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GOD WORKING THROUGH HUMANITY: EXODUS 3:1–15 AND THE THEOLOGY OF
DIVINE-HUMAN PARTNERSHIP

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Introduction

The story of Moses' call to work with God has long fascinated the community of faith, particularly the burning bush.¹ This account of Moses' call narrated in Exodus 3:1–15 is of pivotal importance to the way God chooses Moses to be a leader of God's people, Israel. It is while Moses is tending his father-in-law's flock that he encounters God in a burning bush. The Bible conveys this experience with God in a two-fold manner. First, an angel of the Lord appears to Moses from within the burning bush. Then as the story unfolds, God interacts with Moses from within the burning bush. In this paper, I draw on the theology of Exodus 3:1–15 which depicts how God works with both angels and humanity to argue that the theology of divine-human partnerships is crucial to the way in which God uses Moses to save God's people. I will explore three main features of Moses' story to answer the question why Moses was a suitable instrument to work with God. These aspects of Moses' life pertain to his upbringing, his passion for justice, and his vocation as a shepherd.

Moses' Story and How God Chooses Him

Exodus chapter 1 offers the details of the sons of Jacob who went with their families into Egypt (Exod 1:1–22). At the time they went to Egypt due to a famine in the land of Canaan, Joseph the son of Jacob was still in power in Egypt, and he was able to assist his family. However, later, when a new king who did not respect Joseph rises to power, this unkind leader chooses to oppress the Israelites and treats them as slaves. Additionally, this king delivers a command to the Hebrew midwives, ordering them to kill all newborn male Hebrew babies while sparing their female counterparts. The Hebrew women, however, fear God and do not let the male children die but allow them to live.

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 51.

Exodus chapter 2 narrates the birth of Moses and how he was from the tribe of Levi (Exod 2:1–25). Since he was a male child, her mother had to hide him for a while so that he would not be found and killed under the decree of the king of Egypt. As time went on, his mother eventually puts him in a basket and lets the basket float in the reeds on the bank of the Nile. When Pharaoh's daughter comes with her attendants to bath, she finds the baby Moses and takes him to her home. With the help of Moses' sister, Moses' mother is allowed to nurse him till he is older so that he goes back to Pharaoh's daughter's house. So, Moses became the son of Pharaoh's daughter as told in the biblical narrative. Given his upbringing, Moses thus had the capacity to understand both the Egyptians and Hebrews as he was going to be in conversation with both people groups pertaining to God's liberation plans for the Israelites.

As Moses is an adult (Exodus 2:11–22), he then goes to his people, the Hebrews, and observes how they were being mistreated in hard labor. While he visits his people, Moses finds an Egyptian beating up a Hebrew, and he decides to kill that Egyptian. The next day Moses finds two Hebrews fighting each other and in trying to make them live in peace, he is told of how he had murdered an Egyptian. Moses' developing passion for justice thus places him in a place of learning more about the real justice of God. When Pharaoh hears of what Moses had done, he tries to kill him. Moses then flees to live in Midian, where he marries the daughter of Jethro, Zipporah, and establishes his family in that land. According to Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, "Moses, God's mediator in this story of deliverance, has already been born, reared as an Egypto-Hebrew, fled criminal prosecution, and married a Midianite (Exodus 2) when the decisive event occurs."² In Exodus 2:23–25, the story narrates how the king of Egypt

² Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology*. Translated by Mark E. Biddle (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 25.

died and that the Israelites were still under the yoke of slavery. It is then that the Israelites cry out to God, and God hears their cry for help and remembers his covenant with them.

Concerning the developments in the call of Moses, Donald E. Gowan states that “at the end of Exodus 2, God had just been introduced as an actor in the story, after the author has recounted a long series of disasters that befell the Israelites in Egypt without any significant participations on God’s part. Once introduced, however, God will dominate the rest of the book.”³ The cry of the Israelites is crucial to how God begins to intervene in their plight. God will now use Moses as an instrument to help save God’s people from Egyptian slavery as God leads and guides him. Thomas A. Dozeman points out how “this God appearing to Moses is the same God who made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and led them in their migrations in the promised land.”⁴

The chosenness of Moses by God to lead God’s people is not only special due to Moses’ upbringing and passion for justice, but as a shepherd, he was on the right track to becoming a good leader. William A. Miller points out that “several commenters point out that shepherding is an idealized Old Testament image for becoming a leader. Moses tended sheep owned by another person; later he would become the leader of a people belonging to God.”⁵ God tells Moses of how he had heard the cry of the Israelites and was now working to set them free from the bondage of Egyptian slavery (Exodus 3:8–10). God informs Moses that he will be the instrument God will use to bring the Israelites out of their bondage, to which Moses expresses a degree of apprehension regarding his capacity to undertake such a task as assigned by God.

³ Donald E. Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 35.

⁴ Thomas A. Dozeman (*Eerdmans Critical Commentary: Exodus*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 94.

⁵ William A. Miller, *The Book of Exodus Question by Question* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 25.

Moreover, God had come down to the earth (Exod 3:8), to serve his children through the leadership of Moses (Exod 3:10).

As Moses doubts God, God promises that he will be with him in the process and that Moses will be successful and bring the Israelites out of their bondage, and they would worship God on the mountain of God, a location at which Moses had encountered God (Exodus 3: 11–12). Moses still questions God and needs some assurance that his mission will be successful. He asks God what name he is to use of Him when he encounters the Israelites, to which God reveals His name as “I am” (Exodus 3:13–14). In verse 15, God then sends Moses to speak to the Israelites and to affirm to them that the God of their fathers: The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob had sent Moses to God’s people.

Theology of Partnership in Exodus

The pericope of Exodus 3:1–15 depicts a close partnership between God and Moses as they work together to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. Terence E. Fretheim points out that “God takes the initiative, invites Moses to be sent to Pharaoh, and sets the agenda, but God needs Moses as an instrument in and through whom to work.”⁶ In analyzing this story, Fretheim further states how “many scholars suggest that there is an apparent doublet in verses 7–8 and 9–10. This doublet is appropriate theologically in supporting that neither God (v.8) nor Moses (v.10) acts alone in bringing Israel out of Egypt.”⁷ They both work together in partnership.

In Exodus 3 verse 8, God comes down, יָרַד, to save his people. “God’s presence among God’s people, an act that is revelatory both of his immanence and, ironically, of his glory, is usually expressed by יָרַד in the Qal verb form. This verbal form is also employed in Gen11:5 on

⁶ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 58.

⁷ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 59.

the tower of Babel story and Numbers 11:25 when God ‘came down in the cloud’ to speak to Moses and to put his Spirit upon the 70 elders.”⁸ In Exodus 3 verse 10 God sends Moses, שָׁלַח, to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. “The basic syntax of the Qal form of this verb, שָׁלַח, is transitive, where A sends B. Generally, A denotes a person (human or divine), while B can be another person such as a servant, or B can also be an inanimate object such as a gift, help, or a message.”⁹ This Hebrew grammar clarification further renders a clearer understanding of how God works hand in hand with humanity to respond to the needs of humanity.

Compared to the encounter of Jacob with God in Genesis 28:10–15, Moses’ encounter with God is filled with other features that depict that he was in a holy place. Fretheim points out that “Moses’ encounter with God also contains features of a cultic etiology. The motifs include the identification of holy ground (3:5), requiring Moses to remove his sandals, and the imagery of fire associated with the burning bush.”¹⁰ Moses was indeed in a place that was different from where he had lived and worked as a shepherd. He was now entering God’s territory as God was choosing him to be the one to work alongside God to bring liberation to the enslaved Israelites. God chose Moses and God was going to work in partnership with Moses to bring freedom to the Israelites.

The book of Exodus contains a great theological theme about the manner in which God brings deliverance to God’s people. Also, God is the savior of His people from bondage. As is evident in the narrative of Exodus 3:1–15, God works with both angels and humanity to bring about God’s rule on earth. In the case of Exodus, God was to deliver the people from slavery,

⁸ *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 534.

⁹ *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 119.

¹⁰ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 59.

and he functioned as their God and savior. Thus, as Herbert Wolf states, “The book of Exodus was written to describe the difficulties of the Israelites in Egypt and the faithfulness of the God who rescued them from their bondage.”¹¹ In the Old Testament writings, the Exodus from Egypt became the main illustration in the Bible of God’s ability to save God’s people.¹²

The story of Moses narrated in Exodus 3:1–15 is also an account of divine presence. This shows the reader of the Bible that God is not only transcendent, but he is also accessible. In the narrative, it is the angel of the Lord who appeared to Moses to help him encounter God. In this encounter with God, Moses is afraid to see God, so he hides his face because he was afraid to die. According to Gerald D. Janzen, “As Moses gets closer to the bush, God’s voice alerts Moses that he was now in a presence that is not subject to his curiosity, investigation, or analysis. He is in the presence of the holy.”¹³ Brevard S. Childs summarizes the theology of this narrative of Moses by asserting that “the major witness of Exodus 3 lies in the revelation by God of Himself to Moses as that divine reality who had already made Himself known in the past to the Fathers and who promised to execute his redemptive will toward Israel in the future.”¹⁴ Childs also asserts that “although intimately related throughout the entire book, the themes of divine power and presence take prominence at different stages in the story of Exodus.”¹⁵

The pericope of Exodus 3:1–15 reveals how the theology of God’s presence and salvation is at work in the life of the Israelites. For God to make this happen, God works with Moses and the angel of the Lord in a framework of partnership. Gowan asserts that “God’s promise to be with Moses in the apparently impossible task he has assigned him forms a framework for the call

¹¹ Herbert Wolf, *An Introduction to The Old Testament Pentateuch* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 125.

¹² Wolf, *An Introduction to The Old Testament Pentateuch*, 130.

¹³ Gerald D. Janzen (*Exodus*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 28.

¹⁴ Brevard S. Childs (*The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1974), 87.

¹⁵ Bozeman, *Exodus*, 44.

story.”¹⁶ Moses is a shepherd who is available to be sent by God, and God promises to be with him as he goes on his mission. The angel of the Lord is a messenger who does the role of appearing to Moses so that God can communicate with Moses. The appearance of the angel of the Lord was also an avenue of showing God’s presence with Moses. H.C. Ackerman asserts that “the angel of God appeared to Moses through the burning bush in a manner to manifest the particular will of God”¹⁷ of appointing Moses for the divine task of liberating God’s people out of Egypt.

In the pericope of Exodus 3:1-15, there is a beautiful picture of how God works with angels and humanity to accomplish the task of bringing liberation to God’s people. This pericope also supports how Moses, the angel of the Lord, and God were all working together for the sake of fulfilling the mission of delivering the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. Moses who is “the human partner has a say in shaping the direction and outcome of events in Exodus (Exod 3:1–7:7).”¹⁸ According to Dozeman, “the aim of the opening encounter between the messenger of the Lord and Moses is to place Moses in a place where he would identify God.”¹⁹ This encounter, coupled with Moses’ upbringing, his passion for justice, and his vocation as a shepherd would then lead him to work alongside God in making God’s plan to save the Israelites come true.

Conclusion

Just as God uses his messenger to appear to Moses, Miller supports the notion that “Moses also gets elected by God to be God’s messenger to the Hebrew people and the Egyptians.”²⁰ The account of Exodus 3:1–15 portrays how its authorship supports the theology of

¹⁶ Gowan, *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary*, 54.

¹⁷ H.C. Ackerman, “The Principle Differentiation between ‘The Word of the Lord’ and ‘The Angel of the Lord,’” *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 37 (1921), 149.

¹⁸ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 59.

¹⁹ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 126.

²⁰ William A. Miller, *The Book of Exodus Question by Question* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 30.

God's partnership with angels and humanity. The angel of the Lord and God played their different roles in the narrative in order to assist Moses to be part of the plan to liberate God's people from Egyptian slavery. The story of Moses and his call to work with God to set the Israelites free from Egyptian bondage portrays how God is present with God's people and how God cares for their liberation. This account has shown that God uses one's upbringing, passions, and vocation to be an instrument for advancing God's kingdom. God is still working today and wants to use these aspects of our lives and experiences to serve others.

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