The Significance of the Burning Bush
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where the last consonant is something like a dark *l*. A sentence in Macalister (p.89) is also worth recalling: "The almost accidental allusion to Carians in the history of the kings must not be overlooked."

[25] I am grateful to G. I. Davies, J. A. Emerton and H. G. M. Williamson, who have saved me from numerous mistakes.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BURNING BUSH

The meaning given to a story when it is handed down over successive generations, in written or oral form, will often change imperceptibly. This is particularly true of stories which have a specifically ideological or religious content, for it is then in the interest of the preserving community to continue to relate the story, if it is believed to have continuing value, to their circumstances and developing understanding of themselves. A direct result of such a process is often the loss of the original meaning. It seems to me that the original significane of the curious episode of the burning bush in Exod. iii has been lost in this way.

The recovery of an original meaning will to a large extent depend on our ability to recover the original circumstances in which the story took shape, and indeed to ascertain precisely the literary type to which the story belongs. So long as the present story is regarded as being rooted, however obscurely, in the history of the presettlement era, then its true meaning, both theologically and in the history of religious thought, can only remain hidden. In this brief discussion I shall suggest a different historical context from the one normally accepted, in order to obtain a better understanding of the story.

The burning bush episode falls within the block of material usually isolated within Exod.iii as J. In an earlier discussion of the E material,[1] with which we are not here concerned, I suggested that the J parts of the story do not simply constitute an alternative tradition to the E source, but instead presuppose E in its final form. E shows evidence of progressive reworking over a considerable period. J therefore must be given a later date than the final form of E. I suggested that J is in fact exilic. Now if this is a tenable position, then it follows that we should look to the conditions and concerns of the exile for an explanation of the significant features of the story.

The relevant part of the J story is told very succinctly in Exod. iii 2, 3, 4ac, 5 (continuing in *vv.* 7-8, 16-18).[2] It contains two striking features: first the mysterious bush which burns and yet is not consumed—a seeming contradiction in terms—and secondly its location on "holy ground". These two elements require some explanation. The first may be regarded simply as an expression of the miraculous, though this hardly contributes to a serious discussion,[3] and we should rather seek a more substantial explanation which recognizes the symbolic dimension of the image, and explains it in terms of what we know of the symbolic thinking of the ancient Near East at large, and of ancient Judah in particular. The second is the more startling when we consider that the J passage undoubtedly presumes, though it does not state, that the episode takes place in the wilderness. We may conclude this without reference to Exod. ii,[4] but rather on the basis of J's derivative status with regard to the E material in Exod. iii (it being therefore controlled by iii 1). It might be argued that the holiness of the place is due to its proximity to, or even identification with, the "mountain of God". But the specific mountain location is not made explicit in J. However, to turn an old argument on its head, it is possible that the J writer, far from designating the mysterious plant (on which the botanists are still hard at work)[5] by a conscious paronomasia on the name of Mt Sinai, which of course is the sacred mountain in the J tradition but is not named in the present context,[6] names the plant in anticipation of its association in the reader's ear with the mountain name. He thus gives the coded message that this place, though in the wilderness, nevertheless does not partake of the normal symbolism of the desert, but rather of that of the sacred mountain.[7] The wilderness location of itself would in any event strike the reader as an incongruous place for the deity to reveal himself. It represented the very antithesis of holiness, and even of reality. It was a "non-place".[8]

In the arid climate of the Near East, any green plant is a vivid sign of life etched sharply against the dry terrain. It would be futile to try to identify with any certainty the precise area in Midian the writer had in mind, to ascertain whether trees grew there with any frequency, if at all; if we are to think of a writer living in exile, he probably had little idea of the whereabouts of Midian, and none at all of its real conditions. He was concerned rather with the image of a sterile land, in which grew this miraculous plant, the locus of a

hierophany. A widespread motif throughout the artistic and religious expressions of Near Eastern culture was the tree of life—the epitome of the tenacity and regenerative power of nature in unprepossessing conditions—commonly represented as the medium of theophanies.[9] In temple symbolism the tree is particularly important, representing the centre, the *axis mundi*, from which flows all vitality. It is clear from numerous Old Testament passages from the pre-exilic era that the Judahite mind was saturated with this symbolism. Obvious examples are the tree of life in Eden, itself a mythical conceptualization of the sanctuary,[10] and the *ʾăšērâ* constantly alluded to in the cult, and perhaps simply to be identified with the tree of life in the sanctuary.[11] In the present story, this paramount image of the centre is used to transform the desert, paramount image of the boundaries of the cosmos, into something which it is not perceived to be.

For an exilic writer could hardly fail to be aware of this tradition, and to recognize that, shorn of syncretistic associations, the tree of life growing in the wilderness was a striking image with which to convey an important theological message to his contemporaries and fellow-exiles. It represented a message of hope in the midst of despair, and the promise of life in an environment of sterility and death. But the burning bush combines two images: that of the tree of life, and that of light shining, its burning nature suggesting a torch or a candelabrum. Now since the very notion of a theophany implies cultic ideas and the associations of the sanctuary, such a double image almost inescapably evokes the cultic lampstands—the *mᵉnōrôt*—of the temple. No representations of the *mᵉnōrâ* are known before the Roman period, but a possible prototypical form has been discerned by E. R. Goodenough as early as the thirteenth century BC,[12] and though our information in I Kings vii 49 comes from the exilic Deuteronomist, there is no reason to doubt the presence of *mᵉnōrôt* in the Solomonic temple. The detailed instructions for the (post-exilic re-)construction of the lampstand—now apparently only one is envisaged—in Exod. xxv 31 ff., and its manufacture in xxxvii 17 ff. is undoubtedly based on ancient tradition. Its arboreal form is clear from these passages (cf. Num. viii 1-4), and is confirmed when iconographic representations appear later, because the tripedal base has the form of tree roots. Its divine significance—as the "light of the world"—is also borne out by the description of Zechariah's vision (Zech. iv. 1-14), for the two olive trees which

flank it (and incidentally provide it with an uninterrupted supply of oil, so that it is, as all sacred fires should be, a perpetual fire—it burns, as it were, and is not consumed) represent the two anointed ones (sc. Zerubbabel and Joshua) who stand before "the Lord of the whole world". The temple *m^{e}nōrâ* then represents a "perpetual theophany", and this surely is the meaning of the unconsumed bush in Exodus.[13]

Let me now offer a hypothesis for our understanding of the burning bush. Moses, an archetypal figure whose stature grew enormously during the exilic period (in Deut. i 37, iii 26, ix 18-20, x 10, for instance, he is presented in the latest recension as a redeeming, almost christological figure, and in the Pentateuch at large he is presented in transparently royal terms),[14] here represents exilic man—his treatment in Deuteronomy, just mentioned, reinforcing the idea of his solidarity with sinners. He is in the wilderness—at the edge of the world, at the furthest remove from the centre—conceived of course by the exiles as the sanctuary in Jerusalem. Suddenly, to his amazement, in the darkness and sterility of his condition, he discerns a tree or bush—symbol of life and divine grace—and it burns and is not consumed, just like the temple *m^{e}nōrâ*. As if to confirm his intuition, which he dare not articulate, a voice from the very heart of the vision confirms that this is indeed holy ground, just like the temenos of the temple, and instructs him to remove his shoes. The wilderness is a symbol of Babylon, and even here Yahweh brings the exiles hope in despair: he reveals himself, paradoxically and against all traditional expectation, in the very place which seems formally to deny his presence. Such a story was drawing out for the exiles the most important theoretical principle of the recently developed monotheism of the period: that Yahweh was no longer to be conceived in territorially limited terms; his rule and power were universal. Such a message must have been of great comfort to people whose traditional beliefs could not seriously accommodate the misery of deportation and the destruction of Jerusalem.

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[1] N. Wyatt, "The development of the tradition in Exodus 3", *ZAW* 91 (1979), pp. 437-42.

[2] On the division cf. M. Noth, *Das zweite Buch Mose: Exodus* (Göttingen, 1959),

p. 22, E. tr. *Exodus* (London, 1962), p. 34; cf. B. S. Childs, *Exodus* (London, 1974), p. 52, and N. Habel, "The form and significance of the call narratives", *ZAW* 77 (1965), pp. 301-2, for a different view.

[3] Cf. the naturalistic explanation offered by W. R. Smith, *The Religion of the Semites* (3rd edn, London, 1927), p. 193, and the more sober assessment of J. P. Hyatt, *Exodus* (London, 1971), p. 72.

[4] If Exod. ii 1-23a is allocated to J, then the burning bush episode is set in Midian, since it presupposes ii 15, 22.

[5] Cf. R. Tournay, "Le nom du 'buisson ardent' ", *VT* 7 (1957), pp. 410-13.

[6] The bush is called *sᵉneh*, the mountain *sînay*. The association is generally rejected in modern discussions: Hyatt, p. 71, Noth, p. 27, E. tr., pp. 39-40.

[7] On the negative symbolism of the desert see J. Pedersen, *Israel I-II* (Copenhagen, 1926), pp. 454 ff.; A. Haldar, *The Notion of the Desert in Sumero-Accadian and West-Semitic Religions* (Uppsala, 1950); S. Talmon, "The 'desert motif' in the Bible and in Qumran literature", in A. Altmann (ed.), *Biblical Motifs* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), pp. 31-63.

[8] Cf. the significance attached to the wilderness in the treatment of the second scapegoat on Yom Kippur: D. Davies, "An interpretation of sacrifice in Leviticus", *ZAW* 89 (1977), p. 394.

[9] See W. H. Ward, *The Cylinder Seals of Western Asia* (Washington, 1910), pp. 219-38; Z. Mayani, *L'arbre sacré et le rite de l'alliance chez les anciens Sémites* (Paris, 1935); N. Perrot, "Les représentations de l'arbre sacré sur les monuments de Mésopotamie et d'Elam", *Babyloniaca* 17 (1937), pp. 5-144; H. Danthine, *Le palmier-dattier et les arbres sacrés dans l'iconographie de l'Asie occidentale ancienne* (Paris, 1937); H. Frankfort, *Cylinder seals* (London, 1939), pp. 204 ff.; G. Widengren, *The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion* (Uppsala, 1951). For more general treatments see M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London, 1958), pp. 265-330, and R. Cook, *The Tree of Life* (London, 1974).

[10] See N. Wyatt, "Interpreting the creation and fall story in Genesis 2-3", *ZAW* 93 (1981), pp. 10-21.

[11] Cf. for instance Judg. vi 25-28 (where it is adjacent to an altar), and 2 Kgs xxiii 6 (where it is in the temple: the parallel passage in 2 Ch. xxxiv 3-4 omits the allusion).

[12] *Jewish Symbols in the Graeco-Roman Period* iv (New York, 1954), p. 73 and fig. 6.

[13] Cf. W. Wirgin, "The menorah as symbol of Judaism", *IEJ* 12 (1962), p. 141, who observes that we have in the imagery (of Zechariah) an intentional transfer of the symbolism of the olive tree that "never dies" and therefore represents the tree of life to the lamp which never goes out. We need not see a transfer of symbolism, which is already there, but rather an intensification of it, by the highlighting of its royal and hieratic connotations.

[14] Cf. C. Widengren, *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book* (Uppsala, 1950), pp. 22 ff.

AMBIGUITY AND ASSONANCE AT ZEPHANIAH II 4

The paronomasia so evident at both the beginning and the end of Zephaniah's ringing proclamation of doom on the cities of the Philistines

ky ᶜzh ᶜzwbh thyh wᵓšqlwn lšmmh
ᵓšdwd bṣhrym ygršwh wᶜqrwn tᶜqr