

## STUDIES IN EXODUS No. 8

Exodus 6:1-12

April 24, 2005

### Review

Moses and Aaron's first interview with the Egyptian king, the Pharaoh, had gone badly. He had not only refused to accede to Moses' request that he allow Israel to take a three day journey into the desert, but had, in response, punished the Israelites by making their working conditions still worse. The Israelites, as a result, had turned on Moses as the cause of their calamity and Moses, in turn, complained to God for sending him on a fool's errand and for making him a stench in the noses of his own people.

### Text Comment

- v.1 This promise goes further than anything said so far. Now Pharaoh will not only let Israel go, he will actually *expel* them from Egypt.
  
- v.2 It is typical of much OT scholarship over the past century to conclude that this is a variant account of Moses' call because of its similarity to 3:6ff. They then concluded that an editor rather clumsily put two accounts of the same thing in his narrative in different places. However, with the appreciation of Hebrew narrative artistry that has been gained through recent study, this text is much more likely nowadays to be understood as a necessary repetition of what God said to Moses at first, the kind of reminder and encouragement of which Moses was in great need after his initial failure with Pharaoh.

By the way, it was a convention for ancient Near Eastern kings to begin their proclamations with the formula, "I am *so and so*," even though their name was well known to everyone. "I am Mesha, son of Chemosh, king of Moab..." reads one such proclamation. "I am Yehawmilk, king of Byblos..." reads another. The Bible, and the Pentateuch in particular, employ the language and the linguistic conventions of the people of those days. The same phrase "I am Yahweh" occurs many times in the law of God. The point, of course, is that the Lord is not introducing himself to someone who didn't know who he was. He is announcing his Name in the sense of the declaration of his authority. The force of the words is something like "By the authority invested in me as X, I make the following solemn declaration." [Alter, 339] As one scholar puts it, considering the fact that a person's name in the ANE was revelatory of character, "All that Yahweh had to say and to declare to his people appears to be a development of the fundamental assertion, 'I am Yahweh.'" [Zimmerli in Durham, 75] *What is going to happen, in other words, the exodus, Israel's redemption is all going to be the proof that Yahweh is as good as his name!*

Remember, when we considered the introduction of this divine name in 3:14-15, we said that it means that God is the One who Is and who is present with his

people. It is a name that itself speaks of God's personal faithfulness to his people as their savior.

In any case, note that the phrase "I am the Lord" occurs four times in vv. 2-8 and serves as an *inclusio*, that is, it opens the paragraph and concludes it. The divine authority, the reality of his active presence with his people stands behind what is being said and promised.

- v.3 It is fundamental to biblical theology and to any true understanding of the history of salvation that God's revelation to Moses and his deliverance of Israel from Egypt was in fulfillment of the covenant that he had made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

"God Almighty" is the Hebrew *El Shaddai*. *El* is a short form of *Elohim*, the standard name for God. No one is entirely sure how to translate *Shaddai*. It has been thought to be related to power or God's control over nature by which he bestows fertility. For example in Gen. 17:1-2, we read "I am *El Shaddai*...and I will multiply you exceedingly" or in Gen. 28:3 we read, "And *El Shaddai* will bless you, and make you fruitful, and multiply you." There are other texts like that. All the more weighty evidence because *El Shaddai* occurs as a divine name only five times in the material regarding the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and only six times in Genesis altogether. That leads us to the next question.

Now the statement that the Lord did not make himself known to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by his personal name, Yahweh, is a notorious crux. It seems to be an assertion that Abraham and the other patriarchs did not know the Lord by this name. But if this is so, how do we explain the use of Yahweh as a divine name from Genesis 2:5 onward and throughout the patriarchal narratives? Perhaps the most simple explanation would be that this name, Yahweh, was later read back into that history. That is, the later name was used in telling the earlier story. That would be natural enough because it is precisely the teaching of the Bible that the Yahweh of the exodus is one and the same God who revealed himself to Abraham, indeed, the God who created the world and all things. Some proof that Yahweh was not known in Israel as a divine name earlier than Moses is found in the fact that, before Moses, Israelite personal names are not found formed from the shortened form of Yahweh as they would later be in large numbers. Indeed, Moses changed Hoshea's name to Joshua, according to Numbers 13:16, a name that does contain a shortened form of the divine name Yahweh. Abraham would have known the Lord by the name *Elohim* or *El*, God, not by the personal name *Yahweh*, the Lord.

If that is the explanation, it would be strikingly similar to the situation created by the incarnation. The New Testament makes emphatically clear that believers in the ancient epoch knew God the Son, who was now also a man, Jesus Christ. But they would not have known him by his incarnate name, Jesus. So when Jude, for

example, says that Jesus delivered his people from Egypt, he would be reading back into the earlier history the later name.

The other explanation of this statement that the Lord did not make himself known to Abraham by this name, Yahweh, is that, though Abraham would have known that name and used it in his communion with God and his worship of God, the aspect of God's character that is suggested by that name, his promise-keeping, his faithfulness to his Word, was not so fully revealed to Abraham because, of course, in his lifetime he did not inherit the Promised Land. Yahweh promised that the land would be his and his descendants, but the divine assurance regarding the possession of the Promised Land was not fulfilled in Abraham's lifetime, or Isaac's, or Jacob's. They did not yet know in a full and complete way that the Lord is One who carries out his promises. Hence the statement of verse 4 about promising the land to them which they did not yet possess. (So Cassuto)

- v.5 "I have remembered my covenant," of course, does not mean that God forgot. It is an anthropomorphism to describe God acting in a way that can be seen by man to be a fulfillment of the promises of his covenant. From this point on every saving act of God will be a case of his remembering the covenant into which he freely entered with Abraham and his descendants, including us, who believe in the name of Jesus Christ. All who believe, Paul says, are the children of Abraham. [Cole, 85]
- v.6 Deliverance will be a redemption: God delivering his people from their bondage by the payment of a ransom. The divine action is emphasized: seven verbs follow in rapid succession: I will bring you out, free you, redeem you, take you, I will be your God, I will bring you to the land and I will give it to you.
- v.7 A cornerstone of biblical faith is that the Lord has proven his deity, his faithfulness to his Word, the truth of his promises, the certainty of his will being fulfilled in the world by the deliverance of his people. The same point will be made in the New Testament. This time the proof is greater still: the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
- v.13 The Israelites are too discouraged to believe what Moses says – and had no sympathy for him anyway because he had only managed to make their condition worse – and Moses scarcely believes the Lord's promise either. He has no enthusiasm for another visit to Pharaoh's court. He can't imagine that it will end any better than the last one. Pharaoh didn't take him seriously then, why should he now?

The Israelites who were complaining about their oppression, now made worse; the Israelite foremen who were complaining about the impossible position they had been put in, and Moses who seemed to have bungled everything, had no active conception of the scope and grandeur of God's plans. We should not be too quick to blame. The Lord's

disciples were guilty of the same failing and, more important still, we are far too often as well. [Ellison, 33]

The fact is, there is no final, intellectual, emotional, moral solution, not really, to the true problems of human life apart from the certainty that God will keep his promises and bring his will to pass in the world.

For example, take Habbakuk's question in 1:13:

“Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?”

What is the answer to that question? It is a pressing question for anyone who has any sympathy in his heart, has any loyalty to God, has any concern for the injustice that bedevils the life of mankind? And we can ask Habbakuk's question with just as much feeling as he asked it in his day? Why does God remain silent? If he loves his people why does he permit them to suffer and, in particular, to suffer at the hands of the wicked? Think of those faithful Chinese pastors in prison for more than 20 years.

There is no answer to that question, no satisfying answer, no answer that silences moral anguish, except one. And that answer is that God has plans. He has plans to be faithful to his character, his name; plans to be faithful to his covenant and his promises; plans to be faithful to his people; plans to judge the wicked and that he will, in his own time and in his own way, execute all of those plans and bring them to fulfillment. He has reasons to delay and we are told some of those reasons.

1. We have already gathered from what has been said in Exodus so far that the reason God does not immediately effect Israel's release from Pharaoh's bondage, the reason why Israel's suffering actually has worsened temporarily, is because a defiantly unwilling Pharaoh will be the foil against which God will reveal his saving power in a way that will make the world sit up and take notice, a way that will comfort, nerve, encourage and inspire his people for the rest of time. Israel doesn't know it but her sufferings are a necessary part of one of the greatest moments in world history and the history of salvation. She suffers so as to reveal the living God to the dying world.
2. In the New Testament we read that God waits to vindicate his name and deliver his people because there are other people still to be gathered into the church of Christ. The church militant cannot become the church triumphant until every soldier has been enrolled.
3. Then there is the need for our spiritual training and the endurance of trials is an important part of our spiritual discipline, a tool in the Holy Spirit's hand to work in us what is pleasing to him – gentleness of spirit, sympathy with others, a weaker attachment to this world, a longing for heaven, a sturdier faith, and the like.

The Lord has his reasons why we must bear patiently the cross and pain, but it is fundamental to our faith that we must await developments. Paul puts the point as clearly

as it can be put: Christianity depends utterly upon the fulfillment of promises that have been made but not yet kept. Christians live in the future tense. If Christ does not return we will be revealed to have based our lives on a falsehood. Christians have never hesitated to admit this. But they have then quickly gone on to say that many promises of God for the fulfillment of which believers waited a long time, have already been fulfilled and these are the proof that the promises yet to be fulfilled will be in due time. The Bible often makes the point that the Lord makes here: what God has done proves the reliability of his Word and the certainty of the fulfillment of his promises that are yet unfulfilled. And chief among those promises that were eventually proved true and certain is the promise God made to Abraham that he and his descendants would come to possess the land of Canaan. Fact is, the land was occupied by powerful people when Abraham arrived from Ur of the Chaldeans. Viewed in human terms, there was no chance of Abraham coming to own that entire country. He was a single man among nations. And then, 400 years later, Abraham's descendants were languishing as slaves in Egypt. There was still less chance that they would soon be the proud owners of the land of Canaan, that they would displace all the nations that then inhabited the land. But the events that we are soon to recount in our reading of Exodus, changed all of that and promises made hundreds of years before were kept and Israel did take possession of the very land that had been promised to her by the living God.

And the same can be said of the appearance of the Messiah – for which God's people waited so long – his suffering and death, his resurrection, his ascension to the Right Hand, his sending of the Holy Spirit, the spreading of the Gospel and the Christian faith throughout the world – all of this – utterly unlikely as it would have seemed when these promises were first made, has all come to pass. Can we then doubt that the few remaining promises will come to pass as well?

Remember in Hebrews Jesus Christ is called the *guarantor* of the new covenant. We do not yet have the new covenant in its fulfillment. We have not yet seen that day when all of those who belong to the people of God shall know him in truth and no man shall have to say to his neighbor “know the Lord!” because they shall all know him. *But we know that day shall come* because of what Jesus has already done and the promises that were already fulfilled in his life, death, and resurrection. We know that Yahweh will be as good as his name and as good as his Word, no matter how long we must wait to see all of his promises fulfilled, because he has so often in the past proved his Word.

Now what is all of this but a summons for us to *believe* and to live in the active expectation of the fulfillment of God's promises. “I am the Lord” means that whatever God says will happen *will happen!*

Some of you will have heard of the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century English social reformer Lord Shaftesbury. His given name was Anthony Ashley Cooper. The Anglican world of Victorian Britain, however Christian in an outward way, was not a world shaped by the vivid expectation that Yahweh would certainly fulfill his promises. The 1662 Book of Common Prayer included a chart by which worshippers could find the date for Easter for any year up to 2199. By the way, the American Episcopal Book of Common prayer

published in the 18<sup>th</sup> century enabled its readers to calculate the date of Easter in any year up to the year 8500! These churches were not exactly teaching their members to live their lives in the active and eager expectation of the Lord's return!

It was into that spiritual environment that Anthony Cooper was born in 1801. He had an unhappy childhood, neglected and abused by his parents. His only comfort was the family housekeeper, Anna Maria Milles, who told him Bible stories, taught him to pray, and, it appears, led him to personal faith in Jesus Christ while still a young boy.

When he was a teenager at Harrow School, on one occasion he witnessed a group of drunken men drop a poor man's coffin in the street, cursing and laughing as they did so. Sickened by this incident, he later referred to it as "the origin of my public career." He resolved to dedicate his life to the cause of the poor and the weak.

And no man did more for the poor and the weak than Lord Shaftesbury. Entering Parliament at age 25 in 1826, he began almost immediately his program of humanitarian reform. He set out to ameliorate the worst consequences of the industrial revolution in England. It was the work of the next sixty years of his life and the body of legislation for which he was responsible represents one of the great political achievements of the modern world. He saw to the passage of bills prohibiting the employment of women and children in the coal mines and reduced the hours boys were required to work in the mines. He secured the humanitarian treatment of the insane. He regulated the hours that could be worked by women and children, brought government control and regulation to bear on the unsanitary and overcrowded conditions of lodging houses. He founded the Ragged School Union that cared for chimney sweeps, flower girls, orphans, prostitutes, prisoners, the handicapped, and crippled children.

What was his motivation for all of this? Whence came the passion that saw him prevail over concerted opposition through so many years? First, he believed and loved the gospel of Christ. He wrote, "I am essentially, and from deep-rooted conviction...an Evangelical of the Evangelicals." His good works were the natural outworking of his faith in Christ as the Son of God, his atoning sacrifice for sinners, and his coming again at the end of the age.

During the 1830s, however, he became more than usually convinced of the second coming of Christ. "It entered into all his thoughts and feelings," wrote his biographer. "It stimulated him in the midst of all his labours; it gave tone and colour to all his hopes for the future." For "there is no real remedy, he often said, for all this mass of misery, but in the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Why do we not plead for it every time we hear the clock strike?"

Shaftesbury said himself, "I cannot tell you how it was that this subject first took hold upon me; it has been, as far as I can remember, a subject to which I have always held tenaciously. Belief in [the second coming] has been a moving principle in my life; for I see everything going on in the world subordinate to this one great event." His favorite text from the Bible was Rev. 22:20: "'Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord

Jesus.” He inscribed it in Greek on the flaps of the envelopes he used every day. A few years before he died he ordered that Rev. 22:20 be one of the three texts to be inscribed on his gravestone. And on his deathbed he kept muttering, “Come, Lord Jesus.”

He died, an old man, in 1885 to a great public outpouring of grief, especially from the vast multitudes of the poor and weak whom he had spent his life helping. Whence comes such a consequential life?

Shaftesbury tells us. Toward the end of his life he said, “I do not think that in the last forty years I have lived one conscious hour that was not influenced by the thought of our Lord’s return.” [All the above from John Stott, *The Incomparable Christ*, 167-170]

What is that but the power of the life of a man who really believes that God will be true to his Word and keep his promises. We can perhaps pardon Moses for his doubts, for he had not yet seen the plagues, the hammer blows that the Lord would visit upon Egypt. But we live on this side of the exodus, and still more, on this side of the cross and the empty tomb. We have no excuse for doubting that every promise of the Word of God will be kept, will be fulfilled. We have no excuse if we do not live our lives in consistency with that certainty, in the sure and certain hope that what God has said will come to pass, *will come to pass*. For “He is the Lord.”

I know that you feel as I do that our worst fault is that we do not *believe* as we should, that our faith is not as strong as it ought to be. We do not live as we would live if we could see the Savior returning to earth as some day he will; if we could see the nations and every individual human being brought to the judgement seat of God; if we could see ourselves entering the gates of heaven. But the fact that we cannot see those things with our mind’s eye does not mean they are not as certain, not even more certain, than those things that we can see. He is the Lord. He will prove himself true to his name. And we know that because he has so magnificently and so dramatically and so wonderfully demonstrated the certainty of the fulfillment of his promises in the past.

Woody Allen, in his *God (A Play)*, writes “The trick is to start at the ending when you write a play. Get a good strong ending and then write backwards.” Well, the Lord has told us the ending of the great drama of human life. We know how the play ends. The story depends upon that ending and we know what it is already. Just as the Lord told Moses the ending of the drama of Israel’s sojourn in Egypt. It happened in Egypt just as God said. It will happen to the entire world just as God said. He is the Lord! Listen to him, “I am the Lord,” and count on what he says! It is the safest bet of all that all will unfold as he has said it will. The Lord has plans!