

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY
WEEK 17: EXODUS 3-4 – The Burning Bush

OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS 3 & 4 – Moses Meets His Maker

I. The Burning Bush – Exodus 3:1-10

- A. The Call of Moses (Exodus 3:1-3)
- B. The Commission of Moses (Exodus 3:4-10)

II. The Misgivings of Moses – Exodus 3:11-22

- A. Who am I? (Exodus 3:11-12)
- B. Who are You? (Exodus 3:13-22)

III. Three Signs for Moses to Perform – Exodus 4:1-9

- A. First Sign – Staff to Snake (Exodus 4:1-5)
- B. Second Sign – Leprous Hand (Exodus 4:6-8)
- C. Third Sign – Water to Blood (Exodus 4:9)

IV. More Misgivings of Moses – Exodus 4:10-17

- A. I Am Not Eloquent (Exodus 4:10-12)
- B. I Am Not Sure (Exodus 4:13-17)

V. Moses Returns to Egypt – Exodus 4:18-31

- A. Moses Returns to Egypt (Exodus 4:18-23)
- B. The Emergency Circumcision (Exodus 4:24-26)
- B. Moses Reunites with Aaron (Exodus 4:27-31)



SUMMARY OF EXODUS CHAPTERS 1 & 2

- Exodus 1:1-7 Israelites thrive in Egypt; they were “fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong,” which is an echo of God’s blessing from the creation story in the book of Genesis.
- Exodus 1:8-14 New king of Egypt, doesn’t know Joseph, oppresses the Israelites, ruthless and harsh.
- Exodus 1:15-22 Midwives ordered to kill Israelite boys at birth but let girls live. They disobey. When summoned, they give an excuse. Pharaoh orders all boys of the Hebrews thrown into the Nile.
- Exodus 2:1-10 Moses is born (into a Levite family). Hidden and put in a basket (description similar to Noah’s ark). Daughter of Pharaoh finds him, pays Moses’ mother to nurse him, and then raises him as her own when he is beyond nursing stage.
- Exodus 2:11-15 Moses sees Egyptian beating a Hebrew, looks around, kills him and buries him in the sand. Doesn’t go unnoticed. Is made aware that people know. Gets scared. Pharaoh hears of it and wants to kill him. Moses flees to Midian.
- Exodus 2:16-22 Moses sits at a well and meets the daughters of the priest of Midian, Jethro (or Reuel). Shepherds drive the daughters away, but Moses defends them and helps water their flock. Moses is invited to join them for a meal and is given Zipporah in marriage. They have a son and named him Gershom.
- Exodus 2:23-25 Years pass, and the king of Egypt dies. God hears the cries of God’s people in Egypt and remembers God’s covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Exodus 3 (NRSV)

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

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.” 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?” 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.’” 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 forever, and this my title for all generations. 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.’ 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.’ 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. ²¹ I will bring this people into such favor with the Egyptians that, when you go, you will not go empty-handed; ²² each woman shall ask her neighbor and any woman living in the neighbor’s house for jewelry 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 3:1-3 – THE BURNING BUSH

Moses is doing what he does on most days now that he has settled into life away from Egypt. He is tending (“keeping”) the flock of his father-in-law when God disrupts his routine with a burning bush. The word “keeping” comes from the same Hebrew root as “shepherd,” which is a distinctively Hebrew occupation (Genesis 46:32-34; 47:3-4). The word “bush” in Hebrew is *seneh*, which is somewhat similar to the mountain’s name, Sinai.

Incidentally, the name Sinai probably comes from a root meaning “to shine”, which occurs in Syriac and which in Babylonian is found in the name *sinu* for “the moon”. That’s why scholars insist that the name is related to the Mesopotamian moon god *Sin*, which happens to be the name of the desert that lay between Sinai and the Gulf of Suez (see Exodus 16:1; 17:1; Numbers 33:11). If you remember from our study of Genesis, the two chief seats of the worship of the moon god *Sin* were Ur in the south of Mesopotamia and Haran in the North and this god was also known to be the protector of shepherds and was often considered “the father of the gods,” “head of the gods,” or “creator of all things”; the head of the pantheon. And it’s important to remember that Abraham came from Ur and settled in Haran before heading into Canaan.

Verse 2 says, “The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire from a bush.” Was it God or “the angel of the Lord” who appeared to Moses in the bush? In verse 4, it says, “and God called to him out of the bush.” Sometimes in the scriptures, God appears to people as an angel (which in Greek is the word *angelos*, “messenger”; in Hebrew, mostly *mal’ak*, “messenger, envoy”; both words can be references to either human or heavenly beings).

In Israel, as in the Ancient Near East in general, the underlying concept of the heavenly world was that of a royal court, where God was envisioned as a king and at God’s service were heavenly beings (or divine beings) who served as God’s council (see 1 Kings 22:19-22, Jeremiah 23:18-22, Isaiah 6, Psalm 82, Deuteronomy 32:8). God is also thought to be accompanied by thousands of heavenly beings, the heavenly host, God’s angelic armies (see Deuteronomy 33:2, Psalm 68, Joshua 5:14, 2 Kings 6:17).

“The angel of the Lord” is a figure that appears at several points in the bible, usually when something dramatic and meaningful is about to happen and there are almost always serious consequences for God’s people. The angel of the Lord seems to have been understood as distinct from other angels and serves primarily as a messenger from God to prepare the way for God’s appearance and activity. (See Genesis 16:7-13; 22:11; Exodus 3:2; Numbers 22:22; Judges 13:3; Zechariah 1:11; 3:1; Matthew 1:20, 24; Luke 2:9-15).

The term “theophany” is a fancy term that means “appearance of God” (Greek: *theos* = “God” + *phaino* = “appear”). This term is used to refer to instances recorded in scripture where God appears in some way to humans.

THEOPHANIES FOUND IN GENESIS

- **Standing and/or appearing to people**
 - **Adam and Eve** (Genesis 3:8-24)
 - **Babel** (Genesis 11:4-7)
 - **Abram** (Genesis 12:1-7)
 - **Hagar** (Genesis 16:7-14)
 - **Abraham and Sarah** (Genesis 18:1)
 - **Jacob** (Genesis 28:10-17; 32:24-30)
- **Voice that speaks to people**
 - **Cain** (Genesis 4:9-15)
 - **Noah** (Genesis 6:13, 7:1, 7:16, 8:1, 8:15, 9:1-17)
 - **Abram** (Genesis 12:1-8, 13:14, 17:1-27, 22:11-18)
- **Smoking fire pot & flaming torch** (Genesis 15:17)

THEOPHANIES FOUND IN EXODUS

- **The Burning Bush** (Exodus 3:1-3)
- **Pillar of Cloud and Pillar of Fire/Lightning** (Exodus 13:21-22, 14:19-25)
- **Storm Cloud and Lightning** (Exodus 14:24)
- **The Warrior in the Song of the Sea** (Exodus 15:1-18)
- **The Wind** (Exodus 15:5-10)
- **A Cloud** (Exodus 16:10, 24:15-18, 34:5, 40:34-38)
- **Speaking to Moses on the Mountain** (Exodus 19-24)
- **The Thunder** (Exodus 19:16-19)
- **Between the Cherubim on the Mercy Seat** (Exodus 25:18-22)
- **Pillar of Cloud** (Exodus 33:7-11)
- **God’s Glory passes by Moses** (Exodus 33:17-23)
- **Standing with Moses** (Exodus 34)

Fire is a frequent sign of God’s presence in Exodus (see Exodus 13:21; 19:18; 24:17; cf. Genesis 15:17; Ezekiel 1:27; 8:2). The imagery of God appearing in fire and as the angel of the Lord can also be found later in the biblical story in the story of Manoah and his wife, the parents of the Samson in Judges 13:15-22:

¹⁵ *Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, “Allow us to detain you, and prepare a kid for you.”* ¹⁶ *The angel of the Lord said to Manoah, “If you detain me, I will not eat your food; but if you want to prepare a burnt offering, then offer it to the Lord.” (For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the Lord.)* ¹⁷ *Then Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, “What is your name, so that we may honor you when your words come true?”* ¹⁸ *But the angel of the Lord said to him, “Why do you ask my name? It is too wonderful.”* ¹⁹ *So Manoah took the kid with the grain offering, and offered it on the rock to the Lord, to him who works wonders.* ²⁰ *When the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the Lord ascended in the flame of the altar while Manoah and his wife looked on; and they fell on their faces to the ground.* ²¹ *The angel of the Lord did not appear again to Manoah and his wife. Then Manoah realized that it was the angel of the Lord.* ²² *And Manoah said to his wife, “We shall surely die, for we have seen God.”*

The repetition of the name “Moses! Moses!” is a common feature in the Old Testament when God speaks to someone (Abraham in Genesis 22:11; Jacob in Genesis 46:2; Samuel in 1 Samuel 3:10). Moses’ response “Here I am” echoes that of Abraham, Jacob, Samuel, the prophet Isaiah (see Isaiah 6:5; “Here am I; send me!”), and Mary, the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:38; “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.” Why is “Here I am” the appropriate response to God’s call? It’s probably goes back to the story of Adam and Eve in the garden, when God called to the man and said, “Where are you?” but he was hiding because he had eaten the forbidden fruit and realized that he was naked. And so, throughout the biblical story, when God calls out to people, they tend to respond “Here I am.”

EXODUS 3:4-10 – THE COMMISSION OF MOSES

God commissions Moses to go back to Pharaoh, lead the Israelites out of their miserable slavery in Egypt and travel to the promised land of Canaan (3:7-10). God is clearly trying to disrupt Moses’ life.

Two connections are forged with prior narratives:

- a connection to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is made
- the plight of Israel enslaved in Egypt is reiterated

Two moves are announced:

- God intends to deliver Israel from its plight
- God will bring these liberated slaves into a good land flowing with milk and honey. This second move once again loops the action in the book of Exodus back to promises made in Genesis.

THE GENESIS CONNECTION – ABRAM & SARAI IN EGYPT – GENESIS 12 & 15

The promise of redemption from Egyptian cruelty was foretold as far back as Abraham's day in Genesis 15. In Genesis, chapter 12, Abram and Sarai head down to Egypt because of a famine in Canaan. Abram, afraid for his life (because Sarai is so beautiful), has Sarai tell everyone that she is his sister. Sarai is taken into Pharaoh's house and Abram is treated well. But God afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai. Pharaoh confronts Abram and sends him on his way, back to Canaan.

This version foreshadows the exodus: Famine in the land, descent into Egypt, Sarai being taken into Pharaoh's house, the great plagues with which God afflicts Pharaoh's house in order to release her, and the acquisition of wealth. (see Exodus 12:35-36).

But it is in Genesis, chapter 15, that we have an explicit mention of the future captivity of the descendants of Abraham in Egypt. This prophetic announcement occurs when Abram is asleep, and God speaks to Abram and establishes a covenant with Abram promising to give them the land from between the Nile and the Euphrates.

Genesis 15:12–18 (NRSV)

¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. ¹³ Then the Lord said to Abram, ***“Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; ¹⁴ but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.*** ¹⁵ As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶ ***And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.*** ¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,

What we see in the passage above is a prediction of the Egyptian oppression and the story of the exodus from Egypt mentioned early on in Genesis, connected to the story of Abram (Abraham).

According to Exodus, how long did the Israelites stay and live in Egypt?

Exodus 12:40 ⁴⁰ *The time that the Israelites had lived in Egypt was four hundred thirty years.*

According to Exodus, what did the Israelites take with them when they left?

Exodus 12:35-36 ³⁵ *The Israelites had done as Moses told them; they had asked the Egyptians for jewelry of silver and gold, and for clothing, ³⁶ and the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. And so they plundered the Egyptians.*

According to Exodus, how many generations were there before they returned? (4 generations from Levi to Moses)

Exodus 6:16-20 ¹⁶ *The following are the names of the sons of Levi according to their genealogies: Gershon, **Kohath**, and Merari, and the length of Levi's life was one hundred thirty-seven years. ¹⁷ The sons of Gershon: Libni and Shimei, by their families. ¹⁸ The sons of **Kohath**: **Amram**, Izhar, Hebron, and Uzziel, and the length of Kohath's life was one hundred thirty-three years. ¹⁹ The sons of Merari: Mahli and Mushi. These are the families of the Levites according to their genealogies. ²⁰ **Amram** married Jochebed his father's sister and she bore him Aaron and **Moses**, and the length of Amram's life was one hundred thirty-seven years.*

Who are the Amorites and what was their “iniquity” (sin)?

Ezekiel 16:1–3 ¹*The word of the Lord came to me: ² Mortal, make known to Jerusalem her abominations, ³ and say, Thus says the Lord God to Jerusalem: Your origin and your birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite.*

According to biblical tradition, they were one of the primary peoples in the land of Canaan before the rise of Israel; the others were the Canaanites and the Hittites. The Amorites are associated with the area directly east of the Jordan River and the kingdoms of *Sihon* and *Og*. These “two kings of the Amorites” appear as opponents of Israel prior to the settlement in Canaan. Israelite tradition identifies Og as the last remnant of the Rephaim, a race of giants who inhabited Canaan prior to the Israelite settlement. This tradition is supported by mention of his great bed of iron located in Rabbah of the Ammonites.

Deuteronomy 3:11 ¹¹Now only King Og of Bashan was left of the remnant of the Rephaim. In fact his bed, an iron bed, can still be seen in Rabbah of the Ammonites. By the common cubit it is nine cubits long and four cubits wide.

His territory was occupied by the tribe of Manasseh. Og and another Amorite king, Sihon, were massacred, and the Israelites took control of their land, including sixty walled cities that had formerly belonged to Og's kingdom.

From the perspective of the Israelites, the Amorites were idolaters and perpetrators of iniquity.

Judges 6:7–10 ⁷When the Israelites cried to the Lord on account of the Midianites, ⁸ the Lord sent a prophet to the Israelites; and he said to them, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt, and brought you out of the house of slavery; ⁹ and I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians, and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you, and gave you their land; ¹⁰ and I said to you, 'I am the Lord your God; you shall not pay reverence to the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.' But you have not given heed to my voice."

Joshua 24:11–15 ¹¹When you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I handed them over to you. ¹² I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. ¹³ I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant. ¹⁴ "Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. ¹⁵ Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Exodus 23:23–24 ²³ When my angel goes in front of you, and brings you to the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, ²⁴ you shall not bow down to their gods, or worship them, or follow their practices, but you shall utterly demolish them and break their pillars in pieces.

The promise of God to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt also goes back to the promise God makes to Jacob in Genesis.

Genesis 46:3–4 (NRSV)

³ Then he said, "I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. ⁴ I myself will go down with you to Egypt, **and I will also bring you up again**; and Joseph's own hand shall close your eyes."

HOLY GROUND – MOUNT HOREB (SINAI)

Moses finds himself in the presence of God, standing on what God says is holy ground and gets a crash course in holy etiquette. Where is Moses? Mount Horeb which is also called Mount Sinai. Remember, the Elohist (E source) tends to use "Horeb" for Mount Sinai; "Elohim" rather than YHWH for God; "Jacob" rather than "Israel"; and "Jethro" rather than "Reuel." It was here at Horeb (Sinai) that Moses obtained water from the rock (Exodus 17:6–7), where the Israelites made a covenant with God (Deuteronomy 5:2), and from where they set out for Kadesh-barnea and Canaan (Deuteronomy 1:19). Later, Elijah fled to Horeb (Sinai) because of Jezebel's wrath (1 Kings 19:8). The notion of "come no closer" echoes later in the story when the Israelites are encamped at the foot of the mountain (see Exodus 19:12, 21–24). The same is true for the need to hide his face (see Exodus 33:20) and a similar story of Elijah.

1 Kings 19:11–13 (NRSV)

¹¹ He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

REMOVE THE SANDALS FROM YOUR FEET

A sign of respect and reverence that is still practiced today in Islam and other religions. It honors the holiness of the ground. In Exodus 2:22, Moses says, "I have been an alien (Hebrew, *ger*) residing in a foreign land." He was rejected by the Hebrews in Egypt (see Exodus 2:14). He was rejected by Pharaoh who sought to kill him (see Exodus 2:15). The

Midianites see Moses as a foreigner, “an Egyptian” (see Exodus 2:19). And so, Moses is not fully “home” in any human community.

Taking off one’s shoes in many traditional cultures is associated with not only entering a worship space, but also a home. Thus, here at the foot of the mountain of God, Moses, the “alien,” has at last found a true “home,” not with humans but with God, the God of his ancestors, “the God of Abraham... of Isaac... of Jacob” (see Exodus 3:6).

Joshua is later commanded to do the same thing in Joshua 5:15. There, the “commander of the Lord’s army” (“the angel of the Lord”) appears to Joshua just before the fall of Jericho. Just like here in Exodus 3, it’s with that divine encounter that Jacob is commissioned to do battle with the forces that oppose God’s people.

Joshua 5:13–15 (NRSV)

¹³ Once when Joshua was by Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went to him and said to him, “Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?” ¹⁴ He replied, “Neither; but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.” And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped, and he said to him, “What do you command your servant, my lord?” ¹⁵ The commander of the army of the Lord said to Joshua, “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy.” And Joshua did so.

EXODUS 3:11-12 – WHO AM I?

As in some other call stories in the Bible (Jeremiah 1:1-10), Moses resists the call and raises a number of objections to which God responds. Moses first pleads his own lack of skills and qualifications. Who am I? he asks. God responds. None of that matters; “I will be with you”. Moses is playing the reluctant prophet (see Gideon in Judges 6:15; Isaiah 6:8; Jeremiah 1).

EXODUS 3:13-22 – WHO ARE YOU?

The people will ask Moses, what is this God's name? God responds with a long explication of the divine name, “**I AM WHO I AM**” (3:14). Perhaps a better translation of the name from the Hebrew (*’ehyeh asher ’ehyeh*) is “**I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE.**” It doesn’t seem that “I Am Who I Am” is the name itself, but a preparatory comment before the name is given. The name itself seems to be announced in the following clause in verse 14:

“Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I Am has sent me to you.’ ”

This divine name is built on the Hebrew verb *hayah*, “to be”, and is related to the divine name used frequently throughout the Old Testament, “**Yahweh**,” or **YHWH** (the transliterated Hebrew consonants without the vowels). In the Jewish tradition, this special name of God is considered so holy that it is not to be pronounced in prayer or worship (hence, the absence of vowels). The NRSV translation represents this special divine name with the circumlocution “**the LORD.**” This is the convention used by the ancient Greek and the Septuagint translation of the original Hebrew. As we look at the places where God reveals God’s name throughout the book of Exodus, we see how God’s true nature is gradually revealed.

In verse 12, it is interesting to note the obvious pun that is played on God’s name. God says, “I will be (*’ehyeh*) with you.”

DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS ISSUE

Exodus 3:14-15 has typically been understood by source critics as a product of the Elohist (E source). According to the hypothesis, the name Yahweh is revealed here for the first time. But that causes people to ask, “But what about the recurring use of the name “Yahweh” throughout the book of Genesis? How can God’s name “Yahweh” be revealed here for the first time if it has been used regularly previously? The answer given is that the previous uses of Yahweh in the Pentateuch are from a different source, the Yahwistic (J source). But then, notice that the first time Moses meets with the Israelites in Exodus 4:29-31, Moses never mentions God’s name. This momentous event, the revelation of the divine name, seems to recede into oblivion.

Regardless, the gradual revealing of God’s nature associated with God’s name continues in Exodus 20:2-6, where God expands the divine name at the beginning of the Ten Commandments by recalling God's actions and character, “**I am the LORD your God...who brought you out of the land of Egypt...I am a jealous God, punishing...but showing steadfast love.**”

In Exodus 29:46, God's self-declaration of the name expands another step in the tabernacle cycle, revealing the core of God's nature as a desire to be present with God's people: **"I am the LORD their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell with them."**

After the golden calf debacle that endangered the entire relationship between God and people, God reaches deep down and reveals another aspect of God's inner name and character. The name **"I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE"** from our text in Exodus 3:14 expands into God's deeper character of mercy in Exodus 33:19: **"I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious."**

Finally, in Exodus 34:6-7, Moses experiences the most dramatic revelation of God's name. In a repetition, but also inversion of God's name in Exodus 20:2-6, God's character is no longer first of all "jealous" and "punishing." God's name is, first of all, "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love." No longer is there a qualifier of God's love of "those who love me and keep my commandments" (as in Exodus 20:6).

Furthermore, God's name in Exodus 34:6-7 includes for the first time in Exodus "forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." There will admittedly continue to be consequences to disobedience ("yet by no means clearing the guilty"), but that aspect of God's name and character will now be in a secondary place.

Exodus 34 is God's response to Israel's primal sin against the first commandment in worshiping the golden calf in Exodus 32. Exodus 34:6-7 proclaims that God's name first given in Exodus 3:14 as the enigmatic, "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE," unfolds at its deepest level primarily as "love, mercy and forgiveness."

Exodus 4 (NRSV)

¹ Then Moses answered, "But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, 'The Lord did not appear to you.'"

² The Lord said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A staff." ³ And he said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw the staff on the ground, and it became a snake; and Moses drew back from it. ⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Reach out your hand, and seize it by the tail"—so he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand— ⁵ "so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you." ⁶ Again, the Lord said to him, "Put your hand inside your cloak." He put his hand into his cloak; and when he took it out, his hand was leprous, as white as snow. ⁷ Then God said, "Put your hand back into your cloak"—so he put his hand back into his cloak, and when he took it out, it was restored like the rest of his body— ⁸ "If they will not believe you or heed the first sign, they may believe the second sign. ⁹ If they will not believe even these two signs or heed you, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground."

¹⁰ But Moses said to the Lord, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." ¹¹ Then the Lord said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? ¹² Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak." ¹³ But he said, "O my Lord, please send someone else." ¹⁴ Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, "What of your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. ¹⁵ You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. ¹⁶ He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him. ¹⁷ Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs."

¹⁸ Moses went back to his father-in-law Jethro and said to him, "Please let me go back to my kindred in Egypt and see whether they are still living." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace." ¹⁹ The Lord said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt; for all those who were seeking your life are dead." ²⁰ So Moses took his wife and his sons, put them on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt; and Moses carried the staff of God in his hand. ²¹ And the Lord said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. ²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son. ²³ I said to you, "Let my son go that he may worship me." But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son.'"

²⁴ On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the Lord met him and tried to kill him. ²⁵ But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses' feet with it, and said, "Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" ²⁶ So he let him alone. It was then she said, "A bridegroom of blood by circumcision."

²⁷ The Lord said to Aaron, "Go into the wilderness to meet Moses." So he went; and he met him at the mountain of God and kissed him. ²⁸ Moses told Aaron all the words of the Lord with which he had sent him, and all the signs with which he had charged him. ²⁹ Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the Israelites. ³⁰ Aaron spoke all the words that the Lord had spoken to Moses, and performed the signs in the sight of the people. ³¹ The people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had given heed to the Israelites and that he had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped.

EXODUS 4:1-9 – THE THREE SIGNS

For whatever reason, Moses doesn't think that simply name dropping will be enough to convince the Israelites that he is God's deliverer. Moses is not concerned with whether Pharaoh will recognize his authority, but whether the Israelites will and so he wants or needs to bring them more proof. And so God gives Moses three signs.

SIGN 1: Turning Moses' shepherd staff into a snake (Exodus 4:2-5). Naturally, Moses, being a shepherd, has a staff in his hand. So, God uses the ordinary to do the extraordinary. Why a snake? Think about what a snake represented in Egypt. It was a sign of Egyptian royal authority (Pharaoh's cobra-like headdress worn as a symbol of his authority). Moses is told to grab the snake by its tail to turn it back into a staff (and perhaps as a sign that God has dominion over Pharaoh). We'll see this played out later in chapter 7 when Aaron and Moses do a sign for Pharaoh and Aaron's snake swallows up the snakes from Pharaoh's sorcerers. In the book of Numbers, we will see it played out differently when God sends poisonous serpents among the people and Moses is instructed to make a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole (see Numbers 21:6-9 also 2 Kings 18:4; and connections in Genesis 3:14-15, and John 3:14-15).



SIGN 2: Turning Moses' hand into a leprous hand and back again (Exodus 4:6-7); a sign of God's authority over sickness and disease and perhaps a prefigure of Israel's experience: God taking an unclean nation and making them clean.

SIGN 3: Turning water into blood (Exodus 4:8-9). Moses doesn't actually perform this one on the spot or even for the Israelites, but, is simply told about it. But like the first one, this becomes the first plague that is used against Pharaoh. Remember, blood represents life and death to the ancients (and to us if we lose too much of it). This sign symbolizes the power of Israel's God over the power of the elements as well as over the power of the Egyptian gods and nation whose life force was the Nile.

EXODUS 4:10-17 – MORE EXCUSES/OBJECTIONS

Moses' next objection is that he is not an eloquent speaker. He is concerned that he doesn't have the power of persuasion. But, wait Moses. Didn't God just give you signs that were meant to persuade folks? And really? Do you think your speech problem is going to be a challenge for God?

In the Hebrew of verse 10, Moses literally says, "*I am* not a man of words. *I am* heavy (dull) of mouth and heavy (dull) of tongue." People wonder whether Moses was a stutterer, which is how the Greek translation of the Old Testament (in the Septuagint) seems to take it. But in the Hebrew, that's not clear. Instead, in verse 12, God responds by saying literally in Hebrew "*I will be* with your mouth." And we are meant to notice the battle between the two I AMs.

Yes, Moses, your "I am" is no match for Pharaoh or for convincing your people. But since I AM the great I AM, you have nothing to worry about.

Understanding this, Moses finally blurts out that he doesn't want the job. In verse 13, he says "O Lord, please send someone else." And this, of course, makes God angry. And so, God insists that God has already taken care of everything. God is bringing in some help: Moses' brother Aaron is on his way. And God reiterates that

EXODUS 4:18-23 – PERMISSION TO RETURN

So, Moses leave Mount Horeb and heads back to his father-in-law where he asks for permission to return to Egypt. This is a sign of respect to Jethro (or Reuel) who gave him his daughter in marriage. And Jethro's response is "Go in peace." It's interesting that Moses doesn't say anything about what happened to him while he was away or show Jethro the cool trick he can do with his staff or his hand. Instead, he simply says, "Let me go back to my own people in Egypt." But notice the stated motive for going back: "to see if they are still living."

Umm... Moses... that's not what it's about. That's not the reason God told Moses to go back to Egypt in Exodus 3:1-4:17. He's supposed to go back to bring the Israelites out of Egypt, not merely to see how his kinsfolk are doing. Why does he say it this way to Jethro? It's the same sort of thing that God tells Moses to say to Pharaoh in chapter 3 (verse 18) about the Israelites needing to go on a three-day journey to worship their God. That's not the motive. The motive is to escape the oppression and head to a land flowing with milk and honey. When we pay close attention to the text, we might also notice, however, how similar verse 18 is to what is said in chapter 2, verse 11 about Moses going out to see his kin. If that scene was a foreshadowing of the Exodus event, then it is a nice link. But this time, Moses isn't going out alone to his kin. Now, he comes with help. Now he comes with God. And this time, it won't just be an abusive taskmaster who gets it. This time, they will be set free.

Verse 19 is a little strange. Why does God have to tell Moses to head back to Egypt when that has been the point all along and Moses is already been given permission to do so? It's like different traditions have been woven together here; and rather awkwardly. The NIV version of the bible tries to smooth things over by translating the verb as a pluperfect (which doesn't exist in Hebrew). It translates it as, "The Lord had said" instead of the "The Lord said". It works, but it would not be the normal translation. What follows is the news that Pharaoh is dead. This news is not necessarily meant to say that it's safe for Moses to return because that doesn't make sense with all the deeds of wonder and power that accompany his return. But instead probably is meant to highlight God's special activity behind the scenes to prepare for the action to come.

And so, we have Moses and his wife and his sons (notice that now there is more than one; we don't meet him until chapter 18) and they are put on a donkey and they head back to Egypt and Moses has "the staff of God" in his hand. Reminds me of the scene on many Christmas cards. But does the family really accompany him to Egypt? We never hear about them arriving there. As a matter of fact, we don't hear about them again until chapter 18 and there we learn that Moses had previously sent his family away to live with Jethro, apparently to keep them out of harms way. Of course, this is probably because of different traditions or sources of the story being woven together.

HARDENING PHARAOH'S HEART

An important concept and theme then makes an entrance in verse 21 that we can't ignore.

²¹ *And the Lord said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go."*

What is this about? Is this really something that God does? What does this say about God? As we go further in the story, sometimes we're told Pharaoh hardens his own heart against God and other times we are told that God hardens his heart. This brings up to important questions for us:

- Who is really behind all this evil?
- What does this story tell us about God's relationship to evil?

As the story of Exodus progresses, we begin to learn the answers to these questions. But we must be patient.

Exodus 3:19–20 (NRSV)

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 4:21 (NRSV)

²¹ *And the LORD said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.*

Exodus 7:3 (NRSV)

³ *But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and I will multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt.*

It helps to remember what it says in the book of Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 17:10 (NRSV)

¹⁰ *I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.*

The picture that develops regarding what God is doing with Pharaoh is that God is going to turn Pharaoh's evil back on his own head. Remember what it says in chapter 7 during Moses' and Pharaoh's first encounter:

Exodus 7:13–14 (NRSV)

¹³ *Still Pharaoh's heart **was hardened**, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.*

¹⁴ *Then the Lord said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart **is hardened**; he refuses to let the people go.*

The verb in Hebrew which means "to make or grow hard or firm or obstinate" is *chazaq* חָזַק. It's the same root for the name Hezekiah, which means "God strengthens". But here it is not a passive verb. It's a stative verb meaning it doesn't indicate whether it is Pharaoh or God who is initiating the action. In order to know agency, it helps if we look at the pattern that develops when it comes to the plagues.

PHARAOH'S HEART AND THE TEN PLAGUES

<u>The Plague</u>	<u>What Happens</u>	<u>Responsible Party</u>
1. Blood	Pharaoh's heart "became hard" (Exodus 7:22)	Ambiguous
2. Frogs	Pharaoh "hardened his own heart" (Exodus 8:15)	Pharaoh
3. Gnats	Pharaoh's heart "was hard" (Exodus 8:19)	Ambiguous
4. Flies	"Pharaoh hardened his own heart" (Exodus 8:32)	Pharaoh
5. Livestock die	Pharaoh's heart "was hard" (Exodus 9:7)	Ambiguous
6. Boils	"The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart" (Exodus 9:12)	God
7. Hail	Pharaoh "hardened his own heart" (Exodus 9:34)	Pharaoh
8. Locusts	God announces that he has "hardened Pharaoh's heart" (Exodus 10:1,10:20)	God
9. Darkness	God "hardened Pharaoh's heart" (Exodus 10:27)	God
10. Death of the firstborn	God "hardened Pharaoh's heart" (Exodus 11:10)	God

Interestingly, in the 7th plague of hail, we first see Pharaoh harden his own heart (9:34), but afterward the narrator uses the ambiguous verb "became hard" to describe it. This means that all of the other uses of the ambiguous verb (plagues 1, 3, and 5) most likely do not imply that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, but just the opposite!

So, what does this mean? God gives Pharaoh five chances or opportunities to repent, humble himself, and submit to God's authority, but five times, Pharaoh hardens his own heart. And so, perhaps what we are to make of this is that Pharaoh was responsible for the evil in his own heart. He had opportunity to turn back, but at a certain point, he crossed the point of no return. And so, God turned it upon himself and finished the job that Pharaoh had started.

We see the notion elsewhere in scripture:

Joshua 11:20 (NRSV)

²⁰ *For it was the Lord's doing to **harden their hearts** so that they would come against Israel in battle, in order that they might be utterly destroyed, and might receive no mercy, but be exterminated, just as the Lord had commanded Moses.*

Jeremiah 5:3 (NRSV)

³ *O Lord, do your eyes not look for truth? You have struck them, but they felt no anguish; you have consumed them, but they refused to take correction. They have **made their faces harder than rock**; they have refused to turn back.*

Ezekiel 3:7 (NRSV)

⁷ *But the house of Israel will not listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to me; because all the house of Israel have **a hard forehead and a stubborn heart**.*

In Romans 9, Paul makes a lengthy reference to Exodus and it appears that he says that God was ultimately behind the evil of Pharaoh from the beginning. Romans 9:18 says: ¹⁸ *So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses.*

EXODUS 4:24-26 – THE EMERGENCY CIRCUMCISION

Verse 24 through 26 are a strange interruption to the story and which translation we use is important for understanding what is happening here; though the confusion never gets cleared up.

Here is what the NRSV says:

²⁴ *On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the Lord met him and tried to kill him.* ²⁵ *But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses' feet with it, and said, "Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!"* ²⁶ *So he let him alone. It was then she said, "A bridegroom of blood by circumcision."*

And here is what the NIV says:

²⁴ *At a lodging place on the way, the Lord met Moses and was about to kill him.* ²⁵ *But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it. "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me," she said.* ²⁶ *So the Lord let him alone. (At that time she said "bridegroom of blood," referring to circumcision.)*

The NIV does a great disservice to the original Hebrew by insisting that the Lord met Moses and was about to kill him. That's not what the Hebrew says. Here is the original Hebrew (remember that Hebrew reads from right to left:

Exodus 4:24–26

וַיִּהְיֶה בַדְרֹךְ בַּמַּלְאָךְ וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַמֵּיתוֹ: ²⁴

Now, at the lodging place along the way, the Lord met him and sought to kill him.

וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה זָרָר וַתְּכַרֵּת אֶת־עֲרֻלַּת בְּנֵיהָ וַתַּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי חַתָּן־דָּמִים אַתָּה לִּי: ²⁵

So Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off the foreskin of her son, and touched his "feet." (At that time she said "bridegroom of blood," referring to circumcision.)

וַיֵּרָף מִמֶּנּוּ אֲזַי אָמְרָה חַתָּן דָּמִים לְמוֹלֵת: פ ²⁶

She said, "You are a bridegroom of blood to me." So he let him alone.

The word "feet" is in quotes because it is most likely a euphemism for genitals. Uh-huh. Yep. Okay.

One thing to notice is that the name Moses doesn't appear at all in this short passage. And so, in the Hebrew, it is very ambiguous who it is that the Lord is wanting to kill. If it is Moses, that is very strange, given the burning bush and the commissioning that has taken place. Another strange detail is that it is Zipporah who figures out what is happening with God and who takes corrective action. How did she know? And how did she know that the right thing to do was to circumcise her son? And which son is it? Is it Gershom or is it Eliezer? And whose "feet" does she touch with the foreskin? Moses' "feet" or her sons? And, who let whom alone? And what does "bridegroom of blood" mean?

When we step back and think about this strange passage, what becomes clear is that this passage re-introduces and signals the importance of circumcision that was first introduced in Genesis chapter 17. Remember, circumcision is supposed to be a sign of God's covenant and God commanded Abraham to circumcise his entire family. And so this passage look backwards to that story, and we can assume that it is also meant to look forward to some upcoming event, which it does. Exodus 12:43-49 talks about the importance of being circumcised prior to eating the Passover meal.

Is God mad at Moses because his son isn't circumcised or is God just mad that the son isn't circumcised and ready to take it out on the son? Again, it isn't clear.

EXODUS 4:27-31 – REUNITED AND IT FEELS SO GOOD

Isn't it a little strange that Moses and Aaron meet on the "mountain of God"? Moses was commissioned on this mountain and now it is Aaron's turn to be inaugurated. Moses tells Aaron what God has told him and the signs that he has been given to perform. They then go to meet with the elders of Israel. And in this meeting, Aaron, not Moses, is the one who relays the message to the people, thus fulfilling God's earlier promise that Aaron will speak for Moses (see verse 16). Apparently after Aaron performs, the people receive Moses with enthusiasm. They are convinced by the signs. For some reason, they aren't that interested in knowing God's name. For some reason, Moses never mentions to them that God had revealed God's name to him on the mountain. And so the stage is now set for the confrontation between God and Pharaoh (with Moses and Aaron looking to become the best supporting actors).

NEXT WEEK: Read Exodus 6-11 – The Ten Plagues