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MOSES AT THE BURNING BUSH

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In Exodus 3, Moses, having fled to Midian from the wrath of the Pharaoh (2.15), is in the wilderness, keeping the flock of Jethro, whose daughter he has received in marriage. We have just been told that Yahweh has taken account of the prayers of the oppressed Israelites back in Egypt (2.23-24). Moses now comes to 'Horeb, the mountain of God' (3.1); a heavenly messenger appears to him in a flame of fire from the middle of a bush that burns without being consumed, a sight that astonishes him (3.2-3); a divine voice from the bush tells him to remove his shoes, for the ground is holy; the speaker identifies himself as the God of Moses' father and of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (3.4-6a); and Moses hides his face from the sight of the deity (3.6b). God gives him a commission to liberate the Hebrews from Egypt, assuring him of his continual presence; he speaks of a 'sign' and instructs Moses to return in due course to Horeb to worship God there (3.7-12). My concern here will be mainly with 3.1-6, the bush story, but it is important to remind ourselves of the context in which it is to be found.

This article will adopt a literary approach to the text that is at the same time historical-critical: a form of reader-response analysis that seeks to discover what it will have meant to its original readers. Thus I am seeking to do for Exodus 3 what, for example, M.A. Beavis and M.A. Tolbert have done for Mark's Gospel.[1] I shall not be offering the sort of literary reading that practitioners of the New Criticism

1. M.A. Beavis, *Mark's Audience: The Literary and Social Setting of Mark 4.11-12* (JSNTSup, 33; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989); M.A. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

would attempt, that is, one that prescinds from the original meaning. If I address myself to what the readers made of the passage rather than to what the author(s) meant by it, that is because I take it that to pursue the intentions of the author, except insofar as they have been expressed in the text, is pointless. Authors, biblical or otherwise, do not always, alas, achieve as much as they intend; but equally, they often create more than they intend or realize. We do no service to a text by restricting its meaning to the conscious intentions of its author. In any case, with biblical authors we have no information about their intentions apart from what they actually wrote.

In the case of the narrative we are examining, the notion of the original readership is admittedly problematic. If, as most scholars suppose, the story, or at least the main part of it—that involving the bush—was first written down by the Yahwist, he will have a good claim to be considered its real author and the original readers will be those who will have read the story as part of the J epic. Given, however, the uncertainty that now prevails within the scholarly community about the validity of the Documentary Hypothesis, I have insufficient confidence that the Yahwist ever existed to venture to analyse the bush story as part of the J source. I shall therefore content myself with attempting to read the mind of the first readers of the Pentateuch.[2] If they attended to its context, what will they have made of the passage? To establish meaning within extant literary complexes is difficult enough, in all conscience, without concerning oneself with hypothetical ones.

The idea of the original readers of the Pentateuch is itself not straight-forward. We know roughly speaking when the compilation of the Pentateuch was completed, namely in the exilic or early restoration period.[3] But what was it intended for, and how was it used? Each

2. Some scholars think in terms of a Tetrateuch (Genesis–Numbers) or a Hexateuch (Genesis–Joshua). For my part, I favour the concept of the Pentateuch, but for the present purposes, such refinements make little difference.

3. This is not to say that there is any agreement on the manner of its composition. Is it (*sit venia verbo*) a mosaic of oral/written traditions cobbled together by a redactor? Or the work of a single writer of genius who has gathered together and edited earlier traditions? Or the product of an Ur-text which, at various times, has been supplemented? Each of these theories, among others, has its supporters. If what is said below about liturgical recitation is true, the Pentateuch is unlikely to have been completed before the dedication of the Second Temple in 515 BCE.

of the five books will have originally consisted of several scrolls,[4] and it is inconceivable that many, if any Jews, were in a position to buy a set for their personal perusal. The only plausible use for which it can have been designed and to which it can have been put is surely for liturgical reading. Serial reading of the Torah on Sabbaths and Feasts is explicitly attested c. 200 CE in the Mishnah (*Meg.* 3.4-6). It is likely, however, to be much earlier than that. Since we know that some of the Pentateuchal legal material was originally proclaimed publicly (Exod. 24.3-4, 7; Deut. 31.9-13)[5] and that the Pentateuch as a whole was later recited liturgically, why should one posit a period in between when the completed Pentateuch will have circulated as a literary text for private study? Private study of it is attested only for the king (Deut. 17.19)[6] and for Joshua (Josh. 1.8), and it seems very implausible that a literary work running to a dozen or so scrolls can ever have been copied for private study by more than a miniscule number of Jews. The practice of liturgical recitation, on the other hand, as we have

4. See M. Haran, 'Book-Scrolls in Israel in Pre-Exilic Times', *JJS* 33 (1982), pp. 161-73, 'Book-Scrolls at the Beginning of the Second Temple Period: The Transition from Papyrus to Skins', *HUCA* 54 (1983), pp. 111-22, 116-18.

5. See J.W. Watts, 'Public Readings and Pentateuchal Law', *VT* 45 (1995), pp. 540-57. Although Watts stresses the fact that the language of the legal parts of the Pentateuch bears signs that the Israelite laws had originally been intended for public proclamation, he says (p. 556) that not every writer who had a hand in the Pentateuch's composition intended it for public reading as a whole (he gives Lev. 6–7 and 18 as examples of 'systematic codification') and that 'it is open to serious question whether the Law of Moses in its final Pentateuchal form is really intended to be read in public at one sitting'. If, however, the non-legal as well as the legal material in the Pentateuch was not intended for public proclamation, what can it have been designed for, and how can we imagine it to have been originally appropriated? In another recent article ('Rhetorical Strategy in the Composition of the Pentateuch', *JSOT* 68 [1995], pp. 3-22), Watts argues that the Pentateuch as a whole is concerned to persuade its readers. That was the point of the original reading aloud of the laws, and the rhetoric of persuasion is responsible for the inclusion in the corpus of stories, lists and divine sanctions (he points to a recognition of the persuasive uses of these outside Israel). When, however, he says (p. 22) that when the traditions 'were combined into ever larger blocks of material, the setting in public readings of whole documents must have become increasingly anachronistic', I find myself wondering why he thinks this. Clearly very long books are unlikely to have been read in their entirety on any one occasion, but serial recitation is surely less anachronistic a notion than any alternative.

6. The king was to have a copy made at the dictation of the levitical priests, presumably from the text kept in the Temple for liturgical recitation.

seen, is attested within the Pentateuch for some of the material. Josh. 8.34-35 speaks of the public reading of the Scroll of the Law of Moses (the Deuteronomic Code?), and Nehemiah 8–9 of the public recitation of what was clearly a very long document, perhaps indeed 'the Pentateuch more or less as we have it today'.[7] Neh. 8.18 envisages, in fact, a form of serial recitation, with parts of the Torah being read on each day of the Feast of Tabernacles. Whether there was from the beginning a fixed cycle of lectionary readings, or whether passages were chosen at the discretion of the local worshipping community, is a matter for speculation and makes little difference to my argument.[8]

What will the original readers[9] of the Pentateuch have made of it? What will they have thought of it as being for? What, if anything, will they have taken to be its overarching theme? As David Clines has argued,[10] it takes no abstruse academic study to find in this meandering literary complex one clear theme, that of the divine promise to Israel which has been partly, but only partly, fulfilled. The readings that the hearers will have listened to will have spoken to them of their being a covenanted people whose God had promised them land, fellowship with him and posterity. As they heard the tale unfold, they will have celebrated Yahweh's goodness to them in the past, and will have looked to a future in which they would possess the land again in security and would be able to be confident of retaining the good will of the deity.

What, then, will these readers of the Pentateuch have made of the burning bush lection? What will it have said to them about Yahweh? If it is true that 'wherever exilic Jewry opens the Pentateuch it finds itself',[11] what will it have said to these exilic (or restoration) Jews about what it meant to be a Jew in their situation?

7. Watts, 'Public Readings', p. 542.

8. M.D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974), chapter 10, argues that the Chronicler's opus was designed as a series of haphtaroth to accompany Torah lections, and that already before the Chronicler's time the Book of Joshua was used for haphtaroth. This hypothesis would push the serial reading of the Torah itself back very early, perhaps to the time of original composition. See further Goulder's *The Evangelists' Calendar* (London: SPCK, 1978), chapter 2.

9. By the word 'readers' I mean both those who publicly proclaimed the Pentateuch and their audience.

10. D.J.A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (JSOTSup, 10; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978).

11. Clines, *Theme*, p. 98.

The first thing to be said is surely that the episode clearly forms an introduction to the story of Moses' call as a prophet in order to bring the people, whose cries God has noted, to Canaan. (2.24-25; 3.8) This theophany, in which God calls Moses from his shepherding, will emphasize the fact that Yahweh takes the initiative where his emissaries are concerned. The story of Moses being commanded to leave his sheep to do God's work is clearly akin to the call narratives of other prophets and leaders who are similarly pressed by a divine intervention to leave their everyday lives and take up a higher commission. One thinks of Gideon, who has to leave off beating out wheat in the wine-press (Judg. 6.11-18); of the young Samuel being turned from liturgical functionary to prophet (1 Sam. 3); of Elisha summoned as he is ploughing (1 Kgs 19.19-21); of Amos being called as he is following his vocation as shepherd and herdsman (Amos 7.15).[12] Even early readers of the Pentateuch who may not have been familiar with other examples of call narratives, whether orally or in writing, will scarcely have failed to realize that the text is designating Moses as a leader *malgré lui*. He has fled from Egypt to save his skin (Exod. 2.11-15) and, as soon as he has received his commission, will seek to evade it (3.11–4.17). Since Deuteronomy 18 speaks of the future rise of a Mosaic prophet or prophets, our original readers may well have taken the passage not only to reinforce their sense of dependence on the great prophet of old but also to hold out hopes that God would intervene for them in the near future to raise up a prophet like Moses. The 'fire' of Horeb (Exod. 3.2; 19.18) would not be repeated; but God would guide his people by his word spoken, at his dictation, by one of themselves (Deut. 18.15-17).

Further, the miracle of the bush that burns but is not consumed is of a piece with the marvels soon to be worked in Egypt (the miracle with Moses' rod and the Plagues) and at the Reed Sea. All serve to mark Yahweh out as totally in control of natural forces.[13] He who controls

12. J.O. Akao, 'The Burning Bush: An Investigation of the Form and Meaning in Exodus 3 and 4' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Glasgow University, 1985), pp. 150-67, treats the stories of Moses, Gideon and Samuel as examples of a special form, which he calls 'The Making of a Leader or Hero' (I am grateful to Dr Akao for permission to refer to his dissertation).

13. Akao, 'The Burning Bush', p. 282, argues that these wonders are all worked not so much to legitimize Moses' authority as to indicate Yahweh's might over natural forces. It seems to me, however, more natural to see both ideas in the narrative, as I suspect did the original readers.

the elements is Lord of history too, and is about to show himself to be Israel's liberator. This, of course, will have had an obvious relevance to the exilic/restoration reader.

The narrative also serves to foreshadow the Sinai revelation later in the Book of Exodus, for which v. 12 explicitly prepares the way: 'When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.' There are several parallels: fire, Exod. 3.2; 19.18; sacred ground from which one must keep one's distance, Exod. 3.5; 19.12; Moses' covering of his face, Exod. 3.6; 34.34. A play on words, the word for bush, *s^{e}neh*, suggesting the name Sinai, may also be present, but this is not certain, since the passage speaks of Horeb, not Sinai. The effect, perhaps, of having the Sinai-event prefigured in this way may well have been the realization that Yahweh has a long-term strategy. There will have been comfort in this thought for Jewish readers languishing in exile or coping with the mixed hopes and disappointments of the restoration period.

As has frequently been noted, there are (for whatever historical reason) different ways in this passage of speaking of the deity's intervention: in v. 2, *the messenger of Yahweh appears* to Moses, while in v. 4 *Yahweh sees* that Moses has turned aside, and *Elohim calls* to him. What were the implications for the early readers of the Pentateuch of the difference in terminology? I suggest that speaking of an appearance of a messenger of God will have brought out the transcendence of the deity while preserving his personality.[14] Talk of God speaking to Moses, on the other hand, served to portray Moses as the spiritual progenitor of Hebrew prophets down the centuries. The use of both the terms Yahweh and Elohim has the effect perhaps of identifying the God of Moses with the God of the Patriarchs. In Exod. 6.2-3 Elohim will reveal to Moses that he is named Yahweh though this name had not been known to the fathers.[15] That the God of the Jews of the sixth/fifth century was the God of Abraham, the God of Moses and the God

14. For Luke, however, the mention of the messenger (angel) seems to have had a different implication. The episode is recalled in Stephen's speech in Acts 7 (vv. 30-35). Since in vv. 38 and 53 Stephen is made to speak of the Mosaic law being given through angels (cf. Gal. 3.19)—thus pointing up the inferiority of the old covenant to the new—the mention of the angel in the bush at v. 30 may have a similar purpose. Moses did not get beyond seeing an angel. Unlike Stephen (or Luke) the original readers will have had no inclination to marginalize Moses; rather the contrary.

15. Cf. Akao, 'The Burning Bush', p. 297.

of the prophets was a message calculated to raise flagging spirits.

The command to Moses to remove his shoes (a detail found also in a similar narrative in Josh. 5) has many extra-biblical parallels, as Gaster[16] shows. It belongs to a thought-world, found to this day in Islam, where the removal of shoes is a religious requirement, equivalent to the Christian custom of males baring their heads in a church. In many cultures, priests commonly performed their professional duties barefoot. We may take it that the meaning will not have been lost on the original readers. On the face of it, the words in 3.3, 'He came to Horeb, the mountain of God', might seem to suggest that the site was already sacred. It is improbable, however, that our original readers will have taken the phrase to mean this. Why should they have thought of a place in the Sinai desert as already sacred to Yahweh? Rather, they will have known that Horeb was called the mountain of God and will have taken the text to be saying that it had been hallowed through a divine appearance even before the events of Exodus 19 onwards.[17] The command to Moses to remove his footwear thus stresses the fact that the story has to do with encounter with the divine numen, an encounter which makes of every spot where God intervenes a sanctuary.[18]

The reader will have had no difficulty in taking the statement that Moses covered his face (3.6) to connote the sense of being overwhelmed that any human being, whether in Moses' day or seven hundred or so years later, must feel in the numinous presence of God. It has a Pentateuchal parallel in Adam's hiding himself (Gen. 3.8). Plastaras surely captures the import of the phrase: 'When man goes to meet God, he must be open to receive the word of revelation, but at the same time he must be filled with the sense of his own unworthiness'.[19]

Given the emphasis on the awesome nature of the deity implied in

16. T.H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1969), pp. 231-32.

17. In the similar story in Josh. 5, the words in v. 15, 'the place where you are standing is holy', clearly have a proleptic force, for Jericho can scarcely be thought of as sacred to Yahweh before the Settlement. If this text is based on Exod. 3, it will show that one early reader of the burning bush story will have taken the words 'Horeb, the mountain of God' in the way for which I am arguing.

18. So Akao, 'The Burning Bush', p. 298: 'Yahweh is a God who makes holy wherever He chooses to appear' (Akao believes that the story is exilic and served for the original readership as an apologia for the Temple; p. 286).

19. J. Plastaras, *The God of Exodus* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1966), p. 65.

the command to Moses to take off his shoes and in Moses' covering his face, the reader could hardly have doubted that the fire in the passage had a similar significance. Yahweh was being portrayed as an attractive but frightening presence (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, in Otto's phrase). Fire clearly serves as a symbol of the deity in other Pentateuchal texts: in Gen. 15.17 (a 'flaming torch'), in the Pillar of Fire of Exodus 13 and 14, in the Sinai-events of Exodus 19 and 34 already referred to, and in Deut. 4.12, 24, 33; 5.4-5, 22-24.[20] God, says Alonso Schökel,[21] seems to be thought of as having given some elements to humanity (water, earth, air...) but to have reserved fire for himself—ready, for example, to burn up Korah, Dathan and Abiram, Numbers 16. (The Taberah story in Num. 11 will doubtless be another example.) Fire, Schökel adds, is a fit symbol of the deity principally because of its inaccessibility. The bush, he further observes, may itself, with its threatening thorns, share this symbolism. We may note that the way in which Yahweh in Exod. 3.14 proceeds to describe himself, *'ehyeh 'ašer 'ehyeh*, whatever the precise force of this obscure expression ('I am/shall be what/who I am/shall be'?), which may well have puzzled early readers as much as it does present-day ones, reinforces the sense of the deity as a mysterious presence.[22]

The fire, then, will have been perceived as a symbol of the deity.[23]

20. Elsewhere it occurs in Judg. 6.11-24 (Gideon) and 13.2-24 (Manoah); in the Psalms (e.g. 50.3, 'Our God comes, he does not keep silence; before him is a consuming fire', and 97.2-5) and in Ezek. 1.

21. L.A. Schökel and G. Gutiérrez, *Moses: His Mission. Biblical Meditations* (Slough: St Paul Publications, 1989), pp. 24-26.

22. R.P. Carroll, 'Strange Fire: Abstract of Presence Absent in the Text. Meditations on Exodus 3', *JSOT* 61 (1994), finds that 'there is no [divine] presence in this phrase, only the promise of one in the future' (p. 48). He similarly takes the view (p. 41) that 'if the angel/messenger is other than Yahweh... then there is already in the text a hint of Yahweh's absence from the bush'. Since, however, as we have seen, Yahweh is explicitly present in v. 4, our original reader will, I think, have caught in this passage overtones of divine transcendence rather than of divine absence. It is possible that the phrasing of 3.1, 'Moses was in the back (*ʾaḥar*) of the wilderness', could be taken (as Carroll hints) as foreshadowing 33.23, where God tells Moses that he cannot see his face, only his back (*ʾaḥōrîm*). If early readers so took it, it will have reinforced their sense of divine transcendence (rather than of absence).

23. In the Quran, the fire in the bush is treated as a reflection of God's glory: 20.9-12; 27.7-8; 28.29-30.

It may also, however, have been taken as a symbol of oppression.[24] Deut. 4.20, 1 Kgs 8.51 and Jer. 11.4 represent Egypt as an iron-smelter. This suggests that the vision of the bush will have been taken to indicate that Moses' fellow-Hebrews back in Egypt would not be devoured in the furnace of persecution. Houtman[25] argues vigorously against this reading of the passage on the grounds that the text is emphatic in making a connection between the fire and the presence of the envoy of Yahweh. This is true, and it is indeed confusing to have the fire standing at the same time for two such different things as the divine presence and persecution at the hands of one's foes, but this latter interpretation, which was a commonplace in both Jewish[26] and Christian[27] readings of the passage, must surely have suggested itself to readers as soon as the Deuteronomic idea of Egypt as the iron-smelter became established. Interpretation of the fire as a symbol of persecution, therefore, is best taken as a form of adaptation. It is unlikely to represent the earliest meaning of the image in the oral tradition, if the story originally circulated orally (or in J if it existed); but it will have become part of the meaning as soon as the passage became part of the Pentateuch.[28] That it was so taken by Old Testament

24. Cf. K. Ee Kon, 'Who is Yahweh? Based on a Contextual Reading of Exodus 3.14', *Asia Journal of Theology* 3.1 (1989), pp. 108-17.

25. C. Houtman, *Exodus*, I (Commentaar op het Oude Testament; Kampen: Kok, 1986), pp. 324-25.

26. Philo (*Vit. Mos.* 12) saw the burning bush as a symbol of the oppressed Hebrew people; lowly as the species was, it was not consumed; no more will the weak people of Israel succumb to their foes. This view occurs also in *Exodus Rabbah*. Rashi similarly took the bush to be a thorn-bush symbolizing lowliness: the passage illustrated for him the doctrine that God is with Israel in all his humiliation and troubles (he quoted Ps. 91.15). Ibn Ezra again took the flame to represent Israel's enemies and the bush Israel, which is indestructible.

27. E.g. Theodoret of Cyrrhus (PG 80.229-31); Procopius of Gaza (PG 87.523-28); and Išodad of Merv (*Commentaire d'Išoʿdad de Merv sur l'ancien testament. II. Exode–Deutéronome* [ed. C. Van den Eynde; CSCO, 176; Scriptores Syri, 80; Louvain: CorpusSCO, 1958], text, p. 6; trans., pp. 8-9). For the most part, however, the Fathers opted for a Christological and/or a Marian interpretation of the bush.

28. It is possible, as Rashi (*Pentateuch with... Rashi's Commentary* [trans M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silbermann; London: Shapiro, Valentine & Co., 1946], Exodus, p. 11) was to suggest, to take the ability of the tree to withstand the fire to denote Moses' own durability: 'Just as thou hast seen the bush carrying out the mission I laid upon it and it was not consumed, so go thou too on the mission I entrust to thee and thou shalt suffer no harm.' E. Starobinski-Safran, 'Le rôle des signes

readers is, I suggest, indicated by Isa. 43.2, where we read, 'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you... when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.' Fire is in this text clearly a symbol of persecution (cf. Ps. 66.12), and the use of the same words for 'flame' and 'consume' (*lehābâ* and *bā'ar*)[29] as in Exodus 3 may well be evidence, I would suggest, of an allusion to the bush story (whether known to the author of Isa. 43.2 in a written or in an oral form), the event being understood as a symbol of persecution. In the new Exodus, from Babylon, the God who once rescued Moses from the Nile and the Hebrews from the Reed Sea, the God who did not allow his people to be consumed by the fires of persecution—symbolized by the burning bush—will save them again.

We may note an ambiguity in the phrase 'in a flame of fire'. What will have been for the reader the force of the preposition *b*^{e}, 'in'? Cassuto[30] and Childs[31] suggest that it is an instance of the *beth essentiae*, giving the meaning 'in the form of a flame of fire'.[32] More probably, as Houtman argues,[33] the idea is that the messenger is *in* the flame.

dans l'épisode du buisson ardent', *Judaica* 35 (1979), p. 64, argues for this. She notes that in v. 12, 'I am with you. This shall be to you the sign [*'ôt*] that I have sent you', there are ample precedents in Jewish exegesis for taking the *'ôtq* to refer back to the bush and for calling in aid Ps. 91.15, 'I am with him, in affliction.' The bush is, then, to show Moses that in his own affliction God is with him. I would not rule the interpretation out, whether for present-day or for the original readers, but I do not find it very persuasive. Verse 12 is so far removed from the bush story that a reference back to it seems forced. I doubt if this interpretation will have suggested itself to readers in the pre-Rabbinic period.

29. Exod. 3 actually has *labbat*. Rashi and Ibn Ezra took this to be a construct form of *lēb*, 'heart', but it is probably a contracted construct form of *lehābâ*. The Samaritan Pentateuch has the uncontracted form *lhbt*, and the LXX and the Targum Onqelos read 'flame'.

30. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (repr.; trans. I. Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987), p. 31.

31. B.S. Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM, 1974), p. 50 ('probably').

32. In support of this we may think of the fiery angels of Ps. 104.4. But it is now generally accepted that the meaning of that verse is 'you make the winds your messengers, flames of fire your servants' (REB; similarly RV, NEB, JB, NRSV etc.) rather than 'you make your angels spirits, and your ministers a flaming fire' (cf. AV, PBV).

33. Houtman, *Exodus*, p. 321.

The messenger will, as elsewhere,[34] be thought of as appearing in human form. He is recognized as God's envoy by the flame that surrounds him. I agree with Houtman that 3.6, 'Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God', most naturally suggests that there was in the bush a messenger in human shape, clothed in fire, rather than merely a flame.

Cassuto notes the frequency with which the verb to see (*rā'â*) and a noun cognate with it, *mar'eh*, 'vision', 'sight', occur in this short passage. These terms, he says, 'keep recurring, like hammer strokes'.[35] The messenger of the LORD was *seen* by Moses from the midst of the bush. 'He *saw* and behold... He said, "I will turn aside to *see* this *sight*."' Yahweh *saw* that Moses had turned aside to *see*. In v. 7, we find a final occurrence, when Yahweh says, '*Seeing*, I have *seen*...' The frequency of the occurrence of this root is indeed striking, but what significance might there be in it? Cassuto does not say. At the very least, the repetition will have drawn the reader's attention to the importance of the passage. It may also have served to stress the intervention in human history of the transcendent Israelite God, who not only sees but (in the person of his intermediary) is seen.

When Moses sees the messenger in the bush, his immediate reaction is not to fear God (that comes only later, in v. 6, after God has spoken) but to be curious about the survival of the bush. I wonder whether, in order to read the passage as a coherent literary unit, it is necessary that the reader (past and present) assume that the phrase 'the messenger of Yahweh appeared to him...', means that the messenger is present to Moses among the flames but goes unnoticed until Moses hears the divine voice?[36] Or is one to take it that Moses notices the figure but does not recognize him for who he is until he hears the voice? But in that case, one may surely suppose that Moses would have been represented as curious about the survival not only of the plant but also of the figure in its midst (just as in Dan. 3 Nebuchadnezzar is

34. Cf. Judg. 6.21, where fire is a sign that the messenger sent to Gideon has come from God, and Judg. 13.20, where the messenger that has appeared to Manoah ascends in a flame (like a vehicle, says Houtman, comparable to Elijah's fiery chariot, 2 Kgs 2).

35. Cassuto, *Commentary*, p. 32.

36. Akao, 'The Burning Bush', p. 296, compares 1 Sam. 3, where the young Samuel is slow to realize that it is Yahweh rather than Eli who is calling him. 'In picturing him in this light, the author wants to show that Moses up to now was still a "novice" in Divine–human encounter.'

curious about the survival of Daniel's companions in the fiery furnace). Either, therefore, there must be a roughness of construction in the text which makes a fully coherent reading impossible, or one must suppose that Moses does not at first see the messenger. Since the latter reading would have considerable point—as indicating that it requires experience to perceive God's presence—it is to be preferred, and the original readers are to be credited with having had the wit to take the passage in this way.[37] Exiles who felt that their lot was hidden from God, their cause unheeded (Isa. 40.27), and the generations of the early post-exilic period, could learn from our passage to look harder for signs of his presence in unexpected places.

Moses says, 'I will turn aside and see this great sight (*mar'eh*)' (3.3). Will the Hebrew word have been taken to denote a spectacle that was (for the purposes of the story) objectively in front of Moses and therefore potentially visible to anyone else? Some have thought—the suggestion goes back at least to the late eighth century CE, since it was known to Theodore bar Koni[38] and was used by him (as by Išodad of Merv in the next century)[39]—that the passage describes a subjective vision experienced by Moses. It was not a physical experience, said Išodad, any more than any of the visions of the prophets were. The Hebrew word is used of the supernatural visions of Ezekiel (Ezek. 8.4; 11.24; 47.3) and of Daniel (Dan. 8.16, 26, 27; 9.23; 10.1). It is also used in Num. 8.4, where Moses is told to construct the Lampstand

37. Total consistency of usage, however, does not seem to be present. In v. 2, the Bush is said to *b'r*, whereas in v. 3 Moses says that it does not. Moses, in other words, uses this verb to mean 'consume', whereas in the previous verse it means only to burn, and *'kl* is used for 'consume'. D.N. Freedman, 'The Burning Bush', *Biblica* 50 (1969), pp. 245-46, admittedly avoids the inconsistency by reading *l'* not as *lō'*, 'not', but as *lu'*, taking it as emphatic: 'why indeed the bush continues to burn'. This, though, even if one accepts that the emphatic *lu'* does occur (the strongest case is perhaps Hos. 11.5: 'Back he shall go to Egypt' [cf. NEB, REB, JB, NRSV etc.]) is hardly convincing in this instance, for as Houtman says (*Exodus*, p. 324), what would be remarkable about that? Thorn-bushes are notoriously combustible. Freedman has to suppose that the text is elliptic: the bush continued to burn (*but was not consumed*).

38. A. Scher (ed.), *Theodore bar Koni: Liber Scholiorum*, II (CSCO, 69; Scriptores Syri, 26; Louvain: Durbecq, 1954), p. 146; R. Hespel and R. Draguet (trans.), *Théodore bar Koni, Livre des Scolies (recension de Séert)*, I (CSCO, 413; Scriptores Syri, 187; Mimrè I–V; Louvain: Peeters, 1981), p. 149.

39. Išodad of Merv, *Commentaire d'Išo'dad de Merv*, II, text, pp. 5-7; trans., pp. 8-10.

for the Tabernacle in accordance with the *mar'eh* on the mountain. (A blueprint revealed to him? But see below.) It is not clear whether some or all of these sightings are to be taken as subjective. Houtman[40] wants to take it as an objective encounter, but I do not know that we can decide which interpretation the original readers will have preferred. It is not perhaps of much moment.

Read in the context of the Pentateuch as a whole, the story invites a comparison, as Phyllis Trible has noted,[41] with that of Hagar. Like Moses, Hagar encounters God after she has fled from her oppressor. The bush, or rather shrub, under which Hagar places her child differs from Moses' bush: it is clearly not a holy place, for the divine voice comes from heaven (Gen. 21.17) not from the shrub, and no flame of fire emerges from it. The difference surely serves to emphasize the greatness of Moses, and to give comfort to all those readers who strove to put their faith in Yahweh in Moses his servant (Exod. 14.31).

It will also have been natural for the readers to see in the bush an allusion to the Menorah or seven-branched Lampstand which the Pentateuch represents Moses as constructing at the divine command for the Tabernacle.[42] The Menorah was arboreal in form (cf. Exod. 25.31-40; 37.17-24; Num. 8.1-4), being at the same time a tree (originally probably an almond)—a representation or exemplification of the Tree of Life (the branches perhaps representing the seven days of creation)—and a fire.[43] Wyatt, who argues strongly for a connection between the

40. Houtman, *Exodus*, p. 327.

41. P. Trible, 'The Other Woman: A Literary and Theological Study of the Hagar Narratives', in J.T. Butler *et al.* (eds.), *Understanding the Word: Essays in Honor of Bernhard W. Anderson* (JSOTSup, 37; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), pp. 226, 243.

42. Historically, however, the single golden Menorah in the Tabernacle may well be an anachronism. In the First Temple, there were ten Menoroth, according to 1 Kgs 7.49 and 2 Chron. 4.7, but one in the Second Temple, according to Zech. 4 and Ecclus. 26.17. The tradition of the single Menorah in the Tabernacle, like that of the single Menorah in the First Temple in 2 Chron. 13.11 (and in Jewish tradition), may be a retrojection, if the final composition of the Pentateuch followed the completion of the Second Temple.

43. Cf. L.Yarden, *The Tree of Light: A Study of the Menorah, the Seven-branched Lampstand. Agdistis, Attis and the Almond Tree* (Uppsala: Skriv, 1972). He believes that the Menorah was a stylization of Israel's conception of the Tree of Life combined with notions of the burning bush, and was in part developed as a reaction to tree cults and the use of Asherah images (p. 46). See also C.L. Meyers, *The Tabernacle Menorah: A Synthetic Study of a Symbol from the Biblical Cult*

bush and the Menorah, notes that in Zechariah's vision, Zech. 4.1-14, the Lampstand is provided with a perpetual supply of oil ('it burns, as it were, and is not consumed'). 'The temple *m'norah* then represents a "perpetual theophany" and this surely is the meaning of the unconsumed bush in Exodus.'[44] The passage will have recalled for our exilic readers the presence of God in the Menorah/Menoroth before the Exile, and will have held out for them hopes for its restoration.

I would add a suggestion that a text in Numbers seems to reflect the tradition that the bush refers to the Menorah. If I am right, we have valuable evidence that one of the Pentateuchal *writers* already saw the bush in the way that I am suggesting that the Pentateuch's readers did. When in Num. 8.4 Moses is told to make the Lampstand according to the *mar'eh* God made/is making him see on the mountain, this could surely be a reference to the burning bush tradition. It is the only other occurrence in the Moses traditions of the noun *mar'eh*. In Exod. 25.40, Moses is told to make the Lampstand according to the pattern (*tabnît*) shown (*mor'eh*, *hophal* participle) to him on the mountain. In this Exodus text, the usual and most likely interpretation is that Moses is being, or has been, given a sort of divine blueprint during his sojourn on the summit of Sinai, but the phrase 'on the mountain' is surely surprising: it is superfluous, since the scene is explicitly set on the mountain-top. Further, the idea of the blueprint sounds almost Alexandrian. Similar texts are found about the Tabernacle itself: Exod. 25.9 (See that you make [the Tabernacle and its furniture] according to their pattern [*tabnît*] which I am showing [*mar'eh*] you

(AASOR Dissertations, 2; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976), pp. 176-77, and J.E. Taylor, 'The Asherah, the Menorah and the Sacred Tree', *JSOT* 66 (1995), pp. 29-34. Yarden interestingly suggests that the Christmas tree festooned with candles derives from the Tree of Life and the Menorah (p. 42).

44. N. Wyatt, 'The Significance of the Burning Bush', *VT* 36 (1986), pp. 361-65, 364. Similarly, J. Van Seters, *The Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus–Numbers* (Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology, 10; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994), pp. 40-41. Wyatt and Van Seters both regard the symbolism as being as old as the text, which they attribute to an Exilic J author. Wyatt sees in the bush story a message to the exiles that even in the 'wilderness' of Babylon life is indestructible; Yahweh is active in his people ('Moses. . . here represents exilic man' [Wyatt, 'The Significance of the Burning Bush', p. 364]) even far beyond the bounds of Canaan. If one were to opt for the J source being pre-exilic (if it existed at all), one might rather understand the bush to be an allusion to the Menorah; a case of Exilic relecture.

on the mountain); and Exod. 26.30 (You are to construct the Tabernacle according to its design [*mišpāṭ*] shown you [*hor'êtā*] on the mountain); cf. 1 Chron. 28.19, where David says that he has received in writing in Yahweh's own hand the *tabnît* of the Temple (cf. 28.11). A similar reference to the notion of a blueprint is usually detected in Numbers 8 too, even though neither *tabnît* nor *mišpāṭ* occurs there. The translations, in fact, treat *mar'eh* as if it were *tabnît* or *mišpāṭ*.[45] But in the Numbers text the traditional exegesis must surely be doubtful: I suspect that there the text is most naturally taken as referring back to the sight of the burning bush in Exodus 3. The bush was seen as a prefigurement not only of the Sinai theophany but of the construction of the Menorah. The idea of the blueprint we find in Exodus and 1 Chronicles will have arisen from puzzlement at the earlier formulation preserved in Numbers.[46] The antiquity of the interpretation of the bush as a prefigurement of the Menorah is thus, I conclude, attested by Num. 8.4.

We have seen, then, that the story of the burning bush served for the early readers of the Pentateuch, *inter alia*, to portray Yahweh as an attractive but formidable deity who was in control of the forces of nature and revealed himself definitively on Sinai; a deity who prepared Moses to act as his agent; a deity who—a comforting doctrine this, for exiles among others—was not confined to specific sacred spaces but made of any place where he intervened a veritable sanctuary. There will also have been a reference to Israel's ability, under Yahweh, to withstand the fires of opposition. Finally, the bush will have prefigured the Menorah, a potent symbol of the constant presence of the ever-living God.

ABSTRACT

The author seeks, with some help from Isa. 43.2 and Num. 8.4, to identify the meaning that Exod. 3.1-6 will have had for its original readers (hearers). Readers of it as a Pentateuchal lection will have taken it as the call of a prophet/leader *malgré lui*,

45. LXX (εἶδος), Vulg. (*exemplum*) and EVV (AV, RV, RSV, NEB, REB, JB, NJB, JPS, NJPS: 'pattern').

46. Given his Alexandrian sympathies, it is not surprising that it commended itself to the author of Hebrews: cf. Heb. 9.23 (the Temple rites were copies of heavenly realities).

sent to liberate the Hebrews from Egypt by a deity attractive and formidable, a God not immediately perceived by the neophyte, Lord of nature as well as of history, who makes a sanctuary of every spot where his presence is experienced. To such a God the exilic/post-exilic readers will confidently have looked for the future consummation of the covenant promises in the near future, perhaps through the rise of leaders similar to Moses. The story will also have encouraged them not to fear the fires of ill treatment. Further, the bush will have been taken to foreshadow both the Horeb theophany of Exodus 19 and the construction of the Menorah.