Annunciations

Sacred Music for the Twenty-First
Century

EDITED BY GEORGE CORBETT

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10.1. A Dark Dream: God's Calling of Samuel and the Ministry of Eli (1 Samuel 3)

Caleb Froehlich

God's calling of Samuel in the temple of Shiloh is a story typically associated with children, a story told in children's books, Sunday school lessons, and animated Bible films. A number of the story's features easily lend themselves to this audience. Most obviously, its main protagonist is a child, providing young listeners with a character to whom they can easily relate. Moreover, the central part of the story, God's three-fold call and Samuel's turning to Eli, exhibits the kind of repetition reminiscent of classic tales such as *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, *The Gingerbread Man* and *Little Red Riding Hood* — a pedagogically useful feature for keeping a child's attention and relating particular themes.¹ Partly because of this dominant association, the story is widely viewed even by biblical scholars as simple, straightforward, and charming. Thus, for example, Walter Brueggemann accepts that God's calling is an 'idyllic childlike exchange' and paraphrases this part of the narrative to focus attention, instead, on wider socio-religious themes.² Other scholars see the threefold repetition as a purely rhetorical device for clarity of structure and dramatic emphasis.³ Some regard it as an example of human frailty; at best, a misunderstanding; or, at worst, a display of

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- 1 Irving Wood discusses the similarities between God's Calling of Samuel and folk-tales in Irving Wood, 'Folk-Tales in Old Testament Narrative', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 28 (1909), 34–41.
 - 2 Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), p. 25. See also Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History Part Two: 1 Samuel* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 44; P. Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel* (New Haven, CT: Doubleday Religious Publishing Group, 1995), p. 98; Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), pp. 88–91; Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008), p. 31.
 - 3 Two scholars who interpret it this way are: Robert Karl Gnuse, *The Dream Theophany of Samuel: Its Structure in Relation to Ancient Near Eastern Dreams and Its Theological Significance* (Lanham, CT: University Press of America, 1984), p. 145; Jacob Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986), p. 54.

obtuseness.⁴ With only a few exceptions, scholars fail to deal with the full implications of God's calling in a more serious manner.⁵

In researching this scriptural passage for the composer, Seán Doherty, I did not attempt to remedy these scholarly omissions, but rather to establish a broader theological framework through which to explore the under-examined aspects of the narrative. It was gratifying to find that those elements of the story which most interested me also resonated with him and served as the basis for our discussions throughout the collaborative process. Since some of the elements are contained within a larger context of 1 Samuel [Sam] 3, I first relate the setting for God's call and its possible connection with many people's experience of God today; secondly, I examine what is revealed about the voice of God in the passage and the challenge this presented for the final composition; thirdly, I consider the psychological and emotional turmoil Samuel must have experienced; and, finally, I reflect on how these different elements were refined in Doherty's choral piece 'God Calls Samuel'.

The Setting for God's Call

The setting for God's calling of Samuel is what initially prompted me to select this passage for the TheoArtistry Composers' Scheme. It seemed to me that the narrative's opening statement is arresting, particularly in our contemporary context: 'The word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision (1 Sam 3.1).'⁶ Is the word of God scarce because, to use Friedrich Nietzsche's famous adage, 'God is dead'? Is it because people have stopped going to church and have ceased to engage with religious concerns? If so, is God angry with us? Has God abandoned us because we have abandoned God? In popular Western culture, the silence of God has become a recurrent motif in film, theatre, literature and music, from acclaimed television series such as *The Leftovers* (2014) and *Preacher* (2016) to contemporary tracks such as As Cities Burn's 'Contact' (2007) or Vampire Weekend's 'Ya Hey' (2013) which, playing on the name *Yahweh*, directly addresses God and proclaims: 'you won't even say your name'.⁷

Such contemporary sentiments arguably reflect the scriptural setting for God's calling of Samuel. However, they are expressed less through a lack of hearing, as through a lack of vision. The account begins by highlighting the symbolic significance of sight. 'Vision' was precious in those days, it pronounces, leading directly to the statement that Eli, the high priest, 'could not see' because his eyes had 'begun to grow dim' from old age (1 Sam 3.1-2). In placing these parallel phrases, the narrative links

4 See, for example, Lyle M. Eslinger, *Kingship of God in Crisis: A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1-12* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), p. 150; Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist*, p. 50.

5 For a scholarly perspective which does address Samuel in a substantial way, see Walter Moberly, 'To Hear the Master's Voice: Revelation and Spiritual Discernment in the Call of Samuel', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 48 (1995), 443-68.

6 All biblical passages will be quoted from the English Standard Version (ESV).

7 Ariel Rechtshaid, Rostam Batmanglij, and Ezra Koenig, 'Vampire Weekend Lyrics — Ya Hey' (AZLyrics.com, 2018), <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/vampireweekend/yahey.html>

Eli's physical deterioration with the religious decline of that period. The connection is made more explicit in the details of the preceding chapter (1 Sam 2.12-36). Here, the sons of Eli abuse their priestly duties before the Ark — God's visible token of His presence among the Israelites, housed in the temple at Shiloh. Years of stealing sacrifices from the deity and sleeping with female servants in the tabernacle are the causes for the termination of the family's election. With the priesthood in disrepute, there seems to be no suitable mediator for God's revelation.

Fig 10.1.1 Detail of William de Brailes, *Eli's Sons Commit Sacrilege* (1 Sam 2.13-17) (c. 1250). This page from the Walters manuscript (W.106) is comprised of two scenes from the second chapter of 1 Samuel. In the top image, the priest Eli's sons—Hophni and Phinehas—are depicted treating 'the offerings of the Lord with contempt' (1 Sam 2.17). They are shown taking meat for themselves from the Israelite's sacrifices before burning the fat as an offering to the Lord. The bottom image shows Elkanah and Hannah presenting the child Samuel to God at the temple. Unlike Eli's own sons, 'the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people' (v. 26).

1 Sam 3 represents this religious decadence with twilight hanging over the land of Israel. A nation without the mediating office of the priesthood is a nation falling into spiritual obscurity: the 'no frequent vision', reported at the beginning of the story, is not only reflected in Eli's poor eyesight but in the light slowly fading from the temple and its surroundings. All of Israel has settled down for the night and the high priest himself is 'lying down in his own place', away from his responsibilities at the temple. The nation is in a state of visionless sleep, oblivious to the voice of God. Even as the temple sinks into darkness, however, God has not completely forsaken Israel. A single lamp illuminates Samuel, sleeping dutifully beside the Ark. The juxtaposition of Samuel and Eli is arresting. While the high priest lies in the comfort of his own room, the boy lies near the very symbol of God's presence. This contrast identifies Samuel as the glimmer of light in an otherwise dismal situation. It is precisely in this moment of transition from day to night, a moment characterized by ambivalence and ambiguity, that the word of God strikes. The voice in the darkness does not address Eli or his progeny, the expected recipients of divine revelation, but the child. Its sound is so unexpected that Samuel repeatedly fails to recognize the source: God calls out to him three times and three times he turns to Eli.

There is much in common between the silence of Samuel's time and the silence which many believe characterizes our contemporary religious climate. The repeated call of God, however, throws this supposed silence into a different light. Samuel's failure to recognize the voice of God raises a number of questions which may pertain directly to current preconceptions: is God truly silent or are we simply not recognizing His voice? Similarly, what is the role of religious structures and particular figures within them in mediating the word of God? How would we know if God's silence has to do with our own inhibited hearing or some sort of divine anger? These all lead to the simple, yet profound, question: what does God's voice sound like?

The Voice of God

Doherty and I discussed how to portray the voice of God in the composition. Biblical stories typically provide little by way of description, leaving the sound of God's speech chiefly to the discretion of the artist.⁸ In the animated film *Prince of Egypt* (1998), the directors had the entire cast simultaneously whisper God's lines, resulting in a reverberating chorus of voices. In *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014), Ridley Scott cast an eleven-year-old school boy to speak as God who, he said, 'exudes innocence and purity, and those two qualities are extremely powerful.'⁹ Although 1 Sam 3 provides

8 When God's voice is described in Scripture, it is often associated with the sound of thunder. See, for example, Exod 19.19; 1 Sam 7.10; Job 37.2-5. 1 Kgs 19, however, qualifies this association with natural forces. Here, Elijah discovers that God is not present in the wind, earthquake or fire, but rather in 'a still small voice' (19.12).

9 Carrie Dedrick, 'Ridley Scott Casts 11-Year Old Boy to Speak as God in "Exodus: Gods and Kings"' (ChristianHeadlines.com, 2014), <http://www.christianheadlines.com/blog/ridley-scott-casts-11-year-old-boy-to-speak-as-god-in-exodus-gods-and-kings.html>

no explicit description, the voice of God is given two primary characteristics which the composer has to take into consideration.

The first is that the voice of God is not recognizable as such. It is easy to assume that when God speaks, the verbalization should exhibit qualities that suggest the transcendence or divinity of the speaker. We may be reminded of the common depiction of God's voice booming from heaven, loud and clear, as if James Earl Jones were speaking through a megaphone.¹⁰ Or we might imagine a more phantasmal sound which emphasizes an otherworldliness, such as the cacophony of whispers in *Prince of Egypt*. The voice of God in 1 Sam 3, however, does not exhibit these kinds of qualities. There is no angelic chorus accompanying God's call, or sonorous voice emitting from a celestial echo chamber. Rather, the speech of God sounds ordinary; so much so that Samuel immediately assumes it is human.

The second characteristic follows directly from the first; the voice of God sounds very similar to the voice of Eli. As Walter Moberly points out, the correspondence is evident in the way Samuel responds to God's call:

If one tries to imagine a situation in which a voice in the night were in any way unfamiliar, the initial response of Samuel to the voice would presumably be one of uncertainty or anxiety and might well be expressed by the question 'Who are you?' Or, when Samuel goes to Eli he could have said something along the lines of 'I heard a voice. Wasn't it you calling me?'¹¹

Samuel's response to the call of God, however, does not take the form of a question. Instead, the boy responds with 'Here I am, for you called me', revealing his own belief that it was in fact Eli who summoned him in the night.¹² It is particularly telling that Samuel uses this familiar expression in all three instances (1 Sam 3.4-8).

These two characteristics presented Doherty with a duality: the voice of God as distinct from that of Eli and the voice of God being essentially the same as that of Eli. Regardless of how we tried to conceive God's voice — privileging one of these divergent aspects — questions emerged concerning the possible experience of the listening audience. Should the voice of God be distinct from the voice of Eli? If not, how does one convey the similarity while still allowing listeners to distinguish between the two? In our desire to enable the audience to experience something of this subtle dichotomy, we realized that it would be beneficial to use Samuel's own experience as the starting point.

10 This popular representation corresponds with those biblical passages where God's voice is associated with thunder. Loudness is probably used to indicate the transcendent power or importance of the speech or speaker.

11 Moberly, 'To Hear the Master's Voice', p. 459.

12 'Here I am' or *hinnēnī* can be said to equals, superiors and inferiors. It does not have any special theological meaning. See Douglas Stuart's comments in *Exodus*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), II, p. 114.

The Experience of Samuel

If we imagine God's calling from the perspective of Samuel, the voice of God sounding like Eli's voice takes on a new significance. Biblical scholars generally agree that Eli not only served as Samuel's teacher, but also as his surrogate father.¹³ From the time his mother gave him over for service at the temple — probably at the age of five — the majority of what Samuel heard and learned about God was through the high priest.¹⁴ Considering the high priest's formative role, it may not be unreasonable to propose that Samuel's own idea of God might well have been informed also by his interactions with Eli. Recent studies in child psychology suggest, indeed, that children's ideas of God are mainly modelled on their teachers and parents.¹⁵

At this point, we might be tempted to adopt the Feuerbachian or Freudian supposition that God is merely a projection of Samuel's mind, an imaginary objectification of Eli, his surrogate father. The question, however, is whether this is true for Samuel. 1 Sam 3 seems to challenge precisely this supposition. It does not repudiate the tremendous formative role that Eli is likely to have exerted on the boy's idea of God. Yet, it shows that this might be the means through which to encounter a greater reality, taking up such ideas and transforming them. Indeed, the third time Samuel hears God's call and turns to Eli, his surrogate father points beyond himself. The high priest encourages the child to detach his understanding of God from his parental figure so that Samuel might relate to God on his own.

Eli provides Samuel with a response that not only identifies God as the caller, but also articulates the kind of respect, humility and willingness that seems appropriate

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- 13 See, for example, George Savran, *Encountering the Divine: Theophany in Biblical Narrative* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), p. 141; Hillel I. Millgram, *The Invention of Monotheist Ethics: Exploring the First Book of Samuel* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009), p. 145; Stephen B. Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), p. 84; Mark A. Leuchter and David T. Lamb, *The Historical Writings: Introducing Israel's Historical Literature* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), p. 199.2005
 - 14 Samuel's mother, Hannah, gave her son over to the temple after 'she weaned him' (1 Sam 1.23-25). Scholars generally suppose that this means Samuel was between three and five years old. See the discussion, for example, in Dorothy Kelley Patterson and Rhonda Harrington Kelley, *Women's Evangelical Commentary: Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), p. 428; Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1-15* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 277. A few scholars, however, argue that weaning refers to the time the child is ready leave his mother's care, placing Samuel around twelve or thirteen. See comment in Charles Taze Russell, *Expanded Biblical Comments — Commentary of the Old and New Testament* (Chicago: Chicago Bible Students, 2014). The text states that Samuel 'was still young' when she handed him over (1.25). Hence, I place his age close to five years old.
 - 15 In 2004, a study of 363 Dutch pre-schoolers, for example, found that the children's ideas of God mainly derived from interactions with their teachers and parents. The data showed that the stricter these interactions were, the more punitive God became in the minds of the children. See Simone A. de Roos, Jurjen Iedema and Siebren Miedema, 'Influence of Maternal Denomination, God Concepts, and Child-Rearing Practices on Young Children's God Concepts', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 43 (2004), 519-35. Another study, conducted in 2006, discovered that teachers and parents remain the primary predictors of a child's conception of God well into young adulthood; however, from then on, the link between God and these attachment figures starts to weaken. See Jane R. Dickie, Lindsey V. Ajega, Joy R. Kobylak, and Kathryn M. Nixon, 'Mother, Father, and Self: Sources of Young Adults' God Concepts', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 45 (2006), 57-71.

Fig 10.1.2 Detail of Unknown Artist, *Bible Primer: Old Testament* by Adolf Holt (1919). Following Samuel's dedication at the house of the Lord in Shiloh, Samuel goes to live with Eli where he learns how to minister before the Lord. For the young boy, therefore, Eli served not only as a teacher but also as something of a father figure. Samuel's experience becomes more harrowing when we consider the close relationship he had with Eli.

for one who is addressing God: 'Speak, LORD (*Yahweh*), for your servant hears' (1 Sam 3.9).¹⁶ What is peculiar, however, is that when Samuel hears God call out to him the fourth time, he does not respond by using God's proper name, *Yahweh*, as Eli instructed. This omission seems to imply a certain reluctance or trepidation in the mind of Samuel as he steps into a new understanding (1 Sam 3.10).

Samuel's Bewilderment

As aforementioned, the dominant association of 1 Sam 3 with children has, in part, resulted in overly simplistic or reductionist interpretations of the story. One manifestation of this proclivity has been to characterize Samuel as a prime example of willing obedience. Yet, the story presents the boy as a more complex person. Samuel's responses to each call intimate a growing puzzlement. He initially pronounces 'Here I am!', *runs* to Eli, and repeats his declaration, stating 'Here I am' a second time. His eager willingness to respond to his teacher is obvious. After the second and third call, however, Samuel simply *goes* to Eli and only speaks once he has arrived. He does

¹⁶ Klein, p. 133. YHWH is usually replaced by LORD in bible translations. Here I have changed it back to YHWH so as to better convey that this is God's name rather than a title.

not appear less willing to respond, but his actions seem to show that he is perplexed, perhaps even discouraged, by what is occurring.

Visual representations of Samuel's response to God's calling typically coincide with the picture of Samuel as an eager respondent. Some works, however, depict a more nuanced expression that seems aligned with how one would expect a child to react under these bizarre circumstances. Newell Wyeth's painting, *Samuel Mistakes God* (1929), for example, portrays a tension-laden scene.¹⁷ Samuel stands across from Eli with a disappointed look across his face. The slight tilt of his head and subtle frown give the impression that he is uncertain about what he has just experienced. Another painting entitled *The Infant Samuel* (circa 1853), by James Sant, shows a more dramatic response to God's calling. Here the boy suddenly rises out of bed and turns his head, intently searching for something in the darkness. Samuel's wide eyes exude alarm and bewilderment.

Samuel's Terror

Adaptations of 1 Sam 3 typically downplay the climax of the story. Some omit God's judgment against the house of Eli altogether, ending the retelling with Samuel's dutiful response to the fourth call of God. This neglect is not surprising, especially if the adaptation is for children. As Brueggemann candidly observes, 'the dream narrative is used to articulate a most disruptive, devastating assertion'.¹⁸ When the judgment is included, however, it is usually told from Eli's viewpoint, with little or no regard to its immediate effects on Samuel. The message itself is weighty and abrasive. God tells Samuel that his surrogate family will be punished for their blasphemous behaviour, not just for a lifetime, but 'forever' — there is no hint of appeal or recourse. God's verdict is so severe that 'the two ears of everyone who hears it will tingle' (3.11-14). If we imaginatively place ourselves in the perspective of the child, it is easy to see how terrifying this message could be.

There are very few visual representations of Samuel listening to the judgment of God. A painting by Joshua Reynolds, however, seems to capture the kind of fear he likely endured during this intense nocturnal visitation. In *The Infant Samuel* (1776), we see the boy kneeling on the ground with his face turned up to heaven. There is a certain innocence to his posture with hands pressed tightly together. But Samuel's face clearly looks distressed. His furrowed brows and intense gaze suggest that he is alarmed by what he is hearing. Reynolds produced this scene in another painting *The Infant Samuel at Prayer* (1776), where his heavy use of shadow makes Samuel's distress even more apparent.

17 Wyeth painted this image for Bruce Barton, 'The Boy who Anointed Two Kings', *Good Housekeeping*, 88 (March 1929), 50–58.

18 Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, p. 25.

Fig. 10.1.3 (Left) Joshua Reynolds, *The Infant Samuel* (1776), oil on canvas. (Right) Joshua Reynolds, *The Infant Samuel at Prayer* (1776). Joshua Reynolds' two paintings — both created circa 1776 — are suggestive of Samuel's earnestness and apprehension. In *The Infant Samuel* (left), the child's furrowed brows and intense gaze suggest he is alarmed with what he is hearing. In *The Infant Samuel at Prayer* (right), Reynolds intensifies this sense of consternation by using heavy shadowing in both the background and in depicting the features of Samuel's face.

The story hints at the trauma Samuel endured that night. It states that he 'lay until morning' and 'was afraid to tell the vision to Eli' (3.15). We can imagine the boy turning the devastating words over and over in his head. Samuel may have noticed that, while God specified a terrible judgment to be exacted on the house of Eli, the voice did not tell him to pass this message on to the high priest. Confusion and anxiety most likely compelled him to keep the events of that night to himself. Indeed, when Eli calls Samuel over to his quarters, the high priest has to encourage the child to relate God's message with a threat: 'May God do so to you and more also if you hide anything from me of all that He told you' (3.17).

The Collaboration

In our collaboration, Doherty was particularly taken by the experience of Samuel and decided to adopt a more child-centric interpretation of the narrative. He wanted the choral setting to express the events of the narrative through Samuel's eyes, rather than through the perspective of Eli or a third person narrator. The elements of the boy's nocturnal experience — the darkness, detachment, bewilderment, terror — struck the composer as being those of a true nightmare. This became the overarching theme and set the mood and texture for the final composition. Doherty wanted to invite the

listening audience to enter into Samuel's dark dream, to sense something of the child's bewilderment and terror.

We talked about several possible textual sources for the choral setting that could have been fruitful thematic avenues. For example, we thought about using sources outside of the biblical narrative such as verses from a poem or even texts of our own making. The account of God's calling of Samuel also offered a number of ideas worth investigating musically. However, we could not explore them all due to the time restriction on the composition (three minutes). This brief duration challenged Doherty to be concise and economical in his textual choices, concentrating our ideas into a taut musical and narrative structure.

Appreciating these limitations, Doherty decided to build his text primarily from the names of the protagonists in 1 Samuel 3. The meanings of these names encapsulate the drama of the calling portion of this narrative. I pointed out to Doherty that names which contain 'el' typically speak of some relationship to God. The letters 'el' derive from God's name, *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים). Thus, the name Eli (אֵלִי) signifies 'my God' whereas Samuel (שְׁמוּעַל) means 'God hears' or 'the one who hears God'. In recognizing the meanings of these names, we understood the poignancy contained in the calling portion of the narrative. God calls out 'Samuel!' meaning 'the one who hears God'. The boy answers 'Here I am!' and runs to Eli, whose name significantly means 'my God'. God calls 'The one who hears God!' two more times, and two more times the boy turns to 'my God', rather than to the true God. Doherty kept these names in Hebrew for the setting so as to communicate directly the complexity of the protagonists' relationships with one another.

Collaborating with Doherty in the creation of 'God Calls Samuel' opened up a perspective on the narrative that neither of us had anticipated. We both came to the partnership with different expectations as to what would be expressed in the choral setting but, in the course of our discussions, we each shifted somewhat to arrive at a common concept. This enabled us to have a symbiotic relationship in which my theological insights served to inspire his musical creativity and his music brought an emotional richness to my theological understanding of the narrative. The final product of our collaboration, we hope, captures both the terror and the wonder of God's calling of young Samuel.

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