

## The Hebrew Corner

There is a pattern that is seen often throughout the Tanach, that before a prophet is sent out to prophesy, that God gives him a charge. This usually involves telling the prophet what he is to say, and who he is to say it to. Many times the prophet will be reluctant or fearful, although sometimes eager, to take on the task, so that God needs to give encouragement to the prophet. This month we will look at the initial encounters between God and some of the prophets that he sent out.

First let us look at the encounter between God and the prophet Isaiah, in which he receives his charge, as described in Isaiah 6:1-10:

“In the year that King Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.”

Here it is noted that King Uzziah, for the last few years of his reign in Judah, was made a leper by God in judgment of his offering incense in the temple, which was a duty reserved for priests. Jotham, his son, ruled the land during this time, and upon the death of his father ascended to the throne. Jotham, although he did what was right in the sight of God, as indicated in 2 Chronicles 27:2, never entered into the temple himself, perhaps in fear of what had happened to his father. So it is with this background that Isaiah has a vision of God in the temple:

“Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy,

holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.”

In this section of the passage, we see two important Hebrew words used many places in the Tanach. The word translated as holy is the word qadosh (קדוש, kah-DOHSH), and the word translated as glory is kavod (כבוד, kah-VOHD). The impression is given that the seraphim, winged creatures, were giving non-stop praise to God. This scene overwhelmed Isaiah:

“And the posts of the door moved at the sound of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.”

Of interest here is the emphasis placed on the mouth, as Jesus taught in Matthew 15:18 that what comes out of a person's mouth starts in the heart, and can defile the individual. The Hebrew word translated as sin is hattat (חטאת, chaht-TAHT). Here Isaiah is cleansed of his sin, before he receives his commission.

“Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me. And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their

eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.”

Here God was speaking to Isaiah of the judgment that was to come for the people of Judah, which was not to end until the land and the cities within were devastated and without inhabitants. The phrase, Here I am, in Hebrew is hinneni (הִנְנִי, hih-nuh-NEE), a form of the word hayn (הֵן, HAYN), meaning behold or look, so a direct translation would literally be, Behold me! or Look at me! Obviously, the prophet was trying to get God's attention, to volunteer for the commission. An interesting side note, is the word that is in the exact middle of the book of Isaiah, as the scribes kept very close counts of words in their scrolls, to avoid errors. The word at the exact center of this book is the name Yahweh (יְהוָה), which is the name of God as revealed to Moses. God was literally right at the heart of this book.

The prophet Jeremiah was very hesitant to speak the word of God to people. Thus God needed to give him some encouragement, as seen in the following passage (Jeremiah 1:4-10):

“Then the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations. Then said I, Ah, Lord GOD! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child. But the LORD said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the LORD. Then the LORD put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over

the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.”

The Lord assures Jeremiah that he will be with him. Similarly to the encounter with Isaiah, he reaches out and touches his mouth, this time for the purpose of instructing him in what to speak. It is not clear whether Jeremiah visibly saw a hand moving to touch his mouth, or whether he felt the hand of God touching him. The Hebrew for hand in the passage is yad (יָד, YAHD), which can also mean power. As we can see, God gave his prophets not only persuasive speech, but also widespread authority over nations in many cases.

Sometimes the prophet resisted the call of God. The narrative of the book of Jonah indicates that this prophet, due to his hatred of Nineveh, which was the seat of the Assyrian empire, did not intend to obey the charge of God. The Assyrians were noted for their cruel treatment of people that they had taken prisoner. We see in Jonah 1:1-3, that Jonah planned to flee from God:

“Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me. But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.”

The phrase translated great city is haier hagadolah (הַעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה, hah-EER hah-gah-doh-LAH). God was giving the city of Nineveh one

last chance to repent, but Jonah did not want to cooperate. However, God had an important mission for Jonah, that had even more important implications for mankind. So God had a plan, as we see in Jonah 1:17:

“Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.”

The Hebrew phrase translated great fish is dag gadol (דג גדול, DAHG gah-DOHL). The story continues with the fish spewing Jonah on to dry land. God then repeated his previous command to Jonah that he should prophesy to Nineveh, and this time he did as God commanded. Here it is important to consider that Nineveh was essentially land-locked, so that Jonah must have traveled a great distance from where he was left on the sea shore to get to Nineveh.

The next passage describes what Jonah did when he arrived in Nineveh, and the Ninevites response (Jonah 3:4-10):

“And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water: But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every

one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not? And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.”

This is without doubt the greatest mass repentance of any nation recorded in the Bible. This is the region Abraham came from, in which idol worship was the norm, yet through one sentence of a prophet of God, were moved to proclaim a national fast, and cry out to God for mercy. What is more, God used the reluctance of Jonah to prophesy, to deliver a second, and even more significant message for future generations, as described in Matthew 12:38-40:

“Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign, and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Here Jesus refers back to the experience of Jonah as prophetic of his own death and resurrection, to provide an even greater act of mercy, the forgiveness of sins, and a new life of fellowship with God, available to all who will receive it. So we see that one prophet, acting according to God's plan at the right time, can have a widespread effect extending into the distant future.

May you and your family experience God's love and mercy in full

measure, made possible by the death and resurrection of his son Jesus, our Yeshua, and may God's blessings flow to you during the month.