

Exodus 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Exodus chapter 3 When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, Moses! Moses!

And he said, Here I am. Then he said, Do not come near. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. And he said, 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. Then the Lord said, The Lord of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppressed them.

Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt. But Moses said to God, Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?

He said, But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you. When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.

[1 : 58] Then Moses said to God, If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, The God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they ask me, What is his name? What shall I say to them?

God said to Moses, I am who I am. And he said, Say this to the people of Israel, I am has sent me to you. God also said to Moses, Say this to the people of Israel, The Lord, The God of your fathers, The God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt.

And I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction 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.

And 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. And now, please let us go a three days journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.

But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand, and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it.

[3 : 14] After that he will let you go. And I will give this people favour in the sight of the Egyptians. And when you go, you shall not go empty. But each woman shall ask of her neighbour, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewellery, and for clothing.

You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians. In Exodus chapter 3, we arrive at the event that propels the story that follows.

We have just been told that God has taken notice of Israel in their distress, which prepares us for the call of Moses in chapter 3. Moses drives the sheep into the wilderness from Midian, towards Horeb.

Horeb is typically, but not always, associated with Sinai. It's described as the mountain of God. But there's no evidence that Moses made such an association. And at this mountain he sees a theophany.

A theophany is an external manifestation of God's presence. Moses looks at the burning bush, obviously for long enough to notice that it is not being burnt up. God is present in the bush, in the form of the angel.

[4 : 19] In Deuteronomy chapter 33 verse 16, we possibly have another reference to this bush, where it says, Fire can also represent God's presence, particularly fire that does not need fuel.

It's a divine fire. It's burning, but it's not burning up the bush that is within. It might also suggest the state of Israel in Egypt. Israel is the bush, and God dwells in her.

And Israel is experiencing the fire of persecution in Egypt, but they are not being consumed, because God is in her and with her. Some have also suggested that the bush may pun on, or relate to the name for Sinai.

A peculiar detail of this event is the fact that God does not call to Moses until God sees that Moses has turned aside to look at the bush. Moses has clearly looked at the bush long enough to notice it's not being consumed, so he's been watching for a little while.

And then he goes to the bush to see more closely what's going on with it. And it's at that point when God sees that he has turned aside that God calls to him. This is a peculiar detail, and to me it suggests that it's connected with Moses' relationship with Israel.

[5 : 33] Israel is the bush. God is in the midst of Israel. Israel is being burnt within Egypt, but not consumed. And Moses has already turned aside to look at Israel, to see their state, to take interest in their condition, and to act on their behalf.

And in the same way he sees this bush that's being burned, but it's not being consumed. And as he goes to inspect it more closely, God speaks to him from the midst of the bush.

God's call to Moses is that typical form of address. Moses, Moses, the response being, here I am. God declares that the ground around the bush is holy on account of God's presence.

Moses must remove his shoes from his feet. This is a peculiar detail. We've seen holy times before in the Sabbath, but we've not seen places in quite the same way. There are some similar details in the story of Bethel in chapter 28 of Genesis, but this probably goes some way further.

God declares himself to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses' fathers. Now you can think of the significance of this to Moses.

[6 : 42] Moses has been raised as an Egyptian, and then after a brief abortive attempt to save his people, he has been driven out of Egypt and dwelt among the Midianites. And now God declares himself to be the God of Moses' father, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

While Moses may be cut off from his people, God is identifying him as one of the Hebrews at this point. God declares that he has heard their cry and has come down to act on their behalf, to deliver them from Egypt and to bring them into a spacious and fertile land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

The land of Canaan, to this point, seems to have been occupied by a number of different peoples, not just one great power. No single power ruled over the land, presumably simply on account of its internal variety of zones.

It's very difficult to control, and there were also other external forces making it difficult for any single party to gain dominance within the land. It would be remarkable that Israel would gain such dominance in time.

Moses is called to be a messenger, and this is the first prophetic call of its kind, a call to someone to act as an emissary of God to some people. Abraham acts as a prophet in certain ways.

[7 : 58] He's called out of the land of Ur of the Chaldees, but not in quite the same way with a prophetic call to minister to a people. Moses responds with uncertainty. Perhaps this is related to his humility that's described in Numbers chapter 12 verse 3, or perhaps it's just a lack of faith, his timidity and that getting in the way of accepting God's power to act in his situation and to use him.

To be fair to Moses, I can understand why he would think it was strange that he would be the one called for such a mission. He was not recognised by his own people, the Hebrews. He was an outcast prince who had fled the country 40 years previously as a result of killing someone.

And now he's going to go to Pharaoh to represent the Hebrews, to tell Pharaoh to let his people go. This seems to be a strange calling, one that maybe he's not the most apt to perform.

God responds by assuring him, I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you that I have sent you. When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.

The later part of this verse can be interpreted or translated in a number of different ways. Perhaps it's referring to the fact that God's presence with Moses will be the sign to him, that God has called him and sent him and equipped him for what he needs to do.

[9 : 18] Or perhaps the sign is going to worship God at the Mount Horeb. And as he arrives at Mount Horeb with the people, it will be a sign that God has indeed sent him, that that will demonstrate the truth of his mission.

Perhaps. One thing we should notice is that God's statement of assurance to Moses is something that's very similar to the name that he gives later.

I will be with you. I will be. This should be borne in mind as we proceed to the next section. Moses asks what name he shall say is the name of the God who has sent him.

And you can maybe understand Moses' position here. He's not one of the Israelites. How are they going to accept him? How will they know that he has indeed been sent by the God of their fathers?

There are many gods claiming to be the gods of people's fathers. How did he know that this was the God of the Hebrews? Perhaps then he's asking this name in part to prove himself to the people.

[10 : 18] It's also requested in the context of the foretold worship, that they will worship God on that mountain. To what name will they be calling out? And God gives his name maybe in that context.

Moses, however, as we go through the book of Exodus, seems to have an insistent desire to know God. We see this again in chapter 33. He asks God's name and he asks God's character.

And the answer that God gives here, I am who I am or I will be what I will be, could in some ways be seen as not an answer. God isn't defined by anything other than himself.

When we think about naming things, we're typically naming things as a means of getting control of them. When we give something a name, we feel we have some power over it, some understanding of it. And yet when God gives his name, God is the only one who can pronounce his name truly.

And when he pronounces his name, it's not a name that we can define relative to anything else. God is self-defining. And God's name is also something that speaks of his existence and perhaps also his self-determination.

[11 : 22] God will be what he will be. It's not for us to put God within our control. We cannot do that. A further thing to reflect on here might be the other attempts that we see in Scripture to ask God's name.

In the book of Judges, chapter 13, verses 6 and 17 to 19, the name of the angel of the Lord is asked by Manoah and his wife. And the response is, why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?

It's a name that is not truly given. But then Manoah offers sacrifices to the God who works wonders, playing upon the name. It seems here that maybe there's a giving of a name and a not giving of a name.

In Exodus 3, maybe it's the other way around. Maybe there is a giving of a name, but that name that is given is also, in some sense, not a name. God has a name, but the name itself describes something of God's ineffability, that God cannot be captured by any name, that no name actually is adequate to speak of God.

God exists beyond all names. And what names we have that we use to speak of God are all found to be lacking ultimately. God will be who he will be.

[12 : 35] This giving of the name of God also introduces a sharper form of monotheism. Some have seen within this name a gesturing towards God's self-existent being, that God exists in and of himself.

God does not have any creator above him that has formed him or fashioned him. God exists purely of himself. We should, however, I think, be wary of putting too much weight upon some of those explanations.

Expressions that are not too dissimilar are found within descriptions of pagan deities of that day. And so maybe we should not read too much into it. However, it does seem, as this term develops within scripture and its treatment and uses, that there is something greater about God being referred to.

There's a veiling, but also an unveiling, of God in his majesty that exists beyond human understanding. God's ineffability, God's self-existence and aseity, but also God's commitment to be with his people.

Remember, the first time we see I will be is in reference to God's promise, his assuring promise, to be with Moses as he goes to the Egyptians. And perhaps one of the things that the name of God describes here is his unchanging and unfaltering commitment to his people.

[13 : 48] The fact that he is the same yesterday, today and forever. He's the alpha and the omega. He's the beginning and the end. He's the one who does not change. And as a result, he will be with his people and assure his people of his presence, not just in their present sufferings, but in whatever sufferings they may face in the future.

The statement that follows that God has noticed and will deliver his people is one that draws our attention back to Genesis chapter 50 verse 24, the promise statement of Joseph.

And Joseph said to his brothers, I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. God has taken notice of his people and he will fulfill his promise.

I'm going to go three days journey into the wilderness. Perhaps this is to be outside the realm of sanctity of the Egyptians, but perhaps it also should make us think of Abraham going three days to the Mount of God where he prepares to sacrifice Isaac.

There is going to be other themes of sacrifice of the firstborn here and perhaps we should connect these two events. A question to consider.

[15:02] The chapter ends with the statement that the people will have favour in the sight of the Egyptians and when they go, they shall not go empty, but each woman shall ask of her neighbour and any woman who lives in her house for silver and gold jewellery and for clothing.

You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters, so you shall plunder the Egyptians. Where have we seen a promise of this earlier on in the book of Genesis?
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