

Stephen's Speech: The Last Forty Years of Moses' Life (Acts 7:30-38)

Moses was once strong and proud in Egypt, thinking that he would be a deliverer, God's instrument of salvation for the Hebrew people. And why wouldn't he think that? The story of his early years was no ordinary tale: a slave child the Pharaoh commanded to be executed, by the sovereign guidance of God, becomes the Pharaoh's adopted grandchild and potential heir to the throne. It doesn't take much to spot the hand of God in his life. One could imagine that had Moses known the Book of Esther he would have quoted Esther 4:14 to himself right before cutting down the Egyptian master beating his Hebrew slave: "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place.... And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"

But while Moses' intuition that God was going to use him to do great things was correct, Moses' assumption about God's timing was not. In Moses' mind, the striking down of the Egyptian was supposed to earn him the immediate respect and adulation the Hebrews, who would then follow him in a grand exodus from Egypt to the land promised to Abraham's family. Instead, it earned him the derision of his biological and adoptive families alike, and sent him on a personal exodus into the Midian desert, immediately outside Egypt's jurisdiction.

There, in the desert surrounding Mount Horeb (which means, "Mountain of Desolation"—sounds like a great vacation destination) also known more commonly as Mount Sinai, God humbled Moses. That which he had enjoyed in Egypt was now gone. His palatial home was replaced with a tent, his Egyptian cotton garments with animal hides, his abundance of leisure time with shepherding his father-in-law's sheep, and his dreams of leadership and legacy with simpler thoughts of day-to-day survival. Surely, in 40 years he had asked himself 1,000 times why God allowed him to experience such a fairy-tale upbringing just to dump him the backwoods of the Ancient Near Eastern world. The answer to this question was not immediately apparent. But through his circumstances God made one thing clear to Moses: it is not the will or works of men that cause people and kingdoms to rise and fall; it is by the Lord's desire and power that entities are built up while others are destroyed. Those whom God wishes to exalt, he exalts; those he wishes to humble, he humbles—and Moses had been humiliated.

I'm sure this is where Moses thought his story would end. If it had, the only thing that the world would remember of him—if they remembered him at all—was that he had delusions of grandeur, unwisely acted on them, and, consequently, paid a steep cost. But this would not be the end of Moses' story. The goodness and might of the Lord that Moses experienced in the first 40 years of his life would not compare to the glories he would experience in his last 40 years—and it all started with Moses catching a glimpse of curiously fire-resistant shrubbery.

— Thinking Deeper —

- Why didn't God use the energetic, zealous 40-year-old Moses to lead his people out of captivity?
- Why do you think it was necessary for God to humble Moses first?
- Why does God require that the leaders of his people be humble?

Although it may sound strange, spontaneously combusting bushes are not particularly uncommon in arid climates. Plants with high amounts of volatile oils, like the Eucalyptus tree, can combust when the oils are vaporized by excessive heat. Therefore, a burning bush in the

middle of the desert was probably something Moses had seen or, at least, heard about before. But what made this phenomenon unique was that the bush was not consumed. Its leaves did not crackle and wither. Its branches did not burn away into black coals. It was a curious enough sight to call Moses to turn aside and investigate.

Once the marvel had his attention, God called to Moses and revealed to him not only the mission he had for Moses but also his very Name. Up until this moment in human history, God was known generically as *El* or *Elohim*, both meaning “God.” People knew there was a God. Since Adam and Eve people had a relationship with him. But no one knew his name. Now, for the sake of distinguishing himself from all the false gods of the Egyptians, God shares his name for the first time. Moses had the honor of being the first to hear it. His name is, “I am,” that is, YHWH or Yahweh (represented in English Bibles as LORD in all capital letters).

— Thinking Deeper —

God used a great wonder, a mighty display of his power, to encourage Moses to turn aside so that he might interact with him. I think God is doing great things today, but we have the tendency to miss them. Pray that when God works we might recognize it, see it as an invitation to interact with him, and turn aside to join him.

The man who was rejected by his own people, who was forced to live as a fugitive in exile, was now given not only a commission from God to lead Israel out of their captivity but also the privilege of sharing the Name of God with the world for the first time. God replaced Moses’ dishonor with glory; the one whom God humbled, he exalted.

Moses became a spokesperson of God, the second prophet of the Israelite people, Abraham being the first (cf. Genesis 20:7). Through the power and by the direction of Yahweh, Moses led the Hebrews out of the land of Egypt back to where he had met God in the burning bush. There, on Mount Sinai, God

appeared in an awesome display of power, enveloping the mountain in dark clouds, fire, and lightning. In the midst of the storm, God spoke once again to Moses and gave him the Law. This contained the guidelines by which the LORD wished his people to live, so as to set them apart in the world for himself. The whole of the people, not simply their fathers of old, were now in a covenant with God. The Hebrews were reaffirmed as God’s people in the Median desert, far away from captivity, on the one hand, and far away from the land of promise, on the other.

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Why did Stephen detail to his Jewish audience the life of Moses, which was already so familiar to them?

There are likely several acceptable answers. But one stands out as the most crucial to an understanding of Stephen’s speech as a whole: Stephen was reminding his audience that God had been and still was at work outside the land of Israel, away from the Temple in Jerusalem. As we have discussed before, many of the Jews of Stephen’s day were under the false assumption that the Jews were superior people because it was in their Jerusalem Temple that God lived and interacted with his people. Gentiles could enjoy the blessings given to the Jews, but they had to come to Jerusalem. Nowhere else in the world was God active, nor would he ever be.

But Stephen was aware that the LORD does not live in temples made by human hands. God was working among the Hellenistic Jews and soon the Gentiles also (cf. Acts 10). Rather than calling believers in his Son, Jesus the Christ, to the Temple, God was sending out the Disciples to the nations, where God was already living and active. If he wanted to reveal himself to Gentiles apart from the Temple and the Promised Land, he could, just as he had appeared to Moses in the burning bush and had given Moses the Law *in the land of the*

Gentiles. With the exaltation of Jesus, the Spirit now lives in all those who believe. Worship can happen in the spirit apart from the rituals and rites of the Temple. A new chapter in salvation history had begun!