

AND THE BUSH WAS NOT CONSUMED

J. GERALD JANZEN

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The idea for this paper hit me during a visit to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. I had been browsing the library at Union Theological Seminary nearby, and had come across a reference to an article in a journal that only JTS carried. As I approached the building, I noticed the "logo" over the entrance – a flaming bush and the words, *vehassneh aynennu ukhal*: "and the bush was not consumed."

The text was, of course, familiar to me. I had lectured on it and led exegetical discussions of it over a period of thirty-five years, and I had ventured an interpretation of it in my little commentary on the Book of Exodus. But when I saw it over the entrance to JTS, something stirred within the depths of my hermeneutical imagination: a sense that in this setting the bush and its text might offer a new meaning. In a hurry, however, I did not pause to reflect on what that meaning might be, but found my way to the library and lost myself blissfully amid its treasures. On my way out, I did pause to examine the displays and memorials, especially those concerning the Holocaust. That is when the bush blazed forth with new meaning. Of course! How could I have been so blind all these years?

I had assumed, with commentators generally, that the fire in the bush is a manifestation of the biblical God who, as a later writer put it, "is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29, following a reference to the scene in Exodus 19). I had been preoccupied with the fact that, if this fire manifests the presence of the holy and living God, then it is remarkable that so flammable a thing as a bush should burn and yet not be consumed. For it stands in contrast to the fearful warnings in Exodus 19, the people's fearful response in Exodus 20:19, and the similar dire warning in Exodus 33:3. The only thing I could compare with the bush that burned but was not consumed was the scene in Exodus 24:9-11. There, following the covenant-making ceremony in 24:3-8:

Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel; and there was un-

J. Gerald Janzen is Emeritus Professor of Bible at the Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana.

der his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank. (Ex. 24:9-11 RSV [all subsequent references also RSV])

The dire warning, three days earlier, that anyone gazing on God who was to descend on the mountain in fire would run the risk of perishing (19:21), here gave way to an intimacy in which these representatives of the people could, amazingly, see God and live. Was the bush that burned and was not consumed a veiled promise of divine-human intimacy, now unveiled under the sacred canopy of the covenant sealed in blood and solemn words?

Such a reading continues to hold a great attraction for me, and I am loath to give it up. But in the present essay I want to propose a reading provoked by my visit to JTS. In my view, this reading does greater justice to a question that my earlier understanding had left unsatisfied: Is the appearance and voice of God to Moses out of a bush that burns but is not consumed integral to the narrative context? Or is it simply an arbitrary sign whose significance is exhausted in getting Moses' attention?

I begin with the observation that, while fire is a frequent symbol of the Holy One, fire also carries many other connotations. One that bears on the reading I am proposing is exemplified in the following passages:

*When you pass through the waters I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you (Isa. 43:2).*

Coming from the prophet of the Babylonian Exile, the images of fire and water connote the afflictions which the Judahites suffered in the fall of Jerusalem and its aftermath. *Behold, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction (Isa. 48:10)*. Here again, fire (implicit in the image of the furnace) refers to the afflictions suffered at the hands of the Babylonians. In several passages, however, the image of the furnace with its implied fire is applied to the later stages of the ancestral sojourn in Egypt.

But the Lord has taken you, and brought you forth out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own possession, as at this day (Deut. 4:20).

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For they are thy people, and thy heritage, which Thou didst bring out of Egypt, from the midst of the iron furnace (I Kgs. 8:51).

Cursed be the man who does not heed the words of this covenant which I commanded your fathers when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron furnace (Jer. 11:3-4).

*For Thou, O God, hast tested us;
Thou hast tried us as silver is tried.
Thou didst bring us into the net;
Thou didst lay affliction on our loins;
Thou didst let men ride over our heads;
we went through fire and through water;
yet Thou hast brought us forth to a spacious place (Ps. 66:10-12).*

These last verses follow on a passage that celebrates Israel's deliverance from Egypt (66:5-7).

In all these passages, while the affliction occurs under the sovereignty of Israel's God, the fire refers most immediately to the human agency of Egypt or Babylon, and characterizes Israel's affliction under that rule. With this in mind, let us turn our attention to the possible connotations of the bush in Exodus, chapter 3.

That a vine, a bush, or a tree can symbolize a human individual or group is evident from numerous passages. In the Book of Genesis it connotes the fecundity of Israel's ancestors. For with the birth of Isaac, Abraham plants a tamarisk tree (Gen. 21:33); and when Jacob blesses his twelve sons he blesses Joseph in the name of Shadday, giver of the *blessings of the breasts and of the womb*, in virtue of which *Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring* (Gen. 49:22-26). The blessedness of those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways includes the promise that *your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table* (Ps. 128:3). If a eunuch says, *I am a dry tree* (Isa. 56:3), the psalmist reassures Israel that the one who keeps *torah* is like a fruitful tree (Ps. 1; cf. Ps. 52:8, 92:12, and Jer. 17:3-8 with its contrast between a tree planted by water and a shrub in the desert).

Ezekiel's extended parable in which vine and tree symbolize human rulers concludes with the generalizing comment, *and all the trees of the field shall know that I the Lord bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish* (Ezek. 17:24). Davidic kings may be spoken of in similar imagery. Isaiah 11:1 announces that *there shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots*, and Jeremiah 23:5 announces, *Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch*. Psalm 80 remembers before God the time when *Thou didst bring a vine out of Egypt; thou didst drive out the nations and plant it* (v. 8). But then, turning to the present, it prays, *Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; Have regard for this vine, the stock which thy right hand planted. They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down* (vv. 14-16). In Jeremiah 11:16, the image is again applied to the people of Judah: *The Lord once called you, 'A green olive tree, fair with goodly fruit'; but with the roar of a great tempest he will set fire to it, and its branches will be consumed*. Then, to the people in exile, the tree becomes an image of hope: *Like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands* (Isa. 65:22). Finally, in Isaiah 53:2, the image is used to introduce the Servant of the Lord: *He grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground*. If the Servant is the people Israel (perhaps as epitomized in an ideal exemplar and representative; Isaiah 49:1-6), the image of the young plant as a root out of dry ground (cf. Prov. 30:15-16) aptly describes the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. With this we may turn now to the scene in Exodus 3:1-6.

The context is set in Exodus 2:23-25: under the oppressive rule of Egypt, the people of Israel cry out for help, and, hearing their cry, God remembers the covenant with the ancestors, sees and knows their plight, and comes down to act. How does God do so? Here we may recall the thesis central to Abraham Heschel's magisterial study, *The Prophets*. In his view, central to the prophetic vocation is an experience of, indeed a participation in, the divine pathos. By "divine pathos" Heschel means God's knowing of the vicissitudes of God's people – a knowing which is not simply, so to speak, an intellectual recognition, but a total felt awareness of the people's condition together with a commitment to the divine action (in mercy or in judgment) which that con-

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dition calls for. The prophet is one who is drawn into God's pathos, sympathetically feels God's pathos for the people, and speaks and acts out of that sympathetic feeling.

Heschel's analysis aptly applies to the call of Moses at the burning bush. For what Moses comes to know through that bush is God's pathos over the people's affliction in Egypt, a pathos which he eventually comes to share. It is noteworthy that the scene at the bush is sandwiched between Exodus 2:23-25 and its repetition in 3:7-8. I suggest that these two bracketing passages are the textual exposition of the symbolism of the bush that burns and is not consumed. In seeing the bush, Moses hears, speaking out of its midst, the God who says, *I am the God of your ancestor, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*. Put plainly, the bush is emblematic of the descendants of these ancestors, suffering under the fiery trials imposed on them by the new Egyptian regime. It is a bush, however, that is not consumed by those trials, for it is a bush over which God watches to prolong its life and sustain it in fruitfulness. Indeed, it is a bush out of the midst of which God is heard in a voice that, while distinguishable from the cries of the people in 2:23-25, is not separable from them. At the heart of Israel's groaning under bondage is the cry of the divine pathos, a pathos which moves to come down and redeem. That is the voice and the pathos which lies at the heart of Moses' calling.

Is the burning bush, then, merely an attention-getting device, or is it thematically integral to the narrative context? Clearly, in my view, it is the latter. It is commonly recognized that, form-critically, the call of Moses is to be compared to other passages portraying a prophetic call. In that case, one may note that in the inaugural visions that come to Jeremiah in connection with his prophetic call, the almond rod and the boiling pot that he sees (Jer. 1) are integral to his prophetic message and to the political setting in which he is called to speak. The same may be said for what Amos sees in the five visions reported in Amos 7:1-3, 4-6, 7-9; 8:1-3; 9:1, visions that bracket the report, in 8:10-17, of his prophetic call. To be sure, in all these instances the symbolic import of the visions is made explicit through an interpretive divine word, while in Exodus 3, it may be objected, the significance which I am proposing for the burning bush is at most implicit. But is it only implicit? The verbal resonance between God *seeing* the suffering people in Exodus 2:23, Moses

seeing the flaming bush in 3:2, 3, 4, and God's statement in 3:7 that *I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt*, makes of 3:7-10, with its call to Moses to share God's concern, the explication of the meaning of the bush that burns and is not consumed. Just as Moses is drawn toward the bush by its unconsumed flaming, so he is drawn into God's pathos for the descendants of the ancestors.

The bush, then, is the fruitful but now threatened growth in Egypt of the community springing from Abraham and Sarah, the *young plant and root out of dry ground* of which the exilic prophet will later speak in Isaiah 53 (cf. Isa. 51:1-3). It is a bush that burns under the oppression of Egypt; but, in virtue of the God who is with it (cf. Gen. 21:22; 24:40; 26:3, 24, 28; 28:15; 35:2; 39:2, 3; 46:2-4; 48:15-16; and Ex. 3:12), it is not and will not be consumed.

Such a reading draws the scene in Exodus 3 into luminous thematic accord with later portrayals of the people's sufferings at the hands of their oppressors. Most noteworthy are the portrayals of the three youths in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace (Dan. 3), and of the aged priest, and the widow woman and her seven sons, put to death in fiery trials under the minions of Antiochus IV (II Maccabees 6-7; IV Maccabees). The Greek version of Daniel includes a lengthy addition after 3:23 that appears in the Apocrypha under the heading, "The Prayer of Azariah." In the midst of the fire, Azariah (the Hebrew name of the youth whom Babylonians call Abednego) prays to God for all the people, offering himself and his two companions in the fire as a sacrificial offering on their behalf. Tellingly, at the very heart of this prayer for the deliverance of the people, Azariah calls upon God:

*For thy name's sake do not give us up utterly, and do not break thy covenant, and do not withdraw thy mercy from us, for the sake of Abraham thy beloved and for the sake of Isaac thy servant and Israel thy holy one, to whom Thou didst promise to make their descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the sand on the shore of the sea.*¹

These portrayals concerning the Jewish martyrs carry forward, I suggest, the picture of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, and of Jacob and Leah and Rachel, as a bush that though burning is not consumed. The emblem over the door of the Jewish Theological Seminary carries that testimony forward into a post-Holocaust world.

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ADDENDA

When I had completed the above study, it occurred to me to consult some Jewish commentary on the bush. In *Midrash Rabbah* on Exodus 3 I found the following comment:

Why did God show Moses such a symbol? Because he (Moses) had thought to himself that the Egyptians might consume Israel; hence did God show him a fire, which burnt but did not consume, saying to him, "Just as the thorn-bush is burning and is not consumed, so the Egyptians will not be able to destroy Israel."

In the same vein, Nahum M. Sarna writes, "The bush that remains intact in the face of the flames may be symbolic of the people of Israel surviving Egyptian oppression."² I am happy to think that the reading offered in this paper was not only inspired by my visit to the Jewish Theological Seminary but also accords with this ancient and contemporary strand of Jewish interpretation.

In view of Abraham Heschel's thesis concerning the pathos of God, and the prophet as one who is drawn to participate sympathetically in that pathos, we may take the fire in the bush to connote not only the oppression of Egypt and the people's affliction under it, but also the fervency of the divine pathos over that situation.

NOTES

1. Prayer of Azariah 11-13.
2. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991) p. 14.