



Moses and the Burning Bush

Background notes



God's Attention Grabber Exodus 3:1-4

As any snake handler will tell you, the way to pick up a snake is by the back of the neck, so that it can't turn and bite. Even a bite from a non-poisonous snake can hurt and many in the Middle East are highly dangerous. Moses instinctively kept a good distance from snakes.

Not that Moses had been expecting to pick up a snake that day, but then he hadn't been expecting to see a strange fire in a bush and to hear his name being called from within it.

Moses and the burning bush is a famous story, but it is something of a misnomer because the bush was not actually burning. With this extraordinary attention grabber, God initiated a long dialogue with his chosen leader of Israel. After 40 years of letting him be a humble shepherd in the wilderness of Midian, God wanted to have a serious conversation with Moses. He sometimes used dreams, visions, or visits from angels, but he likes to vary his approach and this strange fiery bush certainly caught Moses' attention.

Some believe this was a 'theophany', an appearance of God showing himself in an approachable form. It was not unusual for God to appear in the form of fire. When Moses realized that God was speaking, he instinctively hid his face.

The bush – was it:

- a) An angel; b) Supernatural flames and the voice of God; c) An appearance of God himself; d) A gas plant called Fraxinella (see end)

Moses' Reaction Exodus 3:2-6

- **Saw:** The bush – the attention grabber. God is seeking Moses, not the other way around.
- **Paused:** Moses paused to notice and examine it further.
- **Heard:** God spoke Moses' name, then identified himself and told him to remove his shoes out of respect. Sometimes God gets our attention and then says "Stop, we need to sort a few things out first".
- **Responded:** When Moses realized he was in the presence of God, his instinct was to hide his face. At school he would have been taught that only priests could look at a god and that any place where a god was believed to be present was holy. Or maybe he instinctively hid his face as he realised that he was in the presence of the Almighty God.

Hidden gods: The Egyptians kept statues of their deities in sealed cabinets. Only the high priest could open the cabinet and take it out. It would be taken on a boat on religious festival days but no one except the priests could look at it or they believed that to look at it would hurt them. Amun the god of Thebes was 'the Hidden One'. Blended with Ra the sun god he was considered the most powerful god and unknowable to humans and even to other gods.

- What sort of things grab your attention?
- Do you notice easily when God is speaking to you or does he have to persist?

The Conversation Exodus 3:7-10

God said:

I have seen the misery

I have heard them crying out

I am concerned about their suffering

I have come down to rescue them.

So far, so good, but then he followed it with, “It’s time for you to go back: I’m sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the People of Israel, out of Egypt.” MSG

- Are you struggling with a problem or difficult situation? God has seen.
- Have you asked him for help? God has heard.
- You may feel he has forgotten you, but he is concerned, and he will come to help.

A plaster for every sore! Exodus 3:11 – 4:18

What are you like at making up excuses?

My friend’s dad used to say that she had a ‘plaster for every sore’, meaning that she had a different excuse for any and every situation. The best one I ever heard, was from a girl who didn’t want to wash the dishes so she said, “I can’t find the water”. We still tease her about it!

- What was God telling Moses to do?
- How many excuses does Moses come up with in this story?

God: “It’s time for you to go back: I’m sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the People of Israel, out of Egypt.” MSG

1. Moses: Why me?

God: Promised help and success Exodus 3:12

2. Moses: But if... asks God’s name

God: Gives an all-embracing name and the rest of his instructions, also telling him exactly what will and will not happen. Exodus 3:14-22

3. Moses: What if... they don’t believe me?

God: Gave him 3 miraculous signs to perform. Exodus 4:1-9

4. Moses: I won’t know what to say.

God: I will tell you what to say

5. Moses: Please no! Send someone else.

God: promised that his brother Aaron would help him. Exodus 4:10-17

- What do you think of Moses excuses?
 - Did he really not want to do it?
 - Was he totally incapable?
 - Had he lost his confidence?
- Do you think that deep down Moses still wished to help his people? Had he ruled himself out due to his huge mistake years earlier?
- I am a nobody. Do you ever feel like that?

God's Responses

1. Moses: Why me? Exodus 3:6 & 12

God: Promised help and success Exodus 3:12

And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."

I was puzzled by how a sign could be something in the future rather than the present. Then I realised that God was saying something like "Look it really is ME, the same God who worked a miracle in Abraham's life and I am promising you SUCCESS in this assignment."

2. Moses: But if the people ask for your Name... Exodus 3:14-22

God: Gives an all-embracing name and the rest of his instructions, also telling him exactly what will and will not happen. Exodus 3:14-22

Why did God give his name as *'I AM WHO I AM'*, or rather *'I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE'*?

Names held a different significance than today and were thought to sum up a person's character. They believed it could enable a person to have some kind of control over a god. Our God is too great to be described in just one word. When Samson's parents asked his name centuries later, he replied 'It is beyond understanding'¹. The idea of a mysterious God was something that Moses understood. It is as though God is saying. "Don't try to pin me down into any of your 'categories'". As it is often said – if we understood God, he wouldn't be God.

Egypt's most powerful deity was Amun-Ra², a merger of Ra the sun god and the god of Thebes whose name Amun meant 'The Hidden One'. He was considered to be unknowable to both humans and other gods.

The three-day journey to offer sacrifices:

"...go to the king of Egypt and tell him, 'The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. So please let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord, our God.'

How long is your week? 7 days? Not in ancient Egypt. There it was 10 days long, but they often had a 3 day 'weekend'. Work rotas from workman's villages show people taking time off work to 'offer to their god'. The request to take a 3-day journey to offer to their God was not unusual in Egyptian culture especially as there were many gods both national and local and it was considered that without the blessing of the gods, they could not prosper. There could be different rules for slaves however, who may not have been allowed time off at all.

3. The miraculous signs and symbolism:

Sign: Staff into snake

Egypt has at least 11 types of venomous snake, the most notable being the cobra, which was considered to offer divine protection to the king, whose crown included the image of a cobra. The only safe way to handle one is to use a stick to immobilize the head, which triggers a panic response in the snake, preventing it from striking. No one in their right mind

¹ Judges 13:18

² Or Amun-Re

would pick up a snake by its tail. It is amazing that Moses was brave enough to follow God's command to do just that! This was his first step of faith in what was to be a long journey.

Snakes and staffs both had great symbolic meaning in Ancient Egypt's mysterious culture. Heka, the god of magic, is sometimes depicted holding a snake as a staff. Other gods and magicians were often drawn holding staffs and wands that were shaped like serpents. Magic wands shaped as snakes and made of bronze or even gold, have been found.

God knows exactly how to make his messages culturally relevant. He empowered Moses to use his shepherd's staff to great effect, as a sign and wonder, that he represented the Most High God. Although Pharaoh refused to be impressed, it certainly spoke to many other people, especially the Israelites and the court magicians.

Sign: Moses hand turned white with a fungus

Fungal infections can still be a problem today, and were even more so in ancient times. The Israelites were given strict isolation procedures to contain them. Leviticus 13:47-59; 14:34-37 In this account, the word used is 'Tzara'at', a white fungus that also appears on fabric and buildings, but is not leprosy. The Egyptians had great respect for their medical practitioners, who were possibly the best in the world, so this sign would get their attention

Sign: Water into blood

This was to become the first of the 10 plagues on Egypt. Every plague was an attack on one or more of the Egyptian gods.

4. Moses: I won't know what to say. I'm not good at presenting.

God: I will tell you what to say and enable you.

5. Moses: Please no! Send someone else.

God: Your brother Aaron will help you. Exodus 4:10-17

Moses finally realised that whatever excuse he tried; God had an answer for it. Once he started to obey, it went exactly as God said it would. At first, he was focusing on his own weaknesses and past failures. He did not as yet have any experience of God's power and help, just some faith, based on old family stories.

But God doesn't choose people with the whole skill set. What he does look for is humility and a willingness to keep our eyes fixed on him. There's a quote that says "God doesn't call the qualified, he qualifies the called. If we all waited until we were confident that we had all the skills we might possibly need to deal with any situation God puts us in, we'd never get anything done! Instead, God calls us into situation and helps us develop the skills as and when we need them. However much we feel we are a failure or a nobody, God can empower us. Sometimes he is waiting for us to fully appreciate our weaknesses.

- How had Moses changed since leaving Egypt, 40 years ago?
- What preparation had Moses already had for this assignment?
 - Good education, familiarity with Egyptian court & culture
 - Experience of living in the wilderness
- Never has anyone been so reluctant to accept an assignment and then become so dedicated to it and famous for it afterwards. What changed?

- What extra help did God now provide? What helped Moses to speak to the elders and Pharaoh?

The fact he had a real encounter with God. There is power in the presence of God. Compare with Pentecost; The miraculous signs; the promise of success.

- How can this story encourage us?

The Fraxinella is a bush that bears white, pink, or red blossom. The leaves and seedpods emit flammable oil that will sometimes ignite in hot weather without damaging the plant. It is nicknamed the 'burning bush' plant. Do you think it could have been one of these that caught Moses attention in the wilderness, or do you think it was something much more dramatic than that?

Watch <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQcKC-Usups>

Credits, sources & further information

Moses and the God of Egypt: John J. Davis

The Koren Tanakh of the Land of Israel: Exodus: Susan & Roger Hertog

<http://www.landofpyramids.org/uraeus.htm>

Image: Burning bush art - Pat Marvenko Smith, © 1992. www.revelationillustrated.com

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