

Excursus on Exodus 3:1-15
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As we heard in the previous lecture, "5 Women Who Did the Unthinkable", the story of Moses is an exciting and sad one, with all the elements to make a great TV miniseries or a movie. In fact, the DreamWorks movie studios did this a few years ago in the animated film, "The Prince of Egypt". Moses' survival from infancy, during a time when all male Hebrew children were being drowned in the Nile, was nothing short of a miracle, orchestrated by two midwives, his birth mother, his adopted mother, and his sister. We all empathize with the painful injustice and irony that Moses suffered in having to flee Egypt after murdering an Egyptian in defense of a helpless Hebrew slave (Exod 2:11-15a). Eventually, Moses settled down in Midian, where he married Zipporah, had a son [Gershom], and worked for his father-in-law, Jethro (2:15b-22). All of these events take place in the span of the first two chapters in Exodus.

In the verses between this first stage of Moses' life and Exodus 3:1-15, a very important scene occurs. There is an "intrusion note" about God hearing the groaning of the Israelites in their servitude in Egypt (2:23-25). What provokes their crying out? The text does not answer this question, indicating only that the people somehow managed to find a voice. Their humanity could only take so much suffering, until they could withstand no more. Note that the text does not say that they cried out "to God", but God hears the cry anyway. Their cries prompt God to take action in the story. [God was not even mentioned in Ch 2]. In two verses (vv 24-25), God is the subject of four important verbs: "God heard"; "God remembered"; "God looked", and "God took note".

Although it may sound strange to the 21st century reader, in the Hebrew Bible, the idea that God must be "reminded" of an earlier promise is not new. In Gen 9, after the Flood, God makes a covenant with Noah, his family, and all of creation that God will never again destroy the earth. God goes on to say that the rainbow will be a sign of the promise, not for the people but for God. "When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth" (Gen 9:14-16). In this case, the cries of an oppressed group are what "remind" God of the covenant God made with the ancestors of the Israelites. This is enough to cause God to begin the process of their liberation.

In Chapter 3, Moses is tending the flocks of his father-in-law and just happens to wander up on the mountain called Sinai (or Horeb, depending on the source), which was a sacred place among the Midianites (and would be for the Israelites). That day, however, as far as Moses was concerned, the mountain was simply a good place to let

the animals graze. He knew that it was called "the mountain of God," but he was only there keeping the flocks. He certainly did not expect to meet the divine there. Imagine his surprise when he saw such an incredible sight, that the biblical writers could only describe it as a bush that was "afire but not consumed by the fire". Surely, Moses wondered if he had been out in the hot sun too long. He blinked his eyes, turned his head, and looked again. It was still there. Then, he heard a voice calling his name. Now, Moses had heard about things like this happening to shepherds who spent too much time alone in the field, but after he heard his name called a few more times, he decided to answer. He responded with, "here I am," and waited. From the bush came the voice of God, and God told Moses to take off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground. And so Moses did, and he heard these words: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (v 6).

This story is just one of a few examples in the Hebrew Bible where someone answers a call from God (or a human) with "here I am", only to face a very difficult situation. For instance, in Gen 22, God calls to Abraham, and he answers with "Here I am". Then, Abraham understands God to ask him to sacrifice Isaac. Another example is in Gen 37, where Jacob calls to his son, Joseph, who answers with "Here I am." He then sends Joseph out to find his brothers, who are tending the flocks in the fields. When he reaches their location, the brothers throw Joseph into a pit and eventually sell him into slavery. To the experienced biblical reader, then, Moses' fateful words, "Here I am", are a foreshadowing that something dangerous is about to happen. Indeed, this is the case; God is sending Moses back to Egypt, where he is a wanted fugitive. God has decided to "make-good" on the covenant God made with the ancestors, a promise of land, offspring, and a relationship with God. To do this, God wants Moses to convince Pharaoh to let his primary source of slave labor go free!

With good reason, Moses protests against this mission from God. Besides the fact that his life would be in danger, if he were to return to Egypt, Moses cannot see how or why Pharaoh would listen to him and agree to this crazy idea. "'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (v 11). God tries to reassure Moses by promising to be with him as he stands up to the sole ruler of Egypt and risks his own life. God even gives Moses a "sign", though it is not one that will be immediately available: "when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain" (v 12). Still unconvinced, Moses tries another tactic. Given that he will be an "outsider" to the Israelites, why would they listen to him, much less trust him to lead them out of Egypt safely? Feeling a bit daring, Moses asks God for God's name, and what he gets is a riddle.

In the Ancient Near East, particularly in the culture reflected in the Hebrew Bible, to know someone's name had the potential to indicate that you had power over that person. For Moses to know God's name would be just a bit too much power for any human to have. In response to this request, God says to Moses: "'*eyeh 'asher 'eyeh*; thus you shall say to the Israelites: '*eyeh* sent me" (v 14). This Hebrew phrase has

most often been translated as "I am who I am . . . I am sent me." However, this only hints at the depth of this riddle of a name for the Divine. The word, *'eyeh*, is the first person singular form of the verb "to be". Since Hebrew does not have true verb tenses (e.g., past, present, future, etc.), this word could be translated as: I am, I was, I will be, I have been, etc. The second Hebrew word, *'asher*, is a relative particle and can mean: that, who, which, etc. Thus, this "name" of God can be rendered in an almost infinite number of ways. Here are just a few:

I am who I am.
I was who I was.
I will be who I will be.
I have been who I have been.
I am who I was.
I will be who I have been.
I am that I will be.

You get the picture. The irony of the answer is that Moses cannot have just one word to name the Divine; otherwise, he might think that he can control God, comprehend God, and contain God. The Divine is beyond human control and comprehension. What is even more intriguing about this phrase is that the only way Moses, the Israelites, or anyone else can "know" God is through God's activity in the world or through God's interaction with humanity. To "know" God requires a relationship with the Divine.¹

The rest of the Hebrew Bible recounts Israel's self-reflection on that relationship with God, both the times when they were faithful and when they were unfaithful. Throughout it all, though, God keeps covenants – the one with all creation after the flood, the one with Abraham, Sarah, & their descendants, the one with Hagar & Ishmael, this one with Israel at Sinai, and countless others.

¹ Jewish tradition holds that it is from Exodus 3:14 that the most holy Divine name, *YHWH*, is derived. At some point in Jewish history, this Name was determined to be so holy that it should not be spoken aloud. The scribes would write these consonants, but the reader/cantor would say, "*adonai*", the Hebrew word for "lord" (literally, "my lord"). Later, when the Hebrew texts were given vowel points, the consonants would be written with the vowel points of *'adonai*. In scholarly translations, like the NRSV, this divine name is rendered with the word LORD, in all caps.