

Old Testament Call Narratives  
T. David Gordon

OT Call Narratives ordinarily have four parts:

- A. Theophany/Epiphany (burning bush, audible voice, etc.)
- B. Call extended
- C. Expression of reluctance
- D. Acquiescence in call

Exod 3:1 Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 And *the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire* out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. 3 And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." 4 When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, *God called to him* out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And *Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God*.... 4:10 But Moses said to the LORD, "Oh, my Lord, *I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.*" 11 Then the LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? 12 Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak." 13 But he said, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else." 14 Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses and he said, "Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well. Behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. 15 You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you both what to do. 16 He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him. 17 And take in your hand this staff, with which you shall do the signs."

Judg 6:11 Now the angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth [large deciduous tree, possibly oak] at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. 12 And *the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him*, "The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor." 13 And Gideon said to him, "Please, my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian." 14 And the LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?" 15 And he said to him, "Please, Lord, *how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.*" 16 And the LORD said to him, "*But I will be with you*, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man." 17 And he said to him, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. 18 Please do not depart from here until I come to you and bring out my present and set it before you." And he said, "I will stay till you return." 19 So Gideon went into his house and prepared a young goat and unleavened cakes from an ephah of flour. The meat he put in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot, and brought them to him under the terebinth and presented them. 20 And the angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened cakes, and put them on this rock, and pour the broth over them." And he did so. 21 Then the angel of the LORD reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes. And *fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes. And the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight.* 22 Then Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the LORD. And Gideon said, "Alas, O Lord GOD! *For now I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face.*" 23 But the LORD said to him, "Peace be

to you. Do not fear; you shall not die.” 24 Then Gideon built an altar there to the LORD and called it, The LORD Is Peace. To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiezrites.

1 Sam 3:1 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision. 2 At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. 3 The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. 4 *Then the LORD called Samuel*, and he said, “Here I am!” 5 and ran to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call; lie down again.” So he went and lay down. 6 *And the LORD called again, “Samuel!”* and Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.” 7 Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. 8 *And the LORD called Samuel again the third time.* And he arose and went to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that *the LORD was calling the boy.* 9 Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant hears.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10 *And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times,* “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant hears.” 11 Then the LORD said to Samuel, “Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which the two ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. 12 On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. 13 And I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. 14 Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever.”

Isa 6:1 In the year that King Uzziah died *I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne*, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” 4 *And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.* 5 And I said: “*Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!*” 6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” 8 And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.”

Jer 1:4 Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 5 “*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.*” 6 Then I said, “*Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.*” 7 But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a youth’; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for *I am with you* to deliver you, declares the LORD.” 9 Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me, “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. 10 See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

Vignettes from the Life of Paul: The Damascus Call  
T. David Gordon

I. Examples of Call Narratives in OT

Exodus 3:1-6	Moses
Judges 6:1-24	Gideon
1Sam 3:1-14	Samuel
Isa. 6:1-8	Isaiah
Jer. 1:4-10	Jeremiah

II. Ordinary Features of Call Narratives

- A. Theophany/Epiphany (burning bush, audible voice, etc.)
- B. Call extended
- C. Expression of reluctance
- D. Acquiescence in call

“There can be little doubt that the classical prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and II Isaiah appropriate and develop the call traditions reflected in the structure of the calls of Moses and Gideon. By using the same call *Gattung* [English, “form” or “genre”] the prophets in question establish a specific link with the past history of Israel. Their own calls, it would seem, are viewed from the historical perspective of the commission of the ancient mediators of Israel. ... Thus, for Jeremiah it was not only a question of claiming to be a *prophet* like Moses, but also of extending the historical line of continuity from the ancient *mediators* via the divine commission and its form.

By employing this form the prophets publicly identify themselves as *God’s ambassadors*. The call narratives, therefore, are not primarily pieces of autobiographical information but *open proclamations of the prophet’s claim to be Yahweh’s agent at work in Israel*.<sup>1</sup>

“Paul presents his commission in a manner reminiscent of the literary form that is used in the OT to depict the call of the prophets...Paul here actually describes his Christophany in the form of a prophetic call. Attention has to be paid to this form critical observation, for it defines the framework for the interpretation of the overloaded subordinate clause.”<sup>2</sup>

III. Texts

Acts 9:1 But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. [Consistently with Lev. 24:16 ‘Moreover, the one who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death; *all the congregation shall certainly stone him*. The alien as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death.] 3 Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly *a light from heaven shone around him*. 4 And falling to the ground, *he heard a voice saying to him*, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” 5 And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” 7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8 Saul rose from the ground, and *although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing*. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 And for

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<sup>1</sup> Norm Habel, “The form and significance of the Call Narratives,” *ZAW* 77, no. 1 (January, 1965): 297-323, all emphases mine.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Olav Sandnes, *Paul—One of the Prophets?* (WUNT 2/43. Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1998), pp. 58, 59.

three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. 10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. ... 13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for *he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.* 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ... For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. 20 And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." (and Acts 22:4-16, Acts 26:9-19)

Gal 1:11 For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. 12 For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. 13 For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. 14 And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. 15 But when he who had set me apart before I was born [Greek, "set me apart *from my mother's womb*," alluding to Jer. 1:5], and who *called* me by his grace, 16 was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

#### IV. Provisional Conclusions

A. None of the texts says that Paul was converted; they all say that he was called to preach to the Gentiles. Faithful instruction requires that we refer to this as Paul's call (as we would in the case of Moses, Gideon, et al.); any reference to this as Paul's "conversion" is speculation. Was Moses "converted" at the burning bush, or was Gideon "converted" under the terebinth?

B. Each text regards the event as unique to Paul ("I did not consult with anyone"), not like the experience of anyone else after the resurrection.

C. Luke's likening of Paul's call to the significant prophetic call narratives in the OT was Luke's way of saying that Paul's call inaugurated a significantly new moment in the redemptive event-complex of Christ's humiliated and exalted work. Elsewhere, Paul indicated that he concurred with this, because in Galatians 1, it is evident that Paul likens his calling to that of Isaiah and Jeremiah. God pledged to make Abraham's descendants numerous, which was fulfilled during the four centuries in Egyptian bondage. God pledged to give those descendants a great arable land, which was fulfilled under Joshua and the judges. But he also pledged to bless all the nations/tribes of the earth through one single descendant of Abraham one day (Gen. 22:18), and this, by Paul's own testimony, was fulfilled in his ministry:

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, *preached the gospel beforehand* to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.: Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. (Gal. 3:8-9, 16).

Note that the pledge of Genesis 22:18 (reiterated at Gen. 26:4) to *bless* all the *nations/Gentiles* through Abraham's single descendant, is referred to by Paul as "the gospel." The gentile mission, spear-headed by Paul after Damascas, is not merely a mission; it is nothing less than the gospel itself, *an overturning of the global curse of Genesis 3*, when the God who once cursed Adam's race now, in the Last Adam, blesses all nation. Luke, in other words, did not understand Paul's gentile mission merely in strategic terms, as an expedient way to spread the gospel. He regarded Paul's gentile mission as itself the third part of what God had pledged to Abraham, and therefore part of the "gospel" itself. As Isaac Watts put it: "No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found...."