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1 Samuel 3:1-4:1a

Seventh Message

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IS GOD STILL SPEAKING?

SERIES: THE CROSSING FATES

Recently a church in my neighborhood displayed a banner with the words, “God is still speaking.” After questioning the value of the slogan as a marketing technique, I pondered the question on a deeper level. Is God still speaking? And if so, how? The evangelical answer is, “Yes, God has spoken in the Scriptures, and now in these last days he has spoken to us in the revelation of his Son, Jesus Christ, in whom all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form.”

This explains why we should make the Scriptures a sacred priority in our lives. But now that they are complete, has God just left us with the book? Does he ever call your name or speak a word directly to you from the pages of these sacred texts? Does he ever ask you to give a specific word to someone else on his behalf? Does he ever place a burden on you to declare his name in a hostile environment, or challenge unjust practices at your workplace? More importantly, can we truly know God unless he chooses to reveal himself, illuminating us by his Spirit to understand what he has written in his word?

Thus far we have traced the miraculous birth of Samuel (1:1-2:10), and the nurture of the prophet in the midst of the corruption of Eli’s sons (2:11-36). Today in chapter 3 we will examine the call of Samuel, the first named prophet since Moses. A prophet is one who is designated by God to be his spokesperson and interpret his will to man. This chapter is typical of the intimate relationship that God would initiate with all of Israel’s prophets, and ultimately Jesus, Israel’s prophet par excellence. By extension it is our story, for Joel prophesied that one day God would pour out his Spirit to such an extent that all his people would be prophets (2:28-29). This was Moses’ great dream, voiced in response to Joshua’s request that he restrain others from prophesying in the camp:

But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!” (Num 11:29 TNIV)

Fokkelman sets forth the chapter in a chiasmic structure of five scenes tracing the transition of Samuel, who begins as the young temple servant, and ends as a prophet with national stature.¹

a	Visions were rare	1-3
	Eli and the boy Samuel in their sleeping quarters	
	Eli becoming blind, lamp of God almost out	
b	The Lord calls Samuel 3 times in vain	4-9
x	The Lord reveals himself to Samuel: anti-Eli oracle	10-14
b’	Eli calls Samuel, is provided with information	15-18
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	Samuel confirmed as a prophet (Eli is gone)	
	God’s word (new light) goes out to all Israel	

I. The Setting: When the Light Goes Dim (1 Sam 1:1-3)

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions [lit. “no vision was able to break through”]. One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the LORD, where the ark of God was. (1 Sam 3:1-3 TNIV)

The focus now shifts from Eli’s sons, who did not know the Lord, to the boy Samuel, who has quietly and faithfully been ministering to the Lord under the aegis of Eli’s leadership and growing “in stature and favor with all the people” (2:18, 26). As the scene opens, the narrator invites us into Shiloh’s sleeping quarters in the late hours of the night. It seems as if everything in God’s household is turning dangerously dark. There are no revelations and no visions. The priest is blind, and the lamp of God is about to be extinguished. The expression, “there were not many visions,” reads literally, “no vision was able to break through (*paratz*).” The Hebrew verb *paratz* is a term used of breaching a wall or enemy stronghold (2 Sam 5:20). This vivid and forceful word suggests that the sins of Eli’s sons had created a formidable impasse so that it had become nearly impossible for new revelation to break through. Does this describe your world? Is your lamp about to be extinguished? Is your hope dim?

At this eerie and frightening moment, when both the high priest and God’s house are about to be consigned to darkness, God in his grace chooses to reveal himself. There is a lot riding on this moment, for this may be the last opportunity God has to bring about a new order before the old one is crushed by the night. In verses 2 and 3 we find Eli and Samuel sleeping in their respective quarters. Eli is sleeping in “his [usual] place,” and is incapable of seeing anything new (or old for that matter), while Samuel is sleeping in close proximity to the Lord and is about to receive a new way of “seeing,” symbolized by the ark. The stage is now set for the young attendant to replace the aged and blind high priest.

II. The Call of Samuel (1 Sam 3:4-18)

A. The Lord calls Samuel 3 times in vain

Then the LORD called Samuel. Samuel answered, “Here I am.” And he ran to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” But Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.” So he went and lay down. Again the LORD called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” “My son,” Eli said, “I did not call; go back and lie down.” Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. A third time the LORD called, “Samuel!” And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, “Here I am; you called me.” Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, “Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. (1 Sam 3:4-9)

This pre-dawn scene is described in a string of short, staccato-like phrases depicting the failed attempts of the Lord to connect with Samuel. Three times the Lord calls, and Samuel awakes and hurries to his master; Eli denies the call and sends him back to bed. At an initial reading, God’s repeated attempts appear like identical failures. But a careful reader of biblical narrative trains his or her mind to observe subtle differences of detail within repetition, for it is in the details that we find subtle clues of progression and spiritual insight. With amazing simplicity the narrator leads us into profound theology about the character of God, who patiently yet persistently breaks through all the barriers to reveal himself to his young servant. The threefold encounter also allows us to see the gradual process by which Samuel learns to distinguish the voice of God from that of his teacher.

In the first instance the Lord calls to Samuel while he is sleeping in the inner sanctuary. Startled by the voice, Samuel responds like a ready servant with “*Hinnen!*” (“Behold, me!” or “Here I am!”). But when he sees that

Eli is not there, he hits the ground running. Racing to the outer chamber, where Eli is sleeping, Samuel again presents himself with “Here I am! For you called me.” The awakened Eli denies that he called him and commands, “Go back, lie down.” Samuel obeys without question.

After Samuel goes back to sleep God calls out to him once again. Having just experienced a complete failure in his perceptions, his obedience is now a bit more cautious. Once awakened he did not immediately speak but “arose and went (not “ran”) to Eli.” The delay of speech and slower pace shows his deliberation before rushing in and waking his master again: “Am I *hearing* correctly? Where did the voice come from? Was it real or just a dream?” Entering the outer chamber Samuel again presents himself to Eli, “Here I am! For you called me.” But it’s strike two! Eli denies that he called him, but adds the affectionate “my son” before commanding him, “Go back, lie down.” “My son” reveals a certain fondness Eli had for his young assistant, especially since his own sons belonged to another father, Belial. But on a deeper level the phrase reminds Samuel of his identity and destiny. Little does he know that today the son will be taking over the office of his *father*.

Following this second failed attempt, the narrator gives the reason for Samuel’s difficulties: “Samuel did not yet know the LORD, nor had the word of the LORD yet been revealed to him.” It comes as a great surprise to us that, despite all Samuel’s training, nurture, and religious service he still did “not know” the Lord. Bruce Waltke explains that “The Hebrew word for theology is ‘knowledge of God,’ entailing both objective revelation and inward witness. Parental consecration and liturgical competence are no substitute for personally hearing the word of *I AM*.”² Unlike his mother, the boy cannot yet distinguish the voice of God from the voice of his teacher. So how does one acquire the knowledge of God? Fokkeman insightfully observes, “The knowledge of God is something you have only if God himself divulges it to you.”³ There comes a time in every Christian’s life when you must grow beyond “childhood” and hear God’s voice in your heart firsthand.

Having interrupting his master’s sleep a second time, Samuel returns to the inner chamber. But I doubt if he was actually able to sleep. As he questions his ability to hear, God calls him a third time. Immediately he obeys. What else could he do? But it’s strike three. Wrong again. This prophet-in-training is out of options. The rookie should be sent down to the minor leagues for more playing time. But the kingdom of God is much more gracious than sports. Eli, though physically blind and spiritually dull, still has enough discernment to know when God is at work, and the honesty to acknowledge it. So the veteran priest instructs the inexperienced rookie how to receive God’s word. Samuel gets another swing of the bat. As Bodner affirms, “The lad Samuel gets four chances to hear the pitch of the divine voice.”⁴

It is important to observe that even though God is establishing a revolutionary new order in Israel there is still the necessity for the “new” apprentice to stay connected and learn from the “old” priest until the Lord removes the old in his sovereign timetable.

B. The Lord reveals himself to Samuel

The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” Then Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.” And the LORD said to Samuel: “See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end. For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God, and he failed to restrain them. Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, “The guilt of Eli’s house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.” (1 Sam 3:10-14)

On this fourth occasion the Lord “breaks through” to Samuel with his decisive presence to complement his voice. The verb “to take one’s stand” is normally used of presenting oneself for battle in a military context (“mobilize” or “poised to strike”), or, in a religious context, to God for service. But here it is used of God, who takes his stand right beside Samuel to make his identity unmistakable and inescapable. How patient and persistent God is. Our inadequacies never make him angry or impatient.

The repetition of Samuel’s personal name “Samuel! Samuel!” evokes the memory of when God called Abraham to spare Isaac (Gen 22:11), when Jacob took his family to Egypt (Gen 46:2), and Moses’ burning bush encounter (Exod 3:4). On each occasion this personal call came at crucial times in the lives of God’s leaders, marking the beginning of a new, life-changing venture.

Upon hearing his name, Samuel responds with “Speak, for your servant is listening.” These are the exact words Eli had instructed him, although he leaves out the divine name, perhaps being hesitant to address God personally. Finally someone in Israel is willing to listen (= obey) to the covenant-keeping God.

Isaiah tells us that this morning tutorial would be a daily occurrence for Jesus’ education:

**The Lord God has given Me the tongue of disciples,
That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word.
He awakens Me morning by morning,
He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple. (Isa 50:4 NASB)**

We are told that the Father himself roused Jesus every morning to personally teach him (“Morning by morning” carries with it two ideas, that of being first priority, and continuous). Before the Servant could speak he had to listen. This is why Jesus frequently sought seclusion from everyone—in order to hear the very words of God. “For I did not speak on my own initiative, but the Father himself who sent me has given me commandment, what to say, and what to speak” (John 12:49). The goal of Jesus’ education was to learn how to speak in an appropriate manner, to bring refreshing life to those who are at their wits’ end. In the gospels we observe Jesus constantly seeking out the lost and the weary and giving them an appropriate word to sustain them. He seldom gives the same formulation twice. To a religious Nicodemus he spoke of the need to be “born from above;” to a thirsty Samaritan woman he spoke of “living water;” to a hungry crowd he spoke of himself as “the true bread.” This is our task as well, as the apostle Paul commands us: “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Eph 4:29).

Once Samuel is able to distinguish God’s voice from his teachers he receives his first prophetic assignment. One might think that God would go easy on the boy. After all, he’s young, inexperienced, and this is his first assignment. Wouldn’t it be reasonable to allow him to wade in shallow waters before throwing him out to sea? But no, God seems not to care. He is going to toss Samuel overboard into the furious swells and leave him there to see if can swim. Consider how difficult it would be for Samuel to swallow his first sermon:

1. **The judgment is already in motion** – “*I am doing something in Israel...*” meaning, the train has already left the station.

2. The oracle will hit with the force of a sonic boom – “*for everyone who hears it, his two ears will tingle!*” The verb “tingle” is used of the loud crashing of cymbals, suggesting that the news will hit with such force, those hearing it won’t be able to hear anything else.

3. The oracle is not an abstract announcement, but a personal word poignantly directed against those whom Samuel knows best: his adopted father, his sons, and the very house where he lived. Eugene Peterson asserts that Samuel listens with personal attentiveness because prophets are hearing not human words but God’s words that speak to the heart with urgency: “God’s address is not turned into material for a Bible study, shaped into a Sunday school curriculum, set as the topic for an academic paper, or trotted into the local bar as fuel for an evening of boozy gossip.”⁵

4. **The judgment is irrevocable, undeniable and total.** Prophecy is normally conditional based on the response of the hearers. But in this case the sins of Eli’s sons were so heinous and habitual that the time of repentance had past. Eli had heard all the reports of his sons’ blasphemy as they desecrated the holy place with their greed, gluttony, and sexual exploitation, but he did nothing to “restrain” them. He rebuked them with words, but his words carried no weight because he was feeding off their exploitation. So the Lord had sworn an oath, which makes the judgment irrevocable. Eli’s legacy

is finished. His two sons are condemned to death. His children's children will die in their prime or go begging for bread, and the sacred sanctuary will be given over to destruction (2:30-36).

5. **But God is faithful; despite your sin his covenantal promises will still stand.** God will continue to show “goodness” to Israel, but Eli will not see it or be part of it (2:32).

What a weighty oracle for a young man to bring to his father! This is something we would expect from the seasoned Jeremiah, but the young Samuel? The one encouragement to Samuel is that Eli has already been prepared for this moment. He has heard the message already from an outsider, an anonymous “man of God.” Samuel knows that he will be acting as the second witness to confirm the matter (Deut 17:6; 19:15; John 8:17; 2 Cor 13:1).

C. Eli calls Samuel

Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the LORD. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision, but Eli called him and said, “Samuel, my son.” Samuel answered, “Here I am.” He said, “What is the word that He spoke to you? Please do not hide it from me. May God do so to you, and more also, if you hide anything from me of all the words that He spoke to you” (v. 17 NASB). So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, “He is the LORD; let him do what is good in his eyes.” (1 Sam 3:15-18)

When morning came and Samuel opened the doors of the house of the Lord, it was the dawn of a new day for Israel, for the Lord had visited Shiloh with new revelation. This was the day Hannah spoke of, when the wicked would be silenced in the place of darkness but the feet of his faithful servants would be guarded (2:9). Neither Eli nor his sons had guarded this door with any kind of care, and a new son was about to take their place. Yet there was little joy residing within Israel's young prophet. He was gripped by the fear of having to face his former master.

Then the inevitable happens. Samuel hears his name once again: “Samuel, my son.” The obedient son answers as he has always done, “Here I am!” But notice the text doesn't say he *runs* to his master as he did the night before. The condemned priest, who instructed Samuel how to receive the word, now instructs him how to deliver it. Prophets are not permitted to hold back or twist the truth. There are to be no white lies and no political spin. They are sworn “to tell the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth, so help you God.” If Samuel is tempted to hold anything back, Eli places him under a double curse.⁶

a what is the **word** [*dbr*] He has **said** [*dbr*] to you? word/speaking

b Please do not **hide** [it] from me! not hide

X May God do so to you, and continue so double curse

b' if you **hide** from me a single **word** [*dbr*] not hide

a' of all the **words** [*dbr*] that He **said** [*dbr*] to you! word/speaking

Though Eli is old and blind, I imagine he already had a sense of what was coming and intuitively felt the emotional weight that was pressing on the boy. Caught between two oaths, Samuel obeys to the letter and tells Eli everything. God was about to bring desolation on Eli's house because of his sons' continual abominations. Imagine the horror of decreeing a death sentence upon your father, hell upon his sons, and the annihilation of his line. Yet this is what Samuel did. He was a faithful servant to God.

The test of a true prophet will be his obedience to give a hard word before a word of salvation can be understood. This will become a proven pattern for the prophets as oracles of judgment normally precede oracles of salvation. This was certainly true of Jesus, as the prophet further explains:

The Lord GOD has opened My ear;

And I was not disobedient

Nor did I turn back.

I gave My back to those who strike Me,

And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard;

I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting. (Isa 50:5-6 NASB)

If people are tempted to believe Jesus was all about love and forgiveness, they need to look at the first sermon he gave in his hometown of Nazareth (Luke 4:16-27). It was such a hard word regarding Israel's unbelief, and gentile receptivity to the truth, that the hometown crowd was filled with so much rage they drove him out of the city and tried to throw him over the cliff (Luke 4:28-29). At the end of his ministry he gave his final prophetic speech announcing the complete destruction of the temple and Jerusalem, and 1.2 million Jews were violently killed because they did not obey his words to flee the city. Will we never understand the love of God until we first come to understand his judgment.

Though he is blind, Eli accepts the verdict because he “sees” the authority behind the prophet's words: “It is the Lord, let him do what is good in his eyes.” “It is the Lord” is Eli's confession that the words of the prophet are not cheap souvenirs or sentimental reflections. Rather, they are the incarnation of God himself, for when the prophet speaks, God becomes visible. The last phrase marks the end of the terrible history of Judges, when “every man did what was right in his own eyes.” Now a new age begins with God “doing what is good in his eyes.”

III. A New Dawn in Israel (1 Sam 3:19-4:1a)

The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD. The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word. And Samuel's word came to all Israel. (3:19-4:1a)

The chapter concludes with a summary that covers some twenty years. The young temple servant is now recognized as a prophet nationwide. The word of God which was once rare is now emanating out from Shiloh with centrifugal force. The Lord's presence that was unable to “break through” is now a regular occurrence in Shiloh, mediated by the prophetic word. The conclusion highlights the theme of the chapter, which is the absolute unity between the Lord and his word. In Hebrew the root *dbr* means both *speech/word* and *deed*. Fokkelman observes that it is found **fifteen** times in this story: “Out of the fifteen times that “word” or “speak” occurs in this story Yahweh is, therefore, the source and subject fourteen times, except in 4:1a... [This tells us that] the chapter 1 Sam 3 deals solely with the word of the Lord.”⁷

The unmistakable reason for Samuel's expanding influence is the absolute integrity of his words. Whenever he spoke, the Lord “let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground”—for the simple reason that his words were God's words. God does not let any of his own words fall to the ground without accomplishing the purpose for which he sent it (Isa 55:11). Whenever God speaks, a new reality happens. Samuel continued to listen to God and faithfully passed that word to the nation pure and unadulterated. He didn't alter it one iota. So even when God dismantled the symbols of his presence and Shiloh was destroyed, Samuel's prophetic ministry sustained the presence of God in Israel and the faith of the remnant. The prophetic word was the one thing you could hang your life on. This same truth is what would sustain Israel during her exile in Babylon.

I would like to conclude with a few reflections that emerge out of Samuel's call.

IV. Is God Still Speaking?

1. The light never goes out

Samuel's call is testimony to the fact that no matter how dark life becomes, God always has his remnant in place, so the light of his word will never be extinguished. This truth should sustain us and keep the flame of faith burning when life grows dark.

2. Our great privilege: To hear God's voice

Isaiah tells us that the privileged relationship which the Servant had with the Father to be daily tutored by him is ours as well (Isa 54:10). Because we are in Christ, we have direct access to the Father and to his wisdom through his Spirit who illuminates the meaning of his word within us:

We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words... The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for "Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor 12-13, 15-16)

The question then becomes, How do we cultivate the ability to "listen" effectively? The text gives several clues.

3. How to cultivate "listening"

a) It's not rocket science. Hearing God's voice is not rocket science, for one doesn't need to be a scholar or a charismatic to hear God speak. What I love about this text is its profound simplicity. As Fokkelman remarks: "All the work here is done by a limited number of ca. 90 words, which are almost all part of the basic vocabulary of a four year-old!"⁸

b) Watch your diet. God speaks through his word. There are no substitutes. As Peter exhorts us, "long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation" (1 Pet 2:2). We need to constantly feed on God's word. This means avoiding the junk food of jaded franchised spiritualities that dilute the purity of the gospel by offering its rewards without the cross, like the devilish "prosperity preachers." In the Old Testament a prophet's preaching had to conform to Israel's covenants. Any violation of that teaching was subject to the death penalty (Deut 13:5). In the New Testament Peter maintains the same high standard for anyone who speaks in church: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God..." (1 Pet 4:10). Those who tamper with the purity of gospel will face a condemnation more serious than death (2 Pet 2:3-12).

c) "Go back to bed." Three times in the text Samuel is told "go back and lie down." Visions normally came at night, when the prophet was off stage and the world quiet. Though God was extremely patient and persistent with Samuel, he never violated his humanity by "getting in his face" to make his voice heard. God is not a bully who knocks us down to get our attention. His is never overbearing in his communication. If you want to hear his voice, it takes attentive listening when there are no other competing voices. As Elijah learned, God was not in the strong wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but a "gentle whisper" (1 Kgs 19:12). Living in a world of incessant activity and obsessive noise, the simple task of sleep has never been more difficult, yet never more needed. But be persistent. Don't give up, for God is eager to speak.

d) Listen with the intent of obeying

When God speaks, you can be assured it won't be a laundry list of infinite tasks, for Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden light. In my experience his voice has been just "one thing": a word to encourage, a sin to confess, a service to render, an individual to confront. Yet it was in the faithful doing of "the one thing" that catapulted Samuel, and by extension Israel, into a new era dominated by the light of his word. Jesus confirmed the importance of obedience to his disciples: "He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him" (John 14:21). It is not enough to say "Speak, Lord." We must always add, "for your servant is listening."

e) Never worry about your influence

1 Samuel 3 begins in darkness but ends with light flooding the temple and going out to light up the entire nation, all because one servant of the Lord was faithful to deliver God's word unadulterated. No marketing schemes or gimmicks or "seeker friendly" techniques needed, just faithful, methodical, thoughtful exposition of God's word. This was Paul's strategy as well:

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. (2 Cor 4:1-2)

May God in his grace give us ears to hear. Amen.

¹ Adapted from J. P. Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis*, 4 vols. (Assen: Van Corcum, 1993), 164.

² Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology, an Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 629.

³ Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 167.

⁴ Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel, A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 39.

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (WBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 38-39.

⁶ Fokkelman explains that Eli's speech of five clauses "realize a perfect ABXBA and contain 5 + 4 + 6 + 4 + 5 words, so that their quantity takes part in the concentric arrangement." Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 183.

⁷ Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 189.

⁸ Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 193.

⁹ This unique and difficult phrase is literally "a sound [or voice] of silence thin," the JPS translates "a soft murmuring sound," others a "gentle whisper."