

# OUT OF EGYPT

A Lenten Reflection on the Exodus and the Spiritual Life

**“I have come to deliver them . . .”**

The mission of Moses and his relationship with God

## The Call of Moses

- The first appearance of Moses as an adult is in the midst of conflict
  - he kills an Egyptian who is beating a Hebrew
  - he corrects two Hebrews who are arguing with one another
- The Fathers do not condemn the killing
  - rather, they interpret it allegorically
    - Moses rejects his royal upbringing ≈ rejection of sin
    - killing of the Egyptian ≈ killing of vice in oneself
    - fight of Hebrew vs. Egyptian ≈ battle of true religion vs. idolatry
  - used as an example to treat virtue as a kinsman, and vice as an enemy
- Moses flees Midian, as Pharaoh wants to kill him
  - an image of flight from the distractions of the world
  - compared with Christ leaving the glory of heaven to save us
- God sees the suffering of his people and calls Moses to lead them out of slavery
- God calls Moses from the Burning Bush
  - Moses “crosses over” to see it (Exodus 3:3)
    - ≈ as a deliberate choice to transcend the material world and focus on heavenly things
    - purity of heart is a necessary condition for seeing God
  - Moses is commanded to remove his sandals
    - sandaled feet ≈ things of earth covering the soul
    - earthly attachments must be stripped away
  - God reveals his identity
    - He is the God who made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob
    - He is aware of the suffering of his people
    - He has a plan for setting his people free
  - God calls Moses by name and knows his strengths and weaknesses
  - God does not accept Moses’ protesting his inability to carry out the mission

- God reveals his Name to Moses
  - a mysterious name
    - “I Am Who Am” (אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה / ehyeh asher ehyeh)
    - I AM (יהוה / YHWH)
  - several layers of meaning may be identified in the mysterious Name
    - God is the only eternal Being, and the source of existence for all that is
    - He “is” in the sense that he is constant and unchanging
    - He is to be found in the present: He is not “I was” or “I will be”
  - an unspeakable Name
    - the *tetragrammaton* (Greek for four-letter-word) is written with only consonants; the vowels are not marked
      - יהוה → YHWH
      - in English, observant Jews follow this tradition and write G–d
      - modern attempts to surmise the vowels yield
        - Jehovah
        - Yahweh
    - ancient (and current) Jewish tradition did not pronounce the Name
      - replaced in reading with אֲדֹנָי / *Adonai*, Hebrew for “the Lord”
      - often written in capital letters: “I am the LORD.”
      - sometimes referred to simply as הַשֵּׁם / Hashem, “The Name”
    - many English Bibles produced by Christian Churches follow this tradition; it has become official Catholic practice
    - the title *Adonai* / Lord is applied to Jesus Christ by New Testament writers
      - Greek equivalent is *Kyrios*
      - has a theological meaning: shows Jesus’ identity as God who revealed Himself to Moses
      - Jesus applies the Name to himself:  
“Before Abraham was, I AM” (John 8:54–59)
  - God had not revealed this Name to Abraham, Isaac or Jacob
    - this is a special mark of his closeness to Moses and the Israelites
      - revealing his Name allows Moses to call on God
      - this is a sign of trust and intimacy
- God promises to give Moses everything he will need to carry out his mission
- God sends Moses with his brother Aaron to assist him ≈ help of our guardian angels

## Moses confronts the Pharaoh

- he is to demand leave to make a 3-day journey into the desert
  - shows the necessity of leaving the world to serve God
  - Origen interprets the three days
    - purification of soul, body and mind
    - direction of rational, natural and moral intellects
    - purification of words, deeds and thoughts

- Pharaoh (≈Satan) does not want to allow a total purification, but would like to keep all or part of our words, thoughts and deeds under his control
- God will overcome Pharaoh's hardness of heart
  - he demonstrates his power by sending the Ten Plagues
    - the Plagues may be seen to have natural explanations
      - this does not have to mean they are not from God
      - Scripture itself admits God uses natural forces to accomplish his purposes (cf. Exodus 14:16ff.)
    - God's providence is seen by the fact that
      - Moses predicts the plagues before they happen
      - God protects the Hebrews from suffering from the plagues
  - scientific theory of the Plagues:
    - the River of Blood "red tide" caused by microorganisms
    - the Frogs leave water because of dead fish, die of dehydration
    - the Gnats midges proliferate because frogs have disappeared
    - the Flies stable flies proliferate because frogs have disappeared
    - the Pestilence horse and cattle disease spread by midges
    - the Boils glanders or other disease spread by stable flies
    - the Hail desert storm uncommon by its severity
    - the Locusts lay eggs in damp sandy ground caused by hailstorm
    - the Darkness west wind which scatters locusts brings sandstorm
    - the death of the Firstborn
      - locust excrement may have contaminated crops in fields and storerooms
      - first-born sons had significant place of honor in Egypt, and would have eaten first — only ones to eat when food was scarce
      - first-born animals were used for temple sacrifices, and would have been fed even when others could not
      - contamination of grain by mycotoxins (mold) can be rapidly fatal
      - Israelite meal—roasted young lamb, unleavened bread, new herbs—would have been free of contamination
- the question of Pharaoh's "hardness of heart" was difficult for the Fathers
  - on some occasions, Pharaoh hardens his own heart; at other times, God is said to harden Pharaoh's heart
    - seems to contradict freedom of will
    - God is involved in that he shows Pharaoh his faults
    - this leaves to stubbornness and unrepentance, due to Pharaoh's pride
  - repeated deliberate sin causes obstinacy and impenitence
  - God's mercy melts a frozen, hardened heart
  - by hardness of heart, one "makes his own plagues" (St Gregory of Nyssa)

## Moses' Relationship with the LORD

- Moses is not only turned down by Pharaoh, but is often criticized by his own people
  - leads to understandable frustration
  - perhaps less understandable, he seems to take this out on the LORD in prayer
- God's reaction to Moses' sharpness shows that he does not reject it
- in fact, Moses becomes a model for prayer
  - he is able to be completely honest about his own feelings, even desperation
  - demands that God keeps his promises to his people
    - trust in God's promises gives Moses confidence
    - this confidence often appears as challenging God
  - his seeming pride is actually humble trust in God (Numbers 12:3)
- Moses is the only person God refers to as his "intimate friend"
  - God speaks to Moses "face to face"
  - He speaks to Moses in plain language, not in riddles (Numbers 12:8)
  - He reveals his ineffable Name in response to Moses' challenges
- Moses' prayer becomes an example for us
  - to persevere in prayer
  - to trust God's strength rather than fear our own weakness
  - to be honest with ourselves and with God
  - to remember God's goodness to us and see it as a reason to trust him