prenatal circumstances effectively set Samuel apart before his birth, somewhat like Jeremiah later (Jer 1:4–5), as devoted to God. God answered Hannah's

ritual faithfulness and prayerful desire with baby boy, her first. In what might strike readers today as strange, she in turn faithfully carried out what we might imagine to be a gut-wrenching, perhaps unfathomable act for some; she sacrificed (gave up) her small child to God as she had vowed, via the priest at Shiloh.

Looking at Samuel through child-centered and literary lenses, we may note his parents carefully prepared him for God, and God confirmed that he accepted Samuel as his own. His father regularly sacrificed to God and fulfilled his vows, and, in an unusual turn, the story separately details his mother's similar preparations. Mothers and wet-nurses typically weaned children around age three in ancient Israel and its environs. The claims that Hannah weaned him before delivering him to Eli the priest at Shiloh, that she took a three-year-old bull as one of her sacrificial animals, and that the Bible stresses that "the child was young" all suggest the boy was very young (1 Samuel 1:22–28). His mother and father visited him yearly, but he lived in the presence of God at Shiloh. Once given over to Eli, the elder priest at Shiloh, 1 Samuel states three times that the child Samuel "ministered to the Lord" there (2:11, 18, and 3:1), an act rather uniquely applied to a young and named child in the Bible. This action contrasts sharply with the portrayal of the two grown sons of Eli, priests whom the writer calls "scoundrels" without "regard for the Lord" (2:12). Samuel grew particularly close to God (2:21, 26; 3:19). 1 Samuel not only depicts God's rejection of Eli's wicked sons; it presents a moving story of God calling directly for young Samuel by name, while Samuel responds with the same words used by Abraham and Isaiah when God called upon them: "Here I am" (1 Sam 32–18; see Genesis 22:1 and Isaiah 5:8). In the theology of 1 Samuel, even a young child may commune with and worship God, developing in knowledge and leadership for service to God and one's community.

Meanwhile, 1 Samuel 15 directly contrasts God's treatment of the little boy Samuel portrayed earlier. Samuel, now an adult, relays God's instructions to Israel's new king, Saul, to retaliate against another people, the Amalekites, for having earlier attacked Israel during its desert wanderings with Moses (see Exod 17:8–16; Num 14:45). This episode provides one of several instances in the Bible, unsettling by today's standards, raised to our attention by child-centered scholars. Samuel tells Saul to utterly annihilate the Amalekites, the "men and women, children and infants," and with the exception of their king and the choicest livestock, he does so (15:3, 8–9). Such passages are not new, and readers have not necessarily overlooked them, but readers typically focus upon Saul's disobedience, his resulting rejection by God, or how this sets up the anointment of David as successor. Main characters are not the only characters in the Bible.

The Amalekites have children. In contrast to 1 Samuel 1–3, this story provides no detail about these children or their individual lives. Instead, the story casts them together under the group name Amalekites, and God orders Saul to slaughter them down to every infant. The Hebrew word from 15:3 variously translated as to "ban," "devote," or "destroy" means to completely give over to God, typically for destruction, like a sacrifice. Deuteronomy 20 describes parameters for this particular type of ritualized holy war, and perhaps its most (in)famous example is the battle of Jericho (Josh 6). Perhaps there is some irony in 1 Samuel's depiction of one child who is "devoted" to God in one sense, and the children of a national people who are "devoted" to God in another sense, through no fault of their own. One characteristic of the theology of the DH is disregard for even the children of Israel's enemies.

There are a number of techniques child-centered scholars might use to aid in focusing our attention on these children. One technique is to raise questions about what the text might imply.

For instance, should we envision infants and children rounded up separately from their parents and killed? Should we imagine Saul's forces breaking into homes and indiscriminately killing each life they come to? Another technique might involve imagining oneself as an Amalekite child, with fear and questioning before death. "Who are the Israelites, mom?" "Is daddy dead?" "Are we going to die?"

As you can see, child-centered interpretation's ability to draw on empathy and raise deep ethical questions is a powerful approach. It can threaten to shatter one's preconceptions of God or the Bible. It can bring into focus stories of warmth and concern often overlooked. Even more, it can provoke us to reflect on how we think about all children today. By centering our focus upon children in the Bible, careful readers encounter fresh readings, critical thinking, and new perspectives.