

EXODUS 3-7

GOD'S PRESENCE IN THE NAME

- 1 *Introduction*
- 1 *Moses was keeping the flock... (EXODUS 3:1)*
- 3 *God Speaks (EXODUS 3:2-9)*
- 4 *The Call of Moses (EXODUS 3:10-17)*
- 5 *Answering the Call (EXODUS 3:18-4:17)*
- 7 *Moses Returns to Egypt (EXODUS 4:18-5:23)*
- 9 *Israel's Assured Deliverance (EXODUS 6:1-13)*
- 11 *The Genealogy and Recommissioning (EXODUS 6:14-7:7)*

INTRODUCTION

Exodus 3–7 forms one of the most carefully constructed call narratives in Scripture, a literary and theological hinge that moves the story from divine hiddenness to divine self-revelation. These chapters mark Moses's first direct encounter with the presence of the LORD and inaugurate the long arc of his transformation from conflicted, self-directed defender of justice into a faithful servant and shepherd of Israel. What begins at the burning bush is not merely a commissioning but the shaping of a prophet whose vocation will be grounded in God's character rather than his own impulses.

The narrative unfolds with deliberate movement. God reveals the divine name, discloses the divine intention to deliver Israel, and draws Moses into partnership. Moses resists, questions, and fears, yet God meets each hesitation with reassurance, signs, and promise. By the time Moses stands before Pharaoh, he is no longer the man who struck down an Egyptian in anger; he is the one who speaks on behalf of the God who hears, remembers, sees, and knows the suffering of the people. Exodus 3–7 thus serves as the theological and narrative hinge between God's hiddenness in the opening chapters and the dramatic acts of liberation that follows.

MOSES WAS KEEPING THE FLOCK... (Exodus 3:1)

The narrative opens with Moses tending the flock of his Midianite father-in-law, a quiet pastoral scene that contrasts sharply with the oppression in Egypt.

“Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.” (Exod 3:1)

Into this stillness, God breaks forth in flame. The bush that burns without being consumed becomes the first sign that Moses is stepping into a realm where ordinary categories fail. God

calls Moses by name, and Moses responds, “Here I am”—a posture of availability that will be tested repeatedly in the chapters ahead.

The shepherd as leader is a common metaphor in the ancient world. While the shepherd was a lowly and humble position in society, it was a role essential for the protection and nurturing of vulnerable animals. Moreover, shepherds risked their lives as fully committed to the preservation of the flock and its deliverance from one place of sustenance to another. Even the LORD claims this role when the priests and leaders of Israel are condemned through the prophet Ezekiel:

“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.” (Ezek 34:15-16)

Moses, the shepherd, will now be called to the role of shepherding the people—to seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak.

setting that carries deep symbolic weight across the ancient Near East. Wilderness—parched, barren, and untamed—was a familiar part of Levantine life, but it also functioned as a visual metaphor: a place stripped of abundance, where blessing seems absent and where a person is prepared, purified, and readied for transformation. It is a liminal space, marked by ambiguity and mystery, where ordinary patterns of life fall away and new beginnings take shape. In biblical narrative, those who enter the wilderness and return do so changed, standing at the threshold of a new vocation or identity. It is the place where ego is emptied and where one meets the living God.

From Midian, Moses travels deeper into this liminal terrain until he arrives at Mount Horeb, later known also as Mount Sinai. Here the narrative invokes another widespread and nearly universal metaphor: the mountain as the meeting place between heaven and earth. Moses appears unaware of the mountain’s holiness; the narrator must tell the reader that this is “the mountain of God,” and the presence of the angel of the LORD confirms its sacred character. Unlike Jacob at Bethel (Gen 28), Moses makes no attempt to construct an altar or memorial. This omission aligns with the theology of Exodus, which insists that God’s holiness is not tied to a fixed shrine but is revealed in movement—through time, through space, and through the unfolding journey of the people.

The coming story is thus presented as both a spiritual and a geographic journey, a movement from Egypt to Canaan via Sinai as a growing relationship with the LORD. No permanent marker will ever be built at Sinai, even as it becomes the place of the most significant revelation in the

Old Testament. The holiness of Sinai is not meant to be captured in stone; it is meant to accompany Israel on its journey. God is on the move, leading the people from Egypt to Canaan, shaping them through covenant and presence until they find rest in the land of promise.

This is the landscape into which Moses steps as he moves from Midian into the wilderness and finally to Horeb. He stands at the edge of a new calling, poised between past and future, ready to encounter the divine presence in the burning bush—the moment that will reshape his identity and set the course for Israel’s deliverance.

GOD SPEAKS (Exodus 3:2-9)

The appearance of the angel of the LORD in Exodus 3:2 introduces a moment of deliberate narrative ambiguity.

“An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush...” (Exod 3:2a)

The reader first encounters an angel, yet by Exodus 3:4 it is unmistakably the LORD who speaks. This fluid movement between angelic and divine presence appears elsewhere in the Old Testament and reflects a literary strategy rather than a theological contradiction. The sacred author gradually leads the reader toward a fuller encounter with the holiness of God’s presence on earth. Scripture is comfortable with anthropomorphic language and with portraying God in ways that bridge transcendence and immanence; the burning bush scene participates fully in that tradition.

The LORD appears “in a blazing fire,” drawing on a nearly universal symbol. Fire is physical yet untouchable, comforting yet dangerous, illuminating yet consuming. It is present but cannot be grasped. In Exodus 3, fire becomes the medium of divine revelation—an earthly manifestation of a reality that exceeds human comprehension. The author underscores this visual encounter through repeated use of the Hebrew verb *rayah* (“to see” or “to appear”), used seven times in five verses. Moses is not given an abstract theological concept; he is given a real, sensory revelation, one that meets him within the limits of human experience. Rudolf Otto’s description of the divine encounter as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—a mystery both terrifying and compelling—captures the tone of this moment.¹

God’s first words to Moses emphasize the immediacy of divine presence:

“Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” (Exod 3:5)

¹ See R Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.

The holiness of the place is not inherent. It becomes holy because the LORD is present. This is a crucial theological point in Exodus: holiness is dynamic, not static. There is, at this stage, no permanent sanctuary, no authorized holy site. The ground is holy only insofar as God dwells there. The narrative resists any attempt to pin God down geographically. Later in Israel's experience, places like Bethel, Shechem, and especially Mount Zion and the Jerusalem temple will acquire lasting sacred significance. But in Exodus, God is on the move, revealing a theology of movement in which divine presence accompanies the people rather than remaining fixed in one location.

Even at Sinai—the site of the most significant revelation in the Old Testament—no permanent marker is erected. There is no altar, no shrine, no memorial stone. Sinai is holy because God meets the people there, not because the mountain itself possesses enduring sanctity. God did not come to settle his people in the wilderness; but, rather, God came to lead them out of Egypt to the Land of Promise. The holiness of Sinai will not remain once God leads the people onward.

This theology of movement continues through the construction of the tent sanctuary at the end of Exodus. Even when God takes up residence in the tabernacle, the divine presence remains mobile, guiding and accompanying Israel through the wilderness. God's dwelling is relational, not architectural; dynamic, not static; oriented toward the journey rather than the destination. Holiness is wherever God is—and God is with the people.

Thus, Moses's encounter at the burning bush is not only a moment of revelation but a declaration of how God will be known throughout the Exodus story. The divine presence breaks into time and space, transforms the ground beneath Moses's feet, and then moves forward, leading Israel toward the land of promise. No permanent marker is laid down because God has not come to settle the people in the wilderness. God has come to lead them out.

THE CALL OF MOSES (Exodus 3:10-17)

The LORD has heard the cry of the people in Egypt, and the divine response takes the form of a commissioning. In Scripture, encounters with the living God are never offered merely for personal enlightenment or spiritual satisfaction; they consistently culminate in a calling or commissioning. Revelation leads to vocation. The God who sees and hears draws Moses into a relationship that expands his knowledge of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and simultaneously enlists him to act on the LORD's behalf for the sake of others. Divine revelation is not simply information but an invitation to trust the one who self-discloses as a foretaste of the promise. Moses's commissioning as the prophet *par excellence* becomes the paradigm for later

call narratives throughout the Old Testament, including Joshua, Gideon, Samuel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel.

God's initial words to Moses from the burning bush root the encounter in continuity with the patriarchs (Exod 3:6). Yet almost immediately, the narrative signals a new chapter. God announces the intention to bring Israel into "a land that is good and broad, flowing with milk and honey" (Exod 3:8). The mission entrusted to Moses—to deliver the people from Egypt—is a new work grounded in a new promise. God tells Moses, "For I will be with you" (Exod 3:12a). This assurance of divine presence is unprecedented. Moses is not sent alone; the LORD will act through him to establish the divine kingdom and covenant among the people.

God also promises Moses a sign: "When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain" (Exod 3:12b). While this could refer to a future return to Sinai, it would be unusual for a sign to come *after* the event it is meant to confirm. More likely, the sign is the burning bush itself, or more precisely, what the burning bush signifies—the manifest presence of the LORD and its assurance for the task ahead. Moses's confidence rests not in a future proof but in the present revelation.

Alongside the promise of presence, the LORD reveals the divine name. Moses is told to say, "I am who I am," or "I will be who I will be" (Exod 3:14a). The Hebrew phrase, *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh*, is intentionally obscure. It may point to the eternal, unchangeable essence of God; it may refer to God's unfolding activity in history. Ultimately, the name is undefinable, mirroring the mystery of God's own nature. Yet it is rich with meaning: it signifies the God whose very being is tied to ongoing self-revelation and to acting on behalf of the people.

God then deepens the revelation:

"Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you" (Exod 3:14b).

I AM" translates the tetragrammaton, the four sacred letters derived from the root "to be"—the same root found in *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* and in the promise "I will be (*'ehyeh*) with you." The connection is intimate and deliberate. The divine name is not an abstract label but a promise: who God is cannot be separated from what God will do. The verb *'ehyeh* carries a sense of effective presence, a being-with that is active, relational, and transformative.

Moses longs for a definitive statement of God's identity. Instead, God gives him a definitive statement of God's promise—a name that reveals an active presence in the world and a future horizon that stretches beyond Egypt into the unfolding story of Israel.

ANSWERING THE CALL (Exodus 3:18-4:17)

Moses is called to action, yet even after receiving a new promise and the revelation of the divine name, he remains deeply reluctant. The dialogue that follows is one of the most instructive in Scripture for understanding how God engages human agents. The LORD does not coerce. Instead, God encourages and accommodates, engages and entices, drawing the hesitant servant into partnership. As Jeremiah later reflects, “You enticed me, O LORD, and I was enticed” (Jer 20:7a)—a pattern of divine persuasion that echoes through the prophetic tradition. God entrusts the divine work to willing partners, patiently bearing human insecurity and weakness, and revealing divine power through the servant’s gradual transformation.

The LORD tells Moses that the king of Egypt “will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand” (Exod 3:19). Narratively, this prediction prepares the reader for the dramatic demonstrations of divine power that will follow. The plagues will not only confront Pharaoh but will also reveal to Israel the God who acts with and through creation on behalf of the oppressed. Moses’s mission is framed from the outset as a work of divine intervention rather than human ingenuity.

Yet Moses hesitates. His first objection—“Suppose they do not believe me or listen to me” (Exod 4:1)—is met with three signs. Each sign is carefully chosen to speak both to Israel and to the symbolic world of Egypt.

- The Serpent from the Staff — Moses takes his shepherd’s crook and throws it down so that it becomes a serpent. This is no magician’s trick; Moses performs no incantation. The sign is an act of God. The impact of the sign is found in the Egyptian lore surrounding the serpent, which was a creature steeped in Egyptian symbolism, associated with divine protection and Pharaoh’s own authority. By transforming the staff, the LORD demonstrates power over the serpent and, by implication, over Pharaoh himself.
- The Leprous Hand — The second sign is a bit of a mystery because it never comes about. The causing of Moses’ hand to turn leprous and restoring it again seems a likely sign of the Lord’s power over illness and human frailty.
- The Nile Turned to Blood — Upon drawing water from the Nile, the water becomes blood when poured on dry ground. This foreshadows the first plague and strikes at the heart of Egypt’s life-source. The LORD is sovereign even over the river that sustains the empire.

These signs are not coercive; they are invitations. God reiterates, “If they do not believe...” —a reminder that Israel, like Moses, is drawn into relationship through enticement, not compulsion. The signs serve to awaken trust and to call the people out of Egypt toward the land of promise.

Still Moses resists, claiming he is “slow of speech and slow of tongue.” God counters with a profound theological assertion:

“Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.” (Exod 4:11–12)

The prophetic voice is not grounded in human eloquence but in divine initiative. Where Moses lacks ability, God provides. This pattern appears throughout the prophetic tradition. Jeremiah makes nearly the same objection—“Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy”—and receives the same assurance of divine presence and instruction. God does not use prophets as mere instruments or megaphones; rather, God plants the word within them, allowing it to mature into a message shaped by a particular voice at a particular moment.

Finally, Moses offers an outright rejection: “Send someone else” (Exod 4:13). The LORD’s anger is kindled, yet God does not abandon either the plan of redemption or Moses himself. Instead, God accommodates Moses’s fear by appointing Aaron as his companion and spokesperson. This concession, as we will see, is never fully initiated as Moses does indeed do most of the talking in the narrative. God’s concession to use Aaron demonstrates that the divine plan will not be thwarted by human frailty. God entices, reassures, and equips, making it possible for Moses to participate in the work of liberation.

A delicate balance emerges: divine sovereignty and human freedom interwoven in the unfolding of salvation. The LORD takes the raw material of Moses—his fears, his hesitations, his limitations—and begins the work of transformation. Moses is drawn into the divine presence even as God works out the redemption of Israel.

MOSES RETURNS TO EGYPT (Exodus 4:18-5:23)

Exodus 4:18–6:1 gathers together a series of scenes that move the narrative from Moses’s commissioning at Horeb back into the fraught political and spiritual landscape of Egypt. The material is clearly composite—woven from older traditions into a single forward-moving storyline—but its theological coherence is unmistakable. Moses, newly called yet still hesitant, begins the journey that will reveal both the depth of his transformation and the magnitude of the LORD’s power.

In Exodus 4:18, Moses seeks permission from his father-in-law to return to Egypt with his family. The narrative first presents Moses’s initiative—he wishes to see whether his kindred are still alive—only to follow immediately with a divine command that sends him on his way. The patchwork quality of the scene reflects the merging of traditions, yet the theological thrust is

clear: Moses's personal concern is overtaken by the LORD's summons, and his journey becomes an act of obedience rather than curiosity.

Exodus 4:24–25 is one of the most enigmatic passages in the Old Testament. The LORD, who has just patiently commissioned Moses, now seeks to put him to death. The scene raises numerous questions without easy linguistic or literary answers: How did Zipporah know that the Lord was seeking to kill Moses? What was God's motivation? Why is circumcision her immediate response? Why does the circumcision appease God? What does "bridegroom of blood" mean?

While the passage resists definitive explanation, three observations might help frame a meaning:

- Divine Righteousness — In the Scriptures, the LORD's judgments are consistently portrayed as righteous. While the narrative leaves the divine motive undisclosed, the rabbinic tradition suggests Moses had neglected the Abrahamic covenant by failing to circumcise his son.
- A Woman at the Center of Deliverance — Returning to one of the motifs in Exodus 1-2, a woman—Zipporah—intervenes to preserve the divine plan. Her decisive action echoes the women earlier in the narrative.
- Foreshadowing Future Themes — Circumcision, the firstborn, and blood will all become central motifs in Israel's deliverance. The blood of circumcision anticipates the blood on the doorposts in Exodus 12; the preservation of the firstborn anticipates the final plague. The fragment thus functions as a theological seed planted early in the narrative.

Whatever else the passage may imply, Moses is preserved so that he may fulfill his mission. Upon his return, the people believe, bow down, and worship when they hear that the LORD has seen their misery (Exod 4:31).

Exodus 5:1 marks Moses's first encounter with the Egyptian king. Moses invokes the divine name—now the most potent sign of God's presence—and demands that the people be allowed to worship in the wilderness. Pharaoh responds with contempt—the most potent sign of the divine presence through the revelation of a name, and the king denies that name:

"Who is the Lord that I should heed him?" (Exod 4:2).

His question becomes the driving theological inquiry of the entire book. Pharaoh denies the name, and thus denies the presence of Israel's God. In a prescient sort of way, the king's question, "Who is the Lord?," is the very question of the book of Exodus.

Pharaoh's rejection is not merely verbal. He responds to the LORD's name by intensifying Israel's oppression. This is the predictable strategy of tyrants: crush hope at its first spark, sow

dissension among the oppressed, and turn the people against their own leaders. The king's tactics mirror the patterns of oppression throughout history.

The Israelites, overwhelmed by increased suffering, turn against Moses and the LORD. Their initial faith collapses into murmuring. In a striking reversal, the people who once cried out to God now cry out to Pharaoh. The theological message is clear: obedience to the LORD does not guarantee immediate comfort. Faithfulness may lead first through hardship before it leads to deliverance. Murmuring and grumbling will be a constant theme in the ensuing narrative as Israel is beset by trouble after trouble, and will help to highlight the danger of abandoning the LORD in the midst of suffering and difficulty. The theological message is clear: Obedience to the LORD will not always bring about immediate success and comfort; but, through the journey well traveled, the LORD's salvation will be made known.

Moses, too, questions God. Having spoken in the LORD's name and revealed the LORD's presence, he now feels abandoned – God appears hidden and concealed. Yet Moses's cry does not go unheard, and the response of the LORD is an invitation to see what cosmic events will soon take place as a demonstration of God's power and presence in Egypt and in all of creation.

Exodus 4–6 thus portrays the tension between divine sovereignty and human frailty, between revelation and resistance, between promise and the painful first steps of liberation. Moses is being shaped, Israel is being tested, and Pharaoh is being confronted. The stage is set for the LORD to act in ways that will redefine the meaning of divine presence for generations to come.

ISRAEL'S ASSURED DELIVERANCE (Exodus 6:1-6:13)

Exodus 6:1–13 renews the call first issued at the burning bush, but it does so with a noticeably different tone, structure, and theological emphasis. The narrative signals that Moses's despair at the end of chapter 5—his sense that obedience has only worsened Israel's suffering—requires a fresh divine intervention. What follows is a second call narrative, one that scholars widely recognize as shaped by later editorial work, most likely from Levitical circles, and perhaps drawing on distinct regional traditions. Yet despite its composite nature, the passage functions as a deliberate theological reset: God reasserts the divine identity, reaffirms the covenant, and recommissions Moses for the work ahead.

The scene of call and invitation in chapter 6, unlike that in chapter 3, contains no burning bush, no holy ground, and no wilderness setting. The divine name is not explained or unfolded; it is simply given, as though Moses should already understand its weight. The LORD's name becomes a source of comfort and authority, offered precisely at the moment when Moses feels

most defeated. The revelation of the name is not an abstract theological exercise—it is God’s answer to Moses’s anguish.

The name revealed here is the same tetragrammaton disclosed in Exodus 3, but the phrasing in Exodus 6:2 and 6:6 reads literally, “I am I am.” The repetition underscores continuity with the earlier revelation while also expanding its meaning. Indeed, God immediately situates this self-disclosure within Israel’s ancestral story:

“I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty (El Shaddai), but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them.” (Exod 6:3)

This does not mean the patriarchs were ignorant of the divine name—Genesis uses it freely—but rather that the full significance of the name had not yet been revealed. The patriarchs knew God as El Shaddai, a title often translated “God Almighty,” though its meaning is elusive. It may derive from the Akkadian *sadu* (“mountain”), linking Israel’s God to ancient conceptions of a high-god dwelling on the heights. In Genesis, El Shaddai is the God who promises land, progeny, and legacy—the cosmic Creator who appears in visions and dreams but does not dwell permanently with the people.

The transition from the generic *el Shaddai* to the specificity of the divine name highlights an important conceptual leap in Israel’s understanding of God. The God of the patriarchs is now revealed as the God who will deliver and abide with the people and is now being revealed to the chosen people as a redeeming God. The divine name is not merely a label; it is a declaration of presence, action, and relationship. The LORD is not only the God who promises but the God who intervenes in history.

This transition also signals a shift in sacred presence. In Genesis, God appears episodically—never dwelling permanently with Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. In Exodus, however, God will be known as the one who abides with Israel, a theme that reaches its climax in the tent sanctuary at the end of the book. The revelation of the divine name is thus the beginning of a new age in Israel’s salvation history: the God of the patriarchs becomes the God who dwells with the people.

The author of Exodus uses this moment to forge an inviolate connection between the ancestral promises and the unfolding events in Egypt. The LORD’s name binds together identity, power, and covenant faithfulness. The God who spoke to Abraham is the same God who now speaks to Moses; the God who promised land and descendants is the same God who will deliver Israel from bondage.

The revelation of the name in Exodus 6 is therefore not redundant—it is foundational. It reassures Moses, reorients the narrative, and anchors the coming acts of deliverance in the

ancient covenant. The LORD's name becomes the theological center of the book, the answer to Pharaoh's question, "Who is the LORD?", and the key to understanding the God who acts in history for the sake of the people.

THE GENEALOGY AND RECOMMISSING (Exodus 6:14-7:7)

Exodus 6:14 introduces a sudden shift in tone and genre to a genealogy inserted directly into the momentum of Moses's recommissioning. Though it may feel abrupt, its placement is characteristic of priestly redaction, where genealogies serve as theological anchors—affirming continuity, legitimacy, and identity within Israel's sacred history. Here, the genealogy functions not as a digression but as a deliberate narrative tool, establishing the priestly lineage that will shape Israel's worship in the wilderness and beyond.

The genealogy focuses primarily on Aaron, not Moses. Reuben and Simeon appear only to situate Levi within the tribal structure, but the spotlight falls squarely on Aaron's descendants. Moses is mentioned, but his children are not; instead, the genealogy highlights figures whose roles intersect with Moses's life and ministry. This selective emphasis reveals the genealogy's purpose: it is a legitimizing document for the Aaronic priesthood, rooting Aaron's authority in the patriarchs and in the tribe of Levi, and anticipating the priesthood's central role in the wilderness sanctuary.

At the close of chapter 6 and the opening of chapter 7, Moses and Aaron are recommissioned. The message is now sharpened and intensified:

"You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his land." (Exod 7:2)

Gone is the earlier request for a three-day journey into the wilderness. Moses now demands unconditional release. The narrative has moved from tentative petition to full confrontation. The LORD's command is absolute, and the stakes are cosmic. Pharaoh's earlier question—"Who is the LORD?"—is about to be answered. The genealogy has grounded Aaron's authority; the renewed call has grounded Moses's. Now the LORD will ground divine authority in acts of power that will reverberate through Egypt and across the world.

This moment marks a turning point in the narrative:

- The Aaronic priesthood is formally rooted in Israel's sacred history.
- Moses and Aaron stand together as commissioned agents of divine liberation.
- The LORD assumes full responsibility for fulfilling the covenant promises.

- Pharaoh's challenge to the divine name becomes the central theological question of the book.

The genealogy, far from being an interruption, is a bridge—linking Israel's past to its imminent redemption, rooting the coming acts of deliverance in the ancestral covenant, and preparing the reader for the priestly leadership that will shape Israel's worship and identity.