



Exodus - Chapter Three

I. Exodus 1:1-18:27 - The Exodus of Israel from Egypt (continues)

Summary of Chapter Three

Moses encounters God within the Burning Bush and is told that God wants him to lead his people out of their enslavement and into the Promised Land. Moses doubted he was the man for the job but God insisted he would be with him.

To enable Moses to convince the Israelites he was from God, the Lord revealed the name by which he was to be known, 'I AM'. Moses was then to go to the elders and take them with him to tell Pharaoh he must let the Israelites travel out for three days in order to worship God. However, God also revealed that Pharaoh would not allow this until God had demonstrated his strength against Egypt. The Egyptians would supply the wealth the Israelites would need in order to leave slavery and make their way to the Promised Land.

I.b Exodus 3:1-4:31 - Moses in Midian

This section focuses primarily on the call of Moses at the Burning Bush (3:1-4:17) but also includes narration of certain events related to Moses' return from Midian to Egypt: the peaceful departure from Jethro (4:18-20), the Lord's reminder and further instruction to Moses (4:21-23), the preservation of Moses' life by Zipporah (4:24-26), and the arrival of Aaron before Moses met with the elders of Israel (4:27-31).

I.b.i Exodus 3:1-4:17 - The Burning Bush: The Call of Moses

At the Burning Bush, God reveals himself, his promises, and his purposes to Moses (3:1-22) and also demonstrates his power both through and for Moses (4:1-17). The call of Moses marks the beginning of the role that he will fill as the one who mediates between the Lord and his people, and it is recorded in detail here, in

part to remind Israel that following the Lord necessitates fidelity to the covenant which he revealed through Moses (Chapters 20-23).

I.b.i.1 Exodus 3:1-12 - Moses at the Burning Bush

While tending his father-in-law's flock, Moses attention was drawn to the sight of a Burning Bush that was not being consumed by the flames. He went to see what this was and the Lord God spoke to him from within the bush. Moses was told that God knew of the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt and that he would deliver them to the Promised Land as he had sworn to their forefathers. Moses doubted that he could be the one to confront Pharaoh to demand the release of his people but God said that he would be with Moses at all times to enable him to do so.

¹ Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

Exodus 3:1

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro. For 40 years Moses lived as an obscure shepherd in the desert of Midian. At this point his life was so humble that he did not even have a flock of sheep to call his own, for the sheep belonged to his father-in-law. The Hebrew for tending or 'keeping the flock' suggests that this was his habitual occupation.

The priest of Midian. As noted in the comment on 2:16-17, Jethro was most likely a descendant of one of Abraham's other children through Keturah who was named Midian. He was sent out from Abraham's family so that Isaac would have sole inheritance in the Promised Land and probably settled with his own family as a leader in the region that would then bear his name.

Horeb, the mountain of God. The mountain where Moses has arrived is also referred to as 'Mount Sinai', as in 19:11. **Horeb** is typically understood as either another name for Mount Sinai or as a term that refers to the region in which the mountain was located for it means desert or desolation. Mount Sinai becomes known as **the mountain of God** through the events that are about to unfold in the narrative of Exodus: God calls Moses from the Burning Bush at the mountain; Aaron meets Moses here when he returns from Midian (4:27); and God meets with Moses on the mountain when Israel comes out of Egypt and gives him the law, the account of which is recorded in Chapter 19.



Mount Horeb

² There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.

Exodus 3:2

Where the angel of the Lord appears in the OT, he is often described as acting or speaking in a manner that suggests he is more than simply an angel or messenger and that he is closely identified with God himself, e.g. Genesis 22:11-18. Here he appears to Moses in a flame of fire, which is a sign of God's presence throughout the events narrated in the Book of Exodus: in the pillar of fire and cloud that leads and protects the Israelites (13:21-22); in the signs of God's presence on Mount Sinai (19:18); and in the tabernacle (40:38). The angel also protects Israel when they come out of Egypt (14:19), and God promises that he will go before Israel into the land of Canaan (23:20 and 33:2). In v.4 this angel of God is identified as 'the Lord' and 'God.'

The bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. It was not just that Moses saw a bush burning; apparently, it is not uncommon for a plant like this to spontaneously ignite out in that desert due to the arid climate and the intense heat, especially in the middle of the day. Nevertheless, two things were distinctive about that bush:

1. The Angel of the Lord appeared from the midst of the bush.
2. Although the bush burned, the bush was not consumed by the fire.

The bush burning but not being consumed was a magnetic sight to Moses, it drew him in for a closer examination. Some think the Burning Bush to be a symbol of Israel, or the people of God more generally: afflicted but not destroyed, because God is in the midst of them. Yet some also say that the Burning Bush was a picture of the Cross. The Hebrew word used to describe this bush comes from the word 'to stick or to prick,' this meaning a thorn-bush or bramble. One can think of the Cross, where Jesus, crowned with thorns, endured the fires of judgement and yet was not consumed by them, and also be reminded of the Cross when considering the Burning Bush.

³ Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.'⁴ When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.'

Exodus 3:3-4

I must turn aside and look at this great sight. Whatever Moses saw exactly, it was nothing normal and outside of his previous experience in the past 40 years!

When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see. God did not speak to Moses until he had Moses' full attention. Often God's Word does not touch a person's heart the way that it might because they do not give it their full attention. The Burning Bush was a spectacular phenomenon that captured Moses' attention; but it changed nothing until Moses received the Word of God that came to him there.

God called to him out of the bush. Moses did not see anyone in the Burning Bush; yet God, in the presence of the Angel of the Lord was there, calling out to Moses from the midst of the Burning Bush. Many commentators and theologians believe this to be an occasion in the OT where Jesus appeared as the Angel of the Lord before his incarnation, as they believe he did many times, for example in Genesis 16:7-13, Judges 2:1-5, Judges 6:11-24 and Judges 13:3-22.

Moses, Moses! God's first words to Moses called him by name. This shows that even though Moses was now an obscure, forgotten shepherd in a remote desert, God knew who and where he was, and that Moses was important to God. The double call Moses, Moses! implied importance and urgency, as when God called Abraham, Abraham! (Genesis 22:11), Samuel, Samuel! (1 Samuel 3:10), Simon, Simon (Luke 22:31), Martha, Martha (Luke 10:41), and Saul, Saul (Acts 9:4).

Here I am. This is a statement of submission, saying to God in effect that 'I am your servant and I am ready to receive your instruction'. Other examples of this response come from Abraham (Genesis 22:1 and 22:11), Jacob (Genesis 31:11 and

46:2), Samuel in 1 Samuel Chapter 3, and Ananias (Acts 9:10). There are several examples where a son responded to his father in this way and even of God responding to his people's cry for help; for example: <<*Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday*>> (Isaiah 58:8-10).

⁵ Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.'

Exodus 3:5

Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet. The instructions to Moses are followed by a reason that emphasises the place where he is standing. The very ordinariness of the location helps make the point that it is holy ground, not because of any special properties of the place but only because of God's presence. This is representative of a theme in Exodus: God is holy, and he is the one who makes or declares places and people to be holy and each is properly understood or treated as holy only in its relation to God. The instructions given to Moses here at the Burning Bush are also given to his successor Joshua when he meets the <<*commander of the army of the Lord*>> as Israel is preparing to take Jericho; refer to Joshua 5:13-15.

Remove the sandals from your feet. Removing the sandals showed appropriate humility, because the poorest and neediest have no shoes, and servants usually went barefoot. It also recognised the immediate presence of God. In many cultures, a visitor would take off their shoes when they come into someone's house, and now Moses was in God's 'house,' a place of his immediate presence.

⁶ He said further, '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.

Exodus 3:6

Although Moses is in exile from his own royal household in Egypt (2:15) and somewhat estranged from the people of his birth (2:14), God reveals himself as the God of your father and makes it clear that Moses' identity is framed primarily by his being an offspring of Abraham, and thus belonging to the people to whom God has pledged himself by covenant; refer to 2:23-25. Jesus quotes from this verse: <<*"I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is*

God not of the dead, but of the living>> (Matthew 22:32), affirming that **Abraham**, **Isaac**, and **Jacob** still live in the sight of God.

Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. God told Moses to do what was appropriate for a creature before their Creator - to revere and recognise his holiness. Moses responded as a man who knew he was not only a creature, but also a sinful creature for he **hid his face**. In his years in the wilderness of Midan, Moses must have often remembered how he had murdered an Egyptian and how proud he was to think he could deliver Israel himself. Moses might have remembered a thousand sins, both real and imagined; now, when God appeared, he responded in a way completely different than he might have 40 years earlier.

⁷ Then the Lord said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings,⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.¹⁰ So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.’

Exodus 3:7-10

God tells Moses of his intimate knowledge of Israel’s affliction: **I have observed**, **I have heard**, **I know**, refer also 2:23-25, and indicates his covenant promises and identification with them by referring to the Hebrew slaves as **my people**, which is also what the Lord will instruct Moses to say before Pharaoh, for example in 5:1.

In this encounter with Moses, God shows that he is clearly separate and distinct from his people, but he is not distant from them, and that loves them with an unending passion, knowing their every need.

I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land. God did not just then decide to give Israel the land of Canaan. It was the same land that he had promised to the patriarchs some 400 years previous to this.

I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. God said **I have come down to deliver them**, then **come, I will send you**. If God said he would deliver them, why did he use or even appear to need Moses at all? This shows that God often uses and chooses to rely on human instruments. God could do it all by himself, but it is most often God’s plan to work with and through ordinary

people, as Paul clearly understood: <<*as we are workers together with him*>> (2 Corinthians 6:1a).

¹¹ But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’ ¹² He said, ‘I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.’

Exodus 3:11-12

Who am I? Moses’ initial question is surely sensible, and God does not reprove him for asking it. However, God does not answer Moses’ question in the way that he asks it, but instead says, ‘I will be with you’ indicating that his presence with Moses is essential to the call and will be all sufficient. When the OT says that God is with someone, it stresses God’s power that enables the person to carry out his calling, as confirmed by Genesis 26:3 and Exodus 4:12. God also promises that the very place where they are speaking will become a confirming sign to Moses when he brings the people out and they serve God on this mountain; refer back to v.1.

I.b.i.2 Exodus 3:13-25 - The Divine Name Revealed

Moses did not believe that the elders of his people would believe God had sent him to lead them out of captivity and asked what name he should give to them to let them know he was from God. God replied ‘I AM’. This was to be the name by which he would now be known for all eternity.

God then instructed Moses to go to the elders and then take them to Pharaoh to demand they be allowed to take the Israelites out into the desert to worship God. He also told Moses that Pharaoh would not allow this until God had revealed his might by striking the Egyptians severely. When the people were finally released from their captivity they would leave with great wealth supplied by the Egyptians.

¹³ But Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your ancestors has sent me to you”, and they ask me, “What is his name?” what shall I say to them?’

Exodus 3:13

What is his name? Given the polytheism and pantheism of the surrounding Egyptian culture, it was essential to know the identity of the one true God, i.e. the God of your ancestors. Furthermore, in ancient cultures, to know the name of someone was to know something very essential about that person, their true identity and character. Although Moses is apparently not familiar with God’s name, this does not mean that the personal name of God was unknown to the Hebrews

prior to Moses; it may have meant that the name had been lost or had fallen into disuse during the centuries of slavery in Egypt, or that the name had not been used extensively or fully understood before this time.

¹⁴ God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you."'“

Exodus 3:14

I am who I am. In response to Moses' question 'What is [your] name?' (v.13), God reveals his name to be Yahweh, corresponding to the four Hebrew consonants YHWH. These three occurrences of I am all represent forms of the Hebrew verb that means 'to be' (Hebrew *hayah*), and in each case are related to the divine name Yahweh, i.e. 'the Lord'; refer to the comment made on v.15. The divine name Yahweh has suggested to scholars a range of likely nuances of meaning:

1. that God is self-existent and therefore not dependent on anything else for his own existence;
2. that God is the creator and sustainer of all that exists;
3. that God is immutable in his being and character and thus is not in the process of becoming something different from what he is, e.g. <<**Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever**>> (Hebrews 13:8);
4. that God is eternal in his existence.

While each of these points is true of God, the main focus in this passage is on the Lord's promise to be with Moses and his people. The word translated I am (Hebrew 'ehyeh) can also be understood and translated as 'I will be'. Given the context of <<**I will be with you**>> (v.12), the name of Yahweh, 'the Lord', is also a clear reminder of God's promises to his people and of his help for them to fulfil their calling. In each of these cases, the personal name of God as revealed to Moses expresses something essential about the attributes and character of God.

I am has sent me to you. God told Moses his name was I am because God simply is; there was never a time when he did not exist, or a time when he will cease to exist. The name I am has within it the idea that God is completely independent; that he relies on nothing for life or existence: <<**Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless**>> (Isaiah 40:28-29), and: <<**For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself**>> (John 5:26). Theologians sometimes call this quality aseity. It means that God does not need anybody or anything, i.e. life is in himself. Also inherent in the idea behind the name I am is the sense that God is 'the becoming one'; God becomes whatever is lacking in a time of need. The name I am invites believers to fill in the blank to meet their need: when one is in darkness, Jesus says I am the light; when one is hungry, he says I am the bread of

life, when one is defenceless, he says I am the Good Shepherd. God is the becoming one, becoming what one needs. In this, God's name is both an announcement and an introduction. It announces God's presence, and invites any interested to know him by experience, to taste and see that the Lord is good.

I AM is a divine title that Jesus took upon himself often, clearly identifying himself with the voice from the Burning Bush: <<*I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he*>> (John 8:24), <<*So Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me'*>> (John 8:28), <<*Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am'*>> (John 8:58), <<*I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he*>> (John 13:19), and: <<*Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' They answered, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus replied, 'I am he.' Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, 'I am he', they stepped back and fell to the ground*>> (John 18:4-6).

¹⁵ God also said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you":

This is my name for ever,
and this my title for all generations.

Exodus 3:15

Thus you shall say to the Israelites. After four hundred years in Egypt, Moses had the job of announcing that now was the time for the children of Israel to go back to Canaan, and to take the land God promised to their ancestors. This was probably totally contrary to what the elders and people of Israel desired. In four hundred years, they had set down roots. They probably had no desire to return to the Promised Land; all they wanted was to be made more comfortable in Egypt. The first word had to come to the people of God (v.16) and then to world (v.18). Often God will not speak to the wider world until he speaks to his people and he has their attention.

The Lord. Although some modern translations keep 'Yahweh' in English, some translations still follow the tradition of replacing Yahweh with the Lord. This practice goes back to the first Greek translation in the 3rd Century BC, the Septuagint, which renders Yahweh as *kyrios* or Lord, a usage that was also quoted extensively in the Greek NT. In this way, translating this term as the Lord also shows the links with the NT, which calls Christ 'Lord,' thereby identifying him with

the God of the OT. When Jesus says: <<**before Abraham was, I am**>> (John 8:58), using the Greek found in v.14 of the LXX, the Pharisees show by their desire to stone him that they understood Jesus to be claiming identity with the God who had revealed himself to Moses. This is confirmed by the table of 'I am' statements in John. Refer to the Supplementary Material for John's Gospel on the website.

This is my name for ever. God here referred to the name just previously mentioned in the same verse, the Lord God (*Yahweh Elohim*). For ever and for all generations emphasises the eternal faithfulness of God to his covenant.

¹⁶ Go and assemble the elders of Israel, and say to them, “The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying: I have given heed to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt. ¹⁷ I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Exodus 3:16-17

Go and assemble the elders of Israel, and say to them. This is the first direct charge to Moses related to the role he will fulfil as the one through whom the Lord will speak to his people Israel.

¹⁸ They will listen to your voice; and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, “The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; let us now go a three days' journey into the wilderness, so that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.”

Exodus 3:18

They will listen to your voice. This was a precious promise to Moses. Forty years before, when it seemed that he had everything going for him, the people of Israel rejected him as a deliverer for the nation, as noted by Stephen: <<**But the man who was wronging his neighbour pushed Moses aside, saying, “Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?”**>> (Acts 7:27-28). Surely, Moses must be wondering why they would listen to him now, when it seemed he had nothing going for him. However, Moses had God with him now; they would indeed listen to Moses' message.

To someone as powerful as the king of Egypt, Moses making a request in the name of the Lord, the God of the Hebrews would look ridiculous. What god would choose to be identified with a nation of slaves and then also presume to make a request from the king of the nation that has enslaved them? Given all the other

equally true things that God could have told Moses to say to designate him, e.g. ‘the Lord, the God who has created the heavens and the earth’, he is evidently making the point to both Egypt and Israel that he has chosen to identify with the people of his covenant even when they appear to have little value in the eyes of the nation they serve except as forced labour.

That we may sacrifice to the Lord our God. The Lord frames the request to Pharaoh in terms of his people being able to worship him, as he will on several occasions throughout the plagues, e.g. <<**Let my people go, so that they may worship me**>> (Exodus 7:16). This signifies to Israel that their freedom from slavery is governed by the promises and purposes of the covenant relationship with the Lord, and it shows Pharaoh that the nature of this relationship supersedes any claim that he believes he has on the Israelites.

¹⁹ I know, however, that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. ²⁰ So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all my wonders that I will perform in it; after that he will let you go.

Exodus 3:19-20

I know, however, that the king of Egypt will not let you go. God knew this from the beginning. He knew what it would take to move the heart of Pharaoh, and the plagues and calamities to come were engineered for a specific purpose and they were not haphazardly planned. Moses asked God about how his fellow Israelites would receive the news of the deliverance from Egypt, but getting the people of Israel behind Moses was only a small part of the struggle ahead - what about the Egyptians? How would they ever agree to let this free labour force leave the country? Without Moses asking, God answered this question.

Compelled by a mighty hand. The might or strength of God’s hand is the means by which he will bring Israel out of Egypt. This image for God’s power working in the world to save his people recurs throughout the narrative of the plagues and the exodus. The use of the image may represent intentional irony because ancient Egyptian texts often described the power of Pharaoh by saying that he had a ‘strong hand or arm’ to destroy his enemies.

²¹ I will bring this people into such favour with the Egyptians that, when you go, you will not go empty-handed; ²² each woman shall ask her neighbour and any woman living in the neighbour’s house for jewellery of silver and of gold, and clothing, and you shall put them on your sons and on your daughters; and so you shall plunder the Egyptians.’

Exodus 3:21-22

I will bring this people into such favour with the Egyptians that, when you go, you will not go empty-handed. God tells Moses not only that Israel will be brought out of Egypt but also that they will plunder the Egyptians. The description must have seemed inconceivable to Moses. Plundering in the ancient Near East was what victorious armies did to cities they had defeated. God describes a situation in which Israel will not only be released from the most powerful nation in the region, but the people will also be given the spoils of Egypt by each woman of Israel simply asking for them from her neighbour. The precious materials that Israel carried out of Egypt would, among other things, become part of what they would use to construct the tabernacle; refer to 35:4-9 and 35:20-29.