



# “My soul magnifies the Lord”

## We unpack the parallels found in the stories of Hannah and Mary

It is fascinating to read side-by-side the opening chapters of the First Book of Samuel and Luke’s Gospel. It is hard to miss the rich tapestry of allusions that link the story of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, with Mary, the mother of Jesus.

An obvious link can be found in the prayer that Mary offers when she discovers she is pregnant (her famous and deeply subversive prayer known as the Magnificat at Luke 1:46-55) and Hannah’s triumphant prayer (1 Samuel 2:11). Try reading them together. The echoes are striking. The opening words of Mary’s prayer - *“My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour...”* - clearly chimes with Hannah’s own (*“My soul exults in the Lord, my strength is exhausted in my God...”*).

What is at work here? Is Mary’s grand reworking of Hannah’s prayers like listening to a jazz master deconstruct a popular show tune? Might both women be drawing on a deep well of familiar Jewish communal prayers that would have been etched on each of their hearts?

The story of Jesus’s presentation at the Temple is a familiar one (Luke 2: 25-36), yet we perhaps overlook the contribution made by two of the supporting characters: Simeon and Anna. Simeon, the devout and elderly Jew, recalls the priestly figures found in the pages of the Old Testament (although, it is worth noting, that Simeon does not appear to be a priest himself).

Anna is referred to as a prophetess, one of only eleven in the Bible. Nine of them were true prophetesses. They are: Miriam (Exodus 15:20); Deborah (Judges 4:4); Huldah (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22); wife of Isaiah (Isaiah 8:3); Anna (Luke 2:36-38); and the four daughters of Philip (Acts 21:8-9). Two of them were false prophetesses: Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14) and Jezebel (Revelation 2:20).

Anna is the daughter of Phanuel. She had been married for only seven years before her husband died. She remained a widow until the age of eighty-four. Throughout this, she faithfully served in the Temple while she waited for the coming of the Messiah.

Anna's name is the Greek form of Hannah, linking back to her namesake in the First Book of Samuel.

Despite the general perception that most of the significant figures in the Temple were men, Anna is a crucial figure of prayer that serves as an anchor for the community. Whilst it is not expressly said, there is perhaps a suggestion that Anna was childless, yet she serves as an important maternal figure for Mary and the infant Jesus.

This reminds us that these stories are all about the communities of the faithful. The grand narrative of the Bible is so often about the the breaking down of biological boundaries in order to forge a broader family of believers.

### Reflections

- Why do you think there are so many stories of women struggling to conceive in the Bible?
- Does recognising the echoes of the Old Testament in the New Testament enrich your own reading of the Bible?
- Should we talk more often about the female prophets found in Scripture in Church?

### Resources

I often feel uncomfortable about the Church's seeming obsession with the traditional family unit and the stigma attached to childlessness. As such, I was very much looking forward to Elizabeth Felicetti's study of childless women of faith, Unexpected Abundance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023). It perhaps only scratches the surface of this important topic, but it will hopefully create a more nuanced debate around the topic of childlessness. This episode of *The Well* podcast features the author and covers the main points (link: <https://thewell.intervarsity.org/podcasts/elizabeth-felicetti-unexpected-abundance>).

Debbie Blue's book Consider the Women: A Provocative Guide to Three Matriarchs of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019) shines a helpful spotlight on three women from Scripture: Hagar (mother of Islam), Esther (Jewish heroine), and Mary (Christian matriarch).

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg's book Nurture the Wow: Finding Spirituality in the Frustration, Boredom, Tears, Poop, Desperation, Wonder, and Radical Amazement of Parenting (New York: Flatiron Books, 2016) will help many struggling parents to recognise the possibility for spiritual growth amongst the seemingly mundane. The podcast series of the same name is worth a listen (link: <https://podbay.fm/p/nurture-the-wowcast>).

**Links to these resources are imbedded into the electronic copy. Just click on the underlined words.**