

## CHAPTER 3

1 **A**nd Moses was herding the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, priest  
2 of Midian, and he drove the flock into the wilderness and came to  
the mountain of God, to Horeb. And the LORD's messenger  
appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of the bush, and he  
saw, and look, the bush was burning with fire and the bush was not

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1. *Jethro*. In the previous episode he was Reuel. Modern critics generally attribute the difference in names to different literary sources.

*into the wilderness*. The Hebrew preposition *'aḥar* is odd. Because it usually means “behind,” the King James Version bizarrely translated this phrase as “the back side of the desert.” The claim that here it means “to the west” is rather strained. Perhaps it may suggest something like “deep into.”

*Horeb*. This appears to be a synonym for Sinai—it is the name used in the E document, whereas Sinai is J's term. The name is transparently derived from a root signifying dryness and so means something like “Parched Mountain.” Abraham ibn Ezra acutely notes that this parched desert location is a full three days' journey (verse 18) from the Nile, the great source of water. That contrast points to a spatial-thematic antithesis: Moses, the man associated with water from infancy on, now encounters the God of all creation in the dry desert, and in flame.

2. *the LORD's messenger*. In what follows, it is God Himself reported as speaking to Moses from the burning bush. Either God first assigns a divine emissary to initiate the pyrotechnic display that will get Moses's attention, or the piety of early scribal tradition introduced an intermediary into the original text in order to avoid the uncomfortable image of the LORD's revealing Himself in a lowly bush.

*the bush*. The Hebrew *seneh*, a relatively rare word, intimates Horeb's other name, Sinai, by way of a pun. Some have conjectured that the name Sinai is actually derived from *Seneh*. In the ancient Near East, deities were often asso-

consumed. And Moses thought, “Let me, pray, turn aside that I may see 3  
 this great sight, why the bush does not burn up.” And the LORD saw 4  
 that he had turned aside to see, and God called to him from the midst  
 of the bush and said, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” And 5  
 He said, “Come no closer here. Take off your sandals from your feet,  
 for the place you are standing on is holy ground.” And He said, “I am 6  
 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 upon  
 God. And the LORD said, “I indeed have seen the abuse of My people 7  
 that is in Egypt, and its outcry because of its taskmasters. I have heard,

ciated with sacred trees, but not with bushes. Rashi construes this epiphany in the humble bush as an expression of God’s identification with the abasement of Israel enslaved.

*and the bush was not consumed.* The epiphanies to the patriarchs did not involve supernatural events, but Moses is destined to lead Israel out of slavery through great signs and wonders. If one recalls the later image in Jeremiah of God’s word as fire in the bones of the prophet (chapter 20), one might see in the divine fire that does not consume the bush a reassuring portent for Moses of the daunting prophetic role to which he is called, for the bush invested with divinity is not destroyed. Rashi makes a similar inference here. In much of the Exodus story, one senses strong symbolic implications in the concrete images, but the symbolism is never explicit.

3. *Let me . . . turn aside that I may see.* Moses is initially drawn by curiosity about the anomalous sight, scarcely imagining what he is getting into.

6. *Moses hid his face.* The gesture reflects the reiterated belief of biblical figures that man cannot look on God’s face and live. What should be noted is how God’s manifestation has shifted from Genesis. God spoke to Abraham face to face in implicitly human form. Here He speaks from fire, and even that Moses is afraid to look on.

7. *I . . . have seen . . . I have heard, for I know its pain.* The three verbs in this sequence pick up three of the four highlighted verbs used at the end of the previous chapter. As Rashi notes, the objectless “knew” of 2:25 here is given its object—pain.

8 for I know its pain. And I have come down to rescue it from the hand of Egypt and to bring it up from that land to a goodly and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and  
9 the Jebusite. And now, look, the outcry of the Israelites has come to Me and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians  
10 oppress them. And now, go that I may send you to Pharaoh, and bring  
11 My people the Israelites out of Egypt.” And Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring out the  
12 Israelites from Egypt?” And He said, “For I will be with you. And this is the sign for you that I Myself have sent you. When you bring the people out from Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

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8. *I have come down to rescue . . . to bring it up.* Ibn Ezra neatly observes that the coming down is directly followed by the antithetical bringing up.

*flowing with milk and honey.* The honey in question is probably not bee's honey, for apiculture was not practiced in this early period, but rather a sweet syrup extracted from dates. The milk would most likely have been goat's milk and not cow's milk. In any case, these two synecdoches for agriculture and animal husbandry respectively become a fixed epithet for the bounty of the promised land.

*the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite . . . and the Jebusite.* This imposing and repeated list of the peoples of the land of Canaan serves as a notice that this is far from an uninhabited country, that it contains resident peoples who will need to be confronted militarily.

11. *Who am I.* Moses's profession of unworthiness is the first instance of a recurring scene in which the future prophet responds to the divine call by an initial unwillingness to undertake the mission (compare Isaiah 6 and Jeremiah 1). Moses has particular cause to feel unworthy. Having been reared as an Egyptian prince, he has become an outlaw, an exile, and a simple shepherd. His one intervention, moreover, with his Hebrew brothers elicited only a resentful denunciation of him as a murderer.

12. *For I will be with you. And this is the sign.* Rashi proposes that God “answered the first question first and the second question second.” That is, to the question “Who am I?”, God responds that He will be with Moses, so Moses will have divine authority invested in him. To the question about bringing out the Israelites from Egypt, God responds that the fire in the bush is the concrete token of the miraculous power Moses will exert as God's agent in res-

And Moses said to God, “Look, when I come to the Israelites and say 13  
to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they say  
to me, ‘What is His name?’, what shall I say to them?” And God said to 14  
Moses, “*’Ehyeh-’Asher-’Ehyeh*, I-Will-Be-Who-I-Will-Be.” And He said,  
“Thus shall you say to the Israelites, ‘*’Ehyeh* has sent me to you.’”

cuing his people. It should be observed, however, that the reference of “this is the sign” is quite ambiguous, and perhaps was intended to be so. It could refer simply to the previous clause: “I will be with you” and *that* will be the sign you require. It could refer to the very burning bush out of which God speaks, as Rashi infers. Or, it could refer to the following clause: the sign that it is God Who has sent Moses will be realized when Moses succeeds in the extraordinary undertaking of bringing the Hebrews out of Egypt and leads them all the way to the mountain on which he now stands.

13. *What is His name?* The name of course implies identity, distinctive essence, and in the case of someone giving orders, official authorization (the emissary can claim to be carrying out his mission in the name of So-and-so).

14. *’Ehyeh-’Asher-’Ehyeh*. God’s response perhaps gives Moses more than he bargained for—not just an identifying divine name (the implication of offering one such name might be that there are other divinities) but an ontological divine mystery of the most daunting character. Rivers of ink have since flowed in theological reflection on and philological analysis of this name. The following brief remarks will be confined to the latter consideration, which in any case must provide the grounding for the former. “I-Will-Be-Who-I-Will-Be” is the most plausible construction of the Hebrew, though the middle word, *’asher*, could easily mean “what” rather than “who,” and the common rendering of “I-Am-That-I-Am” cannot be excluded. (“Will” is used here rather than “shall” because the Hebrew sounds like an affirmation with emphasis, not just a declaration.) Since the tense system of biblical Hebrew by no means corresponds to that of modern English, it is also perfectly possible to construe this as “I Am He Who Endures.” The strong consensus of biblical scholarship is that the original pronunciation of the name YHWH that God goes on to use in verse 15 was “Yahweh.” There are several good arguments for that conclusion. There is an independent name for the deity, Yah, which also appears as a suffix to proper names, and that designation could very well be a shortened form of this name. Greek transcriptions reflect a pronunciation close to “Yahweh.” In that form, the name would be the causative or *hiph’il* form of the verb “to be” and thus would have the theologically attractive sense of “He Who Brings Things into Being.” All this is plausible, but it is worth registering at



- 15 And God said further to Moses, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites: 'The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, sent me to you.

That is My name forever  
and thus am I invoked in all ages.'

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least a note of doubt about the form of the divine name. Here God instructs Moses to tell Israel 'Ehyeh, "I-Will-Be," has sent him. The deity, if the Masoretic vocalization is to be trusted, refers to Himself not with a causative but with the *qal* ("simple") conjugation. This could conceivably imply that others refer to him in the *qal* third person as *Yihyeh*, "He-Will-Be." (The medial *y* sound in this conjugated form would have had considerable phonetic interchange with the *w* consonant in YHWH.) This in turn would make the name fit a common pattern for male names in the third-person masculine singular, *qal* conjugation, imperfective form: *Yitshaq* (Isaac), "he will laugh"; *Ya'aqov* (Jacob), "he will protect," or "he will grab the heel"; *Yiftah* (Jephthah), "he will open"; and many others. If this were the case, then the name "Yah" could have been assimilated to YHWH by folk etymology and then perhaps even affected its pronunciation. Whether the pronunciation of this name later in the Hellenistic period, by then restricted to the high priest on the Day of Atonement, Yahweh, as indicated in Greek transcriptions, reflects its original sound is at least open to question. The logic of *Yihyeh* as the essential divine name would be that whereas particular actions may be attributed to humans through the verbal names chosen for them, to God alone belongs unlimited, unconditional being. This conjecture, inspired by the use here by God of the *qal* conjugation rather than the causative conjugation in naming Himself, is far from certain, but it might introduce at least some margin of doubt about the consensus opinion regarding the divine name.

15. *and thus am I invoked.* The Hebrew of this brief poetic inset preserves strict grammatical-syntactical parallelism with the preceding verset: "and that is my appellation in all ages," but English synonyms for "name" (Hebrew *zekher*), such as "appellation" and "designation," are too ponderously polysyllabic for the little poem.

Go and gather the elders of Israel and say to them, “The LORD God of 16  
your fathers has appeared to me, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and  
Jacob, saying, “I have surely marked what is done to you in Egypt, and 17  
I have said, I will bring you up from the abuse of Egypt to the land of  
the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and  
the Hivite and the Jebusite, to a land flowing with milk and honey.”  
And they will heed your voice, and you shall come, you and the elders 18  
of Israel, to the king of Egypt, and together you shall say to him: “The  
LORD, God of the Hebrews, happened upon us, and so, let us go, pray,  
three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the  
LORD our God.’ And I on My part know that the king of Egypt will not 19  
let you go except through a strong hand. And I will send out My hand 20  
and strike Egypt with all My wonders that I shall do in his midst, and  
afterward will he send you out. And I will grant this people favor in 21  
the eyes of Egypt, and so when you go, you will not go empty-handed.

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18. *they will heed your voice.* God is responding to Moses’s understandable concern that the Hebrews will simply dismiss him with his crazy-sounding claims.

*and together you shall say.* “Together” has been added to make clear what is evident in the Hebrew through the plural form of “say,” that the elders will be speaking together with Moses to Pharaoh.

*happened.* They use a verb that elsewhere suggests chance encounter, rather than the more definite “appeared.” This might imply that they want to intimate to Pharaoh that they did not seek this meeting with the divinity.

*let us go . . . three days’ journey.* They do not say that they intend to return, though these words bear the obvious implication that they are requesting only a furlough (weeklong furloughs were actually sometimes extended to Egyptian slaves). To ask for absolute manumission would have been outrageous.

20. *send out My hand.* A more idiomatic rendering would be “stretch out,” but it is important to preserve the symmetry of God’s sending at the beginning of the verse and Pharaoh’s sending at the end.

- 22 But each woman will ask of her neighbor and of the sojourner in her house ornaments of silver and ornaments of gold and robes, and you shall put them on your sons and on your daughters and you shall despoil Egypt."

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22. *each woman will ask of her neighbor and of the sojourner.* Both "neighbor" and "sojourner" are feminine nouns. The verse reflects a frequent social phenomenon—also registered in the rabbinic literature of Late Antiquity—in which women constitute the porous boundary between adjacent ethnic communities: borrowers of the proverbial cup of sugar, sharers of gossip and women's lore. It must be said that this situation, in which Egyptian women are lodgers in Israelite houses, does not jibe with the Plagues narrative, in which the Israelites live in a segregated region. Some readers have felt discomfort at the act of exploitation recorded here. The most common line of defense is that this is restitution for the unpaid labor exacted from the Hebrew slaves. In any case, it seems wise not to view the story in terms of intergroup ethics. From beginning to end, it is a tale of Israelite triumphalism. The denizens of the simple farms and the relatively crude towns of Judea would have known about imperial Egypt's fabulous luxuries, its exquisite jewelry, and the affluent among them would have enjoyed imported Egyptian linens and papyrus. It is easy to imagine how this tale of despoiling or stripping bare Egypt would have given pleasure to its early audiences. In each of the three sister-wife stories in Genesis that adumbrate the Exodus narrative, the patriarch and his wife depart loaded with gifts: the presence of that motif suggests that the despoiling of Egypt was an essential part of the story of liberation from bondage in the early national traditions.