

THE GENRE OF THE CALL NARRATIVE: BEYOND HABEL'S MODEL

FRED GUYETTE

Norm Habel has proposed a widely accepted model of the call narrative in the Bible as a genre.¹ He believes that there are six elements shared by most call narratives, readily discernible in the example of Gideon's calling.

1. The Divine Confrontation: God's call comes as a disruptive experience, with little or no previous preparation. *Gideon was then beating out wheat inside a winepress . . . The angel of the LORD appeared to him* (Judg. 6:11-12).

2. The Introductory Word: The direct commission of the one called is prefaced by a word of personal communication that serves also as a preparatory word. *'The LORD is with you, valiant warrior!'* (Judg. 6:12-13).

3. The Commission: The verbs *halakh* (to go) and *shalah* (to send) are often part of the commission. *The LORD turned to him and said: 'Go in this strength of yours and deliver Israel from the Midianites. I herewith make you My messenger'* (Judg. 6:14).

4. The Objection: The chosen individual does not believe in his ability to carry out the task. *He said to Him: 'Please, my lord, how can I deliver Israel? Why, my clan is the humblest in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's household'* (Judg. 6:15).

5. The Reassurance: The immediate response of The Lord is an oath of assurance, a divine affirmation of God's character as revealed through His covenant. *The LORD replied: 'I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian to a man'* (Judg. 6:16).

6. The Sign: A sign is provided by God. *And he said to Him: 'If I have gained Your favor, give me a sign that it is You who are speaking to me'* (Judg. 6:17). Note that Gideon does not ask for proof that the Lord will conquer Midian, only for assurance that the Lord has truly "spoken" with him. If God has spoken, the event will undoubtedly take place.

This model only applies to the formal call narrative, when God directly confronts and specifically commissions an individual. However, as Maimonides writes in *Guide for the Perplexed* (Book 1, chapter 45), the Lord calls us in *many* ways, not only in the form of a confrontation and commission. For example, Abraham hears God's call, not as a confrontation but as a promise and an invitation to a journey.² Furthermore, there are examples of other narratives in the Bible which seem to break from Habel's model as part of a different version of a call narrative.

THE CALLING OF SAMUEL

One example of a call narrative that does not neatly fit into Habel's model is the call to Samuel. Samuel hears God calling him as a boy, and it gradually turns into a life-long pattern of listening to God and communicating His word to others. When Samuel is but a child, he goes to live in the Tabernacle with the priest Eli, fulfilling the commitment made by his mother, Hannah. Samuel is beginning to learn what is required for meaningful worship in Israel, when the narrator makes an observation that we do not expect: *In those days the word of the LORD was rare; prophecy was not widespread* (I Sam. 3:1).

One night, though, Samuel hears Eli calling his name – or so he thinks. Samuel hurries to Eli's side, and the words of a child's willing heart are on his lips: *'Here I am'* (I Sam. 3:4). Eli is a little annoyed: *'I didn't call you; go back to sleep'* (I Sam. 3:5). Samuel hears the voice a second time, with the same result. This time Eli replies a bit more gently, *'I didn't call, my son'* (I Sam. 3:6), perhaps realizing that something special might be happening here. When this occurs a third time, Eli explains that it is God calling Samuel, and Eli advises him simply to listen. When he does listen, the word of God brings considerable consternation to Samuel's young heart. Although he is reluctant to reveal the entire content of the message, Eli encourages him to speak. The message is this: since Eli has chosen not to discipline his sons after they acted unjustly, Eli and his house will be removed from their roles as leaders in Israel. From that point forward, Samuel continues to grow strong in the Lord, and all Israel comes to trust that God will speak to them through Samuel rather than through Eli.⁴

To be sure, Eli's leadership is not to be despised. The Ark and the Lamp are still living symbols of God's Law and His presence (Ex. 26:33; Lev. 24:2-4).

It is Eli who helps Samuel discern the difference between the human voice of his teacher and the voice of the divine. Samuel's experience is shaped by the education, the nurture and the affection that he receives from his master, Eli.⁵ Yet Eli's sight, a metaphor for his power of moral and spiritual judgment, is growing dim (I Sam. 3:2). It is one sign, among many others, that the types of leaders who have rescued Israel in the past are no longer adequate for the spiritual, political, and military challenges they now face.

While this narrative does begin with a disruptive experience, a calling which awakens Samuel from his slumber, the other elements are absent. There is no specific commission for Samuel, and no sign is given. However, there may be a subtle kind of commission: Samuel is told that the house of Eli will be wiped out, foreshadowing his role as the new leader, replacing Eli and his sons. This is further emphasized by the last few verses in this chapter, where we are told that God was with Samuel and that he became well known throughout the land as a prophet of God (I Sam. 3:19-20). As Samuel matures from youth to adulthood, he himself will be a bridge between the old and the new forms of leadership, the judges and the kings. When the people demand that Samuel anoint a king for them, Samuel objects (I Sam. 8:6). He tries to warn the people: the sort of king you want will take, and take, and take (I Sam. 8:11-18).⁶ Samuel is being faithful to his vocation when he says these things. However, the Lord himself has decided not to oppose the people's request for an earthly king, and Samuel will have a hand in the anointing of King Saul.

THE CALLING OF ELISHA

Another call narrative that does not fit neatly into Habel's model is the calling of Elisha. Elisha is working the land as a farmer, plowing the ground with twelve pair of oxen (I Kgs. 19:19-21). Rabbi Soloveitchik describes Elisha as a man of property, someone who is interested in his own economic success. His primary objective is to gain wealth and he is attuned to "what is happening in the market."⁷ Elijah calls him by means of a simple gesture: he throws his mantle over Elisha. Very few words are exchanged between them, yet somehow Elisha realizes that he is being summoned by the Lord. This is clearly a disruptive experience: Elisha is surprised by Elijah in the middle of plowing, yet here it is not God or an angel that disrupts, but rather a prophet.

There are hints of other parts of the call narrative. While we expect the verb *halakh* (to go) as part of the commission, here Elisha first asks to kiss his parents good-bye, *'and then I shall go [ve-elekhah] with you'* (I Kgs. 19:20), angering Elijah. Ultimately, Elisha does accept his commission, and the expected verb is used: *He then arose and went [va-yelekh] after Elijah and served him* (I Kgs. 19:21). It may well be that the slight detour to say good-bye to his parents was interpreted by Elijah as the expected "Objection" part of the call narrative; yet Elijah is not one to respond with a "Reassurance" but rather with a dismissive *'Go back. What have I done to you?'* (I Kgs. 19:20).

Elisha, like Elijah, knows how to communicate with symbols and gestures. He goes back home, but only to bid his family farewell. He slaughters the oxen, cooks the meat using the wood from his plow, and distributes it to his neighbors and to those who have worked as his slaves. By these signs, Elisha indicates his intention: "I commit myself wholeheartedly to the prophetic task." Nothing about his new role will be used for the purpose of profit or self-glorification. Whatever Elisha does now will be for the sake of others, as befits the calling of a holy man in Israel.⁸ This gesture may well function as the "Sign" of the call narrative, but here it is not a sign from God to the individual but a sign from Elisha to Elijah, a "Reassurance" that he indeed accepts his new commission.

So Elisha hears God's call as it comes to him through Elijah. Yet Elisha will develop his own way of responding to God's call. In the bloody contest on Mount Carmel, Elijah had slain the prophets of Baal.⁹ After Elisha heals the foreign general, Naaman, the question of idolatrous worship surfaces once again.¹⁰ After Naaman returns to his master, the King of Aram, what should he do about bowing down in the house of the foreign god Rimmon? Elisha's attitude turns out to be very, very different from that of Elijah: *'Go in peace'* (II Kgs. 5:19). Elisha meets the needs of the people he encounters, pointing them to God in his own way and doing what he can to mend a broken world.¹¹

Thus, there are other narratives in Scripture that suggest how unlikely it is that any single model of vocation by itself will be able to capture the mysterious ways in which The Lord calls us, so that we are "newly awakened to action, to hope, to love."¹²

NOTES

1. N. Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives." *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 77 (1965) pp. 297-323. See also D. N. Phinney, "Call/Commission Narratives", in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011) p. 65-71.
2. See D. Hartman, *Maimonides: Torah and Philosophic Quest* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976), p. 57; J. Cohen, "The Makings of a Master Story: Maimonides' Idolatry Narrative as an Educational Paradigm", *Journal of Jewish Education*, 72, no. 2 (2006) pp. 123-144; B. Anderson, "Abraham, the Friend of God", *Interpretation*, 42, no. 4 (1988) pp. 353-366.
4. U. Simon, "Samuel's Call to Prophecy: Form Criticism with Close Reading", *Prooftexts*, 1 (1981) pp. 120-32.
5. R. W. L. Moberly, "To Hear The Master's Voice: Revelation and Spiritual Discernment in the Call of Samuel", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 48, no. 4 (1995) pp. 443-468.
6. F. Polak, "Speaking of Kingship: The Institution of the Monarchy in Israel: Negotiations, Historical Memory, and Social Drama", in *Religious Responses to Political Crises in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008) pp. 3-17.
7. J. D. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Random House, 2006) pp. 103-106.
8. *Ibid.*
9. S. Tonstad, "The Limits of Power: Revisiting Elijah and Horeb", *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*, 19, no. 2 (2005) pp. 253-266; M. Reiss, "Elijah the Zealot: A Foil to Moses", *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 32 (2004) pp. 174-180.
10. W. Smith, "Naaman and Elisha: Healing, Wholeness, and the Task of Religious Education", *Religious Education*, 89, no. 2 (1994) pp. 205-219; J. Kellenberger, "Religious Commitment to One's Own Religion and Acceptance of Other Religions", *ARC: The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University*, 38 (2010) pp. 95-114.
11. G. Rosenthal, "Tikkun ha-Olam: The Metamorphosis of a Concept", *Journal of Religion*, 85, no. 2 (2005) pp. 214-240.
12. F. Rosenzweig, "The Secret of the Biblical Narrative Form", in *Scripture and Translation: Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) pp. 129-142. See also P. Ricoeur, "The Summoned Subject in the School of the Narratives of the Prophetic Vocation", in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. M. I. Wallace, trans. D. Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 262-275.



Full text of articles from Volumes 1 - 42 is available for download on our website:

<http://jbq.jewishbible.org/jbq-past-issues/>

