



Exposition

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The Exodus

A commentary on Exodus 1-15

D. Moses' commission – Exodus 3-4 (Part 2)

Mark Vincent

The format of the commentary

The narrative has been broken down into several **major sections**, of a chapter or two each; some of these will be covered in one month, others will take longer. An **Introduction** is provided for each of these major sections, which sets out the major events and themes dealt with in those chapters.

Each major section is broken into **subsections** or **episodes** (these are typically between five and twenty verses each). For each the **AV text** is followed by a **Comment**, which draws out the major lessons and items of interest from the text. The AV text also contains **Footnotes**, in which additional 'one-off' points are made for those wanting to work through Exodus more slowly.

Introduction

THE DIALOGUE between God and Moses at the burning bush begins at Exodus 3:4 and continues into chapter 4. [Last month](#) we dealt with it as far as 3:10. This month we shall take it as far as the end of chapter 3.

Through His angel, God has just asked Moses to play a crucial role in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt (3:10), and Moses is about to respond.

Much of the discussion which follows revolves around the Name and identity of God. Books have been written on this, and the treatment here is intended to be suggestive rather than exhaustive. There are also other aspects of the Name which will be dealt with when we come to chapter 6.

Who is Moses?—and Who is the Lord?

- 3:11 And Moses said unto God, Who am I,¹ that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?
- 3:12 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 serve² God upon this mountain.
- 3:13 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?

Comment

Moses' first response, though one of a list of reasons he will produce as to why God might have chosen the wrong man, is nevertheless absolutely appropriate in this instance: "Who am I, that I should go . . . ?". Asked to play a part in the purpose of so great a God, only pure arrogance would hold us back from feeling sheer unworthiness and fumbling inadequacy. If we are to serve in God's employ then there must be an acknowledgement from our hearts of His greatness, our smallness, and of the abundant grace and honour which has been bestowed. This is the first element in a response to God's gracious intervention in our lives.

God responds to Moses' question with a phrase which, significantly, uses the Hebrew verb 'to be', which is later to be used so remarkably in verse 14: "Certainly I will be [*ehyeh*, meaning 'I am' or 'will be'] with thee" (v. 12). It seems to me no accident that the verb *ehyeh* is used in both verses 12 and 14, for the one gives an angle of interpretation on the other, as we shall see shortly. God promises to be with Moses, and does so with a double emphasis. In the first place, not only is the verb 'to be' used (it is not strictly necessary from a grammatical point of view), but God also stresses the promise with a little particle *ki*, translated by the AV as 'certainly'. God does not need to say 'certainly', because all He says is by definition certain; yet for man's sake the emphasis is given, much as in Hebrews 6:18 God speaks "by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for [Him] to lie".

Moses, then, will not go alone. He will go with the presence and companionship of God. God will be with him, as He was with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is a fascinating study to follow through the repeated usage of the 'I will be with you' promise throughout the Scriptures. It even follows through into the New Testament, and is inherited, as it were, by Jesus, when he tells the disciples in Matthew 28:20: "I am with you always".

God proceeds to add another element to His promise by offering Moses a token or sign. This is usually taken to be His promise that, upon delivering the Israelites from Egypt, Moses will return with them to this very spot in Horeb to worship the Lord. Whatever else happens, he will ultimately win through and return to Horeb.

Although this is quite a reasonable interpretation, another is also possible, for one might com-

ment that the fact that Moses and the Israelites will worship at Horeb in the future will be small comfort to Moses when he is back in Egypt, for he will not know whether or not God will keep His promise until the ordeal is all over. Instead, it is possible that the token is the very statement or promise of God which had preceded it, "Certainly I will be with thee". Perhaps this promise made by God is the sure token that Moses needs in order to take up his commission to go and deliver. If this is correct, one would simply break verse 12 into two parts: 'Certainly I will be with thee—this [the promise] is the token that I have sent thee. And [what's more], when you come out of Egypt you will worship Me on this mountain'. As God's servants, we each carry with us that same token, that He is with us to protect and guide, wherever we may walk, and whatever we may do in His service.

In verse 13 Moses raises a second matter, which, while not exactly an excuse, smacks somewhat of a hedging or playing for time: 'When I return to Egypt', he asks, 'and the people say, "What is the name of this God Who wants to deliver us?", what shall I respond?'. It seems a bizarre question for Moses to ask, and perhaps the most justifiable reason for it is that Israel have become so far removed from God in their thinking, and so swamped by the many false gods of Egypt, that they have forgotten both His distinctiveness and the unique nature of their own calling. In fact there are a couple of passages elsewhere in the Old Testament that show that Israel had become idolatrous during the period. The Exodus was to be a deliverance, not only from the physical location of Egypt, but also from the darkness of idolatry into spiritual enlightenment.

The Name

3:14 And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM:³ and He said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM⁴ hath sent me unto you.⁵

Comment

One cannot be called 'I am' in the normal way. 'I am' or 'I will be' is no more someone's name in Hebrew than it is in English. What God is presenting His people with here, therefore, is something which is unique, something which will cause them to stop in their tracks, something which will be without parallel in their experi-

ence. That this is entirely apt for our heavenly Father goes without saying. He is a God without parallel, without equal, beyond compare.

Before expounding the Name, a brief grammatical comment must be made. It is probably a mistake to press too hard the question of whether the Hebrew (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*) should be translated in the present ('I am what I am') or in the future ('I will be what I will be'). It is largely a matter of translation, and the underlying meanings comprehended in the Name do not change however we decide to translate it. The tense system of English is not the same as Hebrew; in

English we are forced to make a distinction between a sentence in the present tense and one in the future. This dichotomy does not exist in Hebrew, and exactly the same Hebrew form (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*) would be used to express each of the following English translations:

I am what (or who or that) I am

I am the one who exists

I will be what (or who or that) I will be.

Further linguistic discussion may be found at [note 3](#), but in summary it is quite legitimate to translate the Hebrew as either 'I am' or 'I will be', and it would be a mistake to argue on grammatical grounds for one of these to the exclusion of the other. It would be to force on the Hebrew a distinction that it does not make. The Name potentially contains both a present (ongoing) and a future focus; to opt for an either/or misses one of the beauties of the Name.

It seems to me that theologically also the matter is something of a non-question. We believe that God is from everlasting to everlasting and that He does not change. In this sense what He has been He still is and will always be. Similarly, God has and always has had a plan for the future: He is and will be revealed by that which He does and will do. In fact, we can learn lessons from the Name through consideration of the ongoing or continuing nature of His character, and by a consideration of His future plans.

What, then, are some of the levels of meaning which the Name encapsulates in its context in Exodus 3? God's Name is multifaceted and incorporates several dimensions. Although it is legitimate to express what we think its primary signification might be, it would seem to be a mistake to argue for one particular interpretation to the exclusion of all others.

- To say 'I am who I am' when someone asks one's name is to be enigmatic, to say the least, and is in one sense to avoid the question. (Imagine a dialogue as follows: Question: 'Excuse me, would you mind telling me who you are?' Answer: 'Myself'.) One of the reasons why God might respond in this way is to emphasise that He cannot be put in a neatly labelled box or tidily defined by human language. God speaks for Himself, He is Who He is, and there is no other. He needs no label or tag; no human sentences or words can contain Him. His very existence and 'Godness', as we might clumsily put it, speaks for itself. To define is, in a sense, to limit, to enclose, whereas our God is boundless. He is

the One Who is. Really to appreciate this about Him is to have grasped something truly fundamental. God's Name can be characterised only in terms of itself, not by analogy with something else.

- God is the One Who exists, Who always has existed, and always will. Self-existence is one of His defining qualities, just as mortality is one of ours. We recall the fire of the bush, which flamed without need for fuel on which to feed. God exists, He is The One Who Is, and, by contrast, all other gods and idols are ones who are not. When the Israelites want to know the name of the God Who has sent Moses, the answer to be given is one which shows in one sense how foolish their question is. There is but one God Who exists. There is no other. 'What is the name of the God who will deliver us?' they ask. The answer comes, 'There is only One Who it could possibly be. The One Who exists'.
- But God does not merely exist 'out there' in some remote philosophical sense. For verse 12 has already revealed God's special promise to be with Moses (significantly, the same verb *ehyeh* is used in verse 12 and verse 14). God is not detached from that which He has created; rather He wishes to be involved with it and to engage in relationships. He has promised to be with Moses; now He is promising to be with His people and bring them out of Egypt. God's Name is thus a relationship-word that includes within it principles of fellowship and covenant. We cannot say that He is a God Who is and stop there, for this would be insufficient. He is a God Who is near, a God Who is with the people He is about to redeem, a God Who is with us (compare the Immanuel name in Isaiah and Matthew, and Paul's comment in Acts 17: 27: "though He be not far from every one of us").
- The context at either side of verse 14 makes it abundantly clear that the revelation of the Name is intimately bound up with the revelation of a purpose, namely the purpose to redeem and deliver the Israelites from the land of Egypt. This comes out very clearly in 3:15-22. God's Name is not given in a vacuum, it is given with the promise of delivering the Israelites from death in Egypt and bringing them into the promised land. We are thus brought to a consideration of the future dimension of the Name. God is the One Who

will be; He will be what He will be. And just what will that be? He will be the Deliverer of the Israelites from Egypt; He will be their Saviour from death; He will make a covenant with them and be their God. It is in these things that what He is may truly be made known. We rightly refer to the 'Covenant Name', for God's revelation of His Name is inextricably linked to His purpose to redeem a people for Himself. God's work and purpose are not complete; He still has work to do and will illustrate His identity doing and being that which He has promised. God's name is a verb, not just of being, but also of becoming.

- There is thus a sense of 'wait and see!' about the revelation of God's Name in this passage. What God is may not be encapsulated in a word or a sentence, it is something that has to be experienced and witnessed. God will show what He is by what He does as He redeems Israel. It is only when we appreciate these acts of His that we begin to know Him. Israel will come to know God, not through any particular word or piece of exposition, but through seeing His saving work in action in their lives. We can only know God by getting to know Him, by watching what He

does and learning Who He is in the wonderful works which He does. One writer has commented perceptively: "We might come closer to what is meant in the Bible by the word 'God' if we understood it as a verb, and not a verb of simple asserted existence but a verb implying a process accomplishing itself".* We learn, then, that God has a purpose (in the first instance, to redeem His people from Egypt, and all that this implies spiritually). He will fulfil it; He will do what He has determined. What He has promised He is able also to perform.

That all of these thematic strands (and perhaps others too) may be comprehended in the Name of God is a tremendous thing. The Name provides a deep and satisfying well for reflection for the believer. If we were to draw some of the themes together in conclusion we would see that the traditional Christadelphian understanding of God manifestation is here in very clear form. The Name, in its context, speaks of the existence of God, of the fellowship He wishes to share with His people, and of the covenant that He will make as He redeems them to Himself. It speaks of the way in which He reveals Himself, both through the acts of salvation He accomplishes and through those whom He saves.

The Covenant Name

- 3:15 And God said moreover unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, The LORD⁶ 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 memorial⁷ unto all generations.
- 3:16 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,⁸ and seen that which is done to you in Egypt:
- 3:17 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.
- 3:18 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 He-

brews 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.

- 3:19 And I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go, no, not by a mighty hand.⁹

3:20 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.

3:21 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:

3:22 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.

* Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*, p. 17.

Comment

In verse 15 God enlarges upon what He has just made known in verse 14, this time using the term 'Yahweh' (translated 'LORD'), which we more conventionally think of as His special Name. Yahweh is a third person ('he') form related to the first person ('I') *ehyeh*, 'I am' in verse 14, and carries with it similar associations of existence and covenant purpose. (The exposition of verse 14 above goes through these ideas; some technical information on Yahweh, not for general reading, is provided in [note 6](#).)

God's declaration to Israel of His eternal Name and memorial does not consist purely of the term *Yhwh*, however, for God introduces Himself here by a whole phrase. His Name and memorial is extensive, and runs as follows:

The LORD (*Yhwh*) God (*elohim*) of your fathers,
the God (*elohim*) of Abraham
the God (*elohim*) of Isaac
and the God (*elohim*) of Jacob.

To make the point absolutely clear, the whole sequence is reiterated in only slightly abbreviated form in the following verse (v. 16; *cf.* v. 6). God has now made this association between Himself and the faithful patriarchs three times in His dialogue with Moses. Given such an emphasis, it can be more readily appreciated why Jesus develops its implications for the doctrine of resurrection in the Gospels. Everybody likes to be associated with important people, for it gives them a feeling of their own importance, but this human tendency is subverted here as One so great stoops to associate with mankind. God chooses to identify Himself with humble yet faithful men and women.

Moses is instructed to gather the elders of Israel, and not only make known to them the revelation of God's Name and memorial, but also tell them of His plan to bring them out of Egypt with which it is bound up. Many of the details here (vv. 16,17) revisit points we have already discussed: God's careful observation and knowledge of the sufferings of His people, the great deliverance He will carry out, and the dispossessing of the good land to which He will bring them.

He predicts also that the emergence from the land of Egypt will not be an instantaneous affair. Pharaoh will not allow the people to leave—even though the first request is but for three days journey into the wilderness to carry out religious observances. Pharaoh's refusal will en-

able God to demonstrate unequivocally the great power at His disposal as He stretches out His hand and smites Egypt with His wonders. Only then will the people be released from Pharaoh's grasp, spoiling the Egyptians as they go. All of these details (vv. 18-22) will be covered in full as the events in question unfold later in Exodus 1-15. For now we merely note the remarkable control and foreknowledge of God as He presides over the whole affair.

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1. **v. 11 Who am I?** The issue of *identity* now gets into full swing. God has justified Who *He* is (the God of the fathers), and now Moses asks who *he* is (in relation to so great a God as this, yes, but also, in the weakness of his faith, in relation to the great and mighty Pharaoh). God answers Moses' question by providing more details of His own identity. Of course, Moses' response is absolutely right on one level; none of us are of any account of ourselves in the sight of God. What made Moses somebody, however, was the fact that God had chosen him, that God was sending him, and that God was promising to be with him.
 2. **v. 12 serve.** The word 'serve' here (the usual Hebrew word) seems to carry the connotation of *worship*, as it does in a few other passages. This might strike us as odd until we remember the same usage of the word 'serve' when we speak of a 'Sunday *service*'. It is no coincidence that the same word used here to describe the *service* of God in *worship* is also employed to describe the *bondage* or *slavery* of Israel to Pharaoh. The issue is this: whose slaves shall we be? Slaves of Pharaoh (we know what kind of service *that* is, and where it leads), or slaves (worshippers) of the Lord?
 3. **v. 14.** This is not the place for a treatise on the Hebrew tense system, but, to simplify things, Hebrew makes a distinction between complete and incomplete actions rather than between past, present and future in the way that English does. Here the incomplete or imperfect tense is used; in many passages this carries a present (and ongoing sense); in many others it carries a future sense in Hebrew *by the inflection of the verb alone*.
 4. **v. 14 I am/will be.** This is, I assume, the first person (I) form of which *Yahweh* is the third person (he), see [note 6](#) for a technical discussion. Thus, what is important in the Name Yahweh is the idea of *being*, not the precise conjugation or pronunciation of the word. God

is identifying Himself here as *the One Who is*. The point that I am making is that it is the concept of existence (whether in a present or future sense) behind the Name that is important, rather than a particular form of letters or pronunciation, since 3:14 and 3:15 use both first person and third person forms. It is the truth that the Name encapsulates, rather than a particular form of letters, which is important.

5. **v. 14 I AM hath sent me unto you.** This, of course, is not a proper sentence, which only serves to emphasise the point that God is making. One cannot say, in normal English, 'I am has sent me to you', just as we cannot say, 'I am has just gone out'. God is breaking the rules of grammar here, because the rules of grammar cannot contain Him.
6. **v. 15 LORD (Yahweh).** The term 'Yahweh' was not used in verse 14, but now occurs here in the adjacent verse 15. This note provides some technical linguistic discussion of the term, and is not intended for the casual reader. Unsurprisingly, there has been much etymological discussion of the word. Whereas the form *ehyeh* ('I am', v. 14) is the regular first person imperfect form of the verb 'to be', with *yhwh* things are not quite so simple. *Yhwh* does indeed look to be third person in form, but the regular third person imperfect of 'to be' in the Old Testament is *yihyeh* (notice that the third consonant is different). The conventional explanation is that the verb *hayah*, the conventional verb 'to be' in the Old Testament, has replaced an earlier verb *hawah*, from which *yhwh* is derived. But what form is *yhwh*? Some argue that it is causative in form (the *hiphil*), so that the verb would mean 'he causes to be' (compare the work of God in creation; "Let there be . . ." uses a related form of the verb). Alternatively, *yhwh* could be the regular imperfect form (the *qal*), the ancient equivalent of *yihyeh*. As is often the case in the Old Testament, the strict etymology of the term may not be the point at issue. It is rather the associations the text makes (such as

a play on words) that are important. Given the adjacent positioning of verse 14 and verse 15, it is probably best to understand *yhwh* as the regular imperfect (*qal* in sense, and perhaps in form), 'he is' or 'he will be'.

7. **v. 15 memorial.** This word is indeed associated with *memory*, and might be clumsily translated as 'way in which I shall be remembered and invoked', or 'form by which I shall be addressed'. The AV's 'memorial' in fact serves rather well. Some scholars have suggested that a modern-day equivalent of the term might be something like 'calling card'. The use of this term shows us that it is still highly appropriate to refer to God as the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as well as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
8. **v. 16 I have surely visited you.** Why past tense here? And why the emphasis (the common Hebrew emphatic construction: 'visiting, I have visited')? In the sense that God has *come down* and *seen* what has been going on? Or in the sense that the fact that He has determined to visit them is as good as if it had already happened?—the problem is as good as solved even though God is only just in the process of outlining the plans to His servant.
9. **v. 19 not by a mighty hand.** A rather odd verse in Hebrew as well as English. It may mean that, even when God exercises His power and might, His 'mighty hand', He knows that for a protracted period this will not be enough of itself to persuade Pharaoh to release the Israelites: 'he will not let you go, even with a mighty hand'. An extraordinary display of might (even by God's standards) will be required. Moses is being forewarned that the Exodus may take some time to accomplish.

An alternative, perhaps more attractive, is that the phrase "no, not by a mighty hand" is simply an idiom, which we might render into idiomatic English as something like, 'no way!', or, 'not by any stretch of the imagination', or even, 'never in a month of Sundays!'.