

Comments on Exodus 3

This chapter presents the quintessential theophany, where Moses is introduced to the Lord, and the Lord announces His name. Especially note throughout this chapter the heavy usage of the first-person pronoun "I" when the Lord is speaking. The Lord is emphasizing His reality, His independence, and His personal and active role in Israel's existence. The Lord is a God who exists, acts for Himself and relates with people.

Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb. ² And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. ³ And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.

⁴ And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. ⁵ And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground. ⁶ Moreover he said, I am the God of thy 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 upon God.

v1-6 Moses is shepherding the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro in the wilderness near mount Horeb (v. 1). A messenger of the Lord is standing in a bush and appears in brilliance, as though the bush was on fire, but the bush is not literally burning (v. 2). Seeing the unusual sight, probably at distance, Moses diverts and goes to see why the fire does not extinguish itself by burning out (v. 3).

When Moses approaches, the Lord comes down and speaks with him, calling him twice by his Egyptian name for emphasis, and Moses responds (v. 4). The Lord warns him to remove his shoes before approaching, because the area he is entering is holy (v. 5). The Lord then introduces himself as the God of his father Amram, and also of his patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses recognizes Whom he is speaking with and hides his face out of fear of looking at God (v. 6).

v1 "to the backside of the desert", a poor translation, meaning "after/past the desert". Moses has taken the sheep out past the desert into the more fertile area near to mount Horeb, where the higher elevations would provide better grazing for the sheep because of orographic precipitation.

v2 "the bush", the [Hebrew term](#) used here is unused elsewhere in

the Bible, and means a thorn bush, possibly a blackberry bush. The term is suggestive enough of the blackberry bramble that there is a [monastery](#) on Mount Sinai that has a blackberry bush growing within that is claimed to be the original. And you can [buy](#) the purported cultivar *rubus sanctus* to plant in your own garden.

There are many other references to thorn bushes and thistles elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Gen. 3:18, Isa. 32:13, Jer. 12:13, Ezek. 28:24, Hosea 10:8), which is equated with the hardship of a fallen world and wickedness. None of these references use the Hebrew term appearing in this account. As such, I am inclined to see this burning bush as a blackberry bramble, and therefore assume there is some implied meaning of there being good fruit among the thorns.

One could read this as the good fruit among the thorns being Israel among Egypt. Or, there being both good fruit and bad thorns within Israel, but the Lord must protect the entirety of the plant because of the covenant with Abraham (cp. Matt. 13:24-30, Jacob 5).

"burned with fire...was not consumed", when the Scriptures refer to something as "burning" it is referring to a bright light like from the flame of a fire or the blinding flash of a lightning bolt. However, in this case, the text suggests the bush appears as though it is on fire, and yet is not consumed, so obviously not a literal fire.

Noteworthy is the mountain is referred to as Horeb and not Sinai. The Hebrew "horeb" is associated with the root "harev", which means "dry". Thus, this bush is alive and healthy despite being in an adversely dry climate, not to mention being aflame. A common symbol for something divine being aflame is that of being in a sanctified condition, e.g., the sword which guards the way to the Tree of Life (cf. Gen. 3:24) and the chariot-throne of God (cf. Ezek. 1:13-14).

We can also contrast this bush with the various nonproductive trees burned with fire (cf. Jer. 11:16, Ezek. 15:6, Ezek. 20:47, Joel 1:19, Mark 11:12-25, Matt. 3:10, Matt. 7:19, Alma 5:52, 3 Ne. 14:19, D&C 97:7). A tree which fails to bring forth good fruit is one which is ready to be consumed. So, one which is the opposite of this is a tree which is bearing good fruit.

Regarding the phraseology of "burned...[not] consumed", there are some interesting parallels elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, some of which are clearly literally physical and others

are clearly figurative. Based on the Hebrew Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, the following verses in the Bible contain both the Hebrew word *bā'ar* (H1197 - burned/kindled/consumed) and *'ākal* (H398 - consumed/devoured/eaten):

Exod. 3:2 The bush was burning (H1197) with fire, but it was not consumed (H398).

Exod. 22:6 "If fire break out, and catch in thorns, so that the stacks of corn... be consumed (H398) therewith; he that kindled (H1197) the fire shall surely make restitution".

Num. 11:1 "...the fire of the LORD burnt (H1197) among them and consumed (H398) [them] that were in the uttermost parts of the camp".

Isa. 10:17 "And the light of Israel shall be for a fire, and his Holy One for a flame: and it shall burn (H1197) and devour (H398) his thorns and his briers in one day".

Other potential connections in the original language include:

Jud. 15:5: Where brands are set on fire (H1197) by Samson, and the Philistine stacks are burnt up (H398 is implied by context, though often translated simply as "burned").

Isa. 44:15-16 Mentions burning (H1197) for fuel and eating (H398) from the same fire when making idols.

The present imagery of a burning bush that is not being consumed is particularly interesting in light of the usage of Num. 11:1-3, where the Lord punishes the people for complaining. This brief story is at the beginning of the Rebellion narratives of Num. 11-25, and inverts the present formula of burning and not being consumed.

This suggests the present burning bush primarily represents the mixture of Israel, both good and bad, the fruit and the thorns. When the thorns self-segregate to the edges of the camp (cf. Num. 11:1), then the Lord burns them.

v3 It seems likely the burning bush was initially at some distance from Moses, and he saw it on the heights above him. Seeing a fire at a distance would have been unusual, given there

being no apparent inhabitants, but a natural fire would eventually go out on its own as the fuel burned up. Moses sees the fire doesn't burn up and go out, the bush is not consumed, so it catches his interest and he goes to investigate.

Moses might have thought the fire was naturally occurring from lightning, or a brush fire, or an abandoned fire left from a prior shepherd or traveler. If any of these were the case, the fire would have gone out after a while.

v4 "And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see", after the burning bush has obtained Moses' attention, and he travels to it, the Lord is ready for the conversation and He therefore dismisses the angel who stood there at the bush to attract Moses, providing the miraculous beacon.

"Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I", the Lord calls him twice by his Egyptian name, and Moses responds. This name was given to Moses not by his Israelite parents, but by his adoptive Egyptian mother (cf. 2:10). We are never told what Moses' Israelite name was, but he was surely given one, perhaps Amram, after his father (cf. Num. 3:19, Num. 26:58-59). The Lord would know what his Israelite name was, but He didn't use it, and He didn't correct his name to his Israelite name at his calling.

This suggests the connection of the man Moses between the Israelites and the Egyptians is something the Lord recognizes and values, by not dismissing the Egyptian-given name. The Lord calls this Egyptian Israelite to go and draw the Israelites out of Egypt.

The Lord's calling of Moses by name also leads to the subsequent asking of the Lord's name by Moses in v. 13. The Lord knows Moses' name, but Moses, and Israel, do not know the Lord's name. When the Lord responds and gives His name, it is the superlative version of Moses's response here. Moses says "Here I am" in v. 4 and the Lord says "I am that I am" in v. 14. As obvious and present is Moses in v. 4 when he says "Here I am", so much more obvious and overwhelming is the Lord's presence in this chapter when He says "I am that I am".

v5 "put off thy shoes", when entering a holy place wherein is the presence of the Lord, one is to leave behind those things they normally walk in and step on when in the world. Moses' current occupation of shepherd means he is walking all day long through dirt and occasionally stepping on dung so his shoes are dirty. The feet are also considered the lowest and dirtiest

part of the body in the Semitic mind. Thus, removing the shoes become a symbol of leaving behind the filth of the world, which we accumulate thorough our daily walk in the world, upon entering God's presence.

v6 "Moses hid his face", it is a common Semitism to hide one's face out of fear of God. The background behind it is the symbolism that if God's face is inclined towards you then you are in God's favor (cf. 2 Chron. 7:14, Hosea 5:15, Dan. 9:17), but if away from you then you are in His disfavor (cf. Moses 5:39, Deut. 31:17-18, Deut. 32:19-22, Isa. 54:8, Jer. 18:17, Ezek. 39:23-29. Micah 3:4, Ps. 27:8-9). He will turn His face away from you if you are in His disfavor because if He were to continue to look upon you your sinful nature this would require His divine Justice to destroy you in your sins. Thus, His looking away from you is an act of mercy. And the person being confronted by God turns their face away from them for fear of God seeing them in their sin, thus it is an act of humility on the person's part.

"afraid", the [Hebrew term](#) can mean fear, awe or reverence. It seems unlikely it was abject fear alone, as Moses recovers pretty quickly and enters into a conversation with the Lord where he negotiates with Him.

⁷ And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; ⁸ And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey; unto the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.

v7-10 The Lord announces His intent to Moses. He has heard the cry of the Israelites and has come to fulfill the promise He formerly made to Abraham (cp. v. 8 with v. 17, and Gen. 15:18-21). He then commissions Moses to deliver Israel.

The overarching ancient covenant is placed into the present context and made the theological driving force of the events that are about to unfold. Moses understands the theological context of what is going on, but then immediately has concerns about what has just been stated, which then follows in his

reply.

¹¹ And Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt? ¹² And he said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain.

¹³ And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? ¹⁴ And God said unto Moses, I Am That I Am: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I Am hath sent me unto you.

¹⁵ And God said moreover unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, the Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations. ¹⁶ Go, and gather the elders of Israel together, and say unto them, The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, appeared unto me, saying, I have surely visited you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt: ¹⁷ And I have said, I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt unto the land of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, unto a land flowing with milk and honey.

v11-17 After the theology is explained and the commission given to him in v. 7-10, Moses questions the Lord's choice of himself as the deliverer of the message (v. 11). The Lord tells Moses all will come about as He has said, and Moses will see it himself when he brings Israel back to worship at this very same mountain (v. 12). Moses asks the Lord how he will be the Lord's emissary when he doesn't even know His name and will be questioned by the elders of Israel over his presumptuous claim to be the new religious leader (v. 13).

The Lord responds by giving Moses His Name (v. 14), then emphatically explaining the calling Moses just received is part of the Lord's keeping the covenants made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to preserve their lineage (v. 15) and provide them with land (v. 16-17).

v11-12 Moses questions the commission by debasing himself. The Lord's response is "I will be with thee". This is a statement of divine support granted to all of God's servants throughout all the ages, cp. Moses 1:26, Num. 14:9, Joshua 1:9, Isa. 43:5, Jer. 15:20, Matt. 28:20, Acts 18:10, D&C 34:11. The statement of "I am with you" is connected to the Lord's statement in v. 14 of "I am". God's name reflects His nature and this nature is to support His servants and interact with them. He is no deaf and dumb idol that grants no support. What Moses is saying here is "I am not worthy to be your servant" and the Lord says "My

support makes you worthy".

v12 "this mountain", i.e. Sinai, a.k.a. Horeb.

v13 Moses' argument here is that he is unknown to the elders of Israel, and therefore has no standing among them as either a fellow Israelite or as a prophet of the Lord. Moses saying he is nobody to the Israelites and not a fitting representative of the Lord because he doesn't even know His name. Moses was previously rejected by Israelites when trying to defend them with what little political power he had and he had to escape Egypt or be executed (cf. 2:11-14), so this is certainly part of Moses' concern.

v13-15 Moses requests the name of the Lord, and the Lord responds "eyeh asher eyeh" or "I am that I am...ywhw, the God of your fathers" (there are various translations of "eyeh asher eyeh" forwarded, but they all pretty much forward something similar to "I am that I am"). Moses is requesting the name of the Lord because people generally wanted to know the name of their god at that point in time so they could invoke it when they needed to. Here, the Lord does not reveal his real name to Moses, but rather gives him a symbolic name-title. This is because the local idolaters at that time thought that having the name of a particular god gave you the power to invoke them and perhaps goad them into action on your behalf (as was also the case with angels, hence their general refusal to reveal their names, cf. Gen. 32:29, Judges 13:18). Here, the Lord avoids that kind of nonsense and asserts His independence and autonomy.

The emphatic statement "I am that I am" is a blatant authority statement used forever afterwards throughout the Scriptures. It is an assertion of "independence" in the Philosophical meaning of the word. The Philosophical definition of "independence" means that the thing relies upon nothing for its existence, and is self-existent. This is in sharp contrast to idols. Idols rely upon people to create and worship them, and when the men die and their memories fade the idols cease to exist. The Lord however, is completely independent of mankind, and was in fact created by him, and not the other way around as is the case with idols (this contrast between the Creating Lord who makes man and the man-made idols is particularly prominent in Isa. 44 & 46). Thus, the name "I am" is a name-title

indicating His exalted and independent nature, but lest we see Him as aloof, the name, as indicated above (cf. comments on v. 11-12), also indicates He is a condescending God who supports and interacts with His creation. Thus, we have:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Implications</u>
I am that I am	Exalted above and superior to man, independent from man, the Creator of man
I am with you	Condescending to work with man, associating with man, interacting with His Creation

v15-17 These verses emphasize the covenant made with Abraham and perpetuated through his son and grandson to preserve their lineage and provide them with a place to live (cf. Gen. 15). Note the double repetition of the patriarchs, first addressing the lineage, and then again addressing the land.

If the elders of Israel, who are the leaders, question Moses' leadership, this is Moses arriving with an understanding of the Lord's covenant with Abraham and what the greater theological purpose of his appearance is. The Lord is not sending Moses in unprepared to face those who will question him.

v16-22 The Plagues and Exodus are predicted. The Lord is well acquainted with the incredible pride of the Egyptians as well as their dependance upon the Hebrews for services provided, so He knows perfectly well they are not going to simply accept Moses' claim and permit Israel to leave. Thus, the series of miracles culminating in the Passover (cf. 4:22-23) are predicted.

v17 As was the case with v. 8, the Lord again states He is here to fulfill the promises made to Abraham, but here He is addressing the land. Especially note the parallel of listed names here with that in Gen. 15:18-21.

¹⁸ And they shall hearken to thy voice: and thou shalt come, thou and the elders of Israel, unto the king of Egypt, and ye shall say unto him, The Lord God of the Hebrews hath met with us: and now let us go, we beseech thee, three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God. ¹⁹ And I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go, no, not by a mighty hand. ²⁰ And I will stretch out my hand, and smite Egypt with all my wonders which I will do in the midst thereof: and after that he will let you go.

²¹ And I will give this people favour in the sight of the Egyptians: and it shall come to

pass, that, when ye go, ye shall not go empty. ²² But every woman shall borrow of her neighbour, and of her that sojourneth in her house, jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment: and ye shall put them upon your sons, and upon your daughters; and ye shall spoil the Egyptians.

v18-22 The Lord explains to Moses how things are going to happen, in very plain terms. The elders of Israel will believe you and listen to you. You go with them to Pharaoh and ask him to let all of Israel go three days into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to their God (v. 18). Pharaoh will refuse, because he has complete power of them, and they pose no threat to him (v. 19). The Lord will then demonstrate His power against Egypt, and they release Israel (v. 20). When Israel leaves, the Egyptians will voluntarily give them extraordinary wealth, which they wear and carry on their way out of Egypt (v. 21-22).

At this point, Moses is incredulous, he doesn't want to do what the Lord has asked and doesn't see himself as the person capable of doing what the Lord has asked. So, the Lord responds in a non-theological way as to how it is all going to go down. The Lord is telling Moses, "Don't worry, I've got this."

v18 The Lord tells Moses to make a request of Pharaoh that they both already know he will reject. Are they therefore being dishonest? Of course not. If you already know how someone is going to answer a question, asking the question doesn't make you dishonest, it just makes for dull conversation. But is Moses lying to Pharaoh when he makes the request to take Israel out to worship, when his real intent is to leave? And if Moses already knows Pharaoh will reject the offer, then why is he still trying to get Israel out of Egypt in this manner?

Moses is informed beforehand the Passover is going to occur (cf. 4:22-23), but he doesn't know when it will occur and he also does not know how it will occur. All Moses knows is at some point in the near future the Lord is going to kill all of the first born sons of Egypt. It seems likely that Moses' intention was to get Israel out of Egypt prior to the Passover so if things got ugly the two populations would be separate when it occurred, and then the Israelites would not be blamed for subterfuge or murder. The text presents the Lord as giving Moses some details but not all, the specific details of the Passover are not given until immediately beforehand. And then in 5:3 Moses warns Pharaoh of the impending disaster upon "us" (the Israelites alone, or both the Egyptians or the Israelites as well? I think the latter as the Lord has already told Moses the Plagues are imminent so Moses wants to get Israel out of

Egypt before the Plagues hit) if he fails to permit them to go and worship the Lord. This suggests Moses wants to separate the two populations before the Plagues start, assuming that afterwards the Plagues will dispose the Egyptians such that they will tell them to just go away rather than come back into servitude in Egypt.

Thus, there is no need to accuse Moses of lying or being sneaky when he says they just want to go off and worship the Lord for a few days. I believe his intent was to distance the two populations so there could be no accusation of foul play by the Egyptians. Especially note the statement in 5:3 says "lest he [the Lord] fall upon us with pestilence, or with the sword". Moses already knows the pestilence is imminent so there is no question of that, and the Lord never mentions anything about armed conflict. So, Moses' concern is avoiding direct conflict, or "the sword" (cf. 5:21, 18:4), with the Egyptians in the event they blame them for the Plagues or more specifically the Passover.

v19 "not by a mighty hand", Pharaoh's arrogance and obstinance is enormous, so even when facing a great and powerful opponent, such as an opposing army, he wouldn't relent. The Israelites present no such threat. They are a captive population with no military capability, so they couldn't be considered "a mighty hand" in any worldly way. There is no way Pharaoh will grant their request, as they have no means of presenting any sort of military or political threat.

This is the set up to v. 20. Israel itself does not have a mighty hand, but the Lord does, and He will demonstrate His mighty hand in the sight of all of Israel and Egypt with none to question His strength and power (cf. 6:1, 10:19, 13:9, 19:16, 32:11, Deut. 3:24, Deut. 4:34, Deut. 5:15, Deut. 6:21, Deut. 7:8, Deut. 7:19, Deut. 9:26, Deut. 11:2, Deut. 26:8, Deut. 34:12).

The Lord is making it clear to Moses that he is not expected to present any kind of military or political threat or power to Pharaoh. Moses is delivering a message, like an ambassador, and the Lord is telling him what to expect and how it is going to happen.

The Lord is also making it clear to Moses, and Israel, that He Himself will demonstrate his extraordinary, overpowering might to defeat Pharaoh and Egypt, and they will not do it. They will be the beneficiaries of something they will not have any part of or any ability to do on their own.

v21-22 On these two verses Everett Fox in the Schocken Bible states:

The despoiling of the Egyptians is reminiscent of obtaining booty in war. At the same time, there is probably a legal background to this: the furnishing of a freed slave with provisions. The follow-up to the despoiling, intended or not, is God's command that, in Israel's future observance of religious festivals in the Promised Land, "no one is to be seen in my presence empty handed" (Exod. 23:15).

The despoiling of the Egyptians puts materials into the hands of the Israelites sufficient to build the Tabernacle in the Wilderness, but also the golden calf.

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