

Exodus I – Notes

IV. *The Great I AM*

25-Jun-06 Exodus 2:23-3:15

Theme: God's covenant name of YHWH – Yahweh – reveals His holy character: eternal, unchangeable, and self-existent; Jesus Christ is the great I AM.

Key Verses: Exodus 3:14-15 ¹⁴And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And He said, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵Moreover God said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: 'The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is My name forever, and this is My memorial to all generations.'"

Review

Last week we looked at Moses, the once and future savior. Why do I call him that? Well, his first attempt at being a deliverer ended in failure. Once he tried to be the savior of Israel in his own strength, but he soon learned that he could not accomplish it by human works. However, God was not finished with Moses. God still had big plans for this Levite, this miracle baby who escaped the wrath of Pharaoh and grew up in the king's own household. Moses was correct to think that God had called him to be a deliverer. The circumstances of his birth, his rescue from the river of death in an ark, and his adoption by Pharaoh's daughter all pointed to his uniqueness. Trained in both the knowledge of the Hebrew faith as well as in the wisdom of the Egyptians, Moses was supremely gifted and placed to save his people from the oppression of Egypt. However, Moses acted too soon, too rashly, and too much in his own strength. The people of God were not sufficiently humbled to be rescued, and Moses was not sufficiently humbled to be used by God. And so this "once" savior heads off to the outback for more training to become a "future" savior. Along the way, God providentially guides him to a God-fearing family, where he can grow and serve and learn to rely upon God for his daily provision. God sends Moses to the wilderness to prepare him for service. And Moses was ready to go, because by faith he esteemed "the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward" (Heb. 11:26).

Introduction

What's in a name? Names don't have as much meaning in modern society as they once did, especially in Biblical times. We often choose our children's names based on the way they sound. Sometimes we name our children after parents or grandparents or after a Bible character or other person we admire. But we rarely name our children based on their appearance, skills and abilities, or character.

That's true for naming children, but companies often spend a lot of money to come up with names that describe the quality or benefits of their products. General Motors learned the hard way to be careful in naming their cars to avoid describing undesirable qualities. When you think of the Chevrolet Nova, what do you picture? I'm sure that GM wanted you to think of the tremendous power and energy of a star going nova. However, when they tried to market the car to Latin America, they soon found out it was a commercial disaster. Why didn't Spanish-speaking people want to buy a Nova? Because in Spanish, *no va* means "does not go." And the last thing anyone wanted to buy was a car that wouldn't go! ¡*No va – tenemos un gran problema!* Names really do matter!

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Today, as we join with Moses and meet God in the burning bush, we will be reintroduced to one of the great and significant names of God – a name that describes who He is and what He does. I have divided the text into three sections: 1) the remembrance of God (2:23-25); 2) the manifestation of God (3:1-10); and 3) the name of God (3:11-15).

A. The Remembrance of God (2:23-25)

1. *Cries of a People (2:23)*

“Meanwhile, back at the ranch...” We’ve been following the exploits of Moses, and he has settled down to forty years of living in the wilderness of Midian. Time marches on everywhere, and now we are drawn irresistibly back to Egypt, where an event of cosmic magnitude is taking place. “What is that?” you may ask. Is it the death of the king of Egypt? No. The death of the pharaoh is important, because it opens up the door for Moses to return to Egypt. With the change of administration and the passage of forty years, it is unlikely that Moses is on the Ten Most Wanted List anymore. (However, he will soon become Public Enemy Number One in the new administration, but I’m getting ahead of the story.)

While the death of the king is an important element in the story, the true earthshaking event is described in the following sentence: “Then the children of Israel groaned because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry came up to God because of the bondage” (v. 23b). Quite simply, the event that changes history is the *prayers* of God’s people. Have the Israelites prayed before? Probably. But there is a change of focus and intensity in their prayers now. Perhaps the oppression has gotten worse under the new pharaoh. Perhaps the Hebrews are finally realizing that they need relief that can only come from God. Perhaps it took another forty years after Moses’ failed attempt to save Israel before they have finally been humbled enough to call out to God for help. Whatever the reason, their prayers finally go up to God.

2. *Action of Our God (2:24-25)*

In 2:24-25 we have four action verbs that describe what God does in relation to the prayers of His people. First, God *hears* the groanings of His people. Does this mean that God had been deaf to the prayers of His people up to this time? Had God tuned them out? Was God hard of hearing and they needed to turn up the volume? Of course not! God was aware of their suffering the whole time. But He wasn’t ready to relieve their situation yet, and they weren’t ready to be relieved.

¹⁵The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,
And His ears are open to their cry (Psalm 34:15).

Just because we don’t seem to be receiving an immediate answer to our prayers doesn’t mean that God is not listening. He always hears the prayers of His people, but His timing may not always match our own. We are so used to fast food service that we sometimes expect God to answer our prayers like we are at the drive-thru window. But God has a much better plan for us than burgers and fries – let us be patient while He prepares the filet mignon!

Second, God *remembers* His covenant. Does this mean that God can forget? Does He have a wandering memory? Is He prone to amnesia? Don’t be silly. God cannot forget. “‘Remembering’ is more than a matter of calling to mind, as if God could forget something. It rather indicates bringing something to mind in such a way that it is a prelude to action”

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(Mackay). We see this in the story of Noah and the Great Flood. God had sealed up the ark and flooded the entire earth. In Genesis 8:1, God “remembers” Noah and his family in the ark. Because of God’s remembrance, He acts to reverse the Flood and return the ark to dry ground. When God “remembers” Rachel, he opens up her womb so that Joseph can be born (Gen. 30:22-24). Here in Exodus, God remembers His covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And that means that He is poised to act to rescue Israel from their suffering in Egypt and fulfill the covenant promises made to the patriarchs.

Third, God *sees* or looks upon the children of Israel. They weren’t hidden from Him. They were in front of Him the whole time. In Scripture, looking or seeing something often has the connotation of judging. God is looking at His people and sizing them up. Do they deserve to be rescued? Does anyone deserve salvation? No, but God in His mercy provides salvation anyway. As God evaluates Israel, He determines to deliver them, just as He has promised in His covenant.

Finally, God acknowledges or *knows* His people. In the Old Testament, “to know” someone implies a special, intimate relationship. “Now Adam *knew* his wife Eve, and she conceived...” (Gen. 4:1). God knows His people in an intimate way. He was aware of their suffering, and He was prepared to take action to deliver them from it. There is no problem too personal or intimate that God does not know about it. He is a personal God and He knows His people.

God *hears*, *remembers*, *sees*, and *knows*. All of these verbs point to God answering the prayers of His people. In fact, He had already set into motion the answer to this prayer eighty years before the prayer was prayed! “Moses and the Bulrushers” was the beginning of the answer to this prayer. What a gracious God we have, to anticipate our prayers before we pray them.

God could have rescued His people earlier, but the time wasn’t ripe. Moses wasn’t ready to lead, Israel wasn’t ready to pray, and Egypt wasn’t ready to be destroyed. But now it’s time. The first two chapters of Exodus cover the entire period of oppression in Egypt – 430 years. The next 38 chapters take place during the year of the exodus, the year of redemption.

B. The Manifestation of God (3:1-10)

1. *The Mountain of God (3:1)*

We move from the remembrance of God at the end of Exodus 2 to the initiation of God’s plan for deliverance of Israel in chapter 3. That plan centers on using the man Moses, who has traded in his princely Egyptian regalia for the humble trappings of a nomadic shepherd. Moses is tending sheep for his father-in-law. In 2:18 this man is called Reuel; here in 3:1 he is called Jethro. Some liberal commentators use this discrepancy to claim multiple authorship of Exodus, but really – wouldn’t a half-decent editor catch a “slip” as obvious as this within a few verses of each other? More likely, the priest of Midian was known by several different names, or one of the names was a title. I think that Reuel – “Friend of God” – could be his title; others may believe that Jethro (“His Excellency”) was a title.

Regardless, it is while Moses was watching his father-in-law’s sheep that he comes upon “Horeb, the mountain of God.” Horeb is an alternate name for Mt. Sinai (*cp.* 3:12; 19:1-2). The question everyone always asks is, “Where is Mt. Sinai?” The answer is that no one really knows. The only clue we really have in verse 1 is that Moses was watching over the sheep in the “far side of the desert” (NIV). The Hebrew text is literally “behind the wilderness.” The NKJV says “back of the desert.” The NASB and ESV say “west side of the wilderness.” From the point of view of

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Midian, the backside of the wilderness would be towards the west, towards the Sinai Peninsula. The traditional location for Horeb is in the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula – a 7,500 foot mountain today called Jebel Musa, the “mountain of Moses.” However, Horeb could also be across the Gulf of Aqaba in northwestern Arabia, closer to the land of Midian.

2. *The Theophany of God (3:2-3)*

It is while Moses is wandering around this mountain (wherever it is), that he notices something distinctly unusual and makes a conscious effort to turn aside and give it a closer look. What does he see? He sees a bush, perhaps a common desert plant like our mesquite of west Texas, but this is no ordinary bush. It’s on fire, but the bush is not burning up; it’s not being consumed. That is highly unusual and deserves to be investigated. “Then Moses said, ‘I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn’” (3:4).

In addition to the non-consumption of the bush by the flame, we are also told that the Angel of the LORD was present in the midst of the bush. Who is the Angel of the LORD? This is not the first time He has appeared in Scripture. We’ve met Him twice before, in the story of Hagar and Ishmael (Gen. 16:7-11), and in the story of Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 22:11-15). In both previous occasions, the Angel of the LORD speaks with the authority of God and is identified with God Himself. The Angel of the LORD makes promises to Hagar and she calls him “You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees.” The Angel of the LORD repeats the covenant promises to Abraham and calls Himself “the LORD.” In the same fashion, the Angel of the LORD within the burning bush calls Himself “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (3:6). So it seems apparent that the Angel of the LORD is a manifestation or theophany of God Himself.

I tend to agree with the commentators who state that the Angel of the LORD is a pre-incarnate theophany of the Lord Jesus Christ. Others hesitate to go so far, fearing to compromise the uniqueness of the incarnation. What we can safely say is that the Angel is a visible manifestation of the invisible God.

The burning bush itself has great significance and symbolism. There are two main ways to look at the symbolism of this image. One way to view the burning bush is to see a reflection of the current situation of Israel. The bush represents Israel, and the fiery flames represent their affliction and oppression in Egypt. The presence of the Angel of the LORD within the flames reassures Israel that God is with them and is in fact using the fire for their benefit. Fire is often used to portray purification (*e.g.*, Mal. 3:2-3). The good news is the bush is not consumed. Thus, the Israelites can be assured that God is using their current circumstance for their good and He will deliver them as He promised.

The other way to view the burning bush is simply to see it as a picture of God Himself. Throughout Scripture, fire is often used to portray God’s presence. The flaming swords guarding Eden (Gen. 3:24), the smoking oven and the burning torch cutting a covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:17), the pillar of fire guiding Israel in the wilderness (Ex. 13:21), and God’s fiery manifestation on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:18) all speak of God’s presence. Moses later puts it very succinctly, “For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (Dt. 4:24, quoted in Heb. 12:29). What does the burning bush then teach us about God? Ryken writes:

The miraculous sign points to God’s eternity and self-sufficiency. Like the burning bush, God never runs out of fuel. His glory never dims; His beauty never fades. He always keeps burning bright. This is because God does not get His energy from anyone or anything

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outside Himself. He is completely self-existent and self-sufficient in His eternal being. The burning bush revealed the power and the glory, the eternity and the self-sufficiency of God.

3. *The Voice of God (3:4-6)*

From the midst of the burning bush, the call of God goes out: “Moses, Moses!” This is similar to other calls in Scripture: “Abraham, Abraham” in Genesis 22:11; “Jacob, Jacob” in Genesis 46:2; and “Samuel, Samuel” in 1 Samuel 3:10. The repetition of the name serves to intensify the call. And just like those other saints who heard the double call of their name by God, Moses responds in exactly the same way: “Here I am” (Gen. 22:11; 46:2; 1 Sam. 3:4; *cp.* Is. 6:8). This is not simply responding “present” at roll call when your name is called out. Moses is stepping up and saying, “Here I am! At your service!” (Ryken). Moses was announcing his availability to serve as he responds to God’s call.

Before he can get too close to the burning bush, God tells him to stop and take off his sandals, because “the place where you stand is holy ground” (3:5). Why is the ground holy and why must Moses take off his shoes?

This is the first use of the word “holy” (Heb. *qadosh*) since Genesis 2:3 where God sanctified or set apart the Sabbath day. Significantly, it is the first time that *qadosh* is used in reference to God. The term *holy* implies separation. Things that are holy are set apart for service to God. Holiness is an intrinsic attribute of God – He is separate, set apart from the rest of the world. He is the Creator; everything else is merely creation.

What makes the ground holy? It is the presence of the living, holy God. People and things are not intrinsically holy. We can only have holiness placed upon us through contact or association with God. We are made holy in Christ – set apart for service – because of the Holy Spirit indwelling us. We cannot make ourselves holy by our own merit. Likewise, the holy ground on Mt. Sinai was sacred, set apart, because of the presence of the holy God. It wasn’t permanently holy; but it was holy while God was present.

Why does Moses have to take off his sandals? In general, the ground or dirt is unclean; God curses the ground in Genesis 3:17. Jordan points out that the theological reason to wear shoes or sandals is to separate your feet from the curse of the ground. This is why foot washing in the New Testament is so important – removing the dust from your feet symbolizes removal of the curse. But the dirt around the burning bush is no longer cursed; it is made holy through the presence of God. So Moses can take off his sandals, shake off the cursed dust he is tracking in, and come into personal contact with the holiness of God.

After God speaks to Moses about holiness, He reminds him about the covenant: “I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (3:6a). He does not say God of your *fathers*, but God of your *father*, implying that Amram, Moses’ biological father, is a faithful descendant of the patriarchs. We’ve already seen the faith of both of Moses’ parents commended in the Faith Hall of Fame (Heb. 11:23). By this declaration, God is announcing that He is the God of the past and the present (and by extension, the future as well).

Notice how Moses responds to the presence of the holy God: “And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God” (3:6b). This is a common response in Scripture, when an unholy man comes into close contact with a holy God. In Isaiah’s vision of heaven, he realizes he is undone because he is a man of unclean lips, while around him even the angels of God cover their faces (Is. 6:1-5). Ezekiel falls on his face when confronted by the splendor of God’s holiness

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(Ez. 1:28). The apostle John falls down as if dead when he sees the glory of the risen Jesus (Rev. 1:17). This is the reaction of all those who are overwhelmed with the holiness of God and their own lack of holiness. Often our image of God is of a warm, cuddly old man. Get that image out of your head. The holy God is awesome and overwhelming; the more we understand the character of God, the more reverent our attitude will become.

4. *The Plan of God (3:7-9)*

As God continues to speak, He begins to fill in the details for Moses. Undoubtedly Moses was wondering, “Why is God speaking to me?” So God first catches Moses up on what we already saw in chapter 2, verses 23-25. In Exodus 3:7, God uses three of the same verbs we saw in 2:24-25: “I have seen ... I have heard ... I know....” The only verb missing from the list is “remember,” but even that is implied in verse 6, when God identifies Himself as the covenant God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

To emphasize the concern He has for the sufferings of His people, God essentially repeats Himself in verse 9. Verses 7 and 9 form an *inclusio* or bookends for the statement contained in verse 8. If verses 7 and 9 are the “case for action,” then verse 8 is the plan of action:

⁸So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites (Exodus 3:8).

God has remembered and seen and heard and known the affliction of His people. And so He announces to Moses His plan, which comes in two parts: 1) to deliver the Israelites *out of Egypt*; and 2) to bring them *into the Promised Land*. Pretty simple, huh? This two-part plan highlights an important spiritual principle. God’s salvation takes place in the context of purpose. God does not save people simple to free them from bondage, to allow them to go their own way and do whatever feels good to them. Rather, God’s redemption has the purpose of delivering His people out of slavery to sin and death and into service to Himself. He gathers His Old Testament people, first at Mt. Sinai and eventually around Mt. Zion in Canaan, to worship Him. In the same way, New Testament saints are saved by the blood of Christ and delivered into the kingdom of heaven for eternal service to and worship of our God.

The description of the Promised Land in verse 8 has three parts. First, it is a “good and large land.” There is plenty of room there for God’s people. They won’t be cramped for space, as they apparently were by this time in the land of Goshen. Second, it is “a land flowing with milk and honey.” This is the first occurrence of this phrase in Scripture, but it is used frequently to describe the blessings and bounty of God’s land. Ultimately it looks forward to heaven, where all our needs are met forever. Finally, it is a land currently filled with pagans, all the “-ites” of this and other lists in Scripture. This foreshadows that occupying the land won’t be easy – the land must be purged of its pagan elements and made holy, like the ground on which Moses was standing. Still, God promises to give the land to them, so there is comfort in knowing that God can handle even the removal of the Canaanites from the land.

5. *The Call of God (3:10)*

“Sounds like a great plan, LORD. Nothing to it – God said it, I believe it, that settles it. Way to go, God! All we need to do now is sit back, relax, and enjoy the flight. God’s flying the plane,

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and we're on the way to the Promised Land!" Pardon me if I make light of what Moses' initial thoughts might have been to the revelation of God. Because I am almost certain that the next sentence from the burning bush was the last one that Moses expected to hear:

¹⁰Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt (Exodus 3:10).

"That's right God. You said it! You're going to bring my people out of Egypt and all I have to do is.... Wait a second. Did You say You were going to send *me* to bring the people out? I must have misunderstood you. Boy, that earwax really builds up out here in the desert...."

Here we have the call of Moses by God. God has heard the cries of His people and has determined to deliver them out of Egypt. And He intends to do it by using Moses, an imperfect, human vessel. What a paradox! The almighty and all-powerful God uses weak and sinful humans to accomplish His will.

Why should we be surprised? This is the way God normally works. He first calls us out of the world of sin and saves us by the blood of Christ. And then He calls us to service in His kingdom. Each of us has different kingdom tasks. But all of us have the responsibility to do our callings to the best of our ability, for the glory of God. As Ryken points out, "each of us is called to serve the God of the burning bush. God Himself has called us to do His work in the world."

C. The Name of God (3:11-15)

Lest you think I was overly harsh in caricaturing Moses as reluctant to accept the call of God, we are now entering the section of Scripture where Moses puts up no less than *five* objections to God's call, culminating with "Here I am, send someone else!" Moses had been eager to say "Here I am" when he first heard the Angel of the LORD speaking from the burning bush, but he apparently hadn't counted on the terms of the deal God was proposing.

In the time remaining, we will deal with the first two objections of Moses. These two are the most reasonable, but as we will see, they ultimately are self-centered and resist God's call. Next week, we will conclude the episode of the burning bush and consider the final three objections of our "reluctant hero."

1. Objection 1 – Who Am I? (3:11-12)

The first question is the most innocent: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (3:11). It's actually a pretty good question. A proper understanding of who we are and who God is (next question) is foundational to a Biblical worldview. But what is Moses actually saying when he asks the question, "Who am I?"

One point of view is that Moses is expressing humility. He is no longer the brash young prince of Egypt who is prepared to leap into the middle of a conflict and settle it with his bare hands. He's grown, matured, mellowed. He's had forty years to contemplate his failures while tending sheep in the desert. This 80-year-old Moses is a much more humble man than the 40-year-old Moses we met in chapter two. He now knows that he is inadequate to the task. His failure in Egypt has made him more cautious and less self-confident.

However, Moses may be expressing more than humility and inadequacy. He may also be expressing reluctance, stubbornness, and even unbelief. Moses doesn't appear ready to trust God at His word. This reluctance comes out more clearly later in the dialogue. Currid explains:

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It is likely that Moses was suffering from fear because of his previous experiences in Egypt, particularly Pharaoh's edict that Moses should be killed. He was therefore reluctant to accept his call. Moses' attitude actually conveys a lack of confidence in God. He was viewing himself apart from the Creator, and he realized he could accomplish nothing on his own. He appears not to have grasped the truth that he was not being called to succeed in his own power, but in God's power.

God answers Moses' first objection in two ways. First, he overcomes the inadequacy factor by stating, "I will certainly be with you." "Don't worry Moses," God seems to be saying, "You won't have to succeed in your own strength. I will do all the heavy lifting. All you have to do is obey and go." God did not promise to make Moses adequate, to give him all the gifts and graces he lacked. Instead, He was calling Moses to faith, to believe that God could and would do what He said. After all, "the exodus did not depend on the competence of Moses but on the presence of God" (Ryken). The New Testament teaches us the same principle:

⁹And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9a).

¹³I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13).

As a secondary encouragement to Moses' doubt and reluctance, God gives a sign: "And this shall be a sign to you that I have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain" (Ex. 3:12). That's a pretty strange sign. After all, aren't signs supposed to come first, to confirm what has been said? When God called Gideon, he graciously gave Gideon two signs using a lamb's fleece before Gideon accepted the call (Jdg. 6:36-40). In the same way, God will give Moses three signs in chapter 4 for the Hebrew elders (4:1-9). Those signs were meant to confirm that the rest of the message was true.

But in this case, the only way to see the promised sign (Israel worshiping God at Mt. Sinai) was actually to complete the task in question first. The sign and its fulfillment seem backwards! What kind of sign is this? It is a sign of faith. The sign would never be received unless Moses first believed it to be true. Only in faith and obedience would the sign be fulfilled. Ultimately, it is a test of faith in God to deliver on His promises. We have the same kind of sign. If we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation from sins, one day we will see Him face to face:

²Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is (1 John 3:2).

2. Objection 2 – Who Are You? (3:13-15)

"Okay," thought Moses. "That was a pretty good answer to my first objection. I need to try a bit harder for the second one." This time Moses essentially asks, "Who are You?," but he does so in a roundabout way. He puts the question in the mouths of the Israelites. Moses makes this a test of his credentials. Why should the Israelites believe anything Moses has to say? They had rejected his leadership forty years ago. There was no reason to believe that this time anything would be different. So, if God was going to be with him, Moses wanted some type of verbal confirmation to give to Israel so they would believe him. Enns put it this way: "Whereas the first objection Moses brings is, 'I don't think I can do this,' the second objection is, 'No one else will think I can do this, either.' To buttress his argument, Moses anticipates a question he expects to hear from the Israelites: 'What is God's name?'"

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We should not suppose that Moses did not know the name of God. Remember, names carried greater significance in this society than they do today. They spoke of character and deeds. They described who a person was. Essentially, by asking for God’s name, Moses was asking for a new revelation of God’s character, of His being, of His attributes.

God gives three related answers to Moses in verses 14 and 15:

1. And God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.”
2. And He said, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”
3. Moreover God said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: ‘The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’”

I AM WHO I AM is the first response, I AM is the second, and the LORD is the third. The first two responses are obviously related, and the third response is also related grammatically. But what do these names mean?

I AM WHO I AM can also be translated as “I will be who I will be.” It is often taken as a title of “inscrutability.” That is, God is simply the One who exists. He is self-eternal and self-existent. I AM (“I will be”) is a shortened form of this longer phrase. Note that God’s promise to be with Moses in verse 12 is related to this self-revelation about God’s character. In essence He has already said to Moses: “I AM is with you.”

In verse 15, God expands the discussion of His name by calling Himself “the LORD God.” The word “God” is the common Hebrew word *Elohim* (which by the way is plural, indicating the plurality of His personhood). The word “LORD” (in all capital letters) is well known to us. The Hebrew word is closely related to the verb “to be” and thus is linguistically linked to the I AMs of verse 14. This name has traditionally been called the Tetragrammaton, which literally means “the four letters.” The four letters in Hebrew are as follows, reading from right to left: Yod – He – Vav – He. The name in Hebrew looks like this:

יהוה

The original pronunciation of this name has been lost, because Jews from the period of the Second Temple onwards refused to speak it aloud, because it was too holy. Today, we often pronounce this name as Jehovah or Yahweh (which is probably the more accurate of the two).

This is not the first usage of this name in the Scripture. We’ve already seen it in this chapter – the Angel of the LORD—the Angel of Yahweh—is speaking to Moses. In fact, the LORD is mentioned by name in 141 verses prior to Exodus 3:15. The first occurrence was in Creation (Gen. 2:4). Adam (Gen. 3:9), Noah (Gen. 6:8), Abraham (Gen. 12:1), Isaac (Gen. 26:24-25), Jacob (Gen. 28:13-16) and Joseph (Gen. 39:2) all knew God as LORD, as Yahweh. Nor was this name unknown to the Israelites in Egypt. The name of Moses’ mother – Jochebed – contains a shortened form of Yahweh and literally means “the glory of the LORD.”

Conclusion

1. Theological

From this time onward, the name of God as LORD, as Yahweh, takes on a special significance for the Jews. Just like the imagery of the burning bush, the name “I AM” teaches us that God is

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eternal, self-existent, and unchangeable in His being. All these things are true. But for the exodus generation and beyond, the name of the LORD is associated not only with who He is, but with what He does. The LORD is the covenant-keeping God. He is the God who redeems His people out of slavery and into the Promised Land. He is the God who is faithful to His covenant promises. He is the LORD, the covenant God who dwells in the midst of His people. The LORD is sufficient for all of our weaknesses; He can overcome the doubts and fears of Moses, and He can do the same for you and me. He is the great I AM – nothing is too difficult for our great God.

2. *Christological*

God tells Moses that Yahweh is “My name forever, and this is my memorial to all generations” (Ex. 3:15). Today, we have a new way to pronounce this memorial name. It is not Jehovah, it is not Yahweh ... it is Jesus. In Hebrew, Jesus means “Yahweh saves.” It is a fitting name for the Savior of sinners, because it reminds us of the covenant name of God in the Old Testament. Furthermore, Jesus took the name of Yahweh upon Himself:

⁵⁶“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.” ⁵⁷Then the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?” ⁵⁸Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM” (John 8:56-58).

The Jews wanted to stone Jesus for blasphemy, for by calling Himself “I AM” Jesus was claiming the divine name and nature of God. Of course, it wasn’t blasphemy when Jesus said it, because Jesus *is* the great I AM. He is the eternal, self-existent, and unchangeable God: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8).

The apostle John wants us to make this connection between the I AM of the burning bush and Jesus. Think of all the “I am” statements in the gospel of John that are not present in the other gospels. Jesus says: I am the bread of life (John 6:35); I am the light of the world (John 8:12); I am the door (John 10:9); I am the good shepherd (John 10:11); I am the Son of God (John 10:36); I am the resurrection and the life (John 11:25); I am the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6); I am the vine (John 15:5). Jesus is I AM; Jesus is the LORD; Jesus is Yahweh; Jesus is the Word of God; Jesus is the One who spoke to Moses in the burning bush.

3. *Practical*

We can take great comfort in knowing Jesus, the great I AM of the Bible. We don’t need a “burning bush experience” to know Him. He has been revealed to us in the Scriptures (Heb. 1:1-2). All the promises made to Moses are “yes” and “amen” in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). We can approach Him boldly through our prayers (Heb. 4:16). He has delivered us from the kingdom of sin into the kingdom of God (Col. 1:13). Whenever you feel inadequate, unable to meet the task at hand, look to Jesus for strength (Phil. 4:13). And finally, remember that He is with us and never will forsake us (Heb. 13:5). There is much encouragement in this passage of Exodus. Despite the doubts of Moses, God chose Moses and used Him in a mighty way. And God has chosen each of us, and He will continue working in us, perfecting us until the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6).

Close in Prayer.

Next week: Lesson 5 – The Reluctant Hero – Ex. 3:16-4:17