



Exposition

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The Exodus

A commentary on Exodus 1-15

D. Moses' commission – Exodus 3-4 (Part 1)

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 **sub-sections** 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

IN EXODUS 3 and 4 God reveals Himself to Moses in the burning bush and commissions him to return to Egypt to deliver the Israelites. After many excuses, Moses finally realises that there is no option but for him to do as God commands, and, armed with signs and the rod of God, he sets off back to the land from which he had come. His return journey is an eventful one, but Moses is finally reunited with his brother Aaron. The two of them set off to tell the elders of Israel of God's great purpose of salvation.

What are the themes which pervade these two chapters? The first is one which has been noted already: the theme of identity. Moses has undergone a transformation. He has become that which he would once have been taught to despise: a

shepherd, an abomination to the Egyptians. The heroic acts of deliverance into which he had rushed only one chapter previously are now tempered by a recognition of his own inadequacy. Now, offered a chance to deliver the Israelites from bondage, he responds, "Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh?" (3:11). There is no more fundamental question about identity than Moses' "Who am I?".

Or perhaps there is. God's revelation of Himself to Moses is all about Who *He* is—and it is from this place (rather than with ourselves) that all religious thinking must begin. The revelation of God and the covenant Name in these chapters is fundamental, not only to the Exodus narrative, but to the whole Bible. It is a revelation that is prompted by another question of Moses: "when . . . [the Israelites] shall say unto me, What is His name? what shall I say unto them?" (v. 13). It is a sad indictment that the descendants of Abraham should need to inquire about the identity of the God Who would deliver them.

The consideration of the Name and character of God is a study which, perhaps more than any other, is endlessly deep. The more one reflects upon Exodus 3 the more one sees. There will be opportunity only to hint at some of the directions in which further reflection might lead—but that is for next month, God willing.

There are other themes in these chapters as well. One is the developing tension between God and Moses, as Moses, increasingly inarticulate as he multiplies his excuses, is at last forced to align his own will with his Lord's. It is a struggle through which many a disciple will have passed. Here it is set out in words as God and Moses dialogue with one another—but often it is an internalised struggle that takes place in the

searchings of the heart, in the reading of God's Word, and in prayer.

The remarkable conversation between Moses and his Maker finally comes to an end, and Moses begs leave of Jethro and heads away. Little did he expect the encounter with the angel of the Lord that befell him (4:24-26), but then perhaps he did not expect to see his brother Aaron com-

ing to meet him either. Together they assemble the Israelite elders and deliver a message from God, which is received with such readiness that we might be inclined to feel suspicious about whether this enthusiasm will prove short-lived—as indeed it does in chapter 5.

In this article, however, we can go only as far as 3:10.

God reveals Himself to Moses

- 3:1 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.¹
- 3:2 And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush:² and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.
- 3:3 And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.
- 3:4 And when the LORD³ saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses.⁴ And he said, Here am I.⁵
- 3:5 And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes⁶ from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.
- 3:6 Moreover He said, I am⁷ the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face;⁸ for he was afraid to look upon God.
- 3:7 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;⁹ for I know their sorrows;
- 3:8 And I am come down¹⁰ 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;¹¹ unto the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites.¹²
- 3:9 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.¹³
- 3:10 Come now therefore, and I will send thee

unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth My people the children of Israel out of Egypt.

Comment

Was it just random wandering of Moses and his sheep which brought them to Horeb, or are we perhaps to read more into Moses' 'leading' of his flock to "the mountain of God"? Why, indeed, is that particular designation for Horeb adopted? Is it possible that there were already special associations with the worship of the One True God (that the site was a place where Jethro worshipped even?)—or is the text simply written with the hindsight that this was the place at which God would later give the Law? Either way (and there is no hard evidence), this was not the only time Moses would lead a flock to Horeb. Next time it would be God's flock rather than Jethro's that would be led to the mountain to receive His laws.

At Horeb the angel of the Lord appears to Moses in a burning bush which flames with fire but is not consumed. Why did God choose this particular mode of making Himself known? Fire is often associated with the glorious presence of God in Biblical accounts of theophany, and Deuteronomy 4:24 and Hebrews 12:29 inform us that "our God is a consuming fire". But the latter text presents us with a point of contrast rather than similarity, for here the bush is not consumed. Here are three suggestions as to how the symbolism might be interpreted; they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

1 Rather than depending on or feeding off something else, the fire of Exodus 3 is self-maintaining. Though there is wood for fuel, here is a fire which does not require it. This is a powerful metaphor for the eternity and self-sufficiency of God. We sing of this concept in the hymn, "All-powerful, self-existent God" (Hymn 42).

- 2 The flame of fire may be emblematic of the purity of God, which constitutes a threat to sinners (*cf.* Gen. 3:24). Fire is appropriate to the context of God's deliverance from Egypt, for it involves the outpouring of judgement upon Egypt. The plagues repeatedly show God making a distinction between the Egyptians and the Israelites—one has darkness, the other light; one is punished, the other is spared. Israel are spared the fires of God's judgement by His grace; they are not consumed. In fact, God's glory is revealed or made known in them. We can extend this idea if we think of wood as symbolic of human nature. Through God's grace and the work of the Lord Jesus it is possible for God's presence to blaze in the lives of men and women, and for them to thrive (rather than be consumed) by its heat.
- 3 Alternatively, the fire may represent the furnace of Egypt and its persecutions. Though the taskmasters' whip may burn, the Israel-

The latter three of these are familiar to a reader of the second half of the book of Genesis; God deigns to associate and identify Himself as the God of particular faithful human beings (who lived over 400 years before)—by any standards a remarkable thing. The first epithet is perhaps more surprising; God is also the God worshipped by Moses' own father (who evidently must also have been a faithful man). There is no sense that Moses might want to be different from His parents or that he might resent their religious associations and the upbringing he has received, as may be the case in our own day; instead, those who are brought up in the Truth may rejoice with Moses that God is the God of their father and mother also. In this passage God emphasises His continuity with the past. He has always been there and always will be. He has long been associated with faithful individuals.

What God goes on to say in verses 7-9 may best be illustrated diagrammatically to bring out the repetition and emphasis of the message:

I have surely seen the affliction of My people
 I . . . have heard their cry
 I know their sorrows (*three passive verbs of the senses*)

I am come down to deliver . . . and bring them up (*active verbs now*)
 Unto a land flowing with milk and honey
 Unto the place of the Canaanites . . .

The cry . . . is come unto Me
 I have . . . seen the oppression (*verbs of sensing again*)

ites will not be consumed by their ordeal. On the contrary, God will make Himself known in the very midst of that suffering and persecution. It is there, in the heart of tribulation, that the arm of the Lord will be revealed as He redeems His people. Support for this view can be found in the context of the passage, for the very declaration of God's Name which is to follow is bound up with His purpose to save His people from Egypt. We shall be developing such connections later.

Moses having been made suitably conscious of his own status in the presence of so great a God, the angel now begins to outline Who God is and what He will do. God is introduced with a fourfold designation:

I (am) the God of thy father
 the God of Abraham
 the God of Isaac
 the God of Jacob.

God's purpose to deliver and bring into the good land is bracketed by phrase after phrase which show God's awareness of the situation of His people and His concern for their predicament. This emphasis, already detected in chapter 2, tells an enormous amount about the character of God.

But it is not the end of the passage. Now, in verse 10, the bombshell is dropped as far as Moses is concerned: "Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth My people the children of Israel out of Egypt".

God does not work alone, and He begins the task of redemption by enlisting the help of Moses. Familiarity may cause us to lose the shock that Moses must have felt: "that *thou* mayest bring forth My people". Only one man has been called upon to accomplish a greater task of deliverance, and his work is prefigured here.

1. **v. 1 Horeb.** There seems to be a predilection in certain portions of Scripture to use the term 'Horeb', while others use 'Sinai'. Scholars of a certain bent can have a field day here as they posit different editorial sources, but there are plenty of other explanations. The term 'Horeb' is of Semitic origin, meaning 'desert' or 'desolation', and it is possible that it is the Semitic name for the non-Semitic 'Sinai' connected to the nearby desert of Sin. Others suggest that Horeb may be a peak or part of Sinai, still others that Sinai is a peak or part of Horeb!
2. **v. 2 a bush.** It seems likely the Hebrew term used here denotes a thorn bush (Deuteronomy 33:16 is the only other occurrence outside this passage). It is interesting to set this event against another revelation of God in which a thorn bush was involved: the crown of thorns which was thrust on the head of Jesus. There too the glory of God was seen to be manifested, there too the Name of God was perfectly declared. Though condemned to death by his people, the glory of God shone both in the suffering and beyond into the resurrection that would follow. The Lord Jesus was not consumed by death but rather rose again to triumph over it.
3. **v. 4 the LORD / the angel of the LORD (v. 2).** The identities of the Lord and His angel now coalesce. We have just been informed that it was the angel of the Lord that appeared in the bush, yet now it is the Lord Himself Who sees and Who confers with Moses. This is central to a proper understanding of God manifestation.
4. **v. 4 Moses, Moses.** On a number of significant occasions men and women are addressed by a double calling of their name. One such example is Abraham in Genesis 22:11.
5. **v. 4 Here am I.** This willing response to God is also uttered by Abraham, Jacob and Isaiah. Instructively, it is a form of expression also used by sons in response to fathers (Gen. 22:7; 37:13; compare also Samuel to Eli).
6. **v. 5 put off thy shoes.** Joshua is commanded to perform the same act in the presence of the captain of the Lord's host. The putting off of shoes may not only serve as a demonstration of humility and unworthiness—Joshua was already prostrate when commanded to loose his shoes (Josh. 5:14,15)—it may also be connected to the loosing of one's shoe to acknowledge a redeemer (Deut. 25:5-10; Ruth 4:8). If this is correct, Moses would be showing in action the truth that there would be no redemption without God, loosing his shoe in the presence of One Who would redeem.
7. **v. 6 I [am].** Note that the Divine Name is not used here. The verb 'to be' does not occur here in Hebrew, as is normal for a sentence in which one thing is identified with another (the Hebrew might be reflected as "I—the God of thy father"). It is the use and emphasis of the verb 'to be' later in the text (v. 14) rather than its absence here which is striking.
8. **v. 6 Moses hid his face.** There is a contrast here with Moses' later eagerness to behold the glory of God (Ex. 33-34). When he came down from the mountain on that occasion he had to hide his face from the children of Israel because it shone so brightly. He had evidently passed through a stage of spiritual development that they had not.
9. **v. 7 taskmasters.** This is the first occurrence of the Hebrew term used four times in chapter 5 (a different word was used at 1:11). It comes from a root meaning 'to oppress', 'afflict'.
10. **v. 8 I am come down.** God comes *down* to bring His people *up* out of Egypt. There are a number of places in the narratives of the Pentateuch in which God is spoken of as coming down. One of these is Exodus 19:20, in which God comes down on Mount Sinai (note the parallel location); others include Genesis 11:5 and Numbers 11:25; 12:5. One way of understanding this language is to think of the descent to earth of an angel who bears God's Name; another possibility in certain passages is to understand the language more metaphorically as a particular focusing of the attentions and activities of our heavenly Father.
11. **v. 8 a land flowing with milk and honey.** This is the first of twenty Biblical occurrences of the characteristic description of the Holy Land. Honey speaks of things sweet and rich, milk of nourishment and fruitfulness perhaps. God's good land overflows with them.
12. **v. 8.** Here six nations are mentioned. A seventh (the Gergashites) is found in Deuteronomy 7:1, and in Genesis 15:19-21 ten are listed. Israel were to dispossess the nations who had settled there, the consequences of which are still being witnessed in our own era.
13. **v. 9.** This verse, along with verse 7, emphasises what has already been said in 2:23-25, a section we termed a pivot in the book of Exodus. Phrases are piled together to emphasise the fact that God *does know*, that He *has seen*, that He *does care*, about what happens to His people.