

EXODUS

From Slavery to Service

4. The Call of Moses

**Mission in the Name of the
LORD (Exodus 3:1—4:31)**

References

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Exodus 3:1-6

Curiosity and Call

Exodus 3:1-6. Curiosity and Call

- Mount Horeb
 - Another name for Mount Sinai
 - Horeb = wasteland
 - a nonreligious setting for the hearing for the word (not the last time that God will so chose)
- Moses
 - On a routine journey without religious significance

Exodus 3:1-6. Curiosity and Call

- The “Burning Bush”
 - A *Theophany* = An appearance of God
 - Word for bush (*seneh*) similar to Sinai
 - A messenger or angel of God appears *in* the flame
 - Moses looks at the bush, burning but not being consumed, out of *curiosity*
 - God uses human curiosity for God’s own purposes. Human curiosity can lead to *call*

Exodus 3:1-6. Curiosity and Call

- God speaks from the bush
 - Is the messenger / angel God?
- Divine appearance in a fire anticipates:
 - God's appearance to Moses "in fire" in Sinai (Exodus 19:18; Deut. 4:12)
 - God leading the people in the wilderness *in* a pillar of fire (Exodus 13:21, Num. 14:14, Deut. 1:33)
- Characteristic of theophanies: God uses nature to "clothe" an event that is not natural
 - Theophany thus combines holiness, passion, mystery (fire) with down-to-earthness (bush)
 - Form of "divine condescension:" God makes his presence lowly to enter into conversation with us

Exodus 3:1-6. Curiosity and Call

- Holy Ground
 - Ground becomes *holy* because of God's appearance. That is, God's presence and purpose for the ground *sanctifies* it
 - "God draws a particular plot of ground, an aspect of the created order, into a new sphere of relationship; nature too is affected by and serves as an instrument for the divine presence and purpose." (Fretheim)
 - Moses asked to follow ancient custom of respect and remove shoes (also see Josh 5:13-15)

Exodus 3:1-6. Curiosity and Call

- Moses
 - Becomes afraid to look at the Bush *after* God speaks – he is afraid to look at God!
- God’s self-identification to Moses: “I am the God of *your* father”
 - Ties faith into Moses personal family
 - Shows the continuity *in* God between Moses and his ancestor

Exodus 3:7-12

The Sending of Moses

Exodus 3:7-12. The Sending of Moses

- “I have seen... I have heard... I have known... I have come down”
 - God is deeply *attentive to* (seen, heard), *engaged in* (known) and *present for* (come down) the afflictions of God’s people
 - Fretheim: “God does not look at the suffering from the outside as through a window, God knows it from the inside... entering fully into the oppressive situation and making it God’s own. For God to know suffering is... to allow suffering to enter deeply into the divine being.”

Exodus 3:7-12. The Sending of Moses

- Salvation from the suffering:
 - Involves both:
 - being removed from the oppression
 - “the Gift of a new land, a new place for life and blessing. *God’s redemptive acts lead to a new creation...*” (Fretheim)
 - That is, salvation involves deliverance *from* something (a flawed and oppressive world), *to* something (a new creation for life and blessing)

Exodus 3:7-12. The Sending of Moses

- “So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” (verse 10)
 - Likely stunned Moses. “In one brief utterance, the grand intention of God has become a specific human responsibility, human obligation, and human vocation. It is Moses who will do what Yahweh said, and Moses who will run the risks...” (Brueggemann)
 - God has chosen to act in the world in and through human beings. “God *needs* Moses as an instrument in and through whom to work” (Fretheim)

Exodus 3:7-12. The Sending of Moses

- Dialogue Between God and Moses

Objections of Moses

- **3:11:** Unworthy of task
- **3:13:** Needs more information about God
- **4:1:** People will not listen or believe him
- **4:10:** He is incompetent
- **4:13:** Just send someone else

God's Responses

- **3:12:** God *will be with* him
- **3:14-22:** God provides name: *I will be whom I will be*
- **4:2-9:** God will provide signs
- **4:12:** God *will be with* Moses' mouth
- **4:14-16:** God *will be with* Moses' mouth and Aaron's

Exodus 3:7-12. The Sending of Moses

- Moses' First Objection. "Who am I to bring Israel out of Egypt?"
 - "Here am I" (3:4) now "Who am I?" Initial readiness has turned into reluctance once the mission has been explained
 - Similar objection by Gideon (Judges 6:15)
 - God's answer is the assurance of God's presence in all that Moses undertakes

Exodus 3:7-12. The Sending of Moses

- The Sign
 - Puzzling: how can a future event (Israel worshipping on Mt. Sinai) provide Moses assurance in the present

Exodus 3:13-22

What's in a Name?

Exodus 3:13-22. What's in a Name?

- Moses' Second Objection:
 - Unambiguous warrant required for such a dangerous mission. Israelites will want to know the Name of the God who asks it to establish Moses' credentials
 - God responds with the revelation of God's name: Moses' question has led to fuller divine revelation
 - God reveals not just through divine initiative, but also in response to human questioning

Exodus 3:13-22. What's in a Name?

- The Name of God *ehyeh aser ehyeh*
 - Differing Translations:
 - I am who I am
 - I will be what (who) I will be
 - I will cause to be what I will cause to be
 - I will be who I am / I am who I will be
 - Bespeaks power, fidelity, presence (Brueggemann)
 - I will be who I am / I am who I will be (Fretheim)
 - God will be faithfully God for eternity. “God will be God with and for the people at all times and places”

Exodus 3:13-22. What's in a Name?

- **Yahweh:** summary of the longer ancestral formation (“I AM has sent me to you.”)
 - Derives from form of verb “to be” (*haya*)
 - Later Jewish practice (post Old Testament) was to substitute name **Adonai** (LORD) whenever **Yahweh** encountered in text, rather than say the sacred name of God
 - NRSV and RSV: translate with capitalized word “LORD”
- **Jehovah:** a mistranslation by medieval Christian scholars; does not represent any known pronunciation of the name of God

Exodus 3:13-22. What's in a Name?

- Significance of Naming
 - A name opens up the possibility for, and implies a desire for, a more intimate relationship
 - God has chosen to join the historical community of God's people
 - A name entails vulnerability
 - God's name can be abused as well as honored

Exodus 3:13-22. What's in a Name?

- Three step strategy to depart for Egypt (vv. 16-22)
 - 1. Moses recruits and mobilizes the Elders (the heads of important families and clans) of Israel (vv. 16-18a)
 - 2. Moses and Elders confront Pharaoh (vv. 18b-19)
 - 3. God's mighty hand works against the empire (v. 20)

Exodus 3:13-22. What's in a Name?

- Three day journey into the wilderness
 - Ploy to get out of Egypt
 - Initial negotiating stance
 - Act of worship to a counter-God (God of the Hebrews) intended to delegitimize the religious claims of the empire

Exodus 4:1-9

Moses and Magic

Exodus 4:1-9. Moses and Magic

- Moses' Third Objection: people may not believe or listen
 - Trustworthiness of a leader is critical for any community
 - Striking that Moses raises his objection despite God's prediction in 3:18 "They will listen to your voice..."
 - God cannot fully predict human behavior
 - God takes question seriously, and offers additional resources "that they may believe" (4:5)

Exodus 4:1-9. Moses and Magic

- The Nature of God's Relationship with Moses
 - “God does not adopt a take it or leave it attitude toward what God has said. God is open to disagreement, argument, and even challenge on Moses' part. ... It is more than simply divine patience; it is an openness to consider seriously what the human partner has to say. God's way into the future is thus not dictated solely by the divine word and will. God will take into account the perspective of the human party.” (Fretheim)

Exodus 4:1-9. Moses and Magic

- The Signs
 - Egyptian literature abounds with tales of magicians and their powers. Magicians were important religious functionaries
 - God again is seen acting in and through the particular reality God's people are facing
 - There is no certainty that the signs will lead to belief: “*if they do not believe or heed, ... they may... ”*”

Exodus 4:10-17

Moses and His Mouth

Exodus 4:10-17. Moses and His Mouth

- Moses' Fourth Objection: ineloquence, “slow of speech and tongue”
 - Likely a speech impediment, given focus on physical disabilities in verse 11
 - God's response:
 - 1. Human mouth and other senses are divine creations
 - 2. God will be with him and teach him. That is, God will work in and through Moses' speech impediment, and achieve things in spite of the impediment

Exodus 4:10-17. Moses and His Mouth

- God's Calling to Ministry
 - God calls imperfect human beings
 - God works in and through imperfect beings, using the gifts that they been given
 - God has a way of choosing what is weak in the world to shame the strong (1 Cor. 1:26-29)
- Divine Agency
 - While God is indeed the ultimate cause of all human mouths and senses, we can still say non-divine causes may also have played a role

Exodus 4:10-17. Moses and His Mouth

- Moses' Fifth "Objection:" Please send someone else
 - God has listened and responded to all of Moses' concerns, trying to work with them; but in the end Moses simply refuses
 - God's response now is anger; God must now resort to "plan B"
 - Plan B: Aaron can speak on behalf of Moses
 - God clearly would have preferred "plan A;" but God works with what is possible
 - Ultimately, "plan B" is an interim measure. Moses does eventually speak on his own, and Aaron fades into the background.

Exodus 4:10-17. Moses and His Mouth

- God works in and through human beings
 - “God always aims for the best in every situation, but God must often work with options that are less than the best... God often has to accept what people do with the powers they have been given, even to resist God’s efforts to persuade” (Fretheim)

Exodus 4:10-17. Moses and His Mouth

- Nature of the relationship between Moses and Aaron
 - Moses will remain the primary recipient of God's word. Moses will pass on what God tells him to Aaron
 - “he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him” (NRSV)
 - Prophet = “mouth of God” (Jer. 15:19). Aaron will be the “prophet” of Moses

Exodus 4:10-17. Moses and His Mouth

- The Word of God comes through human mouths
 - There is no pure, unmediated word of God
 - “Moses / Aaron are messengers of that word, but they are no more divine typewriters than are the prophets... One cannot finally sort out the divine word from the human word; they are bound up together in every reported word of God.” (Fretheim)

Exodus 4:18-31

God Seeks to Kill Moses

Exodus 4:18-31. God Seeks to Kill Moses

- Dialogue between God and Moses has ended. Moses still has not explicitly agreed
 - Last speech was God's, spoken in anger
- Moses and Family Head Back to Egypt
 - Father-in-law Jethro told reason is to check if kindred are still alive
 - God seconds decision; instructs Moses on performing “wonders” before Pharaoh and on what to say

Exodus 4:18-31. God Seeks to Kill Moses

- God: “Israel is my firstborn child”
 - Israel, previously “God’s people, ” has been adopted by God
 - Parental image of God, developed later by the Prophets (Jer. 3:19, 31:9, 29; Hos. 11:1-9)
 - “God as parent enters deeply into the suffering of the children and claims them for life and freedom” (Fretheim)
 - God’s statement warning Pharaoh of the loss of his firstborn a *quid pro quo*: Your firstborn for my firstborn

Exodus 4:18-31. God Seeks to Kill Moses

- “The LORD met him and tried to kill him” (Fretheim)
 - Unclear who God tries to kill: Moses (majority view), or Moses’ son (presumably first born)
 - Echoes 2:15 where Pharaoh sought to kill Moses
 - Parallel to Genesis 32, Jacob’s wrestling with God
 - Suggests there is an unresolved matter between God and Moses; narrator is silent over God’s motivations

Exodus 4:18-31. God Seeks to Kill Moses

- God “tries” to kill
 - “tries:” softens the action: God seeks to kill, but does not actually kill. God leaves room for mediation; even invites it
 - Zipporah does not directly thwart killing, but “moves into the temporal spaces allowed by God’s seeking.” Her actions provide the *occasion* for the divine action to “let him alone”
- Foreshadowing of the Passover Blood
 - Touching of blood to Moses’ / his sons feet foreshadows the Passover blood put on the doorposts

Exodus 4:18-31. God Seeks to Kill Moses

- “The LORD met him and tried to kill him” (Brueggemann)
 - “among the most enigmatic verses in the entire book of Exodus”
 - The statement of God’s intention to kill is stark and unqualified
 - “The best we can do is let the narrative witness to the deep, untamed holiness of God... There is no hint that God is testing or measuring Moses, but only that Yahweh operates in inexplicable, undisciplined freedom.”

Exodus 4:18-31. God Seeks to Kill Moses

- Zipporah perhaps enacts an old, primitive rite requiring blood and connection with sexual organs
 - “feet” may be euphemism for genitals
 - Narrative often used conventionally as an explanation for circumcision
 - For safety is found in such a primitive act is perplexing (as is holiness)

Exodus 4:18-31. God Seeks to Kill Moses

- Overarching context of this narrative
 - “... all parties, Israelite as well as Egyptian, must live in the presence of unleashed, unlimited holiness. There are provisional strategies for safety in the face of holiness, but none that will finally tame this dangerous God”
- Aaron
 - Recruited by God (God’ request added to Aaron’s own decision to meet Moses, 4:14)
 - Aaron meets Moses on Mount Sinai/Horeb (“the mountain of God”)
 - Aaron both speaks *and* enacts signs for Moses

Exodus 4:18-31. God Seeks to Kill Moses

- Moses
 - It is finally clear he has accepted God's commission
- The People and Elders hear and believe
 - And they worship, upon hearing “that the LORD had given heed to the Israelites and that he had seen their misery”