

“YHWH Leads His People Out of Oppression:” A Narrative-Literary Analysis of Exodus 3:1-12

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to analyze Exodus 3:1-12 from the lens of narrative and literary criticism and argues that more than being a story about the call of Moses, the text already brings out a theme that is crucial and fundamental in the entire Exodus narrative, that is, the liberating and salvific act of God (YHWH) as the shepherd of his people. Moses is not just a mediator but someone who personifies the immanent and active presence of God who leads the Israelites out of oppression. He is not just perceptive and sensitive to the affliction of his people. God himself is the one who leads them in the struggle for liberation. With the relentless presence of social injustice and oppression in the world of today, the relevance of this leitmotif needs no further elaboration. Nevertheless, it continues to call contemporary Christians, especially the Institutional Church, to be more committed to its vocation of shepherding God's people, that is, to be 'present among' and to strive for the liberation of the oppressed, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised.



INTRODUCTION

Exodus 3:1-12 is one of the most thoroughly analyzed texts of the book of Exodus. Exegetical commentaries by well-known scholars such as Cassuto, Dozeman, and Schmidt have dealt largely with the literary form of Moses' "call narrative" and the dominant themes of YHWH "hearing", "seeing" and "knowing" the affliction of the Israelites in Egypt.¹ However, not much has been said about the other literary and narrative features of the text which can further enrich the interpretation of its meaning. By employing narrative and literary analysis, this essay puts a particular emphasis on the exegetical significance of the "shepherd motif" in Exodus 3:1-12. This symbolic motif, personified by Moses and his mission of leading the Israelite people out of Egypt, points to another very important theme in the narrative, that is, aside from being aware of the oppression of his people, it is YHWH himself, the true shepherd, who will lead his people in the journey towards liberation.

Delimitation

The start of this new narrative unit is signaled by the introduction of new circumstances, characters and the explicit change of location. Exodus 3:1 starts by stating that Moses has now become the shepherd of the flock of his father-in-law Jethro and has led them to the mountain of

¹ See U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. I. Abrahams) (Jerusalem 1967, 1997) 32. Cassuto notes that the primary theme of this pericope is about "seeing." See also T. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus* (ECC; Grand Rapids - Cambridge, UK 2009) 120. Dozeman discusses, in a substantial manner, the literary analysis on the "call narrative" of Moses.

God. Moreover, YHWH, who in the previous chapters of the Exodus narrative remains at the background, is now introduced as an active character in the narrative scene.² The end of this specific unit is marked by the subtle use of “inclusion”.³ The mention of the word “mountain” (הר) in vv. 1 and 12, along with the parallelism between Moses leading Jethro’s flock and the sign of him leading the Israelites to the mountain of God, brackets and encloses the narrative unit.

Context

The chapter preceding Exodus 3: 1-12 narrates the birth of Moses up to the time he fled to Midian, married Zipporah and had a son (Exodus 2:1-22). The narrative sequence is then temporarily brought to a halt. The focus is shifted back to the situation of the Israelites in Egypt in Exodus 2: 23-25. The narrator underlines how YHWH “heard” the groaning of the Israelites, “saw” their affliction and “knew” about their sufferings.⁴ This description of YHWH’s actions, expressed through the verbs **שמע**, **ראה**, **ידע**, is continued in Exodus 3:1-12. The same verbs are repeated most notably in YHWH’s divine speech in vv. 7-

² See Dozeman, *Exodus*, 93. See also H. Utzschneider and W. Oswald, *Exodus I-XV* (trans. P. Sumpster) (Iecot; Stuttgart 2015) 101.

³ This division of the narrative unit up to v. 12 is also proposed by Schmidt and Habel and Hamilton. See W. H. Schmidt, *Exodus 1-6* (BKAT II/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn 1988) 123-130. See also N. Habel, “The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives” *ZAW* 77 (1965): 297-323. See also V. Hamilton, *Exodus. An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids 2010), 90-109.

⁴ Utzschneider and Oswald point out that this short interruption in the narrative flow plays a crucial role in setting up YHWH’s revelation and commissioning of Moses in Exodus 3:1-12. See Utzschneider and Oswald, *Exodus I-XV*, 101. Propp comments that this shift in narrative focus “foregrounds” the revelation of YHWH to Moses in Exodus 3. See W. H. Propp, *Exodus I-XVIII* (AnBib. 2; New York 1998), 181.

8. In this light, Exodus 2: 23–25 acts as an overture which set up YHWH’s revelation and call of Moses.⁵

The verses following Exodus 3:1–12 are focused on the series of objections and responses between Moses and YHWH. This motif of ‘objection and response,’ introduced in Exodus 3: 12, concludes in Exodus 4:13. Hence, Exodus 3:12 functions not only as a marker of the end of the narrative unit,⁶ but at the same time introduces the change of theme and literary form in the succeeding verses. Exodus 3: 1, 12 are also connected with Exodus 4: 2, 17 via the shepherd motif.⁷ The symbolic function of Moses’ staff mentioned in Exodus 4: 2, 17 re-echoes the figurative dimension of his role as a shepherd.

Translation

Now Moses was shepherding the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, priest of Midian. And he led the flock beyond⁸ the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

⁵ See Dozeman, *Exodus*, 111.

⁶ Childs notes that the end of the call narrative in v. 12 set up or introduces the series of objections in which concludes in Exodus 4:17. See B. Childs, *Exodus. A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; Louisville 2004), 53.

⁷ See Propp, *Exodus I–XVIII*, 209. Propp comments that Moses’ shepherd staff is a fitting symbol for God’s presence and Moses’ mission.

⁸ The literal meaning of the Hebrew word אַחֲרָיִם is after or behind. The LXX renders the word as ὑπὸ τῆν (on the other side). Dozeman translates it as “on the far side”. However, Utzschneider and Oswald argue that from a narratological perspective, this word is a signal of fictionality. It refers to a “fantastic geography” or a location that is beyond or at the end of human experience. See Utzschneider – Oswald, *Exodus I–XV*, 107.

Then a messenger⁹ of YHWH appeared to him in a flame of fire in the midst of the bush. Then he saw and behold, the bush burning in fire, but the bush was not consumed. Moses said, “I will turn and see this great sight. Why is the bush not burning?”

When YHWH saw that he turned to see, God called him from the midst of the bush and said: “Moses, Moses!” And he said: “Here I am!” Then he said to him: “Do not come nearer. Take off the sandals upon your feet for the place where you are standing is a holy ground.” And he said: “I am the God of your father,¹⁰ the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

Then Moses covered his face for he was afraid to see God.

Then YHWH said: “Indeed, I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and I have heard their cry of distress because of his¹¹ taskmasters. I know his¹² sufferings. And I have come to liberate them from the hand of the Egyptians and to lead them out from that land to a land good and broad, to a land of flowing milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites and the Jebusites. Indeed, the cry of distress of the Israelites have

⁹ The LXX translates this as “Ἄγγελος.” But as explained by Cassuto, the Hebrew word מַלְאָכִים basically means a manifestation of God that is visible to the human eyes. See Cassuto, *Book of Exodus*, 31.

¹⁰ The LXX has the translation “God of your fathers”. Dozeman notes that LXX’s tries to harmonize the text specifically in relation to Exodus 3:15. Utzschneider and Oswald argue that the point of Exodus 3:6 is to emphasize that YHWH is the God of his father, just as the patriarchs, such as Jacob, referred to YHWH as the “God of his father.” See Utzschneider - Oswald, *Exodus I-XV*, 108.

¹¹ The LXX uses the plural genitive pronoun αὐτῶν. The LXX emphasizes that the word refers to the collective identity of the Israelites.

¹² The LXX uses the plural genitive pronoun αὐτῶν (their sufferings). See footnote no. 11.

come upon me and I have seen the oppression through which the Egyptians oppress them. Now, go and I will send you to Pharaoh and you are to lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

Then Moses said to God: “Who am I that I will go to Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt?” And he said: “I will be with you and this will be a sign for you that indeed I have sent you. When you lead the people out of Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain.”

STRUCTURE AND DYNAMICS

Concentric Structure of Exodus 3:1-12

Dozeman, Childs, Utzschneider and Oswald offer different ways of structuring this narrative unit. But they converge in their emphasis on the centrality of YHWH’s revelation to Moses in vv. 6-8.¹³ The introduction and the initial encounter of Moses (vv. 1-5) with YHWH and his eventual commissioning (vv. 9-12) are centered around these verses. Taking this into consideration, Exodus 3:1-12 can be arranged concentrically:

¹³ According to Dozeman, the narrative relates the commissioning of Moses, but the point of focus is the revelation of YHWH’s identity. See Dozeman, *Exodus*, 120. For Utzschneider and Oswald, the narrative and theological weight of this narrative unit is located in YHWH’s direct speeches starting in v. 7. See Utzschneider – Oswald, *Exodus I-XV*, 101.

Moses Leads Jethro's Flock to the Mountain of God (v. 1)
 YHWH Appears through the Burning Bush and Moses' Initial Reaction (vv. 2-3)
 YHWH Calls out Moses (vv.4-5)
 YHWH's Revelation to Moses (vv. 6-8)
 The Commissioning of Moses by YHWH (v. 9-10)
 The Initial Response of Moses to his Commissioning (v. 11)
 Assurance and the Sign of Moses Leading God's People to the Mountain (v. 12)

This structure follows the basic argument of Dozeman, Childs, Utzschneider and Oswald with regard to the centrality of YHWH's direct speech in vv. 6-8. It also considers the interplay of the divine and the human plains of action as discussed by Utzschneider and Oswald.¹⁴ Vv. 1 and 12, which frames the narrative unit, demonstrates the parallelism between the human action of leading a flock and its divine significance in Moses' leading of the Israelites to the mountain of God. YHWH's appearance through the burning bush and Moses' initial reaction is paralleled by Moses' initial response to his divine commissioning. Moreover, YHWH's calling out of Moses in v. 4-5 is paralleled by the commissioning of Moses in vv. 9-10. This concentric structure highlights that while the narrative is about the commissioning of Moses, the focus is the revelation of YHWH's identity.¹⁵ Moses is the agent

¹⁴ Utzschneider and Oswald highlight that Moses' encounter with YHWH demonstrates the narrative interplay of the divine and the human plains of action. It reaches its climax in YHWH's dialogue with Moses. From such an encounter, Moses is transformed into a liminal figure - mediating between the human and divine space. See Utzschneider - Oswald, *Exodus I-XV*,112.

¹⁵ See Dozeman, *Exodus*, 119-120. See also Childs, *Exodus*, 88.

through whom God will do his work.¹⁶ Hence, the very foundation of his mission is the very “being” of YHWH.

Dynamics of “Coming” and “Going”

Exodus 3:1-12 follows the dynamics of “coming and going” – an overarching dynamic in the book of Exodus. This is made possible by the movements, actions and the direct speeches in the narrative. In the introductory part, the narrator relates how Moses “came” to the mountain of God (v. 1-2) and then “went on” to approach the sight of the burning bush (vv. 3-4). The same dynamics is expressed in YHWH’s direct discourse: “I have come to liberate them from the hand of the Egyptians and lead them out from that land to a land.....” In this divine speech, the dynamics of God’s descent and going out to bring his people out of the place of oppression is brought to the fore.

The element of “going forth” reaches its climax in YHWH’s commissioning of Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt (vv. 10-12). This dynamic also has a symbolic dimension. Moses comes to the mountain of God as a simple shepherd but goes out as a shepherd of God’s people.¹⁷ These dynamics of movement, coupled by literary creativity, enhances the central message of the narrative.

¹⁶ See Hamilton, *Exodus*, 104.

¹⁷ See Cassuto, *Book of Exodus*, 30. See also Utzschneider – Oswald, *Exodus I-XV*, 112.

NARRATIVE-LITERARY ANALYSIS

A. Narrative and Literary Devices

Characterization and Identity

The introduction of Exodus 3:1–12 presents a new development in the character and identity of Moses. After fleeing Egypt and finding refuge in Midian, he is now portrayed as a shepherd who led Jethro's flock to the mountain of God. This characterization of Moses as a shepherd has a literal and figurative function in the narrative.¹⁸ It reveals his new identity in the family of Jethro and at the same time prefigures his mission of "shepherding" God's people out of slavery and oppression.¹⁹ In biblical language, the image of a shepherd usually symbolizes leadership just as YHWH's people is often times presented as a flock.²⁰ As the new elements of Moses's character develops at the beginning of the narrative, YHWH's character and identity is also gradually introduced. Initially, he identifies himself to Moses as the "God of your father, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (v. 6). Then he moves on to reveal intimate aspects of his identity: his awareness of the situation of the Israelites and his plan of salvation (vv. 7–8).

YHWH's character therefore simultaneously develops with that of Moses. Utzschneider, Oswald, Childs and Dozeman argue that this 'dialectic of the human and divine character' eventually becomes a unity in Moses'

¹⁸ See Propp, *Exodus I–XVIII*, 121.

¹⁹ See Cassuto, *Book of Exodus*, 30. See also Propp, *Exodus I–XVIII*, 221–222.

²⁰ See Propp, *Exodus I–XVIII*, 121. See also Childs, *Exodus*, 71.

commissioning in vv. 9-10.²¹ In the dialogue between YHWH and Moses, the divine and the human elements intersect. From such encounter, their identity becomes intimately connected. Moses emerges with a new character and identity.²² He is no longer an ordinary shepherd, but is now the representative of YHWH's message of liberation (vv. 11-12). It will be through him that God will shepherd his oppressed people out of Egypt.

Direct Discourse

Direct discourse is another important narrative device employed in Exodus 3:1-12 particularly in vv. 7-10. Through the use of direct speech, the readers are allowed to enter, in a profound manner, into YHWH's character and identity. Utzschneider and Oswald identified two basic patterns in these direct speeches. They argue that vv. 7-10 can be divided into two main parts: vv. 7-8 and vv. 9-10. Each part is composed by what they call as the "retrospective glance" and the "challenging forward glance."²³ In v. 7, YHWH "looks back" on how he heard the Israelites' cry of distress, saw their affliction and knew their suffering. Then it moves to its forwards glance in v. 8 with YHWH's revelation that he will liberate his people from oppression and bring them up into a "broad and beautiful" land. Vv. 7-8 present and emphasize the nature of YHWH as a God who is sensitive, caring and intimately

²¹ See Dozeman, *Exodus*, 95. See also Utzschneider - Oswald, *Exodus I-XV*, 112.

²² Childs uses the categories "ordinary" and "extraordinary" to explain the interplay between the human and divine actions of Moses and YHWH. He discusses that Moses' ordinary experience of being a shepherd is turned into a new identity as a shepherd and deliverer of God's people. See Childs, *Exodus*, 71.

²³ See Utzschneider - Oswald, *Exodus I-XV*, 121.

involved in the events human history.²⁴ He does not only take note of the cry of his people, but willingly responds to their distress.

The same pattern is seen in Moses' commissioning in vv. 9-10. V. 9 repeats the retrospective element about YHWH's awareness of the Israelites' situation. This repetition sets up the eventual commissioning (forward glance) of Moses in v. 10.²⁵ This two-fold pattern in YHWH's divine speech underline that his plan of salvation is an essential element of his identity and character. Moses' mission is therefore intimately related to the being and nature of God.²⁶ This highlights that YHWH, ultimately, is the "sole...subject and agent of liberation of Israel."²⁷

Inclusion and Parallelism

As mentioned in the introduction, vv. 1 and 12 forms an inclusion. But aside from its pragmatic function, it also has a metaphorical signification. As argued by Cassuto and Propp, the portrayal of Moses in v. 1 as a shepherd is not accidental especially when seen in parallel to the sign given by YHWH in v. 12.²⁸ The inclusion and parallelism in vv. 1 and 12 underline that the primary mission of Moses is to "shepherd" the Israelites out of Egypt. The ultimate fulfillment of Moses' commissioning finds its meaning in

²⁴ See Utzschneider - Oswald, *Exodus I-XV*, 106.

²⁵ See Dozeman, *Exodus*, 130 -131.

²⁶ See Dozeman, *Exodus*, 130. See also Utzschneider - Oswald, *Exodus I-XV*, 121-122. Utzschneider and Oswald underline that the divine speech in vv. 7-10 is focused on the commissioning of Moses.

²⁷ See H. Utzschneider, *Gottes langer Atem. Die Exoduserzählung (Exodus 1-14) in ästhetischer und historischer Sicht* (Stuttgart 1996) CLXVI, 75, quoted in Utzschneider - Oswald, *Exodus I-XV*, 32.

²⁸ See Cassuto, *Book of Exodus*, 30. See also Propp, *Exodus I-XVIII*, 221-222.

his leading out of the people from oppression.²⁹ Hence, vv. 1 and 12, as a framing inclusion, has an exegetical significance. It specifies and provides a symbolic imagery to the mission of Moses.

Repetition of Key Words/Themes

Exodus 3:1-12 shows a pattern of repetition of key words. The narrator's note in Exodus 2:23-25 about YHWH seeing (**ראה**), hearing (**שמע**) and knowing the affliction of the Israelites (**ידה**) is repeated in YHWH's direct speech in Exodus 3:7-8.³⁰ Childs notes that there is a discernible wordplay in the use of these verbs specifically **ראה** which is used at least seven times.³¹ According to Utzschneider and Oswald, the acts of hearing, seeing, and knowing pertains to the capability of perception. In its application to the character of YHWH, it connotes a sense of "taking care" and of "being concerned."³²

Aside from this, another set of verbs, which are in the same semantic field, is highlighted in Exodus 3:1-12. In v. 8, YHWH announces that, having been aware of the Israelites affliction, he will "lead them out" of Egypt and then bring them up to the land of milk and honey. The verb used is the *hiphil* form of **נצל** which literally means "to rip out", "to release," or "to set free."³³ It also has the sense

²⁹ See Childs, *Exodus*, 74.

³⁰ See Cassuto, *Book of Exodus*, 33.

³¹ See Childs, *Exodus*, 70.

³² See Utzschneider - Oswald, *Exodus I-XV*, 105.

³³ See Utzschneider - Oswald, *Exodus I-XV*, 121. Hamilton discusses that this key verb in YHWH's divine speech is used also in 1 Sam. 17:35 where David describes how he rescued his father's sheep from the predators. It is often times used to express God's action of deliverance and salvation for his people. Most of these are in the book of Exodus (e.g. Exodus 18: 4, 8, 9, 10). It is also the verb used by Jethro's daughters in

of liberating and rescuing someone from a certain situation. The same theme is expressed in Moses' commissioning in v. 10 and in YHWH's assurance in v. 12. In YHWH's divine speech, the *hiphil* form of the verb **אצ"ו** (literally, "to bring or lead out") is repeated twice.³⁴ The frequency of the use of these verbs in the narrative underlines that YHWH's primary action, as a response to the situation of the Israelites, is to liberate and lead them out of the land of oppression.³⁵

MESSAGE AND RELEVANCE

A. Message in the Narrated World

Within its narrative world, Exodus 3: 1-12 conveys the message that YHWH is a God who is perceptive, sensitive, and concerned about the affliction of his people. And through the instrumentality of Moses, he will lead and shepherd his people in the journey from oppression towards liberation.

B. Message in its Historical Context

The dating of the book of Exodus and the historical context through which it came about is still a contentious question until today. A good number of scholars such as Utzschneider, Oswald, Waimer, Zenger, Kratz and Otto support the claim that the book, at least the first part (Exodus 1-14), was composed towards the end of the 7th

Exodus 2:19 to explain how Moses rescued and saved them from the shepherds. See also HAMILTON, *Exodus*, 102.

³⁴ See Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 131. See also Hamilton, *Exodus*, 94.

³⁵ See Utzschneider - Oswald, *Exodus I-XV*, 121.

century BC. In this period, Judea was exposed to three hegemonic powers: Assyrians (around 630 BC), Egyptians (around 615-605) and Babylonians (around 605).³⁶ A usual practice of these imperialist powers is to deport the population of the subjugated nations and to impose tributes and forced labor.³⁷ Hence, it was a time when Judea lived under the constant threat of tyrannical rule. A possible allusion to this reality in Exodus 3:1-12 is its vivid description of the affliction and slavery of the Israelites under the Egyptians. In relation to such context, Exodus 3: 1-12 assures the Israelites that YHWH is active in the events of history, that he is aware of their anxieties, worries and distress and in any eventuality, he shall liberate them from the clutches of political tyranny.

C. Relevance to the Present Context

The historical message of Exodus 3:1-12 remains very relevant in today's context. In many parts of the world, especially in developing countries, there are still many people and communities who are subjected to structural and systemic forms of political and economic oppression. Such situation has been precipitated by the onslaught of neo-liberal capitalism and the egoistic geo-political interests of some powerful countries. The deification of profit/money in the name of free market has left many members of the working-class oppressed and many indigenous communities assaulted and stripped of their right to their ancestral lands. The tyrannical rule of some

³⁶ See Utzschneider - Oswald, *Exodus I-XV*, 44. See R. Albertz, "The Recent Discussion on the Formation of the Pentateuch/Hexateuch", *Hebrew Studies* 59 (2018): 74-77.

³⁷ See Utzschneider - Oswald, *Exodus I-XV*, 44.

dictators and “populist” leaders in some countries has also led to the wanton violation of human rights. In all these situations of oppression, YHWH is absolutely not blind, deaf or uninterested.

Furthermore, the shepherd motif in the bible has become a classic symbol of the Church’s pastoral ministry. Church leaders such as bishops and priests are often times referred to as shepherds of God’s people. Viewed in relation to Moses’ mission of shepherding God’s people in Exodus 3:1-12, this ministry demands from the Church a greater commitment towards the liberation of the oppressed and of those whose rights are trampled by the tyrannical rule of the politically powerful.

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