HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
NEW YORK SCHOOL

INSTRUCTIONS FROM AUTHOR TO LIBRARY FOR THESES

AUTHOR ARTURO KALFUS

TITLE THE BURNING BUSH THROUGH THE MIRROR OF MIDRASHIC LITERATURE.

TYPE OF THESIS: D.H.L. ( ) Rabbinic (X)

Master's ( )

1. May circulate ( )

2. Is restricted (X) for 5 years.

Note: The Library shall respect restrictions placed on theses for a period of no more than ten years.

I understand that the Library may make a photocopy of my thesis for security purposes.

3. The Library may sell photocopies of my thesis. ___ yes X no

MARCH 13, 1991
Date

Signature of Author

Library Record

Microfilmed
Date

Signature of Library Staff Member

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE-JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
NEW YORK SCHOOL

Report on the Rabbinic Dissertation Submitted by

Arturo Leonardo Kalfus

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

The Burning Bush Through the Mirror of Midrashic Literature

This rabbinic thesis is a collection and close analysis of the extensive midrashic interpretations on the biblical narrative of the Burning Bush, Exodus 3:1-4:17, and its key themes. The author's purpose is not merely to understand how the themes and symbols of this narrative were interpreted in different ways by generations of rabbinic teachers, but also to discover through their midrashim how we confront the holy and relate to God.

At the outset, the author investigated the various scholarly views regarding the Burning Bush narrative, its scope, thematic divisions, literary and thematic sources, as well as its main purpose. In analyzing the works of such biblical scholars as Brevard Childs, Frank Gross, Moshe Greenberg, Shemaryahu Talmon, and many others, he not only deals with such key motifs as the sheep/shepherd, the sacred tree, and the important symbolism of fire, but he also focuses on a larger literary genre of "prophetic call" narratives. In so doing, he demonstrates how scholars have understood Moses' encounter at the Burning Bush in light of other narratives in Judges, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, to name a few.

After reviewing the scholarly analysis of the biblical material and highlighting the main themes of the biblical text, the author gathered the pertinent rabbinic texts by utilizing the available verse indices and topical anthologies. His research extended from the early traditions of Philo and the Hellenistic Jewish writers to the late medieval anthologies, such as Yalkut Shimoni and Midrash ha-Gadol. In the course of his analysis, he began to isolate key thematic foci from the rabbis'interpretation, which included the description of the Bush itself and the nature of its fire, the Bush as a symbol of Israel's suffering and God's comfort, the qualities which Moses possessed that enabled him to respond to God's mission, but his ambivalence when confronted by God, and also the linkage of the Burning Bush episode to other moments in Jewish History.

Having categorized the rabbinic material in this way, the author then chose to arrange his findings into seven (7) basic chapters. Following on Chapter One, which summarizes the biblical scholarship on the Burning Bush narrative, he turns in Chapter Two to midrashim on the nature of the Bush itself. In it he describes how the rabbis took the physical attributes of the Bush, its size, type, and thorniness to convey attributes of the people Israel, God, and their relationship. The stress is on the downtrodden condition of Israel, yet God

is present with her and Israel will eventually be redeemed. In Chapter Three, the fire of the Bush is described and its symbolism analyzed. The fire variously symbolizes Israel, the Torah, God's presence, and Moses' personal intensity, while at the same time can be taken as representing those who wish to consume Israel. The fire of the Bush, the s'neh, also points ahead to the giving of the Torah, the "fiery, burning law," at Sinai. In the next chapter, entitled "The Many Faces of Suffering," the author presents traditions which show how the Bush represents the suffering of Israel in Egypt and beyond and its spiritual consequences. It also indicates that Israel ultimately would overcome its hardship, since God knows of their suffering and will protect them. God indeed suffers with Israel and since the Divine shares our suffering, we are guaranteed ultimately to be redeemed. Chapter Five focuses on Moses'qualifications for prophecy. Moses is presented as being humble, modest, secure, curious, and prepared for his task. He deserves the mantle of leadership because he "sees" and thoroughly understands the suffering of his people and has total empathy as a human being. God tested Moses through his shepherding, which attested to his leadership ability. Nevertheless, in Chapter Six, the author explores the rabbis' perception of Moses' hesitation in accepting the Divine call and his very human reactions. Several midrashim describe his fears of inadequacy and the need God felt to reassure him of the Divine presence and support. The final chapter sees the Burning Bush as a pivotal narrative in the ongoing history of Israel. Midrashim link the story with creation motifs and the patriarchs, while also pointing forward to Sinai, experiences in the Land of Israel and the Messianic Era. The linkage of the Bush incident with other major events in Israel's history demonstrates the continuity of the encounter between God and Israel.

Although it is always difficult to gain a clear understanding of such an array of midrashic traditions, the author has handled the collected traditions in a competent manner. He has not only presented many interesting textual insights regarding different aspects of both the biblical material and the rabbinic texts, but has successfully highlighted the major thematic foci of the rabbis. God is seen as Israel's protector, insuring its survival throughout the generations. Through its covenantal relationship with God, Israel will endure persecution and pain and continue to exist. The moment of confrontation between God and Moses was the first in a long line of interactions between God and the Jewish people, leading all the way to the Messianic Era. At the same time, as we confront Moses' response to God's call, his strengths and ambivalences, we can begin to understand our own encounter with the Divine and its implications for our lives.

Mr. Kalfus is to be commended for his research, analysis and conclusions. He has demonstrated his ability to closely analyze texts and to integrate diverse material. Though the final product might have been even more sharply focused had the author been able to work a bit more consistently, the thesis is solid and a contribution to our understanding of the rabbis and their world view. Of course, more could have been done to expand the research, e.g., to compare and contrast the rabbis' views of the Burning Bush episode with the Christian and Moslem interpretations. Nevertheless, this thesis provides us with an interesting prism through which to view how the rabbis interpret and extend a focused

biblical text. The author has succeeded in highlighting the nature of the midrashic process as the rabbis shape their own agenda and respond to their own life situation.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Norman J. Cohen
Professor of Midrash

March 25, 1992

THE BURNING BUSH THROUGH THE MIRROR OF MIDRASHIC LITERATURE

ARTURO LEONARDO KALFUS

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinic Program
New York, New York

1992
Referee: Professor Norman M. Cohen

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thesis advisor and teacher, Dr. Norman Cohen has been a source of inspiration since the beginning of this project. Dr. Cohen guided me patiently through the different stages of research, writing and editing. His personal teaching style, his commitment and love for Midrash, his perspective and analysis of sources, are all a model for me to follow. To thank Dr. Cohen for his advise on this thesis will not do justice to what I owe him. I apply to him what I learned from our Rabbis: "Eize Hu Rayo? Kol she patach lo techilah", "Who is your teacher? The one who opened [the way] for his beginning". Dr. Cohen opened for me the world of Midrash. I pray that as his "Talmid", as his student, I will be worthy of his teachings.

I will like to thank my parents who also "patchu li techilah", "guided me from the beginning", allowing me to be who I am now. At this moment I remember especially my father, of blessed memory, who would have been proud of this accomplishment. This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Phyllis Meyers. Her encouragement and support throughout this process are beyond what words of thanks can express. Since we met, and especially since our wedding, Phyllis's presence has been a blessing for me. My prayer is that together, we may be able to continue in Moses' steps when he was at the Burning Bush. May we be able to "see" what Moses "saw" and turn our lives to the service of God's will.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

One might ask why I chose the Burning Bush narrative as a focus for my Rabbinic Thesis? My first contact with this subject came when I was writing a term paper in a course conducted by Dr. Norman Cohen on Comparative Midrashic Anthologies. I was struck by the richness of the subject of the Burning Bush while analyzing just a few verses within these anthologies (Yalkut Shimoni and Midrash Ha Gadol). The Burning Bush narrative exemplified to me the highest levels of intimacy that could be developed in the ongoing relationship between human beings and God. This religious experience was not natural to me. I wanted to examine my personal relationship with God. By immersing myself in this Biblical narrative and being able to grasp what God demanded from Moses, as seen through the midrashic eyes of our rabbis, I might possibly learn about my own relationship with God.

Moses had responded to a divine call that transformed, not only his personal life, but the lives of others, Jews and non-Jews alike. When I read this narrative in the Bible, it seemed to me that Moses, dispite his ambivalences, ultimately was convinced that there was an important task to be done. He had to be involved personally in the transformation of the message he had received in order that others would benefit from it.

There were several questions which were implicit in the Burning Bush narrative and to which I wanted to find

answers. What does it take to change the life and basic orientation of a human being? How is it that a dialogue with God can compel an individual to turn his life and dedicate it fully to a cause? I believe that through the reading of this midrashic literature I can gain insights into these questions. Through the midrashic interpretations, I may be able to enter into a more personal dialogue with God.

The midrash encourages us to try to put ourselves in the place of Moses at the Burning Bush. We may discover through the midrashim that Moses was not alone at the Burning Bush. He represents all of us, and through studying about him, we have the opportunity to stand in the presence of God. His reactions, as recorded in the midrashic literature, may be our reactions. Moses' ambivalence may become ours. Moses' empathy and kindness or his ability to "see" may be ours as well.

The research of this topic went through several stages. At first I looked in reference collections to see whether there were enough sources available for this topic. The collections I consulted first were: Aaron Hyman's, HaTorah HaKetubah v'HaMesorah and Louis Ginzerg's Legends of the Jews.

Once I established the viability of the topic, I began the task of collecting the available midrashim. In order to accomplish this task, I copied each reference to the Burning

Bush narrative (Ex. 3:1-4:17) that I found quoted in the reference works by verse and by name of the midrash. In this manner, I accumulated the references in the rabbinic traditions to the Burning Bush narrative.

The next stage involved the gathering of the midrashim, reading and selection of the ones that where in any way interesting and informative. The selection process inevitably had a subjective character; but I believe that after reading the available midrashic literature on the Burning Bush narrative, the sources that I chose, represent, in their character, scope, theme and theology the broad concerns of its writers.

When a particular source seemed to me "quotable," I wrote it in English translation on a card. So that by the end of this stage I had approximately 180-200 reference cards. Besides these midrashim, I made note of parallel sources in which the same idea or midrash was quoted for purposes of footnoting or for making a comparison between an earlier and later version.

I then proceded to organize according to theme the midrashim I had collected. These were then integrated and consolidated into seven chapters. Before the writing process even began, a detailed outline was developed for each chapter.

At the same time that I was collecting midrashim on the Burning Bush, I began research on the Biblical scholarship

related to this theme. I concentrated on the Burning Bush narrative and what scholars cite as the "the prophetic call" literature.

I began this part of my research by checking reference works such as the "Elenchus Biblicus" and the "Religion Index Periodical." A computer search was done at New York University and libraries at the following institutions were checked: Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Columbia University, The Jewish Theological Seminary, and the New York Public Library (Jewish Section). Books and articles were gathered and through footnotes found in that material, I accessed other articles and books.

Once the writing stage began, I discovered that the more I wrote, the more I got closer to the midrashim I was analyzing and I was able to make more thematic connections. I hope that the final product reflects a thematic progression and the broad variety of rabbinic interpretation.

Chapter One, "A Survey of Scholarship on the Burning Bush Narrative," covers the different scholarly opinions regarding the scope, style, thematic divisions and source analysis of the Burning Bush narrative and the general form of the prophetic call. It points to a larger literary genre of "prophetic call" and establishes comparisons with and contrasts to other prophets. Special attention is devoted to the following themes: the sheep and the shepherd in the

Bible, the desert motif, and the use of fire. This chapter focuses on Ancient Near Eastern evidence of the tradition of the "sacred tree," pointing out that in other cultures, the tree was the place at which to establish an alliance. Finally, the reconstruction of "the name of God" and its meaning is surveyed in scholarly literature.

Chapter Two, "Midrashim on the Nature of the Bush Itself," deals with the physical as well as the symbolic characteristics and meaning of the Bush itself. It describes how the physical depiction of the Bush, its size, type of plant, its strength and weakness, its thorniness are eventually used by the midrashic authors to convey other properties of God, Israel and the redemptive process. The Bush is understood, among other themes, alternatively as the friend or foe of Israel, as the symbol of Israel's conditions and of Israel's vulnerability.

Chapter Three, entitled "The Fire of the Burning Bush," centers on the description of the fire and its symbolism. The fire is explained in a semi-naturalistic fashion. Its characteristics, as described by the rabbis, lead into its symbolic meanings. The fire can symbolize both God and human beings, past experiences of Israel as well as anticipating future ones. It can refer to wicked individuals as well as salvational experiences.

Chapter Four, "The Many Faces of Suffering," deals with the symbolism of the Burning Bush as it relates to the

suffering of Israel in Egypt and its physical and spiritual consequences. It describes the midrashic identification of God's suffering when Israel suffers and the lack of certainty of God's intervention as a saving power after the redemption from Egypt. Finally, from the Burning Bush, midrashic authors teach that despite the many times of Jewish suffering, Israel will ultimately gain spiritual redemption.

Chapter Five, entitled "Moses' Qualities as Prophet According to Midrashim on the Burning Bush Narrative," focuses on the qualities, that according to different midrashim, Moses had to possess in order to deserve being chosen by the divine. The un-written assumption is that God's choice was not left to chance. Therefore Moses is presented by midrashim alternatively as being humble, modest, secure, prepared for his task as a teacher or as being curious. Some sources portray Moses as initially impulsive and wanting power for himself. Finally, Moses was compared to other personalities of the Bible in order to establish his credentials from among great leaders like Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David, or in order to provide contrast with people like Nadab and Abihu.

Chapter Six, "Moses' Ambivilence Regarding the Acceptance of the Divine Mission," explores Moses' hesitations in accepting the divine call. The theological implications of this chapter can not be underestimated. The

relationship between God and human beings was established based on a certain autonomy of the individuals who were involved. By sharing Moses' insecurities about the task with which he was challenged, the midrashic authors gave us a model for reaffirming a covenental relationship. Finally, some midrashim point to Israel's ambivalences, not Moses', in accepting the divine call.

The final chapter, Chapter Seven, is entitled "At the Crossroads between the Past and the Future in Jewish History: The Burning Bush." This chapter describes how the Burning Bush is situated by midrashic authors at the crossroads between the past and the future of Jewish history. Although midrashim point to the past, linking the Burning Bush with the patriarchs or God's descents into the world starting with the creation of the world, the focus is on the future. They link the Burning Bush with the Sinai experience, with Torah, the land of Israel and ultimately with the Messiah and the world to come. By being more future oriented, midrashic writers are offering a distinct message regarding the experience of the Burning Bush. They imply that this event is connected to the ongoing history of the Jewish people.

In order to best understand the midrashic interpretations of the Burning Bush, it is advantageous to begin by examining the biblical background of the narrative. Several scholars have analyzed the text from varying

perspectives. These various scholarly approaches to the Burning Bush narrative will be discussed in Chapter One.

CHAPTER 1:

A SURVEY OF SCHOLARSHIP

ON THE BURNING BUSH NARRATIVE

A. THE LITERARY DIVISION OF THE BURNING BUSH EPISODE

This thesis is based on the Torah text of Exodus 3:1-4:17. In order to facilitate the reading of this text, I will reproduce it here:

CH.3. 1Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. 3Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" 4When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." 5And He said, "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. 6I am," He said, "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

7And the Lord continued, "I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their suffering. 8I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the region of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

9Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. 10Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt."

11But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?" 12And He said, "I will be with you; that I shall be your sign that it was I who sent you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain."

13Moses said to God, "When I come to the Israelites and say to them 'the God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" 14And God said to Moses, "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh." He continued, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites, 'Ehyeh sent me to you.'" 15And God said further to Moses, "Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob has sent me to you: This shall be My name for ever, This My appellation for all eternity.

16"Go and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them: The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to me and said, 'I have taken note of you and of what is being done to you in Egypt, and 17I have declared: I will take you out of the misery of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, to a land

flowing with milk and honey.' 18They will listen to you; then you shall go with elders of Israel to the king of Egypt and you shall say to him, 'The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, manifested Himself to us. Now therefore, let us go a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God.' 19Yet I know that the king of Egypt will let you go only because of a greater might. 20So I will stretched out My hand and smite Egypt with various wonders which I will work upon them; after that he shall let you go. 21And I will dispose the Egyptians favorably toward this people, so that when you go, you will not go away empty-handed. 22Each woman shall borrow from her neighbor and the lodger in her house objects of silver and gold, and clothing, and you shall put these on your sons and daughters, thus stripping the Egyptians."

CH.4. 1But Moses spoke up and said, "What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: The Lord sis not appear to you?" 2The Lord said to him, "What is that in your hand?" And he replied, "A rod." 3He said, "Cast it on the ground." He casted on the ground and it became a snake; and Moses recoiled from it. 4Then the Lord said to Moses, "Put out your hand and grasp it by the tail" -- he put out his hand and seized it, and it became a rod in his hand -- 5"that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, did appear to you."

6The Lord said to him further, "Put your hand into your bosom." He put his hand into his bosom; and when he took it out, his hand was encrusted with snowy scales! 7And He said, "Put your hand back into your bosom." -- He put his hand back into his bosom; and when he took it out of his bosom, there it was again like the rest of his body. -- 8"And if they do not believe you or pay heed to the first sign, they will believe the second. 9And if they are not convinced by both these signs and still do not heed you, take some water from the Nile and poured it on the dry ground, and it -- the water that you take from the Nile -- will turn to blood on the dry ground."

10But Moses said to the Lord, "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." 11And the Lord said to him, "Who gives man speech? Who makes him dumb of deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? 12Now go, and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct you what to say." 13But he said, "Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent." 14The Lord became angry with Moses, and He said, "Their is your brother Aaron the Levite. He, I now, speaks readily. Even now he is setting out to meet you, and he will be happy to see you. 15You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth -- I will be with you and with him as you speak, and tell both of you what to do -- 16and he shall speak for you to the people. Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him, 17And take with you this rod, with which you shall perform the signs."

Scholarly interest resides in trying to explain the limits of the story of the Burning Bush in the book of

Exodus. Noth has argued that the unit extends from Exodus 2:11-4:23. His justification is based on the fact that he sees the flight from Egypt and the return to Egypt as part of a whole. He objected to the shorter division of 3:1-4:16 on the basis of literary interpolation (Noth argued that 2.23a was originally joined to 4.19) and that this division is secondary in terms of the history of the traditions.[1]

Brevard Childs has objected to Noth's arguments on three counts: 1) No evidence can be brought to prove a literary connection between 2:23a ('A long time after that, the king of Egypt died') and 4:19 ("The Lord said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who sought to kill you are dead.") which is supported by the LXX which tried to harmonize the difficulties; 2) The style of the narrative in chapter 2 and 4 is not continuous; and 3) Noth's literary analysis was unduly influenced by his theory of the separate transmission of the Sinai and Exodus traditions.[2]

There is also scholarly disagreement over the end of the section. Driver thought that the unit extended from 3:1-6:1. In his mind there is no real break between Moses' call and the first encounter with Pharaoh in 5:1 ('Afterward Moses and Aaron went and saidto Pharaoh...Let My people

---

1. Quoted in Brevard S. Childs, The Book of Exodus, a Critical Theological Commentary (Louisville, 1974), p.51.
2. Childs, The Book of Exodus, Ibid.

go...').[3] Most scholars do see a difference, although they may disagree as to where the new section begins. According to Childs and Bantsch, a new section begins at 4:18, for Noth at 4:24 and others like Dillmann, Holzinger, Mc Neile, and Clamer believe it starts at 5:1.[4] George Pixley sees the division being marked by the notion of "liberation." Thus he extends the section from 3:1-4:31, which means that "the final organization under the divinely appointed leader" should be the main criteria which includes the preparation for a revolutionary movement.[5] Most contemporary commentaries have followed Childs's division, that is from Exodus 3:1-4:17.[6]

B. Stylistic and Thematic Analysis

Scholars note that there is a stylistic pattern in the Burning Bush narrative (as defined as 3:1-4:17) which is shown by the repetition of several verbal roots in a specific group of verses. In verses 2-7 of chapter 3 the root "to see" (r'h) appears seven times, in verses 10-15 the root "to send" (shlh) appears five times; in 4:1-9 the root "to believe" (amn) appears four times; in 4:10-17 the root

3. Ibid.
4. Childs, The Book of Exodus, p.52.
5. George Pixley, On Exodus, A Liberation Perspective (New York, 1987) p.16.
6. See, for example, Everett Fox, Genesis and Exodus (New York, 1990) p.252 and N. Sarna, Exodus Commentary (New York, 1991) p.13.

"to speak" (dbr) appears seven times and the word "mouth" (peh) appears seven times. These key terms suggest that there is in the narrative of the Burning Bush some literary unity within the section that we are analyzing.[7]

Besides this pattern of repetition of verbs, there are important phrases that recur as well. Childs points out that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who is mentioned in the beginning of the section under study (Ex. 3:6) is reintroduced in 3:15, 16 and 4:5. Similarly, the phrase "I will be with you" which occurs in 3:12, is repeated in 4:12 and 15. Verbs such as "to know" (3:7,19;4:14) and "to go" (3:10,16 and 4:12) are recurrent as well.

In this section of the Burning Bush narrative there are formal devices which tie the text together. God's speeches are relatively long compared to those of Moses; one of the reasons being the lack of response on the part of Moses (3:5-6). In contrast, Moses' speech is often short in length. One of the most evident devices in the narrative is the objections of Moses to the divine call.

These objections are five in number and are not necessarily connected in a logical progression (3:11; 3:13; 4:1; 4:10; 4:13). From Moses' perspective, each time an objection is met with an answer, another arises that is not

---

7. Scholars have pointed to this pattern of repetition. See M. Greenberg, Understanding Exodus (The Melton Research Center of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, 1969), p.102; U. Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus (Jerusalem, 1967), p.32 and B.Childs, op. cit. p.70.

linked to the previous one. Although he begins with a personal focus, by the end, Moses is able to contradict God and attribute the worst to the Israelite people. From God's perspective, each objection is met with a careful answer which underscores the divine reassurance. God will "be there" with him (3:12,14 and 4:12,15). Key phrases in this regard are "the God of your fathers" (3:6; 3:15; 3:16; 4:5) and "I know" (3:19). Another device is that each speech of God ends with God's urging Moses to action (3:10,16;4:12).

From a different perspective, G. Pixley has pointed out that the five objections serve to underscore the process of change that comes from a divine initiative. In Pixley's opinion, the promonarchical ideologues wish to teach the lesson that in order to be succesful, popular change needs a divine initiative.[8] Finally, another literary device in the text points to the writer's use of vocabulary that leads to a sentiment of anticipation. The divine responses not only address Moses' immediate concerns, but describe future events (3:12,18,21 and 4:9,15). This is a pattern of divine reassurance designed to overcome the prophet's initial resistance to fulfill his role.

---

8. G. Pixley, On Exodus, p. 27.

C. The Form of "Call" Narratives

The Burning Bush episode is part of a larger literary structure labelled by scholars as the prophetic "call narratives." Several prophetic calls have a similar structure. The call of Gideon (Jud. 6:11-17), of Jeremiah and (Jer. 1:14-10), and of Isaiah (Is. 6:1-13) are some examples of this type. In a seminal article subsequently quoted by most scholars, Dr. N. Habel distinguished six elements common to the "Call Narratives:" 1) The Divine Confrontation, 2) The Introductory Word, 3) The Commission, 4) The Objection, 5) The Reassurance, and 6) Sign.[9] Not all prophets who were called fall within this structure. The visions of Amos, as an example, lack the element of "the commission." The objection of Amos is not one of personal concern due to his own inadequacy, but rather a cry of intercession for Israel. Moreover, the Amos narrative lacks an accompanying "sign."

In relation to the call of Jeremiah, the text of Jer 1:4-10 is accepted generally as a unit. In this call, the third person used in Ex. 3 and Jud. 6 is turned into the first person. This switch shows the public commitment of the prophet to his call. In Jeremiah's call there are several elements of form and language that resemble Moses' call

---

9. N. Havel, "The Form and significance of the Call Narratives," Zeitschrift fur die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 77 (1965): 298.

(Jer. 1:6, "I don't know how to speak, For I am still a boy"[the prophet's resistance]; 1:8, "Have no fear of them, For I am with you to deliver you"[God's reassurance]).

Although Is 6, Ez. 1-3 and Is. 40 make explicit that the prophet is called from the midst of a heavenly council, in Jeremiah 23 the word "dbr" (word) is virtually synonymous with the "kol" (voice) that other prophets hear (Ez. 1:28, Is. 40 3-6, 6:4-8). The Introductory Word in Jer. 1:5a, "before ("b'terem") I formed you in the womb...", ("b'terem") shows the personal involvement of God and the motif of "preparation" which is typical in other call narratives. The Commission in v. 5b, "I have appointed you as a prophet to the nations," is linked to the Introductory Word. The usual verbs "shlh" (send) and "hlh" (go) are used in the subsequent answers of Yahweh. The Objection in v. 6, "Behold, I do not know how to speak for I am only youth," is similar to Moses' objection in Ex. 3:11 and 4:10. There is a tension between the prophet's will and that of God's.

The Reassurance in v. 7-8 in Jeremiah, "Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you," comes immediately prior to the prophetic assertion and acceptance of his mission. Finally, the Sign in v. 9-10, "Then Yahweh put forth His hand and touched my mouth" does not use the technical term "ot" (sign) but is functionally the same as in the call of Gideon. The "Call Narrative" therefore emphasizes that the prophet will be able to change the

course of history through words.

In the case of Moses' call, Habel's outline is persuasively accurate. The Divine Confrontation in Ex. 3:1-3 and 4a, "And the angel of Yahweh appeared to him in a flame of fire...and Moses said, 'I will turn aside'..." shows lines of similarities with the call of Gideon. Moses, the shepherd, encounters God during his routine activities. Both accounts introduce the story with the formula, "Vayera malach Adonai." The Introductory Word in v. 4b-9 is "God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses...I am the God of your father'..." The key Introductory Word in v. 6 defines this relationship; the emphatic "anochi," -- "I am the God of your father," makes the relationship personal. The Commission in v. 10, "And now ("ve'ata") go, I send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people out of Egypt," emphasizes the urgency of the call.

The technical verbs "hlh" and "shlh" appear in this section. The specific details are announced here, just as they are in Jud. 6:14. It is clear that the function of Moses is not only that of a mediator, but that of a savior as well. The Objection in v. 12a, "And Moses said to God, 'Who am I, ("mi anochi") that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?'", shows Moses trying to reject his call as a messenger and mediator. The expression "Mi anochi" (Who am I?) parallels the "Bi Adoni" of Gideon (Judg. 6:13).

The Reassurance in v. 12a, "And He said, 'I shall indeed be with you,'" empowers Moses to execute his role. The expression "Ki ehyeh imach" ('I will be with you') is identical to the one in Jud 6:16 ('I will be with you'). Within this category, the expression "Ehyeh asher ehyeh" ("I am that I am") has to be considered as reassurance of the Divine Presence. This reassurance eventually changes the life of the prophet.

The Sign in v. 12, "And this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt you shall serve God upon this mountain," is of an unusual character since it is to be fulfilled in the future. Here, the sign is not only a demonstration of God's presence but serves as well the Goal of Moses' commission. This sign is not an individual one; it involves all of Israel.

Having analyzed in detail the call narratives of Jeremiah and Moses, and having compared them with other prophets, Havel arrives at the conclusion that the classical prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and II Isaiah developed their call traditions based upon the calls of Moses and Gideon.[10]

One important question that needs to be asked is whether there is any precedent within the history of Israel from which this pattern of call was inherited. Again Havel

---

10. Ibid, p.316.

suggests the commissioning of Abraham's servant in Gen. 24 as a logical precedent. In this narrative, there is a sequence of presentation which suggests a specific form of commissioning a special ambassador in the service of his master (Introductory word, v.34-36; Commission, v.37-38 ['Now my master made me swear...You shall not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites in whose land I dwell']; Objection, v.39 ['What if the woman does not follow me?']; Reassurance, v. 40-41 ['The Lord...will send His angel with you and make your errand successful...']; Sign, v. 42-48).

After analyzing Gen 24:35-48 in terms of the basic structure of call narratives, Havel arrives at the conclusion that this repetition can not be coincidental. Later authors and prophets must have used this ancient material to highlight the function of the individual who was called. As Gen 24:35-48 concerns this public proclamation of the call narrative, later calls are used to announce that Yahweh commissioned his prophet as God's representative. Havel concludes: "Thus the word of the call narrative gives the individual's credentials as a prophet, messenger and ambassador from the heavenly council. This word summarizes the ultimate commission from the Master.[11]

We have seen that one of Havel's categories for the call narrative is the Objection. According to Childs, the

---

11. Ibid, p.323.

narrative of Ex. 3:1-4:17 in its present form shows that the series of objections were appended later to allow divergent traditions to be incorporated. Childs calls the series of objections "a portrayal of resistance" whose goal is to show that ..."there remains a human initiative and will which, far from being crushed, remains a constitutive element of the one who is being sent."[12]

Moses' first objection (Ex. 3:11) shows how abrupt the call is. The prophet is just as overwhelmed as other prophets were with their prophetic calls (Jer. 1:6; I Sam. 9:21; Jud. 6:15). In the second objection (Ex. 3:13-15), the question can be posed: Was Moses' concern prudent or did it show the exaggerated concern of a person who wants to reject, at any cost, the divine call? The third objection ("But they will not trust me and will not hearken to my voice" Ex. 4:1) shows not only the probable disbelief of the people, but also shows the personal need of the prophet to be convinced of God's power. The fourth objection ("Please my Lord, no man of words am I, not from yesterday, not from the day before, not since you have spoken to your servant, for heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue am I" Ex. 4:10) is not directly linked to Moses' previous concern. It seems to emphasize the traditional prophetic concern regarding the use of the "word" (Jer 1). In the fifth objection, ("Please, O Lord, make someone else your agent" Ex 4:13),

---

12. B.Childs, op. cit. p.73.

Moses did not give any reason for his refusal. It is at this point that the divine anger is expressed; at the same time a concession is made. Aaron is appointed as Moses' spokesman (Ex 4:14). The commission is given to Moses with no opportunity for Moses to respond further.

In summary, the call narrative in Ex. 3:1-4:17 is part of a larger genre in biblical literature. Specific elements within the "call" have been analyzed and compared to other prophetic calls, including the prophet's resistance pointing to the human input within the narrative.

D. Source Analysis of the Burning Bush Text

Scholars are in agreement that there are three strands of sources in the Burning Bush narrative. Some of the criteria for the division of source material lies in the interchange of the divine name and the designation of a different name for the place of the theophany (J speaks of Sinai and the bush, while E speaks of Horeb). The J strand includes the appearance of an angel, while E emphasizes God's calling. Although there is agreement on the three strands (including the Deuteronomist), still the reconstruction of the text is very much in dispute, leading scholars to espouse several theories of reconstruction.

According to B. Renaud in an article on the prophetic figure of Moses in Exodus 3:1-4:17, the Yahwist source is

limited to describing the transmission of a salvation oracle, while the Elohist is the first to use the scheme of a call. However, in this instance it serves as a call to action, not as a mission to preach. The Deuteronomist, who according to Renaud is the final redactor, combines and completes the two earlier traditions, taking over the scheme of the Elohist call narrative and adding to it a specifically prophetic content. The prophetic content is of a particular type, that of an agent endowed with the active power of the word of God who directs history and becomes the instrument of its realization.[13]

B. Childs quotes two extreme interpretations of the Burning Bush narrative. The detailed analysis of W. Richter seems too "hair splitting" for Childs, who thinks that Richter has atomized the text in an unduly fashion. For example, he eliminates the appearance of the angel of Yahweh in v. 2 as being sequentially out of place in order to reconstruct a "smooth text."[14] On the other extreme, M. Buber wanted to defend the unity of the section at the expense of the elimination of alleged accretions in the text. Buber wrote: "The section which deals with the Revelation at the Burning Bush (Exod 3:1-4:17) cannot be regarded as a compilation from varying sources and documents. All that is needed is to remove a few additions,

13. B. Renaud, "La Figure Prophetique de Moise en Exode 3:1-4:17" Reveu Biblique 93 #4 (1986): 510-534.
14. Brevard Childs, The Book of Exodus, p.52-53.

and there appears before us a homogeneous picture; any apparent contradiction can be accounted for by the fact that the text has not yet been fully understood."[15] Cassuto also defended the traditional view in which the interchange of the divine name is seen as a purposeful device of one author.

Childs agrees with Havel in that in spite of the presence of different literary sources, he attributes more of a unity to the present text than has been recognized before. But Childs still maintains the existence of two sources.[16]

Another theory is that of N. Wyatt. Wyatt rejects the assumption that we have an E tradition from the ninth or eighth century BCE coupled with a J version of the tenth century BCE. He discusses the E tradition as lacking homogeneity. Most attention was centered on v. 13-15. These verses were interpreted as being an expansion of an older form of the tradition, since Moses' question in v. 13 elicits at least three seperate responses (v. 14a, v 14b, v. 15), each of which could stand on its own.[17]

Wyatt supports a later dating of the section and that is why he favors J.P. Hyatt's theory. According to Hyatt,

---

15. M.Buber, Moses. The Revelation and the Covenant (New York, 1958), p.39.
16. Ibid, p.53.
17. N. Wyatt, "The Development of the Tradition in Exodus 3," Zeitschrift fur die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 91 (1979): 437-442.

the later date could be defended based on the kind of theological idea underlying v. 14 which is unparalleled in pre-exilic literature and fits the exilic one with the teachings of Deuteo-Isaiah.[18] N. Wyatt then asks about the dating of the section: What is the oldest form of the tradition before us? His answer is that not only the formula in v. 15 ('...The Lord the God of your fathers...') but also that of v. 6 ('I am, He said, the God of your father...') are secondary additions to the text which are dated from the exilic period, when diverse strands of patriarchal traditions were woven together.

In analyzing the J tradition, Wyatt admits that according to convention, J antedates the E account. For Wyatt, however, there is an earlier E tradition that was used by J. The J story therefore is the product of life in the time of the exile inspired by an earlier E tradition but not bound by it.[19] From this source reconstruction, Nicolas Wyatt tries in another article to recover the original meaning of the Burning Bush narrative according to the original circumstances in which the story took shape. He argues that as long as the story is understood as a product of the history of the pre-settlement era, the theological message will not be understood correctly.[20]

---

18. Ibid, p.438.
19. Ibid, p.441.
20. N. Wyatt, "The significance of the Burning Bush", Vetus Testamentum 36 #3 (July 1986): 361-365.

Wyatt suggests a different historical exilic background. For him, the J story contains two features: the mysterious bush which burns and is not consumed, and its location on "holy ground." In order to explain the image of a burning bush, Wyatt is ready to ascribe to it "symbolic meaning" (as the rabbis in the Midrash will do later) based on the symbolic thinking of the Ancient Near East at large. He proves that there are expressions of Near Eastern cultures in which a tree could be considered a "tree of life." In ancient Temple symbolism, the tree represented the center, the axis mundi, from which flows all vitality.[21]

Wyatt's hypothesis, which is based on the description of symbolism to the Burning Bush and the desert, is expressed in the following way:

> "For an exilic writer could hardly fail to be aware of this tradition, and to recognize that, shorn of syncretistic associations, the tree of life growing in the wilderness was a striking image with which to convey an important theological message to his contemporaries and fellow-exiles. It represented a message of hope in the midst of despair, and the promise of life in an environment of sterility and death."[22]

In relation to the characteristic of the Bush burning, Wyatt defines the motif of "light shining" to suggest a torch or a candelabra. The theophany for him has cultic associations relating to the lampstands ("menorot") of the

---

21. See chapter 3 for an expansion on this theme.
22. Ibid., p.363.

Temple. Its arboreal form is confirmed (Num. 7:1-4)[23] in the instructions for the post-exilic reconstruction of these lampstands (Ex. 25:31 ff; 37:17 ff). Wyatt then affirms that "The Temple menora represents a "perpetual theophany," and this is surely the meaning of the unconsumed bush in Exodus."[24]

Finally Wyatt offers an hypothesis for the understanding of the Burning Bush as a whole. Moses, who had grown in importance as an archetypical figure during the exilic period, represents the exilic man. He is in the wilderness, at the edge of the world, removed from its center (Jerusalem). The wilderness is a symbol of Babylon and Yahweh brings even there hope for the exiles who are in despair. Yahweh is no longer conceived in limited territorial terms, but now represents God's universal power. Wyatt concludes: "Such a message must have been of great comfort to people whose traditional beliefs could not seriously accommodate the misery of deportation and the destruction of Jerusalem."[25]

---

23. See W. Wirgin, "The Menorah as Symbol in Judaism," IEJ 12 (1962): 141 who observes that in the imagery of Zechariah, an intentional transfer of the symbolism of the olive tree that 'never dies' represents the tree of life which is parallel to the lamp which never goes out. Quoted by Wyatt in note 13.
24. N. Wyatt, op. cit., p.364.
25. Ibid.

E. The Sheep and Shepherd Motif in the Bible

In the Burning Bush narrative, Moses is described as shepherding the flock of Yitro his father in law. That is the activity that Moses was engaged in when coming to Horeb, the mountain of God. There he saw the flame of fire coming out of a bush which was not consumed.

We must ask if there is a meaning to the activity of 'shepherding' in the Bible so that we can better understand the context of the narrative. The psalmist says:

> Come let us bow down and kneel,
> bend the knee before the Lord our maker,
> for He is our God,
> and we are the people He tends,
> the flock in His care. (Ps 95:6-7)

Yahweh is presented as the creator of Israel while Israel is perceived of as the sheep under God's care. According to Ps 79:13, both the sheep and the pasture are described as belonging to God. In Jer 23:1 Yahweh is not viewed as the shepherd of Israel; the shepherds are actually the leaders of Israel ("Ah, shepherds who let the flock of My pasture stray and scatter! declares the Lord", Jer 23:1). Moses compares the congregation of Yahweh to a flock of sheep, and his successor to a shepherd (Num 27:16-17). According to Moses, the shepherd is the one who can lead the people of Israel to the promised land after him.

Sometimes the shepherd had to protect his sheep from wild beasts, as David did while he was tending his father's

sheep (I Sam 17:34-36). Similar to the confession of Jacob (Gen 31:38-40), the shepherd had to watch over the flocks day and night so that they would not be lost or stolen.

The image that God, not an individual, will be the shepherd of Israel is found in the prophet Isaiah:

> Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
> In His arm He will gather the lambs,
> And carry them in his bosom;
> He will gently lead the nursing ewes. (Is 40:10-11)

The imagery of Yahweh as the shepherd of Israel is also associated with the Exodus:

> But He led forth His own people like sheep,
> And guided them in the wilderness like a flock; And He led them safely, so that they did not fear; But the sea engulfed their enemy. (Ps 78:52-53)

We have pointed to two main interpretations of the theme of shepherding and being a shepherd. On the one hand, shepherds can be the leaders of the people of Israel who will protect their flock, Israel, from external dangers. On the other hand, we have seen that Yahweh as well is portrayed as a shepherd who protects His flock.

From this analysis we can conclude that the image of shepherd and sheep points to images of the protection and the feeding of the people of Israel done either by Yahweh's appointed leaders or by Yahweh Himself.

F. The Evolution of the "Desert Motif" and the "Sacred Tree" Traditions

The Burning Bush episode is related to what scholars call the "desert motif" in Biblical studies. The controversy lies in the opposite theories scholars have espoused as to the significance of the "desert" in Israelite religion. On one end of the spectrum, scholars like K. Budde wrote about "the nomadic ideal in the Old Testament."[26] He connects the Rechabites with the Kenites (from a genealogical note in I Chron 2:55) and affirms that Israelite religion emerged from Kenite Yahwism. Other scholars, especially W.F. Flight, build on this theory and espouse that the motif of nomadic life built in the desert was Israel's ideal of life.[27]

These theories would emphasize the desert as the locale for divine revelation and for Yahweh's love for Israel. Shemaryahu Talmon puts forth a different view. He sees as more important the theme of "disobedience and punishment" than that of the "desert motif" in Biblical literature. According to him, the theme of "transgression and punishment" is more central than the "revelation in the desert."[28] Talmon regards the desert as a passage to the

---

26. K.Budde, New World 4 (1895): 726-745.
27. J.W.Flight, "The Nomadic Idea and Ideal," Journal of Biblical Literature 42, (1923): 158-226.
28. Shemaryahu Talmon, "The 'Desert Motif' in the Bible and in Qumran literature", Biblical Motifs. Origins and Transformations, edited by Alexander Altman (Cambridge, 1966), p.48.

ultimate biblical ideal of the conquest and the restoration of the Temple. Talmon sees a significant shift of orientation in Biblical thought, from the generation of the exodus who saw the desert as a place for purification (the Burning Bush is included in this category) where the theme of divine benevolence is emphasized, to a post-exilic Israelite view which sees the desert less in purgatory qualities than in new images of promise and hope. The desert motif in this view is closely identified with the Davidic covenant which eventually led to the "remnant" motif in the Qumran ideology.[29] Ultimately, Talmon argues that the desert motif which the Burning Bush episode is described evolved from a place which was seen as a refuge from persecution to an image of a period of purification and preparation for the achievement of the new goal which was the conquest and the building of the Temple.[30]

The Burning Bush as the "tree of life" has a long tradition in Ancient Near Eastern literature. The image of a tree was conceived of as an image of fecundity placed on tombs or sarcophagi in Egypt.[31] Trees appear in scenes of animal sacrifice in Phoenician poems as well as in Syrio-Hittites and Assyrian ones. In these cases, it is possible

---

29. Ibid., p.54.
30. Ibid., p.62. For a broader understanding of the 'desert motif'in ancient cultures, see: Alfred Haldar, The Notion of the Desert in Sumero-Accadian and West Semitic Religions, (Leipzig, 1950).
31. Z.Mayani, L'arbre sacre et le rite de l'alliance chez les Anciens Semites (Paris, 1935): 16-20.

to affirm a certain universality of the motif based on certain agricultural rites.[32]

The sacred tree was a place to which it was deemed desirable to be close. God's and trees were interrelated. In Canaan, Ashera and its Babylonian equivalent, Ishtar, were considered images of the "mother" par excellence. These ancient gods were shown as a woman accompanied by a lion whose heads were depicted with a tree in the middle of their faces.[33]

Sacred trees where identified as well with deities. The origin of the Canaanite god Baal-Berit is traced by Mayani to the town of Shechem which was an important center for the cult of trees. Mayani argues that in pre-Israelite times a sacred tree was the principal divinity of the town.[34] The god Tammouz in Syrio-Sumerian cultures resided in the center of a large tree. The Assyrian god related to the sun was called Assur. It is mentioned in a cultic context that this god had an affinity with a tree which is thought by a scholar to be a Cypress.[35] There are Babylonian cylinders which reproduce images of gods with the figure of a tree.[36]

The tree in ancient cultures was the place at which to establish an alliance. This symbolism was found in Cyprus,

---

32. Ibid., pp.21-24.
33. Ibid., p.34.
34. Ibid., p.54.
35. Ibid., pp.58-59.
36. Ibid., p. 61 for a reproduction of this figure.

Assyria, the Semitic Orient and Palestine. This ritual seems to have universal similarities. In an Accadian tablet dated from the seventh century BCE we see two people, one with a beard the other without one, facing each other as if in conversation, with a tree on one side and a pigeon above them.[37] In another depiction, we can see a crowned woman emerging from a tree while at the same time two individuals seem to be dancing around it.[38]

The evolution of the desert motif and the one of the sacred tree in Ancient Near Eastern cultures give us the historical background of which the biblical tradition of the Burning Bush was a part.

G. The Use of Fire

The use of fire fulfilled the basic necessities of human life (warmth, light, cooking). At the same time, however, it had the potential to be used for destruction (waging war). In a religious context, fire played a large role in cult, myth and symbolic speech. In ancient cultures, religious rituals made a distinction between the purer "perpetual fire" and the "new fire" which was kindled with great awe.[39]

---

37. Ibid., p.81.
38. Ibid., p.85.
39. For a broader understanding of the use and the symbolism of fire in ancient cultures, see "Fire" in Encyclopedia of Religion, Mircea Eliade editor in chief (New York, 1986.

In the Bible, fire is used as an instrument of purification, but also of ordeal, destruction and punishment. Fire is used as well in very concrete and figurative ways. We see the important use of fire in biblical theophanies: The covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:17), the divine appearance in the burning bush (Ex 3:2 ff), Yahweh leading Israel by the pillar of fire by night (Ex 13:21-22;14:24; Num 9:15-16; Dt 1:33), and Yahweh's appearance in fire on Mount Sinai (E.x 19:18;24:17; Dt. 4:11-36;5:4-26).

Fire was used in several ways in Israelite worship. A perpetual fire burnt in the Temple, a perpetual fire for burning sacrifices was maintained on the altar, thus showing the continuous presence of God, a fire was used for roasting sacrifices for human consumption, and a fire for burning incense was placed so that the smoke diffused throughout the shrine (Ex29:18, Lev 16:13).[40]

Fire was also used to express divine judgement on sin. Thus, Nadab and Abihu are punished for offering "strange fire" to Yahweh (Lev 10:1). In the majority of occasions, fire is used as an instrument of punishment and destruction. Wickedness is compared sometimes to fire (Is. 65:5, Hos 7:6) and punishable by consumption by fire (Gen 19:24, Lev 10:2, Josh 7:15).

---

40. See the article on "Fire" in the Encyclopedia Judaica (Jerusalem, Israel, 1971) vol 6, p.1303.

Since fire is used for the theophany in the Burning Bush narrative, it often served as a jumping off point for the authors of midrashic literature to expand on the common associations of "fire" within the Bible.

H. The NAME of the God of Moses

Discussion of the meaning and origin of the name of God centers in the Burning Bush episode on the biblical verses of Ex. 3:13-15:

> Moses said to God, "When I come to the Israelites and say to them The God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they ask me, What is His name? what shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh." He continued, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites, Ehyeh sent me to you." And God said further to Moses, "Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you: This shall be My name forever, this My appelation for all eternity."

Different scholarly opinions, theories and hypothees have been advanced in order to understand these verses.

Albrecht Alt proposed new means to understand the pre-history of Israel's traditions. Against Wellhausen's idealistic school of thought, Alt thought of Israel's religion as a more sophisticated one. For him the text of Ex 3:13-15 claims a continuity between the religion of the

Fathers ("when I come to the people Israel and say to them, 'the God of your fathers sent me to you.' What shall I say to them?..." Ex. 3:13) and the later Yahwistic faith of Israel ("Again God said to Moses, 'Thus you will say to the people Israel, Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob sent me to you; this is my name forever..." Ex. 3:15). But to the historian, these statements show an evolution between two stages of historical development.[41]

Cross also points out that in the priestly tradition of Ex. 6:2-3 there is a similar trend: "God said to Moses, 'I am Yahweh. I revealed myself to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El Shadday, but was not known to them by my name Yahweh.'"[42]

In a different direction, Cross's own theory asserts that the name "Yahweh" was originally a cultic name of El, the creation deity. He asserts that the name Yahweh is a primitive divine name which appears in liturgical epithets, in letters from the seventh century BCE from Lachish, in the Mesa Stone (ninth century BCE) and in Amorite personal names found in the Mari texts.[43]

In these Mari texts, the form "yahwi" and "yahu" appear, which will be the Hebrew equivalent of "yihye".

---

41. Frank Moore Cross,Jr., "Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs," Harvard Theological Review 55 (1962):225-227.
42. Ibid., p.227.
43. Ibid., pp.252-253.

Therefore, the name Yahweh could be understood as the causative imperfect of the Amorite-Proto-Hebrew verb '"hwy" which means "to be." On this basis, Cross attempts to reconstruct the formula that appears in Ex. 3:14, "ehye aser ehye." Cross proposes the later of three readings of "yahwe asher yahwe" which is based upon the Ancient near Eastern texts. Chronologically going backwards, Cross follows the progression to an earlier reconstruction as "yahwi du yahwi," and then to the earliest stage which looks at Ugaritic literature for the meaning of "du yahwi" as "du yakaninu" ("He who creates").[44] According to Cross, since "du yahwi" was an epithet of "El," the final reconstruction of the Hebrew "ehye asher ehye" will be "el du yahwi" (the god El who creates).

B. Childs remained critical of Cross' reconstruction. In Childs' opinion, Cross failed to explain adequately the presence of the first person form in the formula; "At best the theory remains highly tentative because of the lack of direct evidence to support the several hypothetical projections."[45] Child' own view of the meaning of the divine name takes an alternative path by suggesting that we should ..."take seriously Israel's own tradition when it interprets the divine name in a manner which is in striking discontinuity with the Ancient Near Eastern parallels."[46]

---

44. Ibid., p.255.
45. B.Childs, The Book of Exodus, p.63.
46. Ibid., p.64.

In contrast to Cross who sees certain continuity between the god "El" and "Yahweh," Childs sees in the Yahweh cult the possibility of a new meaning given by Israel.

We have mentioned before that some modern scholars interpreted these sources to mean that Moses adopted the name of the cult of Yahweh from the Kenites and Midianites.[47] According to Sigmund Mowinkel ..."it is illegitimate to conclude from this that in pre-Mosaic times the Kenites and or the Midianites were the only worshipers of Yahweh. At least just as legitimate is the conclusion that the name of Yahweh was known to all North-Sinaitic tribes, and that they all took part in his annual feast."[48] For Mowinckel, the fact that the Yahweh cult was shared with other peoples is not of central importance. What really matters is the distinct meaning ascribed by the Israelites to Yahweh. According to Mowinckel, Ex 3:16 reveals Moses' new comprehension: "Moses at once understands that the mysterious words refer to the name of Yahweh, and also that the god who speaks to him from the burning bush and can reveal the hidden meaning of the Name, must certainly be Yahweh himself, and such a revelation is sufficient proof that Yahweh has sent him."[49]

We have analyzed several scholarly theories that try to

---

47. See p. 29-30.
48. Sigmund Mowinckel, "The Name of the God of Moses", HUCA 32 (1961):124-125.
49. Ibid., p.126.

provide an interpretation of the divine name in Ex 3. This theme is the most researched one by scholars in relation to the Burning Bush narrative. We will have to see if the authors of yhe midrash had similar concerns that modern scholars express regarding this issue.

CHAPTER 2:

MIDRASHIM ON THE NATURE OF THE BUSH ITSELF

A. The Physical Description of the Burning Bush

The description of the Burning Bush in the Bible is quite sparse. The small number of verses descriptive of the Bush parallels its diminutive physical stature in the minds of the midrashic authors. It also serves to shift the reader's focus away from the Bush itself and onto its symbolic qualities instead. The first three verses of Exodus 3 give the fullest physical description of the Bush:

> Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" (Ex 3:1-3)

The usage of the word "bush" ("s'neh") in Exodus 3:2-4 is only paralleled in the Bible by a reference in Deut. 33:16 on the occasion of Moses' blessing to the Israelites before he died ("With the bounty of the earth and its fullness, And the favor of the Presence in the Bush. May these rest of the head of Joseph, On the crown of the elect of his brothers").

Since the biblical text itself gives few clues to the importance of the use of a bush as the instrument of divine revelation to Moses, Philo adds to this sparse description.

Philo is one of the first of the post-biblical authors who expands the text. In his work, De Vita Mosis, Philo wrote: "[Moses]...found himself at a glen where he saw a most astounding sight. There was a bramble bush, a thorny sort of plant, and of the most weakly kind, which, without anyone's setting it alight suddenly took fire..."[50]

Philo therefore emphasizes the thorny nature of this plant, but also adds another characteristic; that of weakness. In another section of this same work, Philo wrote: "The bramble, as I have said, is a very weak plant. Yet it is prickly and will wound if one do but touch it."[51] Philo's purpose in describing the physicality of the Bush directly leads to his allegorical interpretations. This will be covered in more detail further along in the sections regarding the symbolism of the Bush and the symbolism of the fire.

In one case, a non-believer asked Rabbi Joshua bar Korhah, "Why did God choose a lowly thorn bush from which to speak to Moses?" The Rabbi's answer to him was, "It was done to teach you that no place was devoid of God's presence, not even a thorn bush."[52] Questioning God's choice in using such a diminutive bush is prevalent in the midrash. The Mechilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai states: "Why didn't the

---

50. Philo, De Vita Mosis, The Loeb Classical Library edited by T.E. Page (London, 1935) vol.6, I, 65.
51. Ibid., I, 69.
52. Shemot Rabbah, II, 5; Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah, 8:3.

divine voice speak to Moses from the heavens above or from mountain pinnacles? Or from the tops of mighty cedars? Yet God chose to lower Himself in order to speak from the Bush. Of this it is written, "A man's pride shall bring him low; but he that is of a humble spirit shall attain honor" (Prov. 29:23). There is no tree lower than a thorn bush, and therefore it is written, 'Whatever the Lord pleases to do, that He has done, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and in the lowest places" (Ps. 135:6).[53] The lowly, small bush is used by the Mechilta to illustrate divine freedom. God is free to reveal Himself in any place He chooses. Therefore the choice of a place for the revelation does not need to be majestic.

A semi-scientific explanation is offered by another author in order to explain why the Bush was not consumed. "The fire did not consume the bush, for the abundance of water in the ground around the bush, water without which the bush could not have grown there, kept the fire from taking hold".[54]

Another physical description of the Bush leads a midrashic author to link it to redemption. R. Nahman son of R. Samuel b. Nahman said: "Some trees produce one leaf, some two or three; the myrtle, for instance, produces three because it is called a thick tree (Lev. 23:40), but the

---

53. Mechilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, Exodus ch. 3:8.
54. Tanna Debe Eliyyahu, Pirkei Ha-Yeridot, ch. 2.

thorn bush has five leaves. God said to Moses: 'Israel will not be redeemed but through the merit of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and because of your merit and the merit of Aaron.'"[55] The physical description of the Bush is linked to five people; four of whom are our forefathers and the remaining person ("zechutcha") is the individual listener\ reader of the midrash . In this sense, everyone plays an active role in the redemptive process.

The Yalkut Shimoni, unlike the sources quoted above, is not interested in the physical description of the Bush. The few times that it mentions it, quoting from Midrash Tanchuma Buber, it justifies the divine election of a low bush full of thorns based on the biblical verse in Ps. 91:15 ("When He calls on Me, I will answer him; I will be with him in distress; I will rescue him and make him honored").[56] The Yalkut Shimoni wrote: "Why 'from the Bush' and not any other tree? God answered, 'I will be with him in distress.'"[57] A similar trend can be concluded from the texts quoted by the Midrash Ha-Gadol.[58]

In summary, midrashic interpretations of the physical properties of the Bush center around its size, the type of plant, its strength or weakness, its ability to wound with its thorniness, and the existence of water around its base

---

55. Shemot Rabbah 2:5, see also 1:34.
56. Yalkut Shimoni, vol.1, Remez 167 quoting Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Shemot #12.
57. Ibid.
58. See Midrash HaGadol, to Ex. 3:2.

in order to contain its fire. These physical attributes were used in midrashic literature to convey other properties of God, Israel, and the redemptive process.

B. The Symbolism of the Bush

After God chose the Bush to be the place for the theophany, the ground upon which the Bush grew was also considered sacred. Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer explains this phenomenon by the change of the name of the place where God descended. From being originally called Mount Horeb, it was later referred to as "the mountain of God." In fact, the potential for sacredness was expanded to the entire region. This transformation is interpreted by the word play between "s'neh" and "Sinai".[59]

The symbolism associated with the qualities of the Bush are connected to similar qualities of the people of Israel. According to Rabbi Johanan, Israel, like the Bush, protects itself from hostile outside forces. Just as the thorns of a bush act as a protective fence around a garden, so, too, do the righteous among Israel protect the world from many troubles and sorrows.[60]

However, an additional comparison between the Burning Bush and the people of Israel adds to the motif of the merit

---

59. Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, ch. 41.
60. Ibid.

of the righteous of Israel. The Bush is compared to a rosebush that is able to produce both roses and thorns. Israel follows this pattern, being able to produce both righteous people (roses) and evil people (thorns). Like roses, which are considered the essence of the rosebush, the righteous are considered the lasting essence of their people.[61]

An additional metaphor for the thorn motif is its application to Israel's present condition of suffering. Philo wrote: "All this is a description of the nation's condition as it then stood, and we may think of it as a voice proclaiming to the sufferers: 'Do not lose heart, your weakness is your strength, which can prick, and thousands will suffer from its wounds.'"[62]

Not only does the midrash use the Bush to symbolize Israel in her suffering, but the Bush was associated as well with the ones who suffered for no apparent reason. Thus Philo wrote, "For the burning bramble was a symbol of those who suffered wrongly..."[63] It is important to notice Philo's tendency to universalize the lessons one can learn from the biblical text. In Philo's mind, the symbolism of the Bush did not point just to Israel who suffered, but to anybody who suffered.

---

61. Ibid.
62. Philo, De Vita Mosis I, 69.
63. Philo, De Vita Mosis, I, 67.

A different midrashic interpretation underscores the fragility of Israel's existence, but with an uplifting moral. Israel is compared to a bird that is trapped in the thorns of the bush:

> Rabbi Judah ben Shalom said: "Just as a bird does not feel pain when it flies into a thorn-bush, but when it flies out its wings are torn to pieces, so when Abraham came to Egypt nobody noticed him, but when he departed, the Lord smote Pharaoh with plagues."[64]

This midrash points to the entrapment of Israel in Egypt. Just as a bird descends to sit on a branch of a bush but gets trapped within its thorns, so too did Israel. They descended into Egypt in order to benefit from its plenty and became enslaved over time. In spite of the suffering, Israel moved on. The trap, although painful, was ultimately not deadly. Just as Egypt was punished by God, other oppressors of Israel will be made to suffer the consequences of their evil actions too.

"The thorn bush is the nations of the earth who are like thorns and prickles."[65] Here Egypt is not alone in being seen as an aggressor against Israel. Previously it was mentioned that the world would be protected by the fence of Israel.[66] However, in this midrash, the symbolism is reversed. Now all the nations of the world are seen as hostile to the people of Israel.

---

64. Shemot Rabbah 2:5.
65. Tanna Debe Eliyahu, Pirkei Ha-Yeridot, ch. 2.
66. Shemot Rabbah 2:5.

The concern with hostile nations continued with another form of hostility, e.g., idolatry. Previously, the Bush was identified with Egypt and other oppressors. In one midrash the thorns and thistles of the Bush are symbols for idolators.[67] In yet another midrash, this struggle is exemplified in the following way:

> Why did God choose to speak to Moses from a simple thorn bush in the desert? It is because the thorn bush was never used or misused as an object of worship; it was pure, in that the nations of the world do not use it for idolatry.[68]

The Burning Bush symbolizes the uniqueness of God's revelation to the people of Israel. It was important that the message was transmitted in a manner completely disassociated with other religious practices.

The Bush needed water in order to survive. Biblical commentators have often equated Torah with water. Just as the Bush needs water for its survival, so, too, Israel needs Torah for its survival.[69] Here is another midrash that compares Torah to water:

> Just as water is a source of life for the world, so the Torah is a source of life for the world. Just as water restores the soul, so does the Torah; Just as water purifies man from

---

67. Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, ch. 50.
68. Midrash Ha-Gadol to Exodus 3:2, Mechilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai to Exodus 3:2.
69. B.T. Baba Kama 17a, 82b, Avodah Zarah 5b, Mechilta de Rabbi Ishmael, ch.1, B.T. Taanit 7a, Bereshit Rabbah 41:9, Shemot Rabbah 2:5, Devarim Rabbah 7:3, and Kohelet Rabbah 11:1. For a listing of more sources on this theme, see commentary note in Shemot Rabbah 2:5.

> uncleanness, so the Torah cleanses an unclean man from his uncleanness; Just as water has no taste unless one is thirsty, so the Torah has no taste unless one labors at it; Just as water leaves a high place and flows to a low one, so the Torah leaves one whose spirit is proud and cleaves to one whose spirit is lowly; Just as water makes plants grow, so the words of the Torah nurture everyone who labors over them as they require.[70]

Water was necessary for the Bush, not only in order to grow and survive in a desert climate, but also in order for it not to be consumed by its own fire. According to this midrash, water sustains the spiritual qualities of humanity. Humanity shares in the ability to self-consume with the Burning Bush. Our capability of creating lifestyles of self-destruction point to our need for the sustaining water of the Torah.

Alternatively, the Bush represents the friend and the enemy of Israel. It is a sacred place with special meaning to Moses. The symbolism of the Bush as developed in this chapter has ramifications both to the past, present, and future of the people of Israel.

---

70. Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1:19.

CHAPTER 3:

THE FIRE OF THE BURNING BUSH

A. The Description of the Fire

> An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." (Ex. 3:2-4)

The description of the fire in the biblical text is as sparse as the description of the Bush. Some midrashim added to the description of the physical properties of the fire as a means of expanding the significance of the Burning Bush scene as a whole. The scarcity of words in the Bible did not prevent the midrashic authors from expanding upon the fire's physical properties, but more importantly, of developing different theological views based on these few verses. An analysis of the midrashim describing the fire will provide us with a clue of their authors' ultimate theological concerns.

How big was the fire? Was it one large conflagration or did it consist of many smaller flames upon the bush? How did the fire burn for such a long time without being extinguished? These are some of the questions that Philo attempted to answer in one of his works. He wrote:

> ...though enveloped from root to twigs in a mass of fire, which looked as though it was spouted up from a fountain, yet remained whole, and instead of being consumed, seemed to be

> a substance impervious to attack; and instead of serving as fuel to the fire, actually fed on it.[71]

The Hellenistic influence in Philo and the Greek categories of thought of "form" and "beauty" are exemplified in an additional passage. "In the midst of the flame was a form of the first beauty, and like any visible object, an image supremely divine in appearance."[72]

Philo uncharacteristically suggested an unnatural description of the fire in the bush upon which to base his own idea of the symbolism of the fire.[73] According to Philo, "The property of flame is to consume, yet it is consumed, like wood. The nature of wood is to be consumed, yet it is manifested as the consumer, as though it were the fire."[74] The paradox in the physical description between the two constitutive elements serve as a basis of symbolic explanation.

From another angle, in the Talmudic tractate of Baba Kamma, we find a more naturalistic explanation as to how a flame gets started. The presence of the bush was not enough to explain the fuel for the fire. The 'thorns' are the elements necessary for the kindling of it.[75] This response provides a detail that will add to the Rabbis' symbolic

---

71. Philo, De Vita Mosis, I, 65.
72. Ibid, I, 66.
73. See section B of this chapter, pp. 60-61.
74. Philo, De Vita Mosis, I, 70.
75. B.T. Baba Kamma 60a.

understanding of the fire and the Bush.

Different midrashim attribute various qualities to the fire as it appears in the Bush. The flame itself ("be lebat esh") is described as coming from two parts of the Bush, the upper and the lower halves.[76] A more specific description of two kinds of fire in two parts of the Bush can be found in another midrash. Based on the phrase, "He gazed and there was a bush all aflame" (Ex 3:2), the midrash expounds, "From this they derived that the heavenly fire shoots out branches upwards, burns but does not consume, and is black in color; whereas fire used here below does not branch upwards and is red and consumes but does not burn." [77] There are two colors of fire, black and red. According to another midrash, the black fire is compared to the letters of the Torah scroll and the white fire is compared to the parchment of the Torah.[78]

Yet another midrash compares the fire that burns in the upper part of the Bush to the heart which resides in the upper part of the human body.[79]

The natural heating powers of fire also came in to play in midrashic literature. Simply put, the Rabbis warn that if Moses approached the bush too closely, he would have been

---

76. Shemot Rabbah 3:5.
77. Ibid, For an earlier source, see B.T. Yoma 21a and Berachot 52b.
78. Devarim Rabbah 3:12.
79. Shemot Rabbah 2:5.

burnt. On the other hand, if he removed himself far from it, he would have been chilled. The final suggestion is for Moses to be close enough to the fire to be warm without being so close as to burn himself.[80]

The fire not only was described as possessing two colors, but also consisting of two varieties: a heavenly and an earthly one. While the heavenly fire gives life and extends life, it "causes to bloom;" contrastingly, the earthly fire does not "cause to bloom." It burns and it destroys.[81] With this midrash we see an emphasis on the death and destruction caused by an earthly fire. Again, this midrashic expansion upon the notion of fire will be used for symbolic purposes as well.

Ben Sirah provides an alternate natural interpretation of the fire. He wrote, "According to its fuel, so will the fire burn."[82] Ben Sirah can not conceive of a fire which appears so unnatural that it will not consume. Thus he emphasized the "fuel" for the fire.

Generally, the Burning Bush's fire was explained in a semi-naturalistic fashion. However, all the rabbinic additions in the description of the kinds of fire were shaped in order to emphasize its symbolism.

---

80. Mechilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Massekhta d'Yitro, ch.1.
81. B.T. Yoma 21b.
82. The Wisdom of Ben Sirah, 28:10.

B. The Symbolism of the Fire

What could be more central to the values of the Rabbis than that of Israel and Torah? So, it is assured that as the Rabbis interpreted the text of the Burning Bush story, it would fuel their imaginations and that Israel and Torah would play a major role in the symbolism.

The symbolism of the fire as "Israel" is well attested in the midrashic sources. The equation is made based on the biblical verse, "The house of Israel shall be a fire" (Ob. 1:18). The midrash continues, "In this world, Israel will be like the thorn bush you see. The fire of Israel will not consume any of the nations, nor will the peoples of the earth extinguish the flame of Israel, which is words of Torah. In the days to come, however, the fire of Israel will indeed consume all the nations."[83] The fire of the Burning Bush in this world represents the struggles against enemies, which will be resolved only in the world to come. It is important to point out that there is a faith, from the midrashic point of view, that is forward looking despite the persecution Israel may suffer. Torah is looked upon as the salvational tool to achieve survival.

The symbolism of the fire as words of Torah is emphasized in order to point to the human input in the

---

83. Tanna Debe Eliyyahu, Pirkei Ha-Yeridot ch.2. A parallel rendering appears in Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, ch.40.

process of revelation and ultimate salvation. A baraita in the Talmud says, "Just as a flame does not burn by itself, so do the words of Torah not continue by themselves."[84] The implication is that the fire needs a certain type of 'fuel' which is linked to the preservation of Torah by the people of Israel.

The person reading Exodus ch. 3 and 4 might think that the appearance of the Burning Bush is temporary, its only purpose being to highlight the theophany and the response of Moses to God's call. But according to the Talmud, "The flame which descended from the heavens in the days of Moses was not withdrawn."[85] It is as if the midrashic authors would want us, the readers, and listeners to have the consciousness of the presence of the Burning Bush in our lives today. If the fire was not withdrawn, we, like Moses, should look for a divine encounter which will guide our lives, not in a temporary fashion, but in a permanent one. The motif of the extension of the divine presence as derived from the "fire" is expressed by the midrash in the use of the term "Shechinah." God is not present just in and around the Bush, but God's presence can be anywhere.[86]

The fire denotes qualities and attributes of God. It is a symbol for God's mercy. Although God may punish the sinners, they will not be destroyed by the divine

---

84. B.T. Taanit 7a.
85. B.T. Zebachim 20b.
86. Shemot Rabbah 2:5.

punishment.[87] The lesson is more universal. God's mercy extends itself to any sinner, not just Israel.

The attributes of God are extended to include peace; so the fire becomes identified with this value. "How great is peace! For the Holy One blessed be He did not first appear to Moses through animals or cherubim, but from something that symbolized peace...God showed him the flame burning in the vegetation without destroying it, and without the vegetation extinguishing the flame."[88] The implication of this midrash is that the Burning Bush represented peace because the fire and the bush were able to co-exist in the same space without destroying one another. The fire was not extinguished and the bush was not consumed. Peace seems not to require the victory of one element over the other. Reconciling opposites was another means by which God exhibited His miraculous powers. This image of co-existence of two seemingly opposite and incompatible elements is probably linked to the prophetic vision of Isaiah, "And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid...They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountains, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Is. 11:6-9).

---

87. Zohar, edited by Moshe Margaliot (Jerusalem, 1964),II, 21.
88. Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer, 4:17.

The image of fire is identified with angelic figures. While Michael represents redemption through water, Gabriel is ascribed the form of fire. Gabriel, who is revealed to Daniel (Dan. 8:16), is thought of as the angel of fire;[89] and the one who protects Moses.[90] According to Rabbi Yohanan, is was Michael who first appeared to Moses (representing redemption), while Rabbi Haninah thought it was Gabriel (in his role as the protector of Moses). But it was R. Yosi who prevails, affirming that the former was the one who appeared first.[91] This rabbinic argument underscores the importance of the symbolism of the fire in the Burning bush which is associated with images of redemption and protection.

It is Maimonides in his Guide of the Perplexed that challenges the common rabbinic understanding of the fire being the medium for the appearance of the angel in the Burning Bush. Maimonides criticizes those who "deem themselves [to be] the Sages of Israel." In his opinion, they would believe, incorrectly, ..."that the angel is a body formed of burning fire and that his size is equal to that of a third part of the whole world."[92] According to Maimonides, angels are seen only in the vision of prophecy,

---

89. B.T. Pesachim 118a.
90. Shemot Rabbah 1:23,24,26.
91. Zohar, I,101a and Shemot Rabbah 2:5.
92. Moses Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed, translated by Shlomo Pines, University of Chicago Press, 1963, vol.II, 2:6.

they only appear to be in the likeness of men. Therefore the symbol of the fire, coupled with the symbol of the angel might mean the actions taken by the prophet during his life.[93]

The fire is also interpreted to be the symbol for the intensity of Moses. "Why is it that God appeared to Moses through the medium of fire, and that He did not do so with the other prophets? Because Moses was the type of person who could withstand the intensity of the experience without being burned."[94] The fire here points to the difference between Moses and other prophets. His uniqueness is established by an inner quality not shared with others.

Another midrash described the flames as "a wall of fire" which represented the distance between Moses and God during the moment of the theophany.[95] Intimacy between God and His people, Israel, could not yet be achieved. Israel was still in slavery and had not yet recognized God's redemptive power. Intimacy sometimes could be arrived at through "silence" rather than "speech." In this way, Philo understood the symbol of the fire. In the initial revelatory experience there was a moment in which "the image which was brighter than the light of fire" led to "...silence that spoke more clearly than speech..."[96].

---

93. Ibid.
94. Zohar, II,21
95. Seder Elyyahu Rabbah, ch. 7.
96. Philo, De Vita Mosis, I,66.

During those moments of silence, perhaps the best way to establish communication is to have a heart ("lev") which can listen. Maimonides interprets the expression "the heart of fire" (Ex 3:2) to designate the middle of everything.[97] The "heart of fire" could designate thought, opinion, will and intellect. It is the prophet, through his own qualities, that is the one who can pierce through that heart of fire and establish a dialogue with God.

Yet, by way of contrast, fire is also the symbol for those who perpetrate wrong, as the bush is the symbol for those who suffered wrong.[98] An extension of this motif of the fire leads to the identification of fire with the deaths of Nadab and Abihu.[99] This negative connotation of the fire of the burning bush not only applies to the future but also to the past. Thus the fire is equated with the hatred ("sin'a") that Joseph's brothers had for Joseph. It was because of this hatred (word play between "s'neh"-"sin'a") that Israel was sent into slavery in Egypt (fire).[100]

We have seen the midrashic linkage between the fire of the Burning Bush and the hearts of people. By a word play between "lev" (heart) and "labbat," a Tanchuma source implies that fire is transformed into an element that can

---

97. Maimonides, Guide, I:39.
98. Philo, De Vita Mosis, I,67.
99. Pesikta De-Rab Kahana, edited by Bernard Mandelbaum, New York, 1962, Piska 26:9.
100. Yalkut Shimoni, vol.1, Remez 168 as quoted from Midrash Avkir from the same section.

lead Moses and prepare him ("lelavevo", warm him up) for the future encounter at Mount Sinai.[101] The fire of the Burning Bush used to make Moses accustomed to the fires at the Sinaitic revelation and to appreciate the miracles that point to salvation (Aaron's staff, although it was dry, produced almonds and flowers, being later an instrument for salvation).[102] Instead of being associated with death and disappearance, the symbolism of the fire is converted into one which points to the salvific in these instances.

The midrashic authors developed the motif of the symbolism of the fire in a two stage manner. First, they had to expand upon the few verses of the Bible. Their first extension of the text seemed to have been in the direction of the physical characteristics of the fire itself. The second stage built upon this one. Midrashic authors used the various symbols of the fire of the Burning Bush to create important theological statements from a very limited text. Similar to the symbolism of the Bush itself, the fire is developed in a multi-faceted way. It can refer both to God and human beings, to the past experiences of Israel as well as anticipated future ones, and it can refer to wicked individuals as well as redemptive and salvational experiences.

---

101. Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Shemot #12. Quoted again in Yalkut Shimoni, vol.1, Remez 167 and Midrash Ha-Gadol to Ex.3:2.
102. Midrash Ha-Gadol to Ex. 3:3 and quoted from Shemot Rabbah 5:5.

CHAPTER 4:

THE BUSH AND THE MANY FACES OF SUFFERING

Many midrashim in this chapter focus on the nature of the suffering in Egypt and how Israel ultimately overcame such hardship. The Israelites' experience in bondage was sometimes viewed as merely a precedent for future times of hardship for the Jewish people; a precedent to future suffering that would help to build a strong spiritual character. Other midrashim deal with the preparation for the revelation at Sinai. This preparation would take on the dimensions of both physical and spiritual redemption. Underlying this all is a concern for the importance of the divine role in our lives.

A. Israel's Bondage and its Consequences

> And the Lord said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their task-masters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of Egypt..." (Ex. 3:7-8)

The word play of "raoh raiti" ("I have surely seen") in Exodus 3:7 is the basis for the midrash's explanation of God's knowledge of Israel's suffering. The author of at least one midrash attempted to answer the question, "What exactly did God see?" by writing: "Because after drowning them in the river, they immersed them in a building."[103] Such evil atrocities committed by the Egyptians upon the

---

103. Shemot Rabbah 2:5.

enslaved Israelites would not go unnoticed by God. He became aware of Israel's suffering and reacted accordingly.

The description of the Bush as being "lowly" was extended to the condition of the Israelites under slavery in Egypt -- "being lowly and humble" (shefalim v'yerudim). The entrapment of Israel in Egypt, beginning with their uneventful arrival and leading to their unexpected enslavement, lead eventually to great suffering in their departure.[104]

Despite the intense suffering that is so well recognized by many of these early biblical commentators, comfort is sought and found in many of these same writings. Philo points out that "the sufferers would not be destroyed by their aggressors, who would find that the aggression was in vain and profitless, while the victims of malice escaped unharmed."[105] This stress on being comforted has other examples as well. Israel could be comforted by the message that her aggressors would ultimately be the vanquished ones. Israel would not be dragged down by her suffering. Hope is to be eternally upheld.

Some midrashim tried to explain why Israel deserved to be redeemed. "Israel was redeemed because they had not changed their names, abandoned their language, informed or intermarried."[106] These "virtues" are probably

---

104. Ibid.
105. Philo, De Vita Mosis I, 67.
106. Mechilta de Rabbi Ishmael to Ex. 12:6.

retrojections from the reality of Jewish persecution at the time of their writing. The value of remaining true to one's Judaism was brought out quite clearly in this midrash.

The image of a bird caught in a bush is used several times in midrashic literature regarding Israel's suffering in Egypt in this regard. One of them states:

> At the Burning Bush, God vowed 'to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians' (Ex. 3:8). For just as the bird is caught in the fowler's hand - if he desires he kills it, and if he desires he allows it to live - so was Israel's predicament in exile. Therefore it is written, 'to deliver them out of the hand...'[107]

This text expressed the view that Israel was at the mercy of Egypt ("the fowler's hand") and implied that they must have been aware of it. Yet, in time, God would deliver them!

"God said, 'I am with you in this bondage just as I will be with you in future bondages.' Moses responded, 'Lord of the Universe! Enough! Each trouble in its own time!'"[108] Certain suffering will continue after Egypt. Israel will have to learn to live, not in the extremes of slavery or redemptive conditions, but in a world in which evil behavior is tamed by the life of Torah, the first goal of the Egyptian redemption.

---

107. Midrash Tehillim, ch. 107.
108. B.T. Berachot 9b.

A Yalkut Shimoni midrash gives a comforting opinion by pointing to the survival of Israel despite continuous suffering. According to this midrash: "'The bush was not consumed,' which symbolizes that despite [the fact] that Israel was enslaved by four kingdoms, they did not disappear among them"[109]

A later source, Midrash Ha-Gadol, reaffirms God's commitment to the protection of Israel by linking their suffering with God's own: "Anyone who injures Israel it is as if they injure the One who said that the world should be created."[110]

However, physical redemption was not enough. Paralleling the thematic development between the physical description of the Bush and its symbolic meanings, is the description of the fire and its symbolism. In the following midrashim we can see the development from the physical survival of the Israelites by the divine hand to a concentration on its spiritual redemption. This follows the established pattern of physical aspects leading to more spiritual interpretations.

> 'And I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to raise them up' (Ex. 3:8). To raise them up means that it shall be a spiritual uplifting for them, not simply an escape from bondage.[111]

---

109. Yalkut Shimoni, vol.1, Remez 168.
110. Midrash Ha Gadol to Ex.3:2.
111. Midrash Leqach Tov to Ex. 3:8.

The progression towards the spiritual is emphasized in Midrash Tanchuma. After Egypt, God preferred to wait three months before delivering His Torah at Sinai in order to allow for this spiritual rejuvenation:

> Why should God not have arranged the theophany and the giving of the Torah immediately upon their leaving Egypt? It is like a case of a king's son who recovered from illness. The king said, "Let us wait three months until his strength returns." So, too, when Israel left Egypt, they suffered from the ills and infirmities of slavery. The Holy One Blessed be He said, "Let us wait until they are fully cured of this disease and then I will give them the Torah."[112]

Three is a significant number in Jewish religious symbolism. The reader should note that God's instructions to Moses at the Burning Bush included the following point involving the number three:

> ...and thou shalt come, thou and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt, and you shall say to him, "The Lord, God of the Hebrews, has met with us: and now let us go, we pray thee, three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God. (Ex. 3:18)

The preference for waiting <u>three</u> months can be likened to the saying of R. Joshua ben Nechemiah: "Always the third is preferable."[113] This suggests a planned delay in the divine plan to give the Torah to the Israelites. Just as Moses

---

112. Midrash Tanchuma Ha-Nidpas, <u>Yitro</u>, 10.
113. <u>Ibid</u>.

prepared himself for the call at the Burning Bush, so, too, Israel had to prepare herself for the Torah.

B. God Suffers When Israel Suffers

This section will deal with a very important theological theme: The direct link between the human condition and the attributes of God. Different midrashim explore the extent to which the suffering of Israel in bondage affected God. The theological point here is that not only is God important to human beings, but human beings are important to God as well. That is, God is influenced deeply by the human condition. The question remains whether the identification of God with the Jewish people's suffering involves only acts of empathy, or does it also influence God to act within history in response to our suffering? This theme is also meant to comfort the Jewish people. By declaring that God is with us in our times of suffering, we can continue to live, soothed with the knowledge that God will ultimately redeem us.

The Rabbis even go so far as to say that God suffered in the flames of the Burning Bush:

> God's fifth descent to earth was when He came down into the thorn bush...The thorn bush, full of thorns and prickles, causing pain and distress, thus fulfilled the words of the verse, "In all their affliction, He was afflicted." (Is. 63:9); Why did God dwell in such

> trouble and distress? Because he saw Israel dwelling amidst trouble and distress.[114]

God's descents to earth are few and therefore considered very unusual. In the Bible, besides the Burning Bush narrative, there are only a few other divine descents. Tanna Debe Eliyyahu is suggesting to the reader that this empathic act of God should be looked upon as special and significant. According to Tanna Debe Eliyyahu, God's choice to put Himself in the thorn bush was more than an empathic reaction. It was a divine statement of God's intrinsic reciprocal involvement with the lives of the Jewish people.

There are further supportive and comforting interpretations of God's descent. "Why did the Holy One Blessed be He remove himself from the heavenly heights to speak to Moses from a lowly bush? It is because whenever Israel is in dire straits, it is as though God Himself is in dire straits..."[115]

There are also biblical sources for the idea that God suffered because of Israel's afflictions. One such example is found in Judges 10:16 where it is written, "His soul was grieved for the misery of Israel." A variation on this same theme comes from Midrash Leqach Tov: "For I know their pains." (Ex. 3:7) What is God implying to Moses at the Burning Bush? It is that "... the body of a dead person

---

114. Tanna Debe Eliyyahu, Pirkei Ha-Yeridot, ch. 2.
115. Mechilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai to Ex. 3:2. This tradition is quoted later in Midrash Hagadol to Ex. 3:2.

does not feel the wound. But I feel their pain, even if they themselves don't feel their suffering."[116]
This midrash seems to stress that the situation of Israel in Egypt (slavery) was so pervasive and overwhelming that they may not have had the ability to experience suffering anymore. It is as if they were numbed. This anticipates the ambivalence of Israel once they left Egypt. As soon as some difficulty appeared in the desert, they contemplated returning to their enslavement in Egypt. The numbness continued even after redemption.

A word play based upon Ex. 3:7 ("ra'oh-ra'iti") suggests further explanation of God's identification with Israel's suffering. "Why does the text say, 'I have surely seen ["raoh raiti"] the affliction of my people?' (Ex. 3:7) The verb is doubled to signify that He sees in every generation, just as he sees now."[117] According to this midrash, God's empathy applies not only to the past and present, but it extends to the future. How comforting to know there is a temporal continuity to God's personal involvement in the collective pain of Israel!

The pattern of divine identification with Israel's suffering is seen as a response to the human initiative to cry out to God. Note the following midrash in this regard:

> For He said, " ...suffering as they do, prolonged ill treatment, and subjected to intolerable outrages, with no relief

116. Midrash Leqach Tov to Ex.3:7.

> or pity for their miseries from man...For I know that each severally, and all unitedly, have betaken themselves to prayers and supplications in hope to gain help from Me, and I am of a kindly nature and gracious to true supplicants."[118]

Philo acknowledges here individual prayers to God, but stresses the collective cry of Israel. The collective "Israel" is the voice that cries out and is heard. There is biblical text support for this interpretation. According to Judges 3:15, "...The Israelites cried out to the Lord, and the Lord raised up a champion for them..." and according to Zachariah 13:9, "They shall call on My Name and I will answer them." There seems to be strength in numbers in making a meaningful connection with God.

In another passage, Philo conveys the idea that God moves from the realm of empathy to action for His people, Israel. Philo wrote in his work De Vita Mosis I, 69 that God encouraged the people Israel by assuring them that their weakness is really their strength. God promised further that "those who desire to consume [them] will be [their] unwilling saviours instead of [their] destroyers." Once again, God appears to take an active stand to encourage and comfort His suffering people.

In contrast to the above, there is a sobering motif in another midrash regarding God's withdrawal ("Hastarat

---

117. Ibid.
118. Philo, De Vita Mosis I, 72

Panim") from the earthly concerns of Israel:

> There are times when He sees and times when He does not see! In the generation of the Exodus what is written? "I have surely seen..." But in the generation of the destruction of the Temple it is written, "See, oh Lord, and behold, how abject I have become." (Lam. 1:2)[119]

The collective subconscious fear of losing divine concern for our well-being is expressed succinctly in the above midrash. This midrash points to the uncertainty of experiencing divine saving power; perhaps God will not intervene on every occasion. One should not be too comforted with the belief in divine protection. Ultimately though, the number of comforting midrashim far outweigh the few fearful midrashim that point out our human vulnerability.

The many faces of suffering, both of Israel and of God, point to an interconnection of destinies. From the midrashim that where analyzed we can conclude that a strong bond exists between God and Israel. This covenant leads to a reciprocity of feelings between the human and the divine, just as exists in a loving relationship.

Overall, we have not seen in the above midrashim a justification of suffering or theodicy, but rather a more concrete orientation. The midrashic authors try to find, not the reason, but the cause of suffering. Using the subject

---

119. Echah Rabbati, Petichta 1.

of suffering, they establish the continuity of the divine bond with Israel throughout generations. Despite the previously mentioned midrashic source that questions continuous divine intervention, the majority of midrashim that have been cited in this chapter prefer to focus on a motif of God's comforting of Israel.. The spiritual consequences of suffering are not overlooked. The ultimate goal for Israel is indeed spiritual uplift.

CHAPTER 5:

MOSES' QUALITIES AS PROPHET

ACCORDING TO MIDRASHIM ON THE BURNING BUSH NARRATIVE

A. Qualifications and Characteristics

One of the basic questions that midrashic literature addresses in interpreting the Burning Bush narrative is connected to the qualifications and characteristics of Moses. Who was this man who deserved to be chosen to lead the Jewish people out of Egypt? Did Moses stand out as a special individual before he was chosen or could God have chosen someone who did not have special characteristics?

Moses' actions at the Burning Bush were interpreted in the midrashim in order to find answers to these questions. What Moses did or didn't do as written in the Bible, was closely scrutinized for meaning. One of the motifs discussed by several midrashim deals with the question of whether Moses immediately "saw" the Burning Bush or refused to see it (based on Ex.3:6 ...'And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God'):

> And since he refrained from staring directly at God, he was later granted a unique vision of the Divine (Num 12:8). Thus, it was because Moses acted with such humility at the Burning Bush that he was deemed worthy of leading the people of Israel to receive the Torah.[120]

Moses' refusal to see is interpreted as a positive characteristic. R. Shimon ben Laqish, through a word-play based on "lir'ot" (to see) and "lirot" (shepherding),

120. Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Shemot #13.

arrives at the same conclusion.[121] Since Moses dared not look and therefore did not see the Bush, he should be rewarded by shepherding Israel. If someone would not have been satisfied with this association, the same word play is used ("lirot", to see) in another way. To "see" now is understood not just as physical seeing, but its sense is spiritualized. Moses had "seen" the suffering of Israel in Egypt,[122] and therefore has become more spiritually prepared to fulfill his mission as prophet of Israel.

Another understanding of "seeing" is found in Esther Rabbah 7:9: "The sight of the righteous gives them enlightenment because it raises them to the loftiest heights. Therefore they rejoice in the sight of their eyes, as it says, 'The upright see and are glad' (Ps. 107:42).'" The physical ability to see is not enough. The emphasis is given in this midrash on the manner of seeing. As understood by Maimonides, a different figurative meaning of "to see" entails having an intellectual grasp. For Maimonides, the process of divine knowledge is a difficult one. Therefore "seeing" by Maimonides's perplexed student, who wanted to combine religion and philosophy, should be a gradual intellectual process. This notion is derived from chapter 3, verse 6 of Exodus.[123]

---

121. Shemot Rabbah 2:6.
122. Ibid.
123. Maimonides, Guide, 1:5.

Philo gives a naturalistic interpretation to Moses' approach towards the Burning Bush. Philo understands Moses' turning closer as a sign of his curiosity:

> When Moses, through curiosity, approached the Burning Bush "with his shoes on," he was actually attempting to comprehend the principle of cosmic causality. But he is warned, "Do not approach." He is warned to stay away from the ground of divine cuasality by God who has reserved knowledge from mortal man.[124]

Philo tries to explain Revelation on rational grounds. He affirms that there are limitations to our knowledge.

In another passage, Philo suggests several practical reasons why Moses stands apart from other shepherds: Moses had more skills than any other shepherd of his time, he had a sense of duty, was prompted by zeal, and maintained honesty in the conduct of his duties.[125] These qualities, according to Philo, had to do more with a practical understanding of Moses' job than other theological concerns. In addition, Philo described Moses as a man of perfect harmony of thoughts, ideals, words, and actions.[126]

Moses was a shepherd. This occupation, according to Midrash Tehillim, is a pre-condition for a meaningful divine call. Why? Being a shepherd was considered the most humble of daily tasks since a person had to walk in beggarly attire

---

124. Philo, De Fuga et Inventione (De Profugis), 161.
125. Philo, De Vita Mosis I, 63.
126. Ibid, I, 29.

with his staff and bag.[127] Moses' humility was projected forward to the Temple. Just as he removed his sandles from his feet (Ex. 3:5) as a sign of humility, one would be required to remove one's outer garments before entering the holy shrine.[128] Far from being an activity which lacks any substance, being a shepherd teaches a certain quality; a quality even ascribed to God.

An additional midrash explains a characteristic that Moses acquired from being a shepherd -- that of mercy:

> Our Rabbis said that when Moses our teacher, peace be upon him, was tending the flock of Jethro in the wilderness, a little kid escaped from him. He ran after it until it reached a shady place. When it reached the shady place, there appeared a pool of water and the kid stopped to drink. When Moses approached it, he said: 'I did not know that you ran away because of thirst; you must be weary.' So he placed the kid on his shoulder and walked away. Thereupon God said: 'Because you had mercy in leading the flock of a mortal, you will assuredly tend My flock, Israel.'[129]

This notion of testing the prophet through shepherding the sheep is a prevalent one in midrashic literature. Already starting with Philo, we have examples of it. Philo wrote: "...the flocks increased under him and this roused the envy of the other graziers... In their case it was felt to be a piece of luck if they remained as they have been, but with the flocks of Moses any failure to make daily

---

127. Midrash Tehillim 23:2.
128. B.T. Berachot, 62b.
129. Shemot Rabbah 2:2.

improvement was a set back..."[130] Philo is establishing that Moses' success was not due to chance, but there were rational reasons. His progress was not sporadic but very regular.

Midrash Tanchuma clearly states that God will test the righteous ("tzadikim") through their handling of sheep.[131] By being a good shepherd, one proved that one could be closer to God. Shemot Rabbah compares "knowing how to shepherd" ("yode'a lir'ot") with knowledge of God and the teachings of God.[132] In contrast to the opinions of Philo or Maimonides, who thought that the process of becoming a prophet was a more cognitive one, Midrash Tanchuma, as an example of a trend within midrashic literature, thought that the process of becoming a prophet was a very concrete one. Specific examples of behavior pointed to a certain type of personality.

Testing the righteous through the act of shepherding implied a certain quality that God was interested in finding.

> "Before God confers greatness on a man,
> He first tests him by a small thing and
> then promotes him to greatness."[133]

---

130. Philo, De Vita Mosis I, 64.
131. Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Shemot #10. For a later parallel to this source see Yalkut Shimoni, vol.1, Remez 167.
132. Shemot Rabbah 2:2.
133. Ibid, 2:3.

This type of testing over "small things" led to the discovery of Moses' characteristics of loving kindness and justice ("chesed" and "mishpat").[134]

Another example of "loving kindness" (chesed) is found in the Zohar which underscores Moses' treatment of Jethro, who was a pagan idolator, with loving kindness. The Zohar goes even further to imply that Moses was able to learn the quality of "chesed" from this idolator![135]

The Yalkut Shimoni describes the process by which Moses was elevated to greatness.[136] He received "greatness" in the desert (Manna, clouds of glory, a well). When comparing this to the version in Tanchuma Buber, we can distinguish a different emphasis.[137] Moses, instead of going to the desert, is portrayed as running towards the desert ("rodeph achar ha-midbar"). The implication in the Tanchuma version is that Moses was interested in getting something good from the desert. By contrast, the Midrash Ha Gadol compares two kinds of shepherds, human and divine.[138] Again, anticipating the exodus from Egypt, the main message is that if Israel will follow God's ways, God will provide all of Israel's needs.

The midrashic perception that Moses was prepared to be a prophet was derived from an interpretation of the Hebrew

---

134. Ibid.
135. Zohar, II,21.
136. Yalkut Shimoni, vol.1, Remez 167.
137. Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Shemot #10.
138. Midrash Ha Gadol to Ex. 3:1.

word "hayah" in Ex. 3:1 ("Moses was tending the flock"). Shemot Rabbah understood that each time the word "hayah" ("was") is used in the Bible, it denotes preparedness. Therefore it was concluded that Moses was destined for salvation.[139]

The assumption of these previous midrashim is that Moses learned to be a prophet through his daily activities. There is another line of reasoning which states that Moses was his own teacher. Philo wrote that Moses "...trained himself, both in theory and in practice, to attune and direct his mind and heart to reality rather than to appearances. And it was this sensitivity which caused Moses to fulfill his destiny."[140] Philo's perspective is one that emphasizes the Hellenistic values of his time, with an emphasis on attainment of individual perfection.

A further quality of Moses was his sense of propriety. Seder Eliyahu Rabbah ascribed this sense of propriety to any wise disciple: "If a disciple of the wise lacks a sense of propriety, an animal is better than he is."[141]

Maimonides, who followed an Aristotelian perspective, portrayed Moses as being courageous and lacking fear. He stressed the importance of lonliness as preparation for the prophetic experience.[142] There are other midrashim that

---

139. Shemot Rabbah 2:4.
140. Philo, De Vita Mosis I, 48.
141. Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, ch. 6.
142. Maimonides, Guide, 2:38.

attribute strong, positive leadership qualities to Moses. In one apocryphal book, Moses is shown as being sure about his mission:[143]

> For seven days did God seek to enlist Moses at the Burning Bush, but each time Moses abstained, deeming himself unworthy of the responsibility of leadership and of involvement with the divine mission. "And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God" (Ex.3:6). Finally in modesty, he accepted the mission: his reward was success, and eventually he was able to behold the presence of God. (Num. 12:8)[144]

This Tanchuma tradition challenges the notion that Moses was sure and prepared from the beginning to accept God's call. The common assumption is that one who is chosen by God is automatically prepared for the task. Yet this midrash points in another direction. Getting closer to God is more of a process than a one time event.

Finally, Moses is described as always striving to establish peace between the people of Israel and God.[145] The assumption was that Israel will depart from God and that God, sometimes, will withdraw from Israel. By being the intermediary between the two, Moses searched for ways to establish peace.

All of the qualifications and characteristics analyzed until now can be considered of a positive nature. However,

---

143. The Book of Enoch, 99:14.
144. Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Hayyei Sarah, #6.
145. Tanna de Be Eliyahu, ch.17.

according to some midrashim, Moses displayed certain attitudes which where not what an ideal prophet would have. According to the Zohar, Moses had to be stopped by God since he wanted inmediately to acheive a higher degree of holiness. Moses is seen as initially impulsive, failing to understand that "holiness" is obtained through a process whereby human beings stand on different levels. Taking off his sandals is seen as Moses' first step in a long ladder that must be ascended.[146]

Based on Ex. 3:5 ("Do not come closer"), the Babylonian Talmud tractate Zevachim offers another questionable characteristic of Moses.

> "And He said, 'Do not come closer'. Moses had initially counted on coming closer to God's power, and being elevated to kingship. Therefore, God warned him at the very outset of the mission: Do not expect to be elevated king for your efforts!"[147]

In contrast to those midrashim that portray Moses' humility as a basis for God's choice, here we see that Moses' initial intentions were to acheive power for himself. He thought he could gain earthly rewards by accepting the divine call. Another example of this trend is the following midrash in Shemot Rabbah:

> And he said: "Here I am ["hineni"]. Here I am for priesthood and royalty." God said to him: "You are standing in the place of the pillar of the world."

146. Zohar, Emor 106b.

> Abraham said: "Here I am" and you say "Here I am." Moses wished to have priests and kings descending from him, but God said: "Do not come closer" (Ex. 3:5)...Yet, Moses obtained both- priesthood, in that he ministered during the seven days of consecration; and kingship, as it says: And he was a king in Jeshurun (Dt. 33:5).[148]

According to this midrash, Moses is offered a kind of compromise. Although formally his petition was rejected by God, still the midrashic author found a way through an intricate interpretation to affirm that Moses had gotten what he had requested.

B. Moses Compared to Other Biblical Personages

In order to further establish the uniqueness of Moses as an appropriate person to lead the people of Israel, several midrashim use the method of comparison to other personalities in the Bible, both before and after Moses.

From an ambiguous word in Ex. 3:2 ("And the angel of the Lord appeared to *him* ["*'elay*"]'), the Rabbis ask:

> Why "to him?" To teach that others were with him, yet Moses alone saw; as it is written, of Daniel: And I Daniel alone saw the vision (Dan. 10:7)[149]

---

147. B.T. *Zevachim* 104a.
148. Shemot Rabbah 2:6.
149. *Ibid*, 2:5. For an earlier similar parallel, see B.T. *Yoma* 4b.

The midrash implies that it is given only to a few to be able to recognize manifestations of the Divine. Others may be present at the same time, yet may fail to perceive anything extraordinary at all.

At least in one case, the quality and ability "to see" was a negative characteristic. Pesikta de Rab Kahana gives a lengthy explanation to justify the deaths of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu. After describing in detail their offenses (they entered the Sanctuary having tasted wine beforehand, they entered the Sanctuary without washing their hands and feet, they lacked the prescribed number of garments, because they had no children, and they did not marry so they were arrogant), Pesikta de Rab Kahana adds:

> But according to R. Tanchuma, Ex. 24:11 teaches that Aaron's sons stood and stared in a gross way, feasting their eyes boldly on the Presence. In contrast to such behavior-so said R. Joshua of Siknin, citing R. Levi- Moses did not feast his eyes on the Presence and so unwittingly derived benefit from the Presence - that is the proof that he did not feast his eyes on the Presence? The verse, "And Moses hid his face" (Ex.3:6). And proof that he derived benefit from the Presence? The verse "Moses knew not that the skin of his face sent forth beams" (Ex. 34:29)[150]

Moses' gain, according to this midrash, is without intention ("unwittingly he derived benefit").

---

150. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana, Piska 26:9.

Another difference between Moses and the other prophets is that to other prophets, God did not speak continuously, but with Moses He did.[151] The repetition of Moses' name in Ex. 3:4 is understood as stressing that in Moses there was no doubt about God's call.[152] The Sifra gives another interpretation of the repetition of Moses' name. According to this midrash, there is a quality shared by others with Moses. The prophet, in this instance, is not seen as radically different from everybody else:

> "God called to him out of the midst of the Bush, and said: "Moses, Moses" (Ex. 3:4). As was the case each time in the Bible when God called a person by name twice, Abraham, Jacob, Samuel and Moses, here, too, it is both a call of fondness and a call of immediacy."[153]

Moses is compared to David in several midrashim. Since they shared the quality of being shepherds, they were a good example:

> He tried David through sheep and found him to be a good shepherd, as it is said: 'He chose David also His servant and took him from the sheepfolds' (Ps. 77:70). Why "from the sheepfolds?" ...Because he used to stop the bigger sheep from going out before the smaller ones, and bring smaller ones out first, so that they should graze upon the tender grass, and afterwards he allowed the old sheep to feed from the ordinary grass, and lastly, he brought forth the

---

151. Shemot Rabbah 2:6
152. Ibid.
153. Sifra, Vayikra 1. For a later parallel to the interpretation of the repetition of Moses's name, see Yalkut Shimoni, Vol.1, Remez 168 and Midrash Ha-Gadol to Ex. 3:4

> young, lusty sheep to eat the tougher grass.[154]

According to another midrashic tradition, David observed the Mishnah of the tractate of Baba Kama 79b by going through the wilderness in order to avoid stealing from pastures that belonged to others.[155] David was concerned that his sheep should not eat from pastures which belonged to other people.[156] Therefore, the fact that Moses had presented himself at the Burning Bush as a shepherd was a good sign that he will become a great leader in Israel.

Moses as a prophet is seen by the midrashic authors to have overwelmingly positive qualifications. Yet, some midrashim that we analyzed point to characteristics that Moses had to overcome in order to gain divine election. This teaches us that perfection was not a pre-condition to gain God's attention.

---

154. Ibid, 2:2.
155. Ibid, 2:3.
156. According to another tradition, David and Jacob had called God "their shepherd." See Midrash Tehillim 23:2, in this regard.

CHAPTER 6

MOSES' AMBIVALENCE REGARDING THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE DIVINE MISSION

A. Moses Initial Ambivalence.

According to a midrash previously quoted in chapter five, Moses waited seven days before he accepted the divine call at the Burning Bush,[157] connoting a degree of ambivalence in fulfilling his mission. This ambivalence was based on Ex. 3:6: "And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God." In this section we will mention other ways in which, according to the midrashic imagination, Moses delayed his response and the consequences of his delay.

Moses' ambivalence had ramifications for the future. A midrash in Shemot Rabbah says the following, based on Ex. 3:6 ("And Moses hid his face"):

> Moses did not do well in hiding his face, for had he not done so, God would have revealed to him what is above and what is below, what has happened and what will happen. So when Moses later wished to behold [God], as it is said: "Show me, I pray to you, your Glory" (Ex. 33:18), God replied: "I came to show you, but you did hide your face. Now I tell you that 'man shall not see Me and live' (Ex. 33:20)"[158]

Moses was punished for turning his face away from the Burning Bush and was not allowed to receive divine knowledge of the heavens and the earth, past, present, and future. Not only was Moses "punished" by his action at the Burning

157. See Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Hayyei Sarah #6, p.83.
158. Shemot Rabbah 3:1.

Bush, but in this case, according to our midrash, the consequence of Moses' ambivalence seemed to influence the future degree of closeness between God and human beings.

Moses' uncertainty and hesitation to act, according to Tanna Debe Eliyahu, was based on his fears of those who had persecuted him in Egypt. In one midrash, the following conversation takes place between Moses and God on this subject:

> "Do you wish to deliver me into the power of my enemies who seek my life? Was it not for this reason that I fled from them?" The Holy One replied: "Be not afraid. By now they are dead: 'All the men are dead that sought your life' (Ex. 4:19)." And who were the men? Dathan and Abiram. But had they died? Were not Dathan and Abiram still alive? Yes, as a sage pointed out, whenever Scripture speaks of men "standing rigid," Dathan and Abiram are meant. Hence the previous reference to dead men signifies that it was not Dathan and Abiram, but their fortunes that had withered.[159]

In the midrash of Tanna Debe Eliyahu, Moses' fears were of a physical nature. But the ambivalence of Moses was based as well on spiritual concerns:

> For he considered that human eloquence compared with God's was deficient, and also, cautious as he was by nature, he shrank from things sublime and judged that matters of such magnitude were not for him.[160]

---

159. Tanna Debe Eliyahu, Pirke Ha-Yeridot, ch.2.
160. Philo, De Vita Mosis I, 83.

In this interpretation, Philo minimized Moses' physical objection and states instead that Moses' true concern was for the wrongful impersonation of God, which for a human, can only be a poor imitation of the divine spirit. Philo reinterprets the problem as one of "eloquence" and of being "cautious" by nature. He attributes to Moses personality traits that cause his hesitation. The general line of Philo's argument is to portray the Burning Bush narrative in a more natural manner.

Moses' initial uncertainty was linked in midrashic interpretations to both physical and spiritual matters. The consequences of his ambivalence had implications for himself and Israel in their relationship with God.

B. Moses' Initial Rejections of His Mission

Exodus 3:4-4:17 contains a conversation between God and Moses at the Burning Bush. Within this conversation, God commissions Moses to return to Egypt to free the enslaved Israelites and lead them out into the wilderness. Moses' initial reaction throughout this conversation was one of ambivalence, leading to a series of rejections of God's commission. This section will concentrate upon the following biblical verses:

> But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?" And He said, "I will be with you; that shall be your

> sign that it was I who sent you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain."
> Moses said to God, "When I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh." He continued, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites, 'Ehyeh sent me to you.'" (Ex. 3:11-15)

Several midrashim expand on these verses from Exodus, concentrating on Moses' words of hesitation. One source cites Moses' fears of inadequacy in providing for all of the needs of the Israelites throughout his commission:

> And Moses said to God: "Who am I?" ... R. Nehorai [interpreted], Moses said to God: "You tell me to go and bring out Israel. Where can I give them shelter in summer from the heat and in winter from the cold? Where shall I obtain a sufficiency of food and drink? How many midwives do they have; how many pregnant women, how many babies! What food have you prepared for their midwives? What kind of delicacies have you for those pregnant? How many dried grains and nuts have you prepared for the little ones?"... God said to him: "From the cake which will go forth with them from Egypt and which will be enough to satisfy them for thirty days, you will know how I will lead them!"[161]

According to this midrash, Moses' complaint was based upon his belief that he would be solely responsible for satisfying all of the physical needs of the Israelites.

---

161. Shemot Rabbah 3:4. For parallel sources, see Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1:7 and Midrash Tanchuma Ha-Nidpas, Shemot 14. For sources relating to the "thirty days," see Mechilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Exodus Bo Piska 14, B'shalach 4, B.T. Kiddushin 38a and Yalkut Shimoni, vol. 1, Remez 257.

God's reassurance clarifies this point. God directly answers Moses' concern by replying that God will be responsible for the daily necessities. Note that God's promise of assistance comes with a limited time frame: God will provide the provisions for thirty days.

Specifically, Moses' concern is expressed with the words, "Who am I (Mi Anochi)?" in Exodus 3:11. Shemot Rabbah uses these two words in a word play based upon the use of the word "Anochi" both in Genesis and Malachi. "I ("Anochi") Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you back" [Gen. 46:4]). Malachi 3:23 states, "Lo, I ("Anochi") will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord." Just as Israel went to Egypt with "Anochi," so, too, will Israel be redeemed by Elijah with "Anochi."

Moses questioned whether this would be the redemption promised to Jacob in Genesis 46:4.[162] Moses noticed that in the promise to Jacob, God used the word "Anochi," implying that it would be God who would take Israel out of Egypt. Yet at the Burning Bush, it appears to Moses that it is he, Moses, who is given the task of redemption, not God Himself ("Anochi")! In yet another midrash, Moses continued to question his involvement in God's commission. He doubts that the merit of Israel is great enough to risk his own

---

162. Shemot Rabbah 3:4.

life.[163]

Although the majority of midrashim allow Moses to be seen as doubting and questioning the divine call, another midrash actually praises Moses' rejection as an act of righteousness! This trend represents a minority opinion within the midrashim we have analyzed. Midrash Lekach Tov wrote:

> "And Moses said to God, 'Who am I, that I should go...?' (Ex. 3:11)" Woe to the evildoers who, when God grants them power and leadership, they become arrogant and self-serving. And blessed be the righteous of Israel who, the more they are elevated, the more they are modest and humble in their roles.[164]

C. "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh" as God's Assurance to Moses

Other midrashim focused on additional reassurances that God gave to Moses at the Burning Bush. In particular, God used His name as a sign of His divine involvement. The word "Ehyeh" was interpreted by R. Isaac in the following way: "God said to Moses: 'Tell them that I am now what I always was and always will be;' for this reason the word "ehyeh" was written three times."[165] The repetition of God's name three times is reassuring in a very significant manner. It denotes God's commitment in the past, present, and future of

---

163. Ibid.
164. Midrash Lekach Tov to Exodus 3:2.
165. Shemot Rabbah 3:6.

the Jewish people.

The use of God's name is so significant that the people of Israel might have assumed His protection would save them from any further oppression after the exodus. But in the opinion of R. Jacob b. Abina in the name of R. Huna of Sepphoris, this is not so:

> God said to Moses: "Tell them that I will be with them in this servitude ("shi'abood"), and in servitude they will go again, but I will be with them!" Whereupon Moses said to God: "Shall I tell them this?" God answered: "Enough! Each trouble in its own time ("daiya latzara bisha'atah") ... I reveal this only to you but not to them."[166]

This midrash indicates that God could not disclose the complete truth to Israel regarding their fate. It is interesting to note that God includes Moses in his plan to release only the information that will entice Israel to leave Egypt for redemption. Seemingly, this midrash assumes that "the end justifies the means." Using God's name as a sign, Moses agreed to carry out his part of this planned enticement.

Philo understood the meaning of God's name in a different way. According to Philo, God's name is tied to the knowledge of right and wrong. Philo's assumption was that if the people "knew" this basic difference (by hearing the name of God) that any rational human being is able to

---

166. Ibid. For more on this theme, see B.T. Berachot 9b and Yalkut Shimoni, vol. 1, Remez 171.

achieve, then the people of Israel would choose by themselves to leave their situation of slavery.[167]

Tanna Debe Eliyahu follows Philo's lead by stating: "Then Moses replied to the Holy One, 'Master of the universe, make known to me Your great and holy name' ... When those on high saw that the Holy One had turned over the secret of the name to Moses, they said, 'Blessed be the Name, gracious Giver of knowledge.'"[168] Here we see that the name of God is equated with knowledge.

Moses' initial rejection is met with God's anger in an early source. God questioned the strength of Moses' faith, since Moses felt the need to be reassured by asking for God's name:

> When God responded to Moses, saying "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh (Ex. 3:14)," he was in fact saying, "Woe for those who passed away and are not more. So many times did I reveal myself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and they never doubted my abilities nor demanded, 'What is your name?' And here at the Burning Bush you immediately ask, 'What is your name?' And you hold me to blame for not having already rescued my people!'"[169]

Once again a midrash expands on the motif of Moses' initial ambivalence to the divine call. The difference here resides in the description of God's anger in response to Moses.

Moses, however, was not the only character involved in the exodus to have doubted God's plan. Several midrashim

---

167. Philo, De Vita Mosis I, 74.
168. Tanna Debe Eliyahu, Pirkei Ha-Yeridot, ch. 2.
169. B.T. Sanhedrin 11a.

elaborate the point that it was Israel that showed ambivalence, and not Moses.

Pesikta de Rav Kahana linked the doubts of Israel with Job's doubts regarding his fate. Based upon Proverbs 13:12, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick," this midrash expressed that the long time of suffering in Egypt weakened Israel's ability to respond positively to God's call:

> "I will surely remember you" (Ex. 3:16), they kept asking him: "Moses, our master, merely another promise of remembering? What is my strength, that I should keep on waiting? And what is the time set for my redemption that I should keep on being patient? Is my strength the strength of stones? Or is my flesh of brass? (Job 6:11-12)." So, like Job, Israel asked: "Is our strength the strength of stones? Or is our flesh made of brass?" But as soon as God said: "In this month you shall be redeemed," they said: "A definite time at last! -- Desire fulfilled is a tree of life" (Prov. 13:12). "This month shall be to you the beginning of months (Ex. 12:2) -- [the beginning of your redemption]."[170]

This midrash points out Israel's initial rejection of the divine plan, but ends with a change of attitude. Israel ultimately accepted the divine call when she was given a specific time for redemption instead of a general promise as it was presented initially.

Philo is another of these sources that suggested Israel's doubts:

---

170. Pesikta de Rav Kahana, Piska 5:3.

> And, if in their natural weakness, they seek some title to use, tell them not only that I am God, but also the God of the three men whose names express their virtue, each of them the exemplar of the wisdom they have gained - Abraham by teaching, Isaac by nature, and Jacob by practice.[171]

Philo suggests here that due to "natural weakness," Israel will not be able to distinguish in a rational way what they ought to do. He proposes a second level of understanding - the search for meaning in God's name that would lead to the knowledge of right and wrong. For those who are not able to attain knowledge through the second level of understanding, Philo provides a third level, which is the lowest in his scale. In the third level, understanding is achieved through external signs and miracles.[172] After years of bondage, Israel was in a weakened state and this weakened condition would cause them to doubt Moses' words of a miraculous redemption.

Based upon the dialogue between God and Moses in Exodus 3:4-4:17, a variety of sources describe Moses' early hesitation and fear of accepting his mission at the Burning Bush. God responds by reassuring Moses that He will be with him and with Israel. God gives Moses his name, "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh" as a means of convincing both Moses and Israel of His intent to redeem them. Midrashic sources attribute doubt to Israel as well. Israel's weakened condition requires a

---

171. Philo, De Vita Mosis I, 76.
172. Ibid, I, 76, 82.

specific promise of redemption, complete with a date, in order to strengthen her in her faith.

CHAPTER 7:

AT THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE FUTURE IN JEWISH HISTORY: THE BURNING BUSH

A. Linkage to the Past

There is an inclination with midrashic authors to search for the sources or roots of a major historical event in another moment of Jewish history. The narrative of Ex. 3:1-4:17 was looked upon as a major watershed between a period which essentially was the formative one for the Jewish nation and the period which, starting from the redemption from Egypt, led to Sinai and the land of Israel -- thus fulfilling the divine promise.

When the rabbis confronted the narrative of the Burning Bush they asked themselves whether Moses' actions had any precedent in the Bible. Where did the divine promise originate? Why did Moses make a major change in his life? If there were a divine plan, the rabbis could not accept that the Burning Bush theophany was its beginning; they searched backwards in Jewish history to link this episode to a former time or event in order to give "sacred meaning" to other moments.

Midrashic authors linked part of the verse of Ex. 3:1 ("[Moses] drove the flock into the wilderness ["rodef la midbar"]...") with the promise made to Abraham in Gen. 15:1-4. This connection was made in Shemot Rabbah in the following way:

> God said to Moses: "You will bring out Israel from Egypt by the merit of him with whom I spoke between the pieces"- that is Abraham. The word "wilderness"

> ("midbar") can only mean speech ("dibbur") here, as it says: "your mouth is lovely." ("midbarech naveh" [Song of Songs 4:3])[173]

In quoting Song of Songs, Shemot Rabbah has linked Abraham and the activity of Moses ("rodef lamidbar"), with the description between a lover and his beloved ("midbarech naveh"). Since in the rabbinic imagination Song of Songs is interpreted as the love between God and Israel, this midrash makes the analogy that the love and promise expressed by God to Abraham in Gen. 15 (the lover and the beloved in Song of Songs) is fulfilled with the theophany at the Burning Bush. According to this interpretation, Ex. 3:1-4:17 is understood as the fulfillment of an earlier promise (made to Abraham) between a lover (God) and His beloved (Israel).

Abraham was not the only patriarch who was linked to Moses. According to Philo, the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, all will serve as an example to the people of Israel:

> "And, if, in their natural weakness, they seek some title to use, tell them not only that I am God, but also the God of the three men whose names express their virtue, each of them the exemplar of the wisdom they have gained- Abraham by teaching, Isaac by nature, Jacob by practice."[174]

---

173. Shemot Rabbah 2:4. For an additional linkage between 'midbar' and 'dibbur,' see Shemot Rabbah 24:4 and Bamidbar Rabbah 19:13.
174. Philo, De Vita Mosis I, 76

In this source we see the names of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob used by Philo as reassurance for a doubtful Israel.

In several examples, the linkage between the Burning Bush and Israel's past extends to the days of creation. According to Tanna Debe Eliyahu, Moses' rod, which is mentioned in Ex. 4:2-5 as a future instrument of salvation, was passed through the generations. The rod which had been created at twilight [on the eve of the first Shabbat] had been given to Adam and he passed it on. It was the very same rod which helped Moses be the ideal shepherd that attracted divine attention.[175]

The same midrashic source, Tanna Debe Eliyahu, with its parallel in Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, links the Burning Bush with one of God's six descents into the world. God "descended" in the Garden of Eden, the Tower of Babel, to deliver Abraham, to accompany Jacob and his kindred to Egypt, into the Burning Bush and finally on Mount Sinai.[176] By linking God's descent to the Burning Bush with the other descents, the narrative of Ex. 3:1-4:17 increases in importance. This linkage of major events in the history of Israel points to the continuity of the encounter between God and Israel.

In Pesikta de Rav Kahana we find a more immediate linkage in time. The following allegory was created:

---

175. Tanna Debe Eliyahu, Pirkei Ha-Yeridot, ch.2.
176. Ibid, ch.1 and its parallel in Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer ch.39-40-41.

> Pharaoh found no iniquity in Me, but you found iniquity in Me. With whom may Pharaoh be compared? With [the steward of] a king who, before going to a far
>
> city by the sea, proceeded to deposit with the steward all that he possessed. After a while, the king returned from the far city by the sea and said to his steward, "Return to me what I deposited with you." The steward lied: "I am not your servant, nor did you deposit anything with me." What did the king do to the steward? He had him seized and suspended from a torturer's scaffold. Thereupon, the steward said: "I acknowledge that I am your servant and I am ready to return all you deposited with me."[177]

According to this midrash, Pharaoh is identified as the steward of Israel. As in the above analogy, God has to torture the steward with ten plagues in order to change Pharaoh's mind.[178] The call of Moses is situated then between the moment when God, as it where, left Israel under the stewardship of Pharaoh, and his own punishment for betraying that trust.

B. The Sinai/Wilderness Experience

One significant milepost in the redemptive process of Israel was the Burning Bush. Another significant moment was the collective experience of Israel at Sinai and their wanderings in the desert. Several midrashim connect these two events.

---

177. Pesikta de Rav Kahana, Piska 14:5.
178. Ibid.

Philo was one of the early sources to point out that the angel that appeared in the fire within the Burning Bush (Ex. 3:2) heralded future events for the Jewish people.[179] R. Hoshaia the Elder noted in this regard that Moses' hiding his face at the Burning Bush (Ex. 3:6) would be rewarded in the future:

> Moses did well in hiding his face, for God said to him; "Since you showed me respect and hid your face when I showed Myself to you, I assure you that you will be near Me on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. You will not eat nor drink, but you will feast on the splendor of the Divine Glory ("Shechinah"), as it is said: And Moses did not know that the skin of his face sent forth beams (Ex. 34:29).[180]

This midrash is unusual in its statement that Moses was rewarded by God for refraining from looking at the Burning Bush. His reward would be to stay in the presence of the Shechinah at Mount Sinai.

In another interpretation, seeing the Burning Bush gave Moses the ability not to be afraid of what he would see later on at Mount Sinai. God provided Moses with the opportunity to prepare himself for his prophetic role with Israel.[181]

---

179. Philo, De Vita Mosis I, 66.
180. Shemot Rabbah 3:1. See also Vayikra Rabbah 20:10, Bamidbar Rabbah 2:25, Midrash Tanchuma Ha-Nidpas, Shemot 19, and Yalkut Shimoni, vol. 1, Remez 173.
181. Shemot Rabbah, 2:5.

Pesikta de Rav Kahana used Ex. 3:10 and Ex. 32:7 as prooftexts to create a linkage between the Burning Bush and Sinai:

> "Come therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites from Egypt (Ex. 3:10)." ... "Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely (Ex. 32:7)."

At the Burning Bush, God looked favorably upon Israel, thereby referring to them as "My people." In contrast, after the Israelites created a Golden Calf at the base of Mt. Sinai, God appeared to distance Himself from Israel by stating to Moses, "Your people ... have acted basely." In Moses' reply to God in this midrash, he reminds God of His relationship to Israel as God stated it at the Burning Bush.

> Whereupon Moses replied: "Master of universes, when the children of Israel sin, they are called mine: but when they are free from sin, they are called Yours. Yet, sinful or sinless, they are Yours: 'They are Your people, and Your inheritance (Deut. 9:29).'"[182]

Based on the Burning Bush experience, Moses was able to argue with God on behalf of Israel when they committed the sin of the Golden Calf at Sinai.

The phrase "na'aseh v'nishmah" ("we will do and we will hearken") is the basis for another midrash which involves both the Burning Bush and the Golden Calf narratives. Israel's creation of the Golden Calf was seen as a

---

182. Pesikta de Rav Kahana, Piska 16:9.

transgression upon the commandment "na'aseh" ("we will do"). Therefore, the midrash continued, "Take care of [the commandment] 'we will hearken' as though you were taking care of both [commandments]."[183] After a lengthy list of possible transgressions Israel might commit regarding the commandment of "y'nishmah" ("we will hearken"), the midrash concludes with the following:

> [Even if Israel does not hearken, at least let them become one as they were in Egypt, so that God may still save them.] ... Because Israel was then one, God leaped forth to save Israel: "I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey..." (Ex. 3:8)[184]

The midrash contrasts the unity of Israel in Egypt with the disunity of Israel at Mount Sinai, using God's promise given at the Burning Bush. Another connection between the two episodes was made possible by the use of the word play for the two words, "s'neh" ("bush") and "Sinai".[185] Through this linkage, the sacredness of Mount Sinai was extended chronologically backwards to the region of the Bush ("the mountain of God," Ex. 3:1).

Israel received the Torah at Sinai. The significance of the Torah to the Jewish people is the basis for the following midrashic connection between the Burning Bush and

---

183. Ibid, 14:4.
184. Pesikta de Rav Kahana, Piska 14:4.
185. Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, ch.41.

Torah.

> Just as the thorn bush requires water in order to flourish, so does Israel flourish only by means of Torah, which is compared to water, as it is written, "Come all who thirst, come to the water (Is. 55:1)."[186]

The sacredness of the future reception of the Torah endows even the barren present of the Burning Bush narrative with sanctity. Thus a Targum source wrote:

> [Thus Moses was told,] "... For the place upon which you are standing is holy ground; for on it you will receive the Torah in order to instruct the people of Israel."[187]

Once again the place of the Burning Bush, called "Horeb, the mountain of God," is also ascribed as the cite of Mount Sinai. It is as if the holiness of the ground at the Burning Bush is determined by the future theophany at Mt. Sinai.

There is a sense that the Burning Bush and Sinai are interrelated by the midrashim cited in this section. They appeared so linked together that the reader would find it difficult to study one without the other. The identification between the Burning Bush, Sinai, and Torah transposed the dimensions of space and time.

---

186. Shemot Rabbah, 2:5.
187. Targum Yonatan ben Uzziel to Ex. 3:5.

C. The Burning Bush Linked to Israel's Future

The connection between the Burning Bush and Israel's future experiences did not end with the desert event. It extended to the conquest of the land of Israel, to the destruction of the Temple, and finally to the time of the coming of the Messiah and the world to come.

Seder Eliyahu Rabbah linked Moses' need for God's assurance at the Burning Bush with Joshua's similar need of divine assurance before the conquest of the land of Israel.

> God replied [to Joshua]: "Am I not the very one who at the beginning [of the events leading to the exodus] said to your master Moses: 'Come now therefore and I will send you (Ex.3:10)?'" Thereupon, reluctant to go, Moses replied: "Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent (Ex. 4:13)", and later on said: "Since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt ill with this people (Ex. 5:23). [Nevertheless, with assurance of My help to Israel, I sent him to deal with Pharaoh. Likewise now, with assurance of My help, I send you to deal with Israel's enemies in the Land."][188]

Here in this midrash, it is God who links the Burning Bush with the conquest of the land. The similarities between the two events emphasized the initial ambivilance of Israel's leaders. With the help of God's assurances, both Moses and Joshua were able to overcome their fears and carry out their missions.

---

188. Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, ch. 18.

A midrashic disagreement ensued regarding the divine presence ("Shechinah") -- Did the "Shechinah" still reside in the Temple or did the "Shechinah" move to the heavens? This disagreement was based upon Ex. 3:1, "Now Moses was tending the flock...". Moses had proved himself as a shepherd empowered by God to lead Israel out of slavery. With the destruction of the Temple, midrashic authors debated whether God would continue His role of shepherd of Israel.[189]

Another motif regarding the future of Israel is the connection between the Burning Bush experience and the world to come. The comparison is made in Shemot Rabbah in the following manner:

> Just as the thorn bush flourishes both in desert soil and by the riverside, so does the people of Israel live in this world and in the world to come.[190]

The people of Israel is symbolized here as the thorn bush; this world is symbolized by the desert; and the world to come is represented by the riverside. Israel will survive, whether suffering the hardships of this world, such as the slavery of Egypt, or in the ideal conditions of the messianic age. This is not the first reference in a midrash that links Israel to a thorn bush, such as the Burning Bush.[191]

---

189. Shemot Rabbah, 2:2. See also Midrash Tehilim 11 and Bereshit Rabbah 56:5.
190. Ibid, 2:5.
191. See chapter 3 of this paper, p.56.

The Burning Bush was the starting point in the story of Israel's salvation in the exodus. Other Jewish historical events prompted the midrashic authors to look for this salvational motif in the story of the Burning Bush. The rabbis attempted to benefit from the inspiration and guidance provided by the Burning Bush message. Their ultimate assurance of Jewish destiny was derived from the Burning Bush narrative with its promise of a place for Israel in the world to come.

CONCLUSION

The theophany at the Burning Bush offers us the opportunity to immerse ourselves in one of the most intimate and intriguing dialogues between God and Moses. Following the Torah text, one could wonder, from Moses perspective, how his life could be changed just as a consequence of a few recorded verses. I believe that the rabbis, in writing their midrashim, addressed to a great degree this concern.

I return to my original questions posed in the Introduction of this thesis: What does it take to change the life and the orientation of a human being? How is it that a dialogue with God can compel an individual to turn his life and dedicate it fully to a cause? What type of relationship does God expect to have with human beings?

I believe that our rabbis searched for answers to these questions when they wrote midrashim based on the narrative of Exodus 3:1-4:17. It should not be surprising that the rabbis' answers were not totally uniform in terms of their interpretations of the Burning Bush text. They, like all of us, perceive God and the role of Moses, in different ways.

But if generalizations are to be made after reading these midrashim, I would say that there is a definite pattern or trend in their thought. In relation to God's revelation to Moses and through him to the Jewish people, I perceive that certain expectations of God can be affirmed.

According to different midrashim, God judges His people according to their present behavior despite God's knowledge

that they will sin in the future. God entered into an intimate and immediate relationship with Moses. God's actions in His relationship with Moses reflect His commitment to the convenant with Israel. As part of the convenant, God responds to true prayers and supplications. God does not save a perfect people; God saves those who accept as well as those who reject His will. God is able to relate to imperfect human beings, is able to see their potential for improvement and ultimately saves the Jewish people for the sake of Torah. In the process of redemption, God ascribes great value to human responsibility. Human beings have an important role to play in the redemptive process. As a consequence of the redemption from Egypt, God expects a long life of commitment from His people. As part of that covenantal commitment, God expects a state of spiritual being from His people which can be accomplished through the performance of mitzvot, as an expression of love of God.

The midrashim on the Burning Bush narrative stress the idea that God is a guiding force. God was the protector of Israel, in the short term through the exodus from Egypt, and in the long term, God will be Israel's protector throughout the generations. Although this guiding force will be present for Israel as a nation, God's protection may not be evident in every moment in which Israel is in a crisis.

The midrashim on the Burning Bush teach us about Moses' overall good qualities and qualifications to be a prophet. However, two aspects of the biblical text which the midrashim tend not to emphasize, are the significance of God's name and the detailed series of Moses' rejections of the divine call. Some midrashim go so far as to praise Moses for initially rejecting God's call.

The area that is most developed in the midrashic literature is the one that gives symbolic meaning to the details of the call. Specifically, the Bush itself and the fire are the elements within the narrative which are most used to address the symbolic meaning of the story.

I have learned that this symbolic thrust is future oriented. The theological implications are clear. For the midrashic authors, the Burning Bush was a decisive event in terms of the relationship between human beings and God. This event was seen as linked in a chain which started with Creation and ended with the days of the Messiah and the world to come. This future thrust underscores the basic hopeful attitude of Jewish faith. According to the midrashim based on the Burning Bush, Moses, while confronting God prior to his people's redemption, already committed himself to Sinai, Torah, the land of Israel and bringing about the messianic age.

I believe that the rabbis who wrote these midrashim through the centuries expected each reader of Exodus 3:1-

4:17 to re-enact, through the help of the midrashic imagination, the act of personal commitment that Moses experienced. Midrashic writers encouraged us to go through the different stages which Moses had to experience. By reading these midrashim, I was challenged to "stand again" and be able "to see" what Moses saw in order to renew my personal relationship with God. In this sense, I believe that our rabbis succeeded in enabling us, through the medium of midrash, to link ourselves to the chain of Jewish tradition both past and future.

There are several areas which one could persue in order to expand the scope of this thesis. In Chapter One, I outlined a comparative framework for the prophetic "call." It would be interesting to know how the midrashim dealt with other prophetic "calls." Of similar interest would be the midrashic treatment of God's descents (according to one listing, God descended to earth six times). In particular, a comparative midrashic study of biblical personalities who committed themselves to a cause that changed their lives would add much.

Another possible angle of pursuit would be to compare how other religious traditions have treated the Burning Bush narrative. In particular, comparing and contrasting our findings with the Christian and Moslem understandings of Moses' call would be fascinating, since these faith communities shared for centuries their lives with the Jewish

community.

Finally, one can pursuit how 'moderns' have understood this biblical section. From a sermonic perspective, one can learn how different faiths understand the Burning Bush narrative and apply it to modern day concerns. We could add modern theologians' treatment of this biblical section as well as psychological studies of the personality of Moses. These are other modern avenues to pursue further study of the Burning Bush narrative.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

Babylonian Talmud, Vilna edition, published by Haalmama V'Haachim Ram (Jerusalem, 1981).

Mechilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, J.N. Epstein edition (Jerusalem, 1955)

Mechilta de Rabbi Ishmael, edited by H.S. Horovitz (Jerusalem, 1960)

Midrash HaGadol, published by Mosad Ha-Rav Kook (Jerusalem, 1956) vol. 1-3.

Midrash Leqach Tov, Vilna edition, published by Haalman V'Haachim Ram, 1921.

Midrash Rabbah, published by Yavneh Publishing House (Tel Aviv, 1956-67) vol. 1-11.

Midrash Tanchuma HaNidpas, (Berlin, 1923)

Midrash Tanchuma Buber (Vilna, 1913)

Midrash Tehillim, translated by William Braude (New York, 1959)

Maimonides, Moses , The Guide of The Perplexed, translated by Shlomo Pines, University of Chicago Press (1963).

The Wisdom of Ben Sirah, with commentary by Moshe Tzvi Segal, published by Mosad Bialik (Jerusalem, 1958)

The Book of Enoch, The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha vol.1, edited by James H. Charlesworth, Duke University (New York, 1983)

Pesikta De-Rab Kahana, edited by Bernard Mandelbaum (New York, 1962)

Philo
____.De Vita Mosis, The Loeb Classical Lobrary edited by T.E. Page, vol. 6 (London, 1935)
____.De Fuga et Inventione (De Profugis)

Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, Eshkol publishers (Jerusalem, 1973)

Sifra, Vayikra, edited by Louis Finkelstein, Jewish Theological Seminary (New York, 1983)

Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah, edited by Shimon Donsky (Jerusalem, 1980)

Tanna Debe Eliyyahu, Pirkei Ha-Yeridot, edited by M. Friedman (Jerusalem, 1960)

Targum Yonatan ben Uzziel, Mikraot Gedolot, published by Lyon Press Inc (Brooklyn, New York) vol. 2.

Yalkut Shimoni, published by Mossad Ha-Rav Kook (Jerusalem, 1977)

Zohar, edited by Moshe Margaliot (Jerusalem, 1964)

SECONDARY SOURCES

Buber M. Moses. The Revelation and the Covenant (New York, 1958).

Budde, K. "The Nomadic ideal in the Old Testament" New World 4 (1895): 726-745.

Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the book of Exodus. Magnes Press, The Hebrew University (Jerusalem, 1967).

Childs, Brevard S. The Book of Exodus. A Critical Theological Commentary. The Westminster Press, (Louisville, 1974).

Cross, F.M. "Yahweh and the God of the Patriarchs" Harvard Theological Review 55 (1962): 225-259.

Encyclopedia Judaica, article on "Fire", Jerusalem, Israel, 1971, vol. 6, p.1303.

Flight, J.W. "The Nomadic Idea and Ideal" Journal of Biblical Literature 42 (1923): 158-226.

Fox, Everett. Genesis and Exodus. Schocken Books (New York, 1990).

Ginzberg, Louis. Legends of the Jews, published by Jewish Publication Society (Philadelphia, 1968)

Greenberg, Moses. Understanding Exodus. The Melton Research Center of the Jewish Theological Seminary (New York, 1969).

Haldar, Alfred. The Notion of the Desert in Sumero-Accadian and West Semitic Religions, University of Uppsala (Leipzig, 1950).

Havel, N. "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives", Zeitschrift fur die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 77 (1965): 297-323.

Hyman, Aaron. Torah HaKetubah VeHaMessurah, second enlarged edition (Tel Aviv, 1979)

Mayani, Z. L'arbre Sacre et le Rite de l'Alliance chez les Anciens Semites (Paris, 1935).

Mircea Eliade editor in chief, Encyclopedia of Religion, article on "Fire" by Carl-Martin Edsman, (New York, 1986).

Mowinckel, S. "The Name of the God of Moses" HUCA 32 (1961): 121-133.

Pixley, George. On Exodus, A Liberation Perspective. Orbis Books (New York, 1987).

Renaud, B. "La Figure Prophetique de Moise en Exode 3:1-4:17", Reveu Biblique 93 #4 (1986): 510-534.

Sarna N.
Exodus Commentary. The J.P.S. Torah Commentary (Philadelphia-New York, 1991)
____.Exploring Exodus, Schocken Books (New York, 1987).

Talmon, Shemaryahu.
____."The Desert Motif in the Bible and in Qumran Literature", Biblical Motifs, origins and transformations, edited by Alexander Altman (Cambridge, 1966).
____."Revelation in Biblical Times" Hebrew Studies 26 (1985): 53-70.

Wilson, R. "Prophecy in Crisis: The Call of Ezekiel" Interpretation: A Journal of Bibleand Theology 38 (1984): 117-130.

Wirgin, W. "The Menorah as Symbol in Judaism", IEJ 12 (1962).

Wyatt, N.
_____."The Development of the Tradition in Exodus 3", Zeitschrift fur die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 91 (1979): 437-442.
_____."The Significance of the Burning Bush", Vetus Testamentum 36 #3 (July, 1986): 361-365.