

Calling on the Name of the Lord

קָרָא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה

By Heinrich J. Vogel

When Cain had slain his brother Abel, and Adam and Eve had lived 130 years on earth, a son was born to our first parents, and Eve said, “God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him.” They called his name Seth, because he had been set in the place of his dead brother as a replacement or substitute, which is what his name means. On this occasion Moses writes, “At that time men began to call on the name of the Lord” (Genesis 4:26).

Just what is meant here by “calling on the name of the Lord”? To ascertain this we shall have to study the three words that comprise this phrase. Two of these words are well known and present little difficulty to our understanding. The familiar tetragrammaton which in chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis occurred frequently in the combination אֱלֹהִים יְהוָה, stands alone in chapter 4 as simply יְהוָה, usually read *‘adōnāi*, and refers to the Lord. The word “name” (שֵׁם) is also familiar. It designates the appellation by which a person or thing is known and which identifies and often describes that person or thing. The name of the Lord is a designation for God, and this expression implies and contains everything we know about God.

The problem in understanding the expression, “call on the name of the Lord” is in the verb “call.” In Hebrew there are two verbs קָרַע, one of which means to occur or to happen. It is variously translated as “happen,” “befall,” “meet,” or “come against,” and does not come into consideration here.

The other word קָרַע occurs 736 times in the Old Testament and is translated in five different ways with five different meanings. In 228 instances it refers to giving a name to something or someone. Examples are: “Leah...named him Judah.” “He called that place Bethel.” “He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name.” hier

In 197 verses the word is used to summon someone, to call or designate someone for a specific task, or to invite someone as a guest. Thus “Jeremiah called Baruch,” “Who has stirred up one from the east, calling him in righteousness to his service?” “Invite Jesse to the sacrifice.”

Some 115 times the word means to proclaim and is variously rendered as “proclaim,” “preach,” or “cry.” Jeremiah is told, “Go and proclaim these words.” Jonah is told, “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it.” “The person with such an infectious disease must ... cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ ”

The word is used 119 times to express the idea of calling for help, crying to the Lord or to a king, calling and awaiting an answer. The Psalmist says, “I will call on him as long as I live.” “To the Lord I cry aloud.” “When I call, answer me quickly.”

There are 37 verses in the Old Testament in which the word means to read. “Baruch read to all the people at the Lord’s temple the words of Jeremiah from the scroll.”

In this study we shall concentrate on 40 other passages in which the word קָרַע is used in combination with the word בְּשֵׁם, meaning “to call on the name” or “to call by name.” In five of these passages the expression means to bestow a name on a place. Thus in Numbers 32:38 we read, “They gave names to the cities they rebuilt” (literally: they called by names the names of the cities which they built). In Numbers 32:42 we are told that “Nobah captured Kenath...and called it Nobah after himself.” When the Danites rebuilt the city of Laish “They named it Dan after their forefather Dan” according to Judges 18:29. In 1 Chronicles 6:65[50] it is reported that “From the tribes of Judah, Simeon and Benjamin they (the Israelites) allotted the previously named towns” (literally: these towns, which are called by their names). Psalm 49:11[12] reminds us that when

foolish and senseless men die, “Their tombs will remain their houses forever...though they had named lands after themselves.” In all of these verses קָרַע בְּשֵׁם clearly means to give a place its name.

There are three passages in the book of the Prophet Isaiah in which the expression קָרַע בְּשֵׁם means to name oneself by someone else’s name in order to identify with that person. Isaiah predicts in 44:5 that those returning from captivity need not fear. “One will say, ‘I belong to the Lord’; another will call himself by the name of Jacob.” In chapter 48:1 Isaiah addresses the Israelites, “Listen to this, O house of Jacob, you who are called by the name of Israel and come from the line of Judah.” In Isaiah 43:6,7 God commands the enemies of Israel to release them, “Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth—everyone who is called by my name.”

There are seven instances in the Old Testament in which this expression קָרַע בְּשֵׁם simply means to call someone by his given name. In Exodus 31:2 the Lord says to Moses, “See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri,” and in Exodus 35:30 Moses tells the Israelites, “See, the Lord has chosen Bezalel son of Uri.” In both verses the Hebrew literally say, “I have called by name Bezalel son of Uri.” In Isaiah 40:26 God calls himself the Holy One “Who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name.” The Lord says to Israel in Isaiah 43:1, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.” To Cyrus God says, Isaiah 45:4, “For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I call you by name and bestow on you a title of honor.” In Joshua 21:9 we read, “From the tribes of Judah and Simeon they allotted the following towns by name,” (the Hebrew text reads literally, “towns which are here mentioned by name”). In Esther 2:14 we read that “She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name.” There are several similar passages in the Old Testament in which עַל is used instead of קָ with שֵׁם as for instance in Deuteronomy 3:14, “Jair...took the whole region of Argob...; it was named after him (עַל-שֵׁמוֹ), so that to this day Bashan is called Havoth Jair.”

Apart from the passages in which the expression קָרַע בְּשֵׁם refers in a general way to the names of persons or things, there are a number of verses in the Old Testament in which the reference is specifically to the name of the Lord. In all of these verses the expression קָרַע בְּשֵׁם has the sense of worship of God or prayer to God.

When Abram pitched his tent east of Bethel “he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord” (Gen. 12:8). After his sojourn in Egypt Abram returned to Bethel, where he had first built an altar. “There Abram called on the name of the Lord” (Gen. 13:4). After Abraham had made a treaty with Abimelech, he “planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called upon the name of the Lord, the Eternal God” (Gen. 21:33). As his father Abraham had done, so Isaac eventually settled in Beersheba, and “Isaac built an altar there and called on the name of the Lord” (Gen. 26:25). In all of these references the expression “to call on the name of the Lord” means to worship him. This was evidently done by sacrificing on the altar that had been built for that purpose and by prayer to God in connection with such worship.

In Elijah’s contest with the priests of Baal in Ahab’s time he proposed that both he and the priests of Baal prepare a bull for a burnt offering, place it and the wood on an altar, but set no fire to it. “Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The God who answers by fire—he is God.” Elijah permitted the priests of Baal to choose and prepare one of the bulls first and told them, “Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire.” “Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon” without response. Then Elijah built an altar of twelve stones, prepared the sacrifice, drenched the sacrifice, the wood and the altar three times with water, and “at the time of the sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “‘O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.’ Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the

trench” (1 Kings 18:24–38). Calling on the name of the Lord is here dearly addressing a prayer to him. In 2 Kings 5:11 the expression is used in much the same way, when “Naaman went away angry and said, ‘I thought that he (Elisha) would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of leprosy.’”

In the Psalms too, calling on the name of the Lord is equivalent to worshiping him. Asaph prays in Psalm 79:6, “Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not acknowledge you, on the kingdoms that do not call on your name.” In Psalm 80:18[19] Asaph prays, “Revive us, and we will call on your name.” Psalm 105 begins with the words, “Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done.” These same words are a portion of the psalm that David used at the dedication of the tabernacle after he had brought the ark of the covenant to the City of David according to 1 Chronicles 16:8. The expression **קָרַע בְּשֵׁם** occurs three times in Psalm 116:4,13,17, “Then I called on the name of the Lord.” “I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.” “I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the Lord.” In all these Psalm passages calling on the name of the Lord is a form of worship associated with prayer, giving thanks and praising the Lord. The same is true of Jeremiah’s use of this expression in Lamentations 3:55, where he says, “I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit.”

Isaiah uses the expression in the same way (12:4), “Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name.” Even of Cyrus Isaiah says (41:25), “I have stirred up one from the north, and he comes—one from the rising of the sun who calls on my name.” In Jeremiah’s prayer (10:25) he includes the plea from Asaph’s Psalm, (79:6), “Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not acknowledge you, on the peoples who do not call on your name.”

Three times we find the expression in the Minor Prophets. Joel says (2:32[3:5]), “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Zephaniah prophesies, “Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him shoulder to shoulder” (Zeph. 3:9). Zechariah says of the remnant of the scattered sheep (13:9); “They will call on my name and I will answer them.”

There are two verses in Exodus in which the subject of the verb “to call on the name of the Lord” is God himself. In Exodus 33:19 God says to Moses, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence (**וְקָרָאתִי בְשֵׁם יְהוָה לְפָנֶיךָ**). In the next chapter we read (Exod. 34:5–7), “Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord (**וַיְקַרֵּא בְשֵׁם יְהוָה**).” In these two instances the expression **קָרַע בְּשֵׁם**, clearly means to proclaim the name of the Lord. Preaching in God’s name is an essential part of public worship and is certainly included in the concept of calling on the name of the Lord.

When we read in Genesis 4:26, “At that time men began to call on the name of the Lord,” we understand this to refer to the public worship of God. At the time that must have included various forms of worship, such as sacrifices like those which had been brought by Cain and Abel, prayer, praise and thanksgiving for blessings received, and the public proclamation or preaching of God’s name, particularly to those descendants of Cain who no longer worshiped the true God but had become idolatrous.

Most lexicons interpret the expression **קָרַע בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה** to mean “using the name of **יְהוָה** in worship.” The reference in Genesis 4:26 must refer to public worship, since we know that private worship had been practiced before the time when Seth named his son Enosh. The *Pulpit Commentary* by Spence and Exell says that “to call upon the name of the Lord means either (1) to invoke by prayer the name of Jehovah, i.e. Jehovah himself as he had been pleased to discover his attributes and character to men, referring to the formal institution of public worship. The expression is elsewhere used to denote all the appropriate acts and exercises of the stated worship of God—Gen. 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; 1 Chron. 16:8; Ps. 105:1. Or (2) to call themselves by the name of Jehovah—Num. 32:42; Judg. 18:29; Isa. 44:5.

Leupold is right when he remarks, “The great importance of public worship, both as a matter of personal necessity as well as a matter of public confession, is beautifully set forth by this brief record. This act bears eloquent testimony to the courage of this group, who wanted to be known as such whose hope was placed only

in יְהוָה. It is not enough to say that יְהוָה's religion began with Enoch.' It began with Adam and developed into regular public worship in three generations.”