

## **Second Assignment**

**How does the story of the theophany from the burning bush represent a radical change in the life of Moses?**

RGB1005H online: Introduction to the Old Testament

February 14, 2015

Moses is a central figure in the Pentateuch. He is credited with liberating the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and leading them to the Promised Land. However, Moses didn't accomplish this by himself. According to the Biblical account, Moses' role as liberator of his people began with an encounter with God (or "theophany") which transformed his life and enabled him to take on that role.

The story of Moses has been the subject of a large body of literature within the Christian tradition, both ancient and modern.<sup>1</sup> Today much of the literature centres around the issue of the historicity of the Moses tradition, with the debate being between the "maximalists" who accept much of the Moses tradition as historically valid, and the "minimalists" who accept very little of the tradition as historical.<sup>2</sup> However, according to Brian Britt, a new approach is emerging which focusses on the myth and legends associated with Moses.<sup>3</sup> This approach is not so much concerned with the historicity of the Moses' tradition, but with how it has been remembered and applied in new circumstances. Consistent with the latter approach, my focus in this paper is on the memory that Moses' role as an agent for change for his people began with his own transformation through a numinous experience of God and what that transformation entailed.

The life-changing encounter with God took place in the desert wilderness of Midian while tending the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro, a Midianite priest.<sup>4</sup> How did Moses, a prince of Egypt, end up as a shepherd living as a nomad in the wilds of Midian?

---

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, translation, introduction and notes by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978); Gerhard von Rad, *Moses* (London: Letterworth Press, 1960).

<sup>2</sup> Brian Britt, "The Moses Myth, Beyond Biblical History," *The Bible and Interpretation*, accessed February 14, 2015, [http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Britt-Moses\\_Myth.shtml](http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Britt-Moses_Myth.shtml).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> The Midianites were nomadic tribes, living (it is thought) east of the Gulf of Aqaba.

The story of Moses is well-known.<sup>5</sup> The descendants of the family of Jacob (known as the Hebrews) were now slaves in Egypt (Ex 1). Moses was the son of a Hebrew couple who was rescued from death by a daughter of the king of Egypt as a baby and raised in a palace (Ex 2:1-10). Despite being raised as an Egyptian, he retained a kinship with his people, and he also seems to have developed a sense of what today we would call political and social justice. The series of incidents (Ex 2:11-23), which led to his flight to Midian illustrate this. One day he saw a Hebrew being beaten by an Egyptian. He murdered the Egyptian and hid his body. Later he interfered in a fight between two Hebrews, and the perpetrator asked him whether he was going to kill him like he had killed the Egyptian. Moses realized that news of the murder was out and he fled from Egypt, and ended up in the land of Midian. He met some girls at a well; drew water for them, went to their home for dinner, began to work for their father, married one of them and started a family. The Bible tells us that many years passed.

The “burning bush” story is found in Exodus 3-4 and contains many ancient and important themes of which I will focus on two. The first is God’s concern for the oppression of the Hebrews. God says to Moses: “I have observed the miseries of my people who are in Egypt, I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters...” Moses had the same concern about the suffering of his people when he was in Egypt. His passion for justice is what led to the flight to Midian in the first place. The key question is: what enabled him to go back to Egypt and try again? The answer lies in Moses’ direct experience of God. In those moments he had a mystical experience and an extraordinary call from God, which has come down to us through the ages as the “burning bush” story. An extended discussion of the nature of mystical experience is beyond the scope of this paper, but in the classic text *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William

---

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., the summary of his life in Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Richard Clifford and Daniel Harrington (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), 136-38.

James observes that one of its features is “illumination” in the sense of the light that often accompanies those experiences but, more importantly, in the sense of clarity or a new way of seeing.<sup>6</sup> James writes that these mystical experiences typically carry with them a sense of authority which remains after the experience itself ends.

It seems to me that Moses’ direct experience of God somehow tapped into his own deep distress over the plight of the Hebrews in Egypt. The difference now was his sense – his knowledge – that God was calling him – Moses – to liberate his people. This deep noetic sense never left him. The experience of God did not change his anxious personality as evidenced, for example, in the long negotiation with God in Exodus 4. Rather, Moses’ radical transformation into a religious political leader was only possible because of his sense of God’s call and of God’s presence in his life. Because his transformation was rooted in his experience of the divine, Moses’ leadership was characterized by collaboration, for example, with Aaron, his brother; he did not seek power for himself, but rather was driven by his sense of who God is and what God requires of humanity.<sup>7</sup>

Moses’ experience isn’t unique in the Bible. The Bible is filled with stories of people who had experiences of God which changed the trajectory of their lives. Abraham is an example of someone who left his home and travelled across the known world in response to an experience of God. As James indicates, mystics from all religious traditions describe similar experiences. I believe that people still experience these moments of clarity, of illumination, of a sense of having been called. Some, like Moses, are transformed by those moments into powerful agents for change, in spite of their frailty and humanity and their reluctance to take on the role.

---

<sup>6</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. Martin E. Marty (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Group, 1982), Lectures XVI and XVII.

<sup>7</sup> Class Notes: The character of Moses: intermediary and leader.

## Bibliography

Boadt, Lawrence. *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Revised & updated by Richard Clifford and Daniel Harrington. New York: Paulist Press, 2012.

Britt, Brian. "The Moses Myth, Beyond Biblical History." *The Bible and Interpretation*. Accessed February 14, 2015. [http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Britt-Moses\\_Myth.shtml](http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Britt-Moses_Myth.shtml).

James, Williams. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Edited and with an introduction by Martin E. Marty. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1982.

Biblical references: The Harper Collins Study Bible: Including Apocryphal Deuterocanonical Books. NRSV. Fully Revised and Updated. Student Edition. San Francisco: HarperOne, 1989.