

# The Burning Bush and Christ

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## **The Exodus account is closely connected with the story of Christ in the Gospels.**

Just as the Israelites journeyed to Egypt so also did the Holy Family. They wandered in the desert as did Christ. They were tempted as was He. They received manna from heaven. Christ was the true bread of heaven. They drank water from the side of a rock. Water poured forth from His side on the cross.

And so, when we approach the story of the burning bush—the encounter with God from which the entire exodus account really takes off—we should instinctively be on the watch for ways in which it might foreshadow Christ.

The main account of the burning bush is in Exodus 3:1-6:

*Meanwhile Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian. Leading the flock beyond the wilderness, he came to the mountain of God, Horeb. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him as fire flaming out of a bush. When he looked, although the bush was on fire, it was not being consumed. So Moses decided, “I must turn aside to look at this remarkable sight. Why does the bush not burn up?” When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called out to him from the bush: Moses! Moses! He answered, “Here I am.” God said: Do not come near! Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your father, he continued, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.*

This is unquestionably a manifestation of God's presence. God calls out to Moses from the bush. The ground on which Moses stands is declared sacred. And Moses fears to behold God. But is Christ here?

For the Fathers, there would have been little doubt. For it is the Word of God that always reveals God. Certainly the fullness of God's manifestation to man came in the Incarnation, but moments like this, the Fathers would say, are the work of the pre-Incarnate Christ. Their approach is certainly a biblical one: St. Paul himself **declared**, for example, that the rock from which the Israelites drank water in the desert was none other than Christ.

In fact, from the very beginning itself, in Genesis, Fathers like St. Basil of Caesarea associated God's speaking with the second person of the Trinity, the Word. Again, their intuitions are confirmed by Scripture itself. As John 1 informs us, it was Christ who fashioned creation.

God speaks throughout the rest of Genesis. He sentences Adam and Eve to banishment from the Garden of Eden. He calls Noah to build an ark. He calls Abraham to the mountain to sacrifice His son. But there is something noticeably different about His speaking this time. Now divine speech correlates with divine presence. The Word of God makes God present to Moses, hence the admonition that he is standing on sacred ground. Such presence is, moreover, accompanied by a visible sign, the miracle of the bush that burns but is not burnt.

Moses meets God in personal way on Mt. Horeb. God does not thunder from the heavens. Nor is He perceived as some sort of disembodied voice invisible yet audible. The episode of the burning bush rather has the character of a personal meeting. So it is most fitting that near the end, God gives Moses his name: 'I am who I am' (in verse 14).

The Church has long seen this simple utterance as being a statement of enormous significance. When translated in the Greek, the language in which the earlier Church read the Old Testament, the verbs here are those of being. God was declaring not that he was a being among others. He was stating that He *was* Being.

The Church has traditionally enlisted Greek philosophy in order to unpack the profound meaning contained in this verse. In a particular way, Aristotle and his conception of the Unmoved Mover might be able to help us better understand what is happening here.

Recall that the Unmoved Mover is one of the arguments from philosophy for the existence of God. The argument is founded on an understanding of the world that sought to strike a sort of balance between two diametrically opposed views. One saw all reality as constant change. The other considered the only real thing to be

that which did not change while everything else—that is, our visible world in which things decay and die—as not really existing.

Aristotle asserted that that both are true: some things change, yet there is an unchanging reality behind it all. The Unmoved Mover, then, was the divine being who set the world in motion but was itself motionless. Put another way: there was a God who caused all the change in the world but was Himself unchanging.

Is this not what happened with the burning bush? It was on fire, a process that changes the chemical composition of an entity in a way quite visible to anyone. Yet the bush also remained unconsumed, unchanged. It is thus a particularly apt manifestation of divine Being.

And it is Christ, we have seen, who always reveals God to man. Ask yourself, for a moment, who else identifies themselves as ‘I am’ in Scripture?

In the Gospel of John it is none other than Christ Himself. At least seven times, Jesus makes an ‘I am’ statement. Some examples include: ‘I am the bread of life,’ ‘I am the light of the world,’ ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life,’ and ‘I am the resurrection and the life’ (See John 6:35, 8:12, 11:25, and 14:6).

But the burning bush also points directly to Christ. Consider again, the way in which the bush burns but is not consumed. Now in Scripture, fire is one of the most recurring means by which the invisible God is represented. God descends in a cloud of fire later on Mt. Sinai. Fire will consume the sacrifices of Elijah. Ezekiel also witnesses something akin to the cloud of fire. Hebrews 12:29 declares that God is a ‘consuming fire.’

But of course this fire does not consume the bush. It is a divine presence that does not consume the physical reality with which it is making itself known. God is no less divine of course. And the bush is no less a bush. There is one manifestation but seemingly two distinct aspects to it: wood and flame.

Does this not suggest to us the Incarnation? For it is in the Incarnation that God reveals Himself most profoundly to us. And it is in the Incarnation that divinity assumed humanity without consuming or obliterating it: Jesus Christ was fully human while remaining fully divine. Fire came to the bush without destroying it.

The burning bush thus further illuminates for us how the Incarnation was God’s full manifestation to us. For it was in the Incarnation that the unchanging and the changeable were most profoundly united while remaining distinct. God who is changeless, motionless, and immortal assumed that which is subject to change, motion, and mortality. The fullness of divinity dwelled with the fullness of humanity. In Christ, immovable truth moved among us.