

STUDY NOTES FOR LESSON 2

Exodus Chapters 3-4

THE AUTHOR OF EXODUS

Consider the record before us. The hero and central character of the Book of Exodus is Moses. But Moses is also the book's author. The amazing tale of God's miraculous interventions to save his life, then ensure that he is raised in the court of Pharaoh as a prince, then cast into the Sinai desert for 40 years as a lowly shepherd, only to be called back to his prophetic purpose by God speaking to him personally from a mysterious burning bush, all actually took place; and *after* it did, Moses, with the added perspective of being on the other side of his own improbable history, wrote it all down for us. In addition he wrote the history of God's dealings with mankind from its beginning, for he authored the first five books of the Bible, known to Jews as the Torah. Moses is an extraordinary figure in the history of our world. Among the prophets he is known as the great lawgiver, and we will continue to see just how pivotal his role was in establishing the nation of Israel and the Jewish culture on a firm moral and legal basis through all the years since. Through the receipt of God's laws to Moses, mankind started on the road that has ended in the Western civilization that is our own birthright. We owe him a great deal.

We all know that through Moses, God gave the most basic of laws—the Ten Commandments, whose influence is felt in every law code of every civilized nation in our world today. But the Torah contains many more laws than just these ten. Through Moses, God revealed an extensive code of law that began working in the lives of its followers to lift them from slavery to lives of individual dignity through strong moral precepts rooted in a morally ordered family life. Now the nation had a solid structure of law upon which to begin. This divinely revealed moral and civil law put in place important boundaries that kept the Children of Israel away from the deathly currents of sexual license and disregard for human life that marked so many of the cultures of the time. With these civil structures in place, the people and their leaders could begin the arduous task of building a lasting society founded on principles of justice. That society became a "city on a hill," the foundation of the Judeo-Christian values that made the world a better place for all people.

As Latter-day Saints we know some things beyond what can be known from the Bible. We have the records of the Pearl of Great Price, which contain writings of Moses lost from the Bible as we now have it, and also the record of Abraham, called the father of the faithful. We also know much more about Enoch and the Zion society he founded, a society so successful that God removed it from the earth and took it to Himself. With that one exception, the history of the world before Moses does not seem to have produced a godly society or government¹. In spite of Father Adam's efforts, his descendents became so wicked they were wiped out in the great flood. After the flood men founded Babylon, the great archetype of worldliness and earthly power, and also a sample of what kind of civilization is wrought by men who work without God.

The only place that true worship survived in the earth was in a family, a family that would begin to take shape through the faith of its great patriarch, Abraham. Abraham was a man that God loved. Twice in the Bible he is called God's "friend." (2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8) Because his heart yearned more for God and what God could give him, than

for the things of the world, God established a covenant with him and made him the founding patriarch of a great line of people, promising that "in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed." (Gen 12:3)

In time Moses would come to fully understand the promises given to Abraham and write the words just quoted in his own record. Also in time he would realize that it was he, Moses himself, that was the pivot point for turning the millions of Abraham's descendants who had been born in Egypt, from an unorganized downtrodden tribe of slaves, into a true nation, one that had laws and governance that would be a light and standard to all the rest of the world. You might say that Moses took the promise of blessing the whole human race given to Abraham, and gave it form and permanence by becoming the great lawgiver of Israel.

But not right away. The Moses of Exodus chapters 1-4 is not the Moses who wrote the books of the Torah. He is yet to become that man. Remarkable in the extreme is his humility, which permits him to write so honestly of the path of growth he traveled, including a record of his initial resistance to God's call and other follies. You cannot say Moses whitewashed his own history. As a result, we can relate to the man who asks God to "find someone else" because we have all faltered in the same way, looking in panic at our own weakness rather than at God's perfect sufficiency and unending abundance. In the process of time he becomes one of the greatest prophets the world has known. There is no living man or woman that does not owe a debt of gratitude to Moses for the "civilizing" effect his words and works have had in history.

THE GOD OF THE BURNING BUSH

Exodus 3 Considering the entire scope of mankind's history as the Bible presents it, Exodus chapter three is the crucial pivot for the turning point in Israel's birth as a nation. After 430 years God is about to break His silence. Instead of just working through miraculous providences, He now begins to intervene openly through mighty miracles and the calling of a prophet leader. In this chapter God establishes who He is to Moses, a necessary first step, and after that, He establishes what He wants Moses to do.

Let us look at some of the things established for all time by The God of the Burning Bush.

1) God is a holy God---mighty in power and perfect in all His attributes. Moses is told to take off his shoes in His presence, and he hides his face in fear when he hears God speak. Taking off one's shoes may reflect the need to discard the dirt and grime that inevitably gets on our shoes as part of walking through daily life. We are unclean in our travels through life. He is spotless, and we acknowledge that.

2) God is compassionate. "I have seen the affliction of my people . . . and have heard their cry . . . for I know their sorrows." (Ex 3:7)

3) God acts in the affairs of men. Many people today imagine God to be an impersonal force who doesn't know or care what men and nations do. That is their mistake. The scriptures make clear that God chooses His own times to act openly.

4) God commissions men and women to act on His behalf. "I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people." (Ex 3:10)

5) God will equip His servants with whatever they need to accomplish their task. Moses tried to argue his own inadequacy but God reassures him and sends Aaron to assist him. If the God of Heaven calls someone to a task, it is His responsibility to give His servants everything they need to finish that task. God's power shines through mankind's weaknesses.

6) God requires faith of those who follow Him. In spite of the awesome manifestation Moses received on the mountain, it took great faith to go back to Egypt and announce to the people what God had commanded him to do. In spite of the assurances we get in our "mountain top" experiences, God always requires that we act upon the directions we have received back in the ordinary, day-to-day world. And that takes faith.

THE HOLINESS OF GOD

The children of Israel had been living surrounded by Egyptian culture. Typical of other ancient civilizations, it was saturated with sexual license. We take for granted certain moral strictures that are a part of Western civilization, but Western civilization derives from the code found in the Torah. Egypt had no such moral codes. Incest was celebrated among royalty as it was reportedly found in the mythologies of their many gods. Their gods, by the way, were often half animal and half man; fittingly so, since their religion appealed to the animal in their natures. There was no sanction against homosexuality, which was open and commonplace. Religious practices were inextricably linked with sexual debauchery.

How many Israelites assimilated into Egyptian culture we have no way of knowing, but they were certainly influenced by it. Joshua warns them in later years to "put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the Lord." (Joshua 24:14) Notice that "gods" is plural. One of the most striking things about religion in Egypt was the multitude of gods. Some have numbered as many as 2,000 of them. A god was the powerful spirit residing in one of the forces of nature. There were gods of the sun, moon, sky, stars, cats, beetles, death, war, pregnancy, love, writing, crocodiles, wind, the Nile River, and on and on. Among the gods of the Egyptian pantheon there were marriages and infidelities and jealousies. Some were more powerful than others, and all were different beings with differing personalities and concerns. It was against this backdrop of false gods surrounding the children of Israel for hundreds of years, that God sent the sunlight of His pure truth to burn away the mists of darkness blinding the minds of His people. He would take His people out of the world, which Egypt represented.

It is interesting in light of that, that the first manifestation Moses sees of God is a purifying fire that burns in a common bush but doesn't consume it. The sight so startles and intrigues him that he turns aside to look. A voice tells him he is on holy ground, and he must put off his shoes.

Holiness is a key idea in the Bible. As we will see in more depth later, it means a separation between the everyday and the sacred. To interact with God, one must recognize the difference between the normal, dog-eat-dog, dirty world man lives in and the spotless purity and perfection of God. Acknowledging that, a person must separate themselves symbolically from the mundane world, by, for example, removing the shoes that symbolize their everyday walk, or dressing in different clothes, or, as in the case of the "holy sabbath day," by doing different things on that day than they do on the other six days. Holiness is a different way of being that one consciously enters into by leaving the former way of being.

It acknowledges that God himself is different than we are—higher and more pure². “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9) This is the beginning of God’s teachings to his people about holiness and the first time the word *holy* is used in the Bible.

GOD’S INTRODUCTION

God introduces himself to Moses in terms of his historic relationship to Abraham, Issac and Jacob, the Patriarchs who received the promises of God’s eternal covenant. He knew this would bring to Moses’ mind that covenant, and would confirm to him that He was a covenant keeping God. His purpose is to fulfill those ancient promises by bringing the children of Israel out of slavery and into the good land, flowing with milk and honey, that was originally promised to Abraham. “Therefore I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people.”

MOSES DEMURS

Let us combine all the protests of Moses that follow in chapter 3 and 4 with this first one, in which Moses hears the plan of God to use him to deliver the children of Israel from Egypt and cries out, “Who am I? that I should go unto Pharaoh?” Like many people who have perfect faith that God performed the miracles they read about in the scriptures, their faith falters when they themselves are given a hard task by the Lord. They look at themselves and ask, “Who am I?” God must refocus their vision upon Himself so that they ask the right question: “Who is God?” In effect God says, “What you are, Moses, is not the important thing here. That I am with you is the important thing. I can do all things but without me ye can do nothing.” (from John 15:5)

THE NAME OF GOD

One of the first questions Moses has for the Voice speaking to him from the burning bush is “What shall I say unto them,” when the people ask, “What is his name?” That is exactly what they would say if Moses came and told them God had spoken to him. “Which god?” they would want to know, or “What kind of god is he?” It is going to be up to Moses to re-teach the nation of Israel who God is, because over the years, without formalized worship or the word of God to read (they were illiterate), confusion had crept in, fanned by the false religious practices constantly on display all around them.

God replies to Moses in the famous phrase, “I am that I am.” Many books have been written about this name Jehovah, or Yaweh³, used by the Lord to identify himself here. Scholars debate endlessly about the derivation of the name and what its correct translation should be. The bulk of scholarship believes that this phrase derives from an archaic verb—Hayeh—which means “to be or to exist.” The form here is first person imperfect. An imperfect verb is something which was going on in the past, is still happening now in the present and will continue on into the future, such as ‘I am singing’, or ‘I am eating’. So in English it would literally mean, “I am being” or “I am existing.” One scholar translates it: “I am who I have always been.” This ties in nicely with God’s reference to the Patriarch’s. He is still the God that he has always been and will continue to be: a God of mercy who keeps His promises. Others see the phrase as saying, “I Will Be What I Will Be.” Perhaps instead of looking for the exact-one-true-right-answer-for-all-time to this puzzle, we might get more meaning by pondering prayerfully what God means to us.

POCKET FULL OF MIRACLES

Moses is, not without reason, afraid that the Israelites will not believe him. God gives him three miracles to use to establish his own credentials as a prophet, and to establish the credentials of the One who sent him. The first is his own shepherd's staff. A staff or rod was important to the pharaohs as a symbol of their power. They are often represented in Egyptian art as holding two crossed scepters in front of their chest. So Moses is to come before the king with his own rod of power in direct challenge to Pharaoh's power. A shepherd, whom the Egyptians despised (Gen 46:34), carrying nothing but his humble staff in his hand, was going to humble the great Pharaoh with his imposing golden scepter representing the might of Egypt.

It is worth noting that God told Moses to pick up the snake by its tail after throwing down his staff—a sure way to be bitten. A snake handler would always go for the head. But at God's word, Moses did what he was told to do. The resulting miracle surely strengthened Moses' own faith as well as being a sign to others.

The second miracle shows a remarkable power over death and decay, of which leprosy is the perfect type. All men feared this disease, which was like a visible creeping death. To be able to call forth disease from healthy living tissue, and then restore it again in an instant, was a mighty miracle. Moses too was again being assured of God's own power over death.

As a third miracle, Moses is given the ability to turn the water of the Nile river into blood. The Nile was, ironically, the virtual life-blood of Egypt and regarded as the source of all that was good in Egyptian life. There was both a god and a goddess of the Nile, so to display such power showed the superiority of the true God over pagan gods. Eventually, this miracle becomes the first of the 10 plagues God uses to free Israel. By giving Moses a preview of this plague, done with no audience, God assures that Moses will confidently be able to call it forth on that day when all Egypt is watching.

I WILL BE WITH THY MOUTH

Moses, in his human fear, pleads that he is not eloquent and of a slow tongue. Acts 7 however tells us he was "mighty in words and in deeds." (Acts 7:22) It is true that he had spent the last 40 years in a desert community probably speaking Aramaic, or some related tongue considerably removed from the Hebrew being spoken in Goshen, or the Egyptian of the royal court. He would be rusty. Some Jewish sources assert that Moses had a stammer or some kind of speech defect, but it is worth noting that the book of Deuteronomy is basically a collection of powerful speeches delivered by Moses. Whatever shortcoming is here being brought forth as an excuse, it was overcome, as God knew it would be, through faith. In the meantime, Moses is given the aid and comfort of his brother Aaron, whose language skills are quite up to date. This brings to mind the companionship that Hyrum and Joseph Smith had together in the great venture of the Restoration. The sense of strength and comfort that two people could derive from one another as they labored side by side would be an invaluable blessing. "Two are better than one." (Ecclesiastes 4:9)

TROUBLE AT THE INN

There is a strange story inserted in three verses of chapter four (24-26). The Joseph Smith Translation helps, but there is always going to be a bit of mystery about this account because all the puzzle pieces aren't given. Both Joseph Smith and Biblical scholars agree that the hinge-point of the story is Moses' failure to circumcise his youngest son. We don't know either boy's age at the time Moses left Midian for Egypt, but it appears that one of the boys was not circumcised as he should have been at eight days of age.

Though Moses was a prophet, the law of circumcision was still an absolute requirement for entering the Abrahamic covenant; and God was angry with Moses for his failure to do this. Many commentators think that Moses fell ill with a serious sickness, and the angel of the Lord announced to him that he would die unless the circumcision were quickly taken care of. It fell to Zipporah to do this in order to save Moses' life, though she apparently found this task repugnant. Perhaps this is part of the reason it had not been done. We don't know the details. It also seems that after this incident, Zipporah and Moses' two sons went back to Midian, because later, after the Israelites come out of Egypt, Jethro brings Zipporah and Moses' two sons to join up with the camp of Israel. That story is found in Exodus 18:1-6.

THE PEOPLE ARE TOLD AND BELIEVE

Moses has taken up the task, strengthened and built up in his faith by his encounter with God on Sinai, and now his brother Aaron, prompted by God, comes to meet him on the road. That was surely a great meeting of two brothers after 40 years apart. Aaron believed all that Moses told him, prepared as he was by revelation that he should go to his brother. They then walk together towards their confrontation with Pharaoh, sure of the victory that awaits those who serve the only true and living God.

But first they must inform the people, who as yet know nothing of God's plan to deliver them. They gather all of the leaders and Aaron, perhaps because of his fluency with Hebrew, delivers the news that God has heard their cries and is going to set them free. Then the three miracles that confirmed Moses' faith, were done again in front of the people. And they "believed;...then they bowed their heads, and worshipped," as God had promised Moses all along that they would.

¹ A possible exception is Melchizedek, a name that means Righteous King. We know very little about him except that he was the king of a small city state who lived in Abraham's time. His city did not remain to have a lasting effect on the nations around it, but his personal righteousness was such that the high priesthood still bears his name.

² In the Latter-days we have learned that God is not *utterly* different than we are, but that we are in fact His children and we have the potential to become like Him. This truth was 'privileged information,' only revealed to mankind in the last dispensation after our culture had moved away from the ancient, false religions that bound men down. In order to free mankind from the falsehood of multiple gods, they had to first learn that "the Lord our God is one Lord." (Deut 6:4) This truth was the basis of "monotheism," one of the great contributions of the Jews to the world.

³ Remember, we aren't sure of the pronunciation, only that the name had the four consonants Y-H-W-H.