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On Portions, Nostrils, and Anger—A *Crux Interpretum* in 1 Samuel 1.5

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Abstract
This article discusses the interpretation of the "portion one of nostrils" that Elkanah gave to Hannah in 1 Sam 1.5. The paper analyses several ancient and modern suggestions against the text itself. A look at the way the Hebrew word אַפַּיִם is used by the biblical authors reveals that there is only one logical interpretation of the verse. A "portion one of nostrils" must mean an angry portion.

Keywords
1 Samuel 1.5, sacrificial meal, interpretation, love, anger, Vulgate

Interpreting the Bible is not always an easy thing to do. There are many reasons for this, among them our limited knowledge of ancient languages and cultures. This limitation forms a burning problem for every interpreter of the Bible, translators and translation specialists included. Without the necessary knowledge, we cannot communicate the meaning of the text. The long-standing answer to the challenge created by limited knowledge has been academic study and discussion. The academic study of the Bible has always endeavoured to add to our knowledge in the area of languages and cultures. Part of this academic work is creating new suggestions for understanding old problems. An equally important part is the discussion of such suggestions. This article, dedicated to my friend and colleague Roger Omanson, aims to take part in the discussion of one interpretational problem in the Old Testament.

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In the background of this article lies a question asked by a learned Bible translator working on the beginning of 1 Samuel. He questioned the common solutions to a problem in the text and wanted to have a better understanding of the Hebrew and of the reasons for some model translations that were different from most of the modern versions he knew. A look at the matter showed that the question was very interesting. A closer look at the central elements of the problem showed that modern commentators and translators have overlooked the most obvious interpretation of the Hebrew text. It may be that the reasons for such oversight are understandable. One of the common ways of interpreting the texts might also play a role here. It is logical and reasonable to assume that other interpreters, especially when they agree with one another, are on the right track. However, a majority vote can also be incorrect.

The Problem

The first book of Samuel opens with the story of the birth of Samuel the prophet (1.1–20). The text describes Hannah, Samuel's mother, as a childless wife. Her husband, Elkanah, had another wife, Peninnah, and she had several children (v. 2). Every year, the narrative tells us, the whole family visited the tabernacle in Shiloh to sacrifice to the Lord (v. 3). The sacrifice in the Hebrew text is that of a זבח-type. In other words, there is a meal connected with the sacrifice.

When the mealtime came, the husband gave a portion to every member of the family. First he gave portions to Peninnah and her children. In v. 5 the portion that Elkanah gave to Hannah is in Hebrew מנה אחת אפים. These are three common Hebrew words, "portion" (מנה), "one" (אחת), and "nostrils" (אפים). In this article I discuss the meaning of these three words taken together: what is a "portion one of nostrils"? By looking at this extremely literal and unhelpful translation, one can see that the interpretation of the expression depends on the meaning of the last word אפים "nostrils." There are two possible ways to explain the grammar of the text on this point. Either the numeral is linked with the preceding noun, "portion" (one portion of the אפים type), or it is linked with the following noun, "nostrils" (a portion, one of אפים), whatever that may mean (see Tsumura 2007, 113 for details).

Existing Solutions

In Hebrew אפים is the dual form of the noun אף "nose." In its concrete meaning the dual means "nostrils," but it has extended or figurative usages.

Standard dictionaries mention "face" (i.e., the "region" where nostrils are) and "anger" (because in anger one breathes heavily through the nose).

Already in antiquity several different interpretations of the Hebrew expression appeared. In Targum Jonathan the portion is a "chosen" one (בחיר), being based on the interpretation of אפים as "face." The portion matches the "face" of Hannah as beloved wife. Coming close to this is the interpretation in the Lucianic text of the Septuagint as a "personal portion" (μερίδα κατά πρόσωπον), a portion according to the "face." In the Peshitta the portion is a "double" one (ܦܝܠܬܐ) because אפים is a dual form. In the Vulgate, however, Jerome connected the portion with "sadness" (*tristis*).

The Old Greek offers a different text: "and to Hannah he gave one portion, because she did not have a child; however, Elkanah loved Hannah more than this one [= Peninnah?], and the Lord had closed the area of her womb" (cf. NETS). Many scholars think that the Greek translator interpreted the Hebrew text so that the problematic אפים became a conjunction ("however", πλὴν ὅτι; see for instance Pisano 1984, 17–19).

Based on the variation in ancient solutions, modern commentators point out that the meaning of the Hebrew expression is not clear, creating an interpretive problem for the translators. Omanson and Ellington in their Handbook on 1 Samuel explain the problem in some detail (2001, 28) and end up suggesting two possible interpretations to the difficult "a portion one of nostrils." According to them, the portion is either "special" or "double." The scope of the Handbook did not allow Omanson and Ellington to go any further into the problem. However, as we have seen, these two possibilities are not the only ones and the matter might benefit from a fresh look at all the options.

Corruption?

As the Hebrew dual causes a large part of the interpretive problem, we shall turn our attention to it first. One might think that the existing Hebrew, with the difficult אפים, might be corrupted. Some interpreters and translators indeed see the problem as a textual one. The commonly suggested alternative for a correct Hebrew text is based on the Septuagint. According to this alternative, the original uncorrupted meaning would have been that Elkanah gave Hannah only one portion, although he loved her. It is, however, not certain that the Greek translator would have read a different text from the present Masoretic one. The LXX reading is more likely a creative answer to the problem in the Hebrew text. This is why both HOTTP and CTAT (Barthélemy 1982), quite correctly, prefer the Masoretic text. Commentators

have suggested other possible corrections (e.g., McCarter 1980, 52), but since they lack any ancient support, one really hesitates to follow them.

The Use of the Dual

If the dual אפים is part of the best Hebrew wording of the passage, then how did the authors of the Old Testament actually use the dual here, and what might be the best choice for rendering this particular passage? As I have already mentioned the dual has a concrete meaning and several potential extended meanings.

Tsumura argues that in 1 Sam 1.5 the dual is used in the concrete sense. Thus, according to him, Elkanah actually gave Hannah two choice parts, namely two noses, or more precisely, two heads, one from each sheep sacrificed at the same time. Tsumura uses two arguments to support his interpretation. He follows Barthélemy (1982, 138) and says that here the dual is a technical term. Then, citing some Ugaritic texts as parallels, he claims that here the dual "might reflect the practice that animals were sacrificed in pairs in ancient Canaan" (2007, 113–14). Such a claim is not totally without foundation.

It is true that in the law concerning daily and monthly sacrifices (Num 28.1–15) and in the law concerning festival sacrifices (Num 28.16–30.1) some animals do appear in pairs. It is not clear, however, how to relate the laws in Numbers to the story in 1 Samuel. The daily sacrifice in Num 28.1–8 is called אשה, not זבח. Besides, the two animals are not offered at the same time, but one in the morning and the other in the evening. The sacrifice for Sabbath in Num 28.9–10, by contrast, is עלה, meaning that the animals are burned, not eaten. The same applies to the sacrifice at the new moon in Num 28.11–15. The animals sacrificed are burned. The sacrifice at the new moon differs from the other two in that it requires not two but ten animals. Also, the sacrifices for the festivals include more than just one pair, and the sacrifices are called either אשה or עלה. All of this means that Elkanah's family were not following the laws in Num 28–29, but that they celebrated a different kind of sacrifice. The laws in Numbers do not help us to understand 1 Sam 1.5, and Tsumura's suggestion, although interesting, must be regarded as an unproven hypothesis.

Thus, the concrete meaning of the dual does not fit our text, and the dual must carry an extended meaning. But which one of the available extended meanings is most appropriate? It is best to start by looking at all the passages where the dual of this noun is used. The noun אף (nose) appears 410 times in the Old Testament. The dual אפים is much rarer, appearing only 42 times. An analysis of the 42 passages will give the following overall picture.

In 20 cases the question is about bowing to the ground in order to show respect. We can exclude this usage from our discussion. In 14 cases the question is about the "length" of anger. Length means slowness to become angry and the opposite of it means hastiness in becoming angry. In these 14 cases the dual אפים is used in the metaphorical sense of anger mentioned in the dictionaries. We can also exclude this idiom from our discussion. This means that the dual appears with other idioms or phrases only 8 times. Because the number of the cases in limited, we can study all of them here.

In Gen 2.7 God blows into the nostrils of a man to give him life. Here the dual has the concrete meaning. In Gen 3.19 the curse God gave to Adam was that Adam would gain his bread by the "sweat of his nostrils," referring to hard labour. Even though translations usually speak about the sweat "of the face" or "of the forehead," the meaning of the dual seems to be the concrete "nostrils." According to Gen 7.22, the breath of life lies in the nostrils of a living being. The expression refers to life by speaking about breathing. In Exod 15.8 the Lord made the waters of the Reed Sea gather by the breath of his nostrils, thus forming a passage for the Israelites. In the Song of the Sea the miracle is then described using an anthropomorphic image of God. In the narrative parallel in Exod 14.21 the sea is divided by Moses' raised hand and by a strong east wind. Thus, we should take the dual אפים in 15.8 in the concrete sense of nostrils. These passages in Genesis might not help us to interpret the crux in 1 Sam 1.5.

Lamentations 4.20 speaks about the captivity of the king, whom the poet calls the anointed one of the Lord. He is also the "breath of our nostrils," an image similar to that of Gen 7.22. The king is "our life," securing the well-being of the state. This passage does not help to interpret the crux either.

Proverbs 30.32–33 advises against boasting, because that would be like squeezing the "nostrils," producing a hostile reaction. The dual אפים in v. 33 is not used in the concrete sense because the proverb compares the squeezing of nostrils to the squeezing of the nose (אף), which creates a bleed. Thus, the normal interpretation of the dual is "anger": do not press others' anger by boasting. In Dan 11.20—the last remaining passage—the question is about the prophesied successor of the northern king. The person in question will be broken shortly, but not in "the nostrils" nor in war, showing that the dual אפים refers here to anger comparable to war. The modern standard exegesis assumes that the northern king is Antiochus III the Great and his successor is his son Seleuchus IV Philopater, whom his own minister Heliodorus murdered (see Appian, *Hist. Rom.* 11.45).

This discussion about the usage of the dual אפים shows that the meaning "face" found in the dictionaries does not exist in reality. Such usage appears only in the idiom about bowing to the ground in order to show respect. If we

think about this idiom the suggestion that the dual means "face" is unnecessary. The dictionaries probably give the meaning only under the influence of idioms in some Indo-European languages. It seems then that the dual has either the concrete meaning "nostrils" or the metaphorical meaning "anger" only. Because I have already argued that the concrete meaning does not fit this passage, the only logical possibility is to interpret the dual here as "anger."

New Solution

Even though several modern commentators deny the possibility of interpreting the dual אפים as "anger" (e.g., Bar-Efrat 2009, 66; Dietrich 2003, 39), my analysis points in this direction as the only logical alternative. But it is not enough to argue the interpretation on the lexical level. The suggested interpretation must also fit the context. The context forms the major obstacle to the interpretation suggested here. Commentators like Dietrich think that interpreting אפים as anger does not suit the context of the phrase. However, it seems that not everyone agrees with this. Jerome in his Latin version probably had "anger" in mind when he translated the Hebrew as *Annae autem dedit partem unam tristis* ("but to Hannah he gave one part of sadness"). In the Douay-Rheims Bible the Latin is interpreted as "but to Anna he gave one portion with sorrow." Luther probably based his German translation of the Latin, too, when he wrote *aber Hanna gab er ein Stück traurig* ("but to Hannah he gave one sad portion"). Luther indicates some awareness of the problem in his early (1523) draft of the German translation. He added the word אפים in Hebrew letters with his translation "traurig" (see Luther 1906, 36).

Modern interpreters' rejection of "anger" as the logical interpretation of the dual must be based on what follows in the text. The Hebrew is clear in the second half of v. 5, saying "because he loved Hannah and the Lord closed her womb." Perhaps it is exactly the idea of the loving husband that excludes the possibility of speaking about an "angry portion." How can a loving husband give an angry portion to his beloved wife? Love and anger seem to form a mutually contradictory pair. This might, however, be a hasty conclusion. I think that one should read the text further. It is not only that Elkanah loved Hannah, but there is another issue, too. Hannah did not have children, because the Lord had closed her womb. If we interpret the last clause in Hebrew ("and the Lord had closed her womb") as another causal clause, the text becomes clearer. Elkanah would give Hannah her portion with anger, because he loved Hannah but blamed the Lord for her childlessness.

My analysis of the problem and of the passages that include the Hebrew אפים has shown that there is a danger in the common practice of relying on the work of others. The dictionaries, the commentaries, and the translations may well follow an inferior interpretation. The starting point for my analysis was the impetus from the Vulgate and versions following it. It seems to me that modern scholarship and the translation traditions have overlooked the interpretation of Jerome, since it does not suit the interpreters' reading of 1 Sam 1.5. But that reading is perhaps too narrow. In order to realize this, one needs to return to the texts and analyse them carefully.

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