

## Studies in Exodus No. 4

Exodus 3:13-22

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### Review

Last time we considered Moses' encounter with the Lord at the burning bush and that encounter as a paradigm of every believer's encounters with the Lord. We broke off our consideration in the middle of the conversation that God had with Moses on that occasion. We take it up tonight where we left off last Lord's Day evening.

- v.13 The sense of Moses' question is gathered by the comparison of this question with the one he asked in v. 11. There, when called to deliver Israel from bondage in Egypt, he asked, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh...?" God bypassed that question with the assertion that he would be present with Moses. Now Moses turns to a second question: "Who are you?" The idea is that if I, with no status in Israel, claim to address Israel in your name, they are going to want to know *about you*.

The question is literally: "what is his name?" But the question is not about identity, anymore than Moses' question in v. 11 was about his identity. Israel would know that he was a man named Moses. Moses is asking about whether God can accomplish what he is promising to do? He wants to know God's "name." But in the Bible God's "name" was a revelation of his nature, his character. The question is practical not theoretical. If we are going up against the Egyptians, who is God who will be with us to help us?

It is worth noting that the tremendous answer that is given to Moses' question does not completely obscure the fact that Moses, in asking the question, seems already to be resisting the assignment God is giving him. That is, he may not have asked the question in the best faith. You'll notice that he does not ask the question for himself but cloaks his own doubts in the form of the people's query. [Childs, 76] This is one in a series of questions by which, as we will see still more clearly in chapter 4, Moses becomes ever more obviously determined to evade the responsibility that God has given him. It would not be the first time that great answers, answers that have forever changed the way in which a subject would be discussed, were given in response to ill-motivated questions. Think of the answer that Jesus gave to the Jewish leaders who were trying to trip him up by asking him whether it was right to pay the tax the Romans imposed on occupied Israel: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." The question of church and state has been discussed in terms of his answer ever since but the question itself was nothing but a ploy! Here the answer God gives to Moses is one of the most important statements in the Bible and yet Moses may not have asked the question for any other reason than to find a way out of having to do what God had told him to do.

- v.14 Literally rivers of ink have been spilt in the discussion of the answer God gives to Moses. Without going into the history of interpretation, it is enough to say that there have been

long debates both about *how to translate* the three word answer that God gives to Moses and about what the phrase *means*. But certain things seem reasonably clear. Though the phrase is clearly *related to* the divine personal name *Yahweh*, as is the shorter form of the reply at the end of v. 14, the reply that God gives to Moses is not, in fact, a name. The Lord is not called this in the Bible. It is not his name *per se*. It is an assertion *about God* not his personal name. What is more, the phrase seems clearly to be an assertion of God's active existence, his presence in power. With God it is always and ever "I am."

The demonstration of this is that the verb "I am" that appears twice in the phrase *I am who I am* in v. 14 is the same verb – the very same word; the same person, number, and tense – rendered "I will be" in the Lord's assertion "I will be with you" in v. 12, perhaps better translated "I am with you..." And it is the same very as appears a second time in v. 14, " 'I am' " has sent me to you." In other words, the context suggests that what is being asserted is the Lord's active presence. *Yahweh is!* However much it may not have seemed so to Israel groaning under her oppression in Egypt, the Lord *is*. His existence in power and majesty is ever present, ever real.

- v.15 "Upon the foundation laid by this declaration... "I am," repeated four times – once in v. 12 and three times in v. 14, the special name of God, יהוה, "Yahweh," is revealed." [Durham, 39] The Hebrew name *Yahweh* sounds like and, in all likelihood, is derived from, the Hebrew verb "to be" in the first person singular imperfect, "I am," as appears in vv. 12 and 14. (Hebrew tenses are not like English tenses, so don't be confused if an imperfect is translated "I am." To be precise, Hebrew doesn't have verb tenses so much as verb aspects. It's complicated.) In any case, the Lord is the existent one. He is the Living God, present in the world and present to and for his people. Then, special emphasis is laid on that name by linking it to the covenant God made with the patriarchs. That name remains the same: yesterday, today, and forever.

Now, two important points need to be made about *Yahweh* as a divine name, usually rendered in English translations of the Old Testament by "Lord," as here by the NIV. Ordinarily in the NIV and other ETs, when you read "the Lord" the Hebrew reads *Yahweh*.

*First*, this is the name that the KJV translated as Jehovah. As you may know "Jehovah," is a hybrid. A bit of background. Hebrew was originally written with only the consonants. The vowels were added by the reader as he read. He knew what vowels separated the consonants of any word and put them in as he read. Later on, however, the vowels came to be written in the form of little marks or pointings placed under the consonantal letters. If you go to Psalm 119 and find the Hebrew alphabet printed there, letter by letter, each letter the title of a section of that acrostic poem, a section in which each line begins with a word beginning with that letter, you will find only consonants. The Hebrew alphabet is entirely consonants, no vowels. The first letter, *aleph*, is not the letter "a." It is the consonant *aleph*. There are several "a"s in Hebrew, one long, one short, but they are written as little marks under consonants and are not part of the alphabet itself. Hebrew was, and in some respects, remained a consonantal language. As I said, at first only the consonants were written. Later the vowels, called vowel points,

began to be written under the consonants. Later in Jewish history, no one knows for sure precisely when, the Jews began refusing to pronounce the divine name for fear of violating the third commandment, the commandment that forbids taking the name of the Lord in vain. The foolish reasoning was that if you never said the name of the Lord, you couldn't take it in vain. In any event, in order to remind them not to say *Yahweh* when they came to those four consonants in the text of Holy Scripture, as one does thousands of times, the scribes put below the consonants of that name the vowels of another Hebrew word, "lord," the Hebrew *adonai*. Those vowel points reminded the reader to say *adonai*, Lord, rather than *Yahweh*, the name actually written on the page. Hebrew speakers of the time would immediately have recognized that those were not the vowels for *Yahweh* and would be reminded to say *adonai* instead. In that way they would never inadvertently pronounce the Lord's name. By the way, we are in the Gospel of Matthew on Sunday mornings. Matthew characteristically writes "kingdom of heaven" instead of "kingdom of God." That substitution of another word for the name of God was a habit that he had as a first century Jew. You stayed away from saying "God" or "Yahweh" as protection against violating the third commandment. We have come full circle. In our culture and now on TV everyone, I mean everyone, uses "My God," or "Oh my God" as an interjection. There is no conscience about the Lord's name whatsoever. One can err in either direction.

Well, back to my point. *Jehovah* is the consonants of *Yahweh* and the vowels of *adonai* written together and pronounced together. Once it came to be written this way – the consonants of one name and the vowels of another – it was never an actual name in the Hebrew Bible, it was instead a kind of code. Nobody *said* "Jehovah." But that was not understood when the first English translations of the Bible were prepared. They translated it the way it was written and so we got "Jehovah." It was a kind of innocent mistake. "Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah" will always be sung by the Christian church, and it will never be replaced by "Guide me, O Thou Great Yahweh," but Hebrew scholarship almost universally accepts that the divine name would originally have been pronounced "Yahweh" not "Jehovah," coming, as it does, from the Hebrew verb "to be."

Second, *Yahweh* is the Lord's *personal* name. The context of God's revealing his name to Moses reminds us of this fact. There is a difference between "God" and "Lord," between *elohim* and *Yahweh*. Both are used thousands of times in the OT and often interchangeably. There are, for example, two psalms in the Psalter (14, 53) that are the very same psalm with one difference: one has God, *elohim*, throughout and the other has Lord, *Yahweh*, throughout. Both names are used rightly of the one living and true God. But they are not strictly synonyms. Other religions of the ancient Near East, as religions today, used some form of the title "God" to refer to their deity, whether Amun, or Baal, or Marduk. *Yahweh*, however, is the personal name of God. It is used by no other religion. "God" is more a title than a name, though it is used both ways in the Bible. It is not so unlike what happened with the name "Jesus" and the title "Christ" in the New Testament. Technically "Christ" is not a name. It means Messiah and often in the Gospels and Acts we find it used properly as a title: Jesus *the Christ*. But, clearly, as time went on it became part of Jesus' name and we get very many times "Jesus Christ" as the name of the Lord. So with *elohim* the title, God, which also becomes a name.

We'll have cause to return to this matter later, when we come to chapter 6, but, for now, it is enough to say that, though this rule is not always followed in the Bible, "God" is more often used in contexts in which the deity is being spoken of in reference to the entire creation, "Lord" or *Yahweh* more often in contexts when the deity is being spoken of in reference to God's people, and his relationship to them. So we have "God created the heavens and the earth" in Gen. 1, but "the *Lord* God spoke to Adam" in Gen. 2. We have "the heavens declare the glory of *God*" in Psalm 19:1 but "the law of the *Lord* is perfect reviving the soul" in 19:7. As I said, the Bible does not follow this rule consistently – so, while it is no rule, one uses the divine names in their original and purest sense when he says, "I love you *Lord*, not I love you *God*," and when he says "God rules over the nations of the world" not "the *Lord* rules over the nations of the world."

- v.17 In other words, the ancient promise still avails and the time of redemption has arrived. What is about to occur is precisely what God had promised long ago to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
  
- v.18 Moses is commanded to identify the Lord as "the God of the Hebrews." *Yahweh* would, of course, mean nothing to him. The words Moses are to use are suited to Pharaoh's understanding. We are always to do this when speaking to the world! Don't expect them to know our terms. Put it in a way they can understand. This statement to Pharaoh will set up the contest between Moses and Pharaoh, which is really a contest between the true God and the gods of Egypt, mere idols, as events will make painfully clear to the Egyptians. In any case, Moses is assured that the Israelites will follow him – a point concerning which Moses understandably would have had some doubt – and will recognize his authority as the man the Lord has commissioned to deliver them from bondage in Egypt. Not only will they recognize his authority, they will support him in his dialogue with Pharaoh. The request to make a three-day journey is a ploy to get the contest started. You will notice that Moses isn't to say that he and Israel will return to Egypt. It is the opening gambit in negotiations.
  
- v.20 Not only will the Israelites recognize Moses' authority, the Egyptians will eventually accede to his request to let Israel go. But it is not God's plan for Israel to get Pharaoh's permission to leave immediately. There is a revelation of himself that God intends to make.
  
- v.22 Not only will Egypt accede to Moses' request to let Israel go, they will load the Israelites down with wealth as they depart the country of their bondage. This is not theft on Israel's part; it is repayment for the service she rendered as slaves. No earthly court could compel Pharaoh to repay the Israelites for their labor, but the heavenly court not only can but will! [Cassuto, 44] The Lord will not only defeat the Egyptians, he will dust off the place where they were standing! All of this, you see, is what it means to have *Yahweh* with you; to have the "I am who I am" with you. Total victory.

The reference to Egyptian women living in Israelite homes raises an interesting question. Was boarding Egyptian women a form of income for poor Israelite households, or was

there still enough prosperity among some Israelites that they could still hire domestic help?

In a famous passage in his work on *Miracles*, C.S. Lewis contrasts the tame god of human invention – whether of philosophy, such as idealism, or religion, such as pantheism, or of a still more widespread human sentimentalism, an avuncular but harmless father figure – with the living God of biblical revelation.

“An impersonal God – well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth, and goodness, inside our own heads – better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap – best of all. But God himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband – that is quite another matter.... There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion (“Man’s search for God”!) suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found him? We never meant it to come to *that!* Worse still, supposing he had found us?”

That, of course, is precisely what happened to Lewis himself. He had dabbled with questions *about* God and suddenly and shatteringly found himself face to face *with* God, the living God. Moses’ *Yahweh!* It makes all the difference in the world first to know who and what the living God *is* and then to know that God is *there*. It does nothing less than transform human life.

In an immortal passage in his *Confessions*, Augustine asks Moses’ question: “Who then are you, my God?” And he answers his own question.

“What, I ask, but God who is Lord? For ‘who is the Lord but the Lord’, or ‘who is God but our God?’ (Ps. 17:32). Most high, utterly good, utterly powerful, most omnipotent, most merciful and most just, deeply hidden yet most intimately present, perfection of both beauty and strength, stable and incomprehensible, immutable and yet changing all things, never new, never old, making everything new and ‘leading’ the proud ‘to be old without their knowledge’ (Job 9:5, Old Latin version); always active, always in repose, gathering to yourself but not in need, supporting and filling and protecting, creating and nurturing and bringing to maturity, searching even though to you nothing is lacking...”  
[Chadwick, 4-5]

And on and on he goes, describing the mystery, the insupportable wonder of knowing the living God.

We live in a world in which God has been made to seem especially remote. Great thoughts about man, constant talking about him, have left little room for thoughts about God, his ways, his nature. The pressure of skepticism about God in our elite culture has also taken its toll. People are educated nowadays in America with no thought of God; nothing is taught in reference to him. Everything is thought about without regard to him, as though one could know everything needful without knowing God or even about God. Though some deny God’s existence outright, most people do not; they simply find him unimportant. For many people in America today, including many who would say that they are Christians, virtually the only time they mention God is in

mindless interjections. They use his name as a kind of exclamation point, but, otherwise, he matters very little. And what is the reason for that?

The reason is, of course, that they don't *know* God. They don't know what he is like, and they have no living sense that he is *there*; that is actively present to themselves, above them, behind them, before them, ruling over all things that bear on their lives. It is this practical *unbelief* in the God who is and who is there that defines their lives, makes them what they are and what they are not. And, as Christians, as believers in the Word of God, it is our most solemn obligation *not to be like them*.

Here is the opening of a sermon by Charles Spurgeon, preached January 7, 1855. It was not just any sermon of the great preacher, it was the first he delivered as the minister of the congregation he would pastor until his death. He was, almost unbelievably, just twenty years of age.

“It has been said by someone that ‘the proper study of mankind is man.’ I will not oppose the idea, but I believe it is equally true that the proper study of God’s elect is God; the proper study of a Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father.

“There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can compass and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-content, and go our way with the thought, ‘Behold I am wise.’ But when we come to this master science, finding that our plumbline cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought that vain man would be wise, but he is like a wild [donkey’s] colt; and with solemn exclamation, ‘I am but of yesterday, and know nothing.’ No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God.

“But while the subject *humbles* the mind, it also expands it. He who often thinks of God, will have a larger mind than the man who simply plods around this narrow globe.... The most excellent study for expanding the soul, is the science of Christ, and Him crucified, and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity. Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity.

“And, whilst humbling and expanding, this subject is eminently *consolatory*. Of, there is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief; and in the influence of the Holy Spirit, there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead’s deepest sea; be lost in his immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of

trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead.” [As cited in Packer, *Knowing God*, 17-18]

Well, that is what the Lord here tells Moses in a nutshell. Let Israel know that the Lord, *Yahweh*, the one who was, is, and will be, let her know that “I am” is with you and with her, and she will know all that she needs to know. And he says the same thing to you and to me tonight. There is not a problem in our lives but that the knowledge of the Lord and his active presence is its solution. Israel was groaning under oppression in Egypt. What she needed to hear was that *Yahweh* had seen her oppression and was preparing to act on her behalf. If *Yahweh* is for us, who can be against us. And, if *Yahweh* is for us, even in the midst of our trials, punishing as they sometimes are, we are, we must be filled with hope.

The distant, remote, kindly, father-figure God of much of modern American culture – alas, including Christian culture – is of no use to us. He is not even interesting. People don’t bother even to think about him. Only a God enveloped in impenetrable mystery, a God of awful righteousness, of inflexible justice, of infinite power joined with limitless compassion, mercy, and love can satisfy human souls in the midst of the struggles of life; in the face of the certainty of death; only the knowledge of such a God can transform our lives and lift us up above the limitations of human life.

Nobody worships the gods of Egypt anymore. Aton, Amun once had great temples built for them, but they are nothing more than archaeological museums today. No one worships *Marduk* or *Baal*. No one loved those gods then and no one worships them now. No one’s life was transformed by the knowledge of those idols in their day and hardly anyone but biblical scholars even knows their names today. But all over the world, hundreds of millions of people worship *Yahweh*, the God Moses knew by the same name; and not worship only, but love and trust to take care of their lives and bring them into the fulfillment of all of their longings.

*Yahweh*, the God who is *there*. The living God of eternal being. The God who made and rules the world. The God who entered into covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and with their descendants forever. He is our guarantee that what has been promised to us will come to pass in due time. He is the reason there is writ large over the Christian life an assurance of victory, a certainty of triumph. The “I am” is with us. It is not for nothing that when Jesus, God the Son, came into the world, he referred to himself so often by that same verbal phrase, “I am.” Tell them, “I am” has sent you. Pharaoh will scoff, until his entire country had been devastated and his own royal household overwhelmed with sorrow. He had encountered the “I am” and neither his gods nor his army could stand for a moment against him. Well the “I am” is with us, with you right now, if you believe in him and in his Son. With you; right there with you!

Israel had to wait for her deliverance, but when it came, it came indeed. Such is the assurance, the confidence, the hope of all those who know the Lord and trust in his active presence with them in the world.