CHAPTER 9

THE BURNING BUSH

(*Exod. 3*)

Jacob died in Egypt, and one by one his sons followed him. By the fourth generation there had been a change of dynasty in Egypt.[1] With the coming to power of new rulers much in the past was forgotten or studiously ignored. The growing clan of Hebrews in Goshen near the eastern frontier was regarded as a menace, should the unruly tribes of Syria and Canaan seek to break into the Nile Delta, as had the Hyksos centuries earlier. The Egyptians sought to tame the freedom-loving semi-nomads and reduce their numbers by drafting them into the forced-labour system of Egypt, which provided for the building and upkeep of the country's temples, tombs and palaces. When this failed, more drastic methods were tried to reduce their number.

It seems clear that the effort to kill the Hebrew boys at birth did not last very long. The attitude of Pharaoh's daughter shows that there were those who regarded government policy as inhumane, and they were doubtless soon able to change it or make it inoperative. It did result, however, in a Hebrew once more finding himself in the seats of the mighty.

It is customary to stress all that Moses will have gained by his education and position, cf. Acts 7:22, though we should

[1] Cf. Gen. 15:13–16, Exod. 6:16–18, 20; 22:40. For a discussion of the apparent contradiction here, cf. NBD, "Chronology of the Old Testament".

do well to regard with the greatest suspicion the tradition quoted by Josephus (*Ant. II x.* 2) that he gained a great victory over the Ethiopians and married the daughter of their king. The whole colouring of the story suggests a fertile imagination. The Bible, in any case, ignores this aspect of his life and does not even suggest a motive for his interventions in favour of his compatriots. The statement that the Pharaoh sought to kill Moses (Exod. 2:15) suggests that rightly or wrongly he suspected that Moses was plotting against him.

We may take it that the three periods of forty years into which Moses' life falls are round figures, but they do stress that all the years of education, civilization and culture were balanced by an equal period of labour and semi-barbarism. Among relics of the past from Egypt there has survived the story of Sinuhe, an Egyptian noble, who in fear of having incurred the Pharaoh's anger fled to a semi-nomadic tribe in Canaan or southern Syria. The story brings out how, in spite of honour and prosperity, and a marriage blessed with children, he regarded permission to return to Egypt to spend an honourable old age there as the crowning mercy. It is difficult for us to grasp the contrast between the palaces of Egypt's capital and the tents of the priest of Midian.

For our purpose it is of minimum importance who the Pharaoh from whom Moses fled may have been, which area was claimed by the Midianites in the time of Moses, or where Horeb-Sinai lay – the site of "the mountain of God" (Exod. 3:1) is far from certain. Somewhere in that wild, desert land Moses was pasturing his father-in-law's sheep. He had sunk to the level of his ancestor Jacob, "a wandering Aramean" (Deut. 26:5), before God had begun to make him prosper. Suddenly he saw a desert thorn-bush burst into flame, something not uncommon in that intense heat. But instead of being burnt up in a few minutes, this one continued to burn with a steady flame. Moses' curiosity, perhaps a relic of his Egyptian education, stirred within him, and he went over to see what was happening.

Jesus' invitation, "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden" (Matt. 11:28), has a far deeper and wider meaning than those who think purely of the burden of sin realise. It is a moot point whether riches or the crushing burden of daily toil numb the soul and make it insensible to God's voice the more quickly and surely. The hard toil of the nomadic shepherd had not dulled Moses' senses so completely that he had no longer eyes for anything outside the daily round.

As he looked at the flame burning steadily in the bush, a voice sounded in his ears, "Take off your sandals; you are standing on holy ground" – holy because God was there. Moses, awe-struck, obeyed, and the voice went on, "I am your father's God, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob". In holy awe Moses covered his face, for now he knew that the flame marked the presence of God.

Traditional Jewish exegesis understands "your father's God" as a collective, i.e., the God of your fathers, and this is the reading of the Samaritan Pentateuch; it is also the usual Christian understanding. We may, however, question it. A collective in such a setting is improbable and probably without any real parallel. We should rather understand that before Moses had to leave his parents' home in order to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter, Amram had seen to it that he understood the faith that had encouraged him and his mother to shelter their baby, and that it was this faith that accounted for the existence of his people.

It has been usual to look on the bush as symbolic, and it may be so. It could be a picture of Moses, dried up and fruitless after half a life-time in exile, yet capable of so receiving the Spirit of God, that he would become probably the greatest of the Old Testament prophets (Deut. 34:10). Equally it could depict Israel, enslaved, fearful, corrupt, in whose midst, however, God would live down the centuries, until he became incarnate in a Jewish maiden, and indeed until he had worked out his purpose in the people of

his choice. So, too, we may use it of the Church with all its imperfections and failures, but yet bearing the light and power of the Messiah to the uttermost parts of the earth. For our story, however, it is merely the means by which God can test whether Moses would still respond to the supernatural, or whether the hardships of desert life had so brutalised him that he could not think of more than mere subsistence.

The voice went on to tell him that the time had come for the promises to the patriarchs to be fulfilled, and that he was to be God's messenger to the Pharaoh, that he might lead the people out of Egypt. Here at last we see the real reason for the forty years at the Pharaoh's court. The sequel is comprehensible only when we remember that no commoner, especially if he were a foreigner, could have demanded admission to the Pharaoh's presence. Moses was still officially a member of the royal family with all the privileges that implied.

Moses' answer betrayed how the iron of the long, empty years had entered his soul: "Who am I that I should go?" To that there was no answer, and indeed no answer possible, for he was, after all, the tinder-dry, barren desert-bush, but there was the promise, "I will be with you". Then there was the sign: when all had been accomplished, the people brought out of the house of bondage would worship God on that very mountain. Such is the essential principle of faith. However much God may condescend to the weakness and doubts of his children, ultimately obedience to God's call and guidance involves a faith that is prepared to wait for its confirmation instead of having an immediate sign. To demand more than that is to walk by sight, not by faith. The children of Israel were given miraculous signs, but these did not free them of doubt.

Moses answered the challenge to his faith by questioning Israel's faith. They might, he said, ask for God's name. What was he to answer? The more we consider this apparently innocent question, the more our suspicions should be

aroused. Some forty years after, so far as we can tell, losing the last vestiges of touch with his people, it is improbable that Moses would have any real idea of how they would receive God's message. In any case they knew, just as well as Moses, that the name Yahweh – cf. footnote on p. 20 – was the name used by the God of the Patriarchs, and had Moses given them any other, they would have suspected him of being a fraud. As A. B. Davidson said in HDB (Vol. II, p. 200), "A new name would have been in those days a new God". Exod. 6:20 shows that already through his mother's name, Jochebed, Moses was familiar with the divine name.

The thought is almost irresistible that behind Moses' question lay a deep-rooted heathen superstition. It is, of course, true that as M. Noth says, "In ancient Eastern thought the name of the person who existed was a necessary part of his existence and one knew of a reality only if one was able to pronounce its 'name'. In the same way Moses will only be able to make the Israelites believe in the reality of his encounter with God if he is able to tell them the name of the God who appeared to him" (*Exodus*, p. 42). But once this God is linked with the God of the patriarchs, whose name was known, there must be something deeper.

The idea was that in addition to the many titles given to a deity he had a secret name known only to the initiated, and that to call on him by that name gave the worshipper some control over the deity he worshipped, (cf. p. 77). Moses' thought probably was that if he was to go on God's errand, he might as well guarantee that he could make certain of God's aid. Should anyone consider this derogatory to Moses, he should bear in mind that there is no suggestion that the forty years in Midian had been a time of deepening knowledge of and fellowship with God, and the whole story of God's meeting with him at the bush hardly suggests that he was then the man of deep faith he later showed himself to be.

Instead of answering Moses' request, God explained what his name Yahweh meant – this seems to be the force

of Exod. 6:2, 3, i.e., not that the name was unknown, but that its meaning and implications were. There are many suggestions how and why this was, but since none are provable, and the subject is irrelevant to our purpose, they are best left unmentioned. God explained the force of Yahweh by linking it with the verb *hayah*, to be or to become. How the enigmatic *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* is to be translated is a matter of controversy, and nothing would be gained by listing the dozens of suggestions that have been made. In fact the main translations of the Old Testament into English in text or margin opt for two chief variations.

(a) "I am who (that or what) I am" – NEB "I am; that is who I am" means essentially the same. Some few have interpreted this purely as a rebuke to Moses. He had no business to pry into that which God had not yet revealed. He must bow to the fact of God and accept him in the measure he had made himself known. There can be little doubt that this element cannot be completely eliminated from God's reply, however we interpret it, but it cannot be its chief purpose, even though Moses merited a rebuke of this kind.

The usual understanding is that God is here stressing his essential unchangeableness, his separation from everything that could make him in any way dependent on his creation. This is, of course true, and one could quote numerous passages of Scripture to establish it. It seems too to have been the way in which LXX understood it. This is natural, for Alexandrian Jewry had been influenced by Greek thought in which the static, unchanging nature of deity had been stressed. It also fitted the outlook of Maimonides (1135–1204), who was strongly under the influence of Aristotle.

Quite apart, however, from the question whether this interpretation really suits the context, it is doubtful whether the basic meaning of *hayah*, which seldom means mere existence, and above all the use of the imperfect tense used, justify it. A. B. Davidson could write in *The Theology of the*

Old Testament, "I do not think there is in the Hebrew Bible a case of the imperfect of this verb having the sense of the English *present*" (p. 55). So we come to the second interpretation.

(b) In the margin of RV, RSV, NEB, TEV we find the rendering "I will be what I will be". Yahweh is the God who reveals himself and enters into covenant relationship with his people. Nothing will invalidate that revelation or relationship. Even when that revelation reached its fulness in the Son, the eternal Word, there is need of the Holy Spirit to lead into all truth. Even though the record of revelation is closed, John Robinson was indubitably correct, when he said in his farewell address to those of his congregation leaving Delft Haven in the *Speedwell* for the New World, "I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of His holy word" (1620). Knowledge of God is essential to salvation (Jn. 17:3), but only when we see face to face, shall we understand fully as we have been fully understood (1 Cor. 13:12, 13). So God was telling Moses that in faith he had to go forward on the basis of what he knew of him, and in so doing he would learn more of God, and the new would be a deepening of what was already known. In addition he would discover that the God who called and sent would also accompany. Similarly although Jesus is the same, yesterday, to-day and for ever, none but a man who has lost his way will claim that he has come to a full knowledge of him.

It is worth mentioning that when the name Yahweh appears in a compounded proper name, it is always in a shortened form, either Ye- or Yo- (English Je- or Jo-), e.g. Jehoahaz, Jehoram, Jonathan, Josiah, Jochebed, or -iah, e.g, Ahaziah, Zedekiah. This can adequately be explained only by assuming that these forms are derived from Yah, English Jah. It can well be that this was the original form of the title, and that now God added H to it – cf. Abram, Abrahm, p. 52 – so linking it with *hayah* and giving it a fuller meaning than it had earlier possessed.

God went on by implication to rebuke Moses' suggestion of lack of belief on the part of Israel. They would believe (3:18); the difficulty would come from the Pharaoh, but this would turn out to Israel's gain. Moses continued to hide his lack of trust by suggesting unwillingness to believe on the part of Israel (4:1). So God gave him three signs, which would, if necessary, convince the people (4:2–9). They did prove effective in creating trust (4:29–31), but it might well have been that the elders of Israel would have believed in any case, even as God had foretold. It could be that they would have shown more faith later, had Moses not faced them with signs from the first.

Moses showed his real state of heart by pleading that he was slow and hesitant of speech (4:10, NEB). Even had it been true, it was an insult to God, who had chosen and called him. The God who gave him power to do miracles could look after his mouth and indeed after all his faculties (4:11). Apart from Moses' plea here there is, however, no suggestion anywhere that Moses had any difficulty in speaking. True, in Midian he had had little opportunity for oratory, and he may well have felt that his Egyptian had become rusty. No, it is clear evidence of unwillingness and lack of faith. Obviously, some of the rabbis, for whom criticism of Moses was near to blasphemy, invented a legend to explain how he as a child, when in danger of death, had had his lips badly burnt, and this permanently impaired his speech!

Moses' answer was "O Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom Thou wilt send" (4:13, RV), which Rashi's grandson Rashbam (12th century) rightly interpreted as "send by anyone but myself". The answer was the more impertinent, because by calling Yahweh "Lord" he acknowledged his right to send him. No wonder that God was angry. It could be that God would have used Aaron as Moses' mouthpiece in any case, for it was usual at the time for the great and mighty to communicate their will through a spokesman, and the use of Aaron will have enhanced

Moses' stature in the eyes of the Pharaoh. But the position enhanced Aaron's stature in the eyes of Israel, and this involved Moses in personal trouble (Num. 12:1) and, it may be, made the sin of the golden bull the more readily possible (Exod. 32:1). It may also explain why Moses had to pass on the priesthood to his brother, though he had acted as the priest at the making of the covenant and the consecration of the Tabernacle and of Aaron and his sons.

Let us not end on this note. We may take comfort from the fact that once Moses bowed to God's will, God was able to use him as the prime instrument in the forging of Israel into a nation and the establishing of a Law which stood unparalleled until its divine giver took on himself the likeness of sinful flesh and appeared as the heir of David's line.