

○ THE STORY OF HANNAH (1 SAM 1:1–2:11) FROM A PERSPECTIVE OF *HAN*

THE THREE-PHASE TRANSFORMATIVE PROCESS

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This article explores how Hannah undergoes her difficult life experience called *han*, and how she is being transformed beyond the logic of ‘us’ or ‘them’ hermeneutics. In the process of transformation Hannah engages three phases of attitude or moments of life: ‘I am nothing,’ ‘I am something,’ and ‘I am anything.’ The story of Hannah becomes a story of public, holistic transformation that involves self, community and society.

INTRODUCTION

The story of Hannah in 1 Sam 1:1–2:11 can be read in various ways: spiritual, theocentric, androcentric, or feminist. Hannah can be read as a model of persistent prayer or piety (spiritual) (Franke 2005: 195–200; Hill 2001: 319–338);¹ as a powerless person whom God empowers through grace (theocentric) (Brueggemann 1990: 10–21; O’Day 1985: 203–210); as a mother of the great leader Samuel (androcentric) (Evans 2004: 28–30); and as a woman whose hardships and shame are named and overcome, and whose active role of ritual offering is foregrounded (feminist) (Meyers 1996: 117–126). Among these readings, feminist or emancipation hermeneutics exposes most concretely the ideologies of the privileged and advocates for the voices of the marginalized (Tamez 1982: 53). However, such a reading also has its limitations; the basic limitation is inherent in identity politics – ‘us’ or ‘them’ hermeneutics.² In reality, the world is much more complex; even among the oppressed exist oppressors and vice versa (McLaren 2002: 1–17).³ Hermeneutically speaking, identity politics-driven hermeneutics has a relatively narrow conception of community, but perhaps not as rigid a conception of community as other hermeneutical schools;⁴ for example, the preferential option for the poor in liberation theology tends to exclude others who are not poor or marginalized in the community, just as oppressors exclude others on the basis of their social identity or privileges. Similarly, another branch of emancipation hermeneutics, *minjung* theology in Korea, has the same weakness in that *minjung* (the grass roots) are central to the discourse at the expense of a larger and far more complex community (Suh 1981: 65).

In order to strengthen the weakness of emancipation hermeneutics as such, I focus on the following hermeneutical issues in this article: how we might conceive of the community for all without losing the spirit of emancipation hermeneutics; how we might read the story of Hannah differently – from a perspective of Hannah’s experience in its diversity and complexities. In so doing, my reading will be anthropocentric⁵ or intercultural in the sense that I read Hannah’s marginal experience from the vantage point of *han* (the Korean term meaning bitterness and wounded heart) – a particular perspective of *han* which has to do with marginal experience as a potential source for transformation. My view of *han* differs from the typical understanding of *han* by most *minjung* or feminist theologians who seek *han*’s end (Chung 1994: 52–62; Lee 2004: 158–168). In my view, then, *han*, as I will explore it through Hannah’s story, has a powerful

potential for transformation. That is, as a *han*-ridden person Hannah goes through a transformative process which engages self, community and society. I will examine her marginal, transformative identity to see why marginality (or marginal identity) can be affirmed as a source of transformative power. Then I will look into the multiple dimensions of *han* in her marginality so that we may understand the deeper level of her *han*. Lastly, by incorporating these hermeneutical tools with which I have explored the marginal, transformative identity and multiple dimensions of *han*, I will interpret the story of Hannah as a three-phase transformative process: 'I am nothing,' 'I am something,' and 'I am anything.'

MARGINAL, TRANSFORMATIVE IDENTITY

Marginal, transformative identity can be described as the self's dynamic, holistic process that involves transformations of self, community, and society (Ricoeur 1992: 21–23).⁶ According to the classical view, marginality or marginal identity is defined by a center and as such is viewed negatively (Lyman 1977: 12; Stonequist 1961: xvii); a person of 'in-between' culture (for example, between Korean and American) is seen as 'a cultural schizophrenic' (Lee 1995: 46) or someone who has 'a divided self' (Stonequist 1961: 217). In this view, the hope is to move from the older identity (or culture) to another newer, more secure identity. But this traditional definition of marginality is challenged by Jung Young Lee in his book *Marginality* (Lee 1995: 46–53). He introduces three key concepts of marginal identity: 'in-between,' 'in-both,' and 'in-beyond' (Lee 1995: 29–75). First, experience of 'in-between' (between two cultures, for example) is hard for the marginalized but it cannot determine 'who I am.' On the contrary, the experience of marginality can be affirmed as part of 'who I am,' and used as creative energy to contribute to a larger world. Second, 'in-both' means that one can embrace both the old and the new place;⁷ for example, one can become both Korean and American without negating either one. At this stage, the 'in-both' of marginality can affirm 'who I am' wherever I live,⁸ not according to what others say I am. Third, 'in-beyond' means that one can stay in both places and go beyond them. At this stage, one can identify with a greater community of all, beyond one's own cultural norms or comfort zone.⁹ Seen this way, marginality can be redefined as having power to transform self, community and society; it engages the world differently. This view of dynamic marginality can be applied to Hannah. She is indeed marginalized due to her infertility, but her experience of marginality, though difficult and/or negative, is not the last word for what she is about; she moves on, engaging her marginal identity and allowing for transformations to take place in the process of her struggle and suffering.

Furthermore, the marginal, transformative identity involves self-understanding of 'who I am' in terms of life experience (or attitude) among which three moments of life or three modes of attitude stand out: 'I am nothing,' 'I am something,' and 'I am anything.'¹⁰ The first person *I* implies that the self's view of life, or attitude, is important in transformations. The first moment of life is 'I am nothing' which refers to the lowest moment of life and the most humbling experience. 'I am nothing' also can be understood through the experience of *han*, which is 'the suppressed, amassed and condensed experience of oppression caused by mischief or misfortune so that it forms a kind of 'lump' in one's spirit' (Suh 1981: 65; Ahn 1995: 42).¹¹ This negative sense of *han* is a time of nothingness, and a time to search for meaning out of nothingness. The second moment of life, or attitude, is 'I am something,' which comes after or in the midst of nothingness;

it is a time of awakening and self-affirmation from which one can declare: 'I am nothing' is not 'who I am.' Similarly, a *han*-ridden person would not give in to the negative experience of *han* but would find a glimpse of hope (Chung 1994: 52–62).¹² The last moment of life, or attitude, is 'I am anything,' which is a time of commitment full of greater self-determinations. The person going through the moments of nothing and something ends up in the moment of anything. Likewise, a *han*-ridden person also sees beyond herself a hope yet to be realized. These three moments of life have roles to play in transformations of self, community and society, as I will show later in the Three-phase Transformative Process.

HANNAH'S HAN

To grasp the deeper level of Hannah's *han* from an anthropological perspective, I need to locate *han* in multiple dimensions of her life – personal, communal, and socio-political. The first dimension has to do with her personal life. Her husband Elkanah cannot resolve her *han*. Elkanah is apparently a naively good husband (Alter 1981: 82–83). He tries to comfort her: 'Am I not more than ten sons?' But his comfort, in fact, aggravates her *han* because he does not understand the deeper side of Hannah's personal pain and struggle caused by Peninnah, Eli and him (Amit 1994: 73–76). Elkanah as a male patriarch has what he wants – sons born by Peninnah, his second wife.¹³ Hannah is the one who has to deal with a very personal dimension of *han* – anger, frustration, powerlessness, helplessness, and hopelessness. According to Amit, Elkanah shows indifference to Hannah's pain by neglecting her wish to become a mother, and is 'guilty not only of insensitivity to his wife's feelings but also of disregard for her future' because 'if the husband dies and the woman is left with no children' she has no man to support her (Amit 1994, 75).

The second dimension of Hannah's *han*, which overlaps the first dimension, concerns her immediate communities, including her family. Hannah's *han* increases in the context of a double marginalization: the burden of bearing a male child for Elkanah and bearing public stigma in society. Hannah lives with the shame or stigma leveled against her because of a cultural frame that holds her responsible for the couple's inability to bear a child.¹⁴

The third dimension of Hannah's *han* has to do with the larger society and involves politics and religion. It is implied that the priest, Eli, is not doing his job well, to the extent that he cannot distinguish between praying and being drunk (1 Sam 1:12–14). When Hannah prays silently with her lips moving, Eli thinks Hannah is drunk. Eli, the most important religious leader in her time, does not know what is going on with her. It is an irony that Eli, who would have had a lot of experience with drunkards, does not distinguish between praying and being drunk. Maybe there was something unusual about the way Hannah prayed. Perhaps the crucial question is: if he thought she was drunk why he did not ask her the reason for getting drunk. Was she drinking her sorrows away?¹⁵ The implication is the same in either case: Eli's dull sense in reading Hannah's situation at the temple. Therefore, it is implied that there is a total crisis of leadership; a new, transformed leadership is needed, as implied in the Lord's judgment on the house of Eli where Samuel will replace Eli (1 Sam 2:34; 3:12–14) (Meyers 1996: 117–126).¹⁶ Against this backdrop of a declining leadership – religious and political – it is not surprising that 1 Samuel begins with the birth story of Samuel. But the story of politics begins with Hannah, not with Samuel. There is no evidence that Hannah is less concerned about politics or religious matters simply because

she is a woman desiring a child, in the context of honor and shame or of the rivalry between herself and Peninnah.

THE THREE-PHASE TRANSFORMATIVE PROCESS

The story of Hannah involves three moments of life experience as she undergoes the process of transformation: 'I am nothing,' 'I am something,' and 'I am anything.' Though the text does not say how long Hannah prayed when her family went to the temple at Shiloh, it seems clear that she prayed for a long time – for many years (they went 'year by year' – 1 Sam 1:3); Hannah does not pray only overnight or for just a few times. If we suppose that she has prayed through pain and struggling discernment, there must have been ample moments of life over a long period of time, including everyday life at home, in a community, and society. In other words, there is a long process of *han*-ridden life. Thus, we can safely divide Hannah's life experience or moments in her life into the three phases of transformation to which I now move.

THE FIRST PHASE: I AM NOTHING

'I am nothing' is a moment of life when her soul is severely damaged or ruined by oppressors or self-inflictions. She feels nothing. Peninnah provokes her: 'you are nothing because you do not have a son, and God has closed your womb.' In Hannah's time, if someone does not bear a child, it is a sign of misfortune; moreover, Hannah is responsible.¹⁷ Thus, it is not difficult to imagine her agony and pain – her *han* deeply rooted in her own soul. It is a moment of life in which she gets stuck between herself and social expectations; society views her as worthless or nothing for her inability to bear a child. In a patriarchal society, no-male means less participation in society; moreover, Hannah will be left alone without protection if Elkanah dies without children born by her. She also has to struggle with the issue of theodicy: 'Why did God close her womb?' So Hannah weeps enough, struggles enough, and prays long nights and days, year by year (1 Sam 1:6–7). Every time Hannah goes to the temple of the Lord at Shiloh, Peninnah troubles her about her infertility. Furthermore, Hannah receives only one portion from Elkanah because she does not have a child. These facts cause her to lose her appetite; she does not eat or drink. That is why she seems to pray, according to Eli, with no voice – because she is enervated from the experience of nothingness.

It is also a time when Hannah has difficulty understanding the Priest Eli. Why could a leader in the house of the Lord not appreciate what was going on with her? The text hints that the one who is blind or drunk is not Hannah but Eli; he is blind in a sense, not seeing what is happening in the temple. It is also implied that Eli has a dull sense of reading people and the community. Hannah's soul could be further saddened or broken due to the priest's insensitivity.

In this long period of struggle and brokenness, it should be noted that the text does not mention Hannah's resistance to Peninnah. There is no rivalry motif in the story of Hannah. Rather, she sets aside a special time for God, taking her *han* to God. In this time of nothingness, she expresses her *han*: 'No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD' (1 Sam 1:15, NRSV). The Hebrew phrase for 'deeply troubled' is *qeshat ruah*. These two words mean, respectively, 'severe, hard, harsh' and 'breath, wind, spirit.' Put together, the phrase can be translated 'I am a woman whose spirit is hard' or 'I am a woman who has had a hard time to breathe.' In verse 10,

Hannah expresses her situation as *marat nepesh* ('embittered soul'). She breathes with difficulty or a harsh spirit, meaning a lack of living being (*nepesh*). In a situation of *qeshat ruah* and *marat nepesh*, Hannah pours out her soul before the Lord. This pouring out of her soul can be referred to the experience of *han* mentioned above.

Hannah's engagement with God continues: 'Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time' (1 Sam 1:16). It is important to understand her 'anxiety and vexation all this time,' which goes deeper than a mere personal level and should include the social political dimension of her time, characterized by a lack of leadership. We cannot consider that Hannah would be unaware of this kind of malfunction of the temple and society; in other words, her great anxiety and vexation should point to the societal elements of her wish, which is to dedicate her son to the service of God for the community. In summary, her time of 'nothingness' is certainly a time of soul searching, like being in Sheol (1 Sam 2:6), a time of questioning about God, and a time of understanding the community and society.

THE SECOND PHASE: I AM SOMETHING

While seeking meaning in the midst of *nothingness*, Hannah asks of the Lord, and *God hears her han* (Cartledge 2002: 143–144; McCarter 1980: 62–65);¹⁸ it is a moment of something when she recovers the sense of who she is. Namely, she moves from laments of nothingness to the realization that 'I am really nothing' before God; it is like facing the sun in daylight, which no one can do directly. Then, Hannah recovers a sense of self ('I am something'), and opens her eyes to God and sees a greater community of all.

This moment of something does not happen overnight but through a long time of prayer and struggle, as she undergoes a long process of gradual understanding about herself in relation to God and others. Hannah seems to realize a new time, a new space, and a new understanding about herself, how she lives, how she sees the community and society from a different perspective. Hannah's sense of 'something' comes only with a deep realization that 'I am nothing' before God – an experience of lowly moments of life. Then, Hannah is reconnected to the spirit, the breath of God. Hannah's song in 1 Sam 2:1 shows a joy for life that shines brighter through the experience of *han*: 'My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory.' Hannah breathes smoothly again, despite her nothing-like *han*. Because of this 'nothingness' experience, a moment of humbling and awakening, she recovers her self (autonomy), and continues to hold onto the rule of God (heteronomy) – the mode of heteronomous autonomy (Levinas 1998: 204–205).

THE THIRD PHASE: I AM ANYTHING

As a result of a long process of prayerful discernment, Hannah enters the mode of 'I am anything' – a moment of deep commitment and action; this mode is found in her prayer and offering at the temple when she takes the young Samuel to the Lord. She prays and vows: 'If you give me a male child, I will give him back to you. I will set him before you as a Nazirite.' Hannah dedicates Samuel back to the community and society from which she receives all kinds of anxieties and vexation, and which in return has caused her *han*. Hannah's dedication of a child is more than a religious function in which Samuel is expected to perform religious duties in the temple. It is a religious *and* political action by which Samuel is expected to reform or lead society. Actually,

the idea of Hannah's political action can be better understood against the backdrop of the political, religious dysfunction in the Israelite story. If Hannah is aware of religious, political evil done in the temple (the text suggests that Eli and his two sons are ill-performing) and society, what else could she give other than her son in that religious and political context? In addition, in a patriarchal society, where women's role is so limited, Hannah's only viable option for renewal of society (or community) is her son, Samuel, who becomes an active leader for the following generations. In this way, Hannah is transformed, seeing beyond herself to a future leader who will fulfill her dream – a transformed community and society. Though she begins with 'nothingness' – a bitterly broken heart of *han*, she does not give in to 'nothingness.' Instead, beyond (and through) her *han*, she dreams of a better society for all, which can be accomplished through her son (Meyers 1996: 117–126).¹⁹

Notably, Hannah does not aim to revenge or repay what she receives from her adversaries or society (Klein 1994: 83). Instead, after a long time of prayerful discernment, she seems to know why she prays and what she seeks; it is a moment of immanence and transcendence; it is a new realization of 'in-beyond' identity that conceives of the whole community. Indeed, Hannah's story becomes a model of personal and public transformation that goes beyond a personal level. This is a true model of public service which involves holistic eyes – a viewpoint where love of self, love of neighbors, and love of God converge. The reason for and the purpose of her prayer is ultimately to give back what she receives; otherwise, meaning or transformation of self, community and society would be incomplete.

CONCLUSION

In Hannah's life there are three *things* in balance: nothing, something and anything. If nothing-like time comes, it is a time that she is 'hard of spirit.' It is also a time of searching for meaning in self, community and society. It is also a time of humbleness when she stands before God. Then, there comes a time of smooth breathing; it is a time of celebration of life when God hears her *han*. Finally, there comes a time of service to self, community, and society. These three things are not a one-time event or moment but recurring moments that involve transformations of self, community and society. Likewise, the story of Hannah can illuminate our life stories in the way that we should live these three states in balance.

Through these three states of transformation (in Hannah's story), we recognize a broader conception of community that involves transformations of self, community, and society as a whole. As there is no separation between three things – nothing, something, and anything – so is there no separation between self, community and society; personal transformation is connected to public transformation and vice versa.

ENDNOTES

¹ Augustine reads Hannah as a model of wholehearted prayer; Chrysostom links God's purpose for suffering to Hannah's spirituality. Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of prayer (piety): 'You, then, woman, imitate her, and if you are childless, give evidence of this prayer, and appeal to the priest to join in making intercession for you; if you accept wholly his words in faith, the blessing of the fathers will result in lovely fruit in season.' Quoted in Hill (2001: 328).

2 I use ‘identity politics’ in the sense that scholars or practitioners advocate one identity against the
other by making distinctions between oppressors and the oppressed, for example.

3 Debate over the issue of identity politics continues. Within feminism, for example, there is a wide
spectrum of positions ranging from identity politics-driven feminism to postmodern Foucaudean
feminism. In this article I am concerned with a specific branch of feminism which works by identity
politics.

4 Conceptions of community affect our interpretations. In this article, I use a different conception of
community which points to the vision of an egalitarian community for all, not characterized by
identity politics.

5 I use ‘anthropocentric’ in the way that the story of Hannah will be read through her experience of
han and marginality – not from a theocentric perspective.

6 Paul Ricoeur’s *ipse* identity is characterized by selfhood which changes over time. This changing
identity also has to do with narrative identity which involves the story of others. I expand the notion
of ‘others’ to self, community and society.

7 The idea of marginality extends to a broader sense of marginal experiences, i.e., socio-cultural life,
religious life, and theological discourses. In that regard, ‘places’ here can mean a variety of things:
culture, identity, experience, thought, etc.

8 The primary identity of marginality is not determined by external elements such as race or culture.
Here ‘in-both’ means that the marginalized people should determine the identity of marginality.

9 Lee explores the meaning of marginality and its significance to Christian theology; he expands the
theological insights of marginality to Jesus.

10 The idea of *I am nothing, something, and anything* is based on my understanding of anthropology,
which comes from my personal experience and a creation story in Genesis: that is, we are made of
three parts, dust (*adamah*), spirit (*ruah*) and soul (*nepesh*); the first part informs the mode of *nothing*,
the second part, *something*, and the last part, *anything*.

11 Ahn puts it similarly: ‘*han* has unresolved deep feelings of anger, frustration and resentment of people
who have become the objects of injustices upon injustices.’ Especially, Korean women’s *han* is aggrava-
ted by patriarchy coupled with Confucianism’s rigid social system as seen in the *three-principles and
five virtues* of Confucianism.

12 Like most *minjung* theologians, a Korean American feminist, Chung Hyun Kyung, for example, sees
han primarily as negative – something to be overcome. But I consider *han* as having positive energy
within it. Lee’s ‘in-both’ thinking alludes to this aspect of *han*.

13 The text itself does not say that Peninnah is the second wife; Peninnah is believed to be Elkanah’s
second wife, based on the order of names: Hannah and Peninnah.

14 The text does not suggest that God is judgmental of Hannah’s barrenness; but in ancient culture a
woman’s infertility would amount to public shame and disgrace.

15 I am indebted to Rob Worley who made excellent comments on this line of thought.

16 Actually, Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas were ‘scoundrels’ and ‘had no regard for the Lord’ (1
Sam 2:12–17), which aggravates a declining leadership.

17 The story of Hannah resembles Job’s story. Job claims he does not deserve such huge calamity and
suffering. However, Job’s friends keep coming, and insist that Job sinned and that God is right. His
friends seem to say: ‘you do not know what you did wrong. God is not wrong. Repent. If you didn’t
do something wrong, your sons and daughters might have done wrong.’

- 18 The name of Samuel could be a derivative of the verb *shama* ('to hear') and the divine appellative $\varepsilon\lambda$. Other possibilities include 'he-who-is-from-God' (*shemeel*) and 'asked of God' (*shaul meel*).
- 19 Hannah's expectation of her son's leadership does not imply that she is passive. On the contrary, she shows a strong public act when she brings Samuel to the house of the Lord 'along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine' (1 Sam 1:24).

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