

## **God's Presence in 'the Call of Moses': The Structure, Theme, and Theology of Exod 2:23-4:17**

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### **Abstract**

This article is a byproduct of an exegetical study done as part of a senior project. The study examines a significant passage in the book of Exodus that relates the call of Moses. The article is primarily interested in the structural patterns in this passage. However, it also highlights certain theological ideas that are found in the passage.

**Key words:** call of Moses, God's answer, structure

### **Introduction**

The 'Call of Moses' is one of the most intriguing passages in all of canonical scripture which has inspired the souls of countless people and tickled the minds of numerous scholars. So many different interests and explorations of the passage have in turn led to varied interpretations. When one compares the emphases of the different scholars listed below, one will certainly notice a few commonalities as well as some stark differences. It has been said that structure is the vehicle of meaning and what one quickly notices that these various scholars all came up with different ways to structure the 'call' passage. As Childs puts it, 'There is considerable disagreement among commentators on fixing the limits of this section. The issue is contested with respect to both the beginning and ending of the unit' (Childs, 1962, 51). Some scholars have structured the book based on perceived themes such as Cole and Durham. Others have used literary techniques such as shifts in genre and characters to determine structure like Kaiser. Still others have based their constructions on theoretical sources attempting to discover how the passage may or may not have originated such as Noth. Perhaps this disagreement in structure has led to some of the variances that we observe in emphases and interpretation of the passage. What is clear is that one's methodology or techniques for deriving structure has an effect on how the text is divided and on any theology that is derived from the text.

In interpreting the 'call of Moses' portion of Exod, Walter C. Kaiser Jr., who partitions Exod 3:1-10 as 'Calling a deliverer', emphasizes the concepts of God's presence and God's promise to the Patriarchs as being the foremost concerns of the passage (Kaiser, 1976, 315-16). Alan Cole who denotes Exod 3:1-4:31 as Moses' 'Meeting with God' emphasizes Moses' mission as a result of this fresh revelation of a God that the Israelites already knew (Cole, 1973, 62-80). John I. Durham sees this passage as extending from Exod 3:1-7:7 which he entitles 'The Call of the Deliverer, His Commission, and His Obedience' which he further subdivides into smaller units to emphasize the reality of God's presence and the human response (Durham, 1982, 29-30 and 85-88) and the authority of God to oppose Pharaoh and send Moses (36-37, 43-44, 48-49, and 62-64). Cornelis Houtman, who demarcates this passage from Exod 2:23-4:19 under the title 'the Call of the Deliverer', like Kaiser, also emphasizes the presence of God and His promise to the Patriarchs (Houtman, 1993, 322-326). While Brevard S. Childs, who sees 'the Call of Moses' as extending from Exod 3:1-4:17, stresses God's presence and power, and identifies the authority as derived from that power as the reason that legitimates Moses' call and mission while at the same time guaranteeing its success (1962, 71-79). The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary (SDABC) is in agreement with Childs in seeing 'The call to Moses' as comprising Exod 3:1-4:17 (Nichol, 1978, 493).

The purpose of this study is ultimately theological. It will attempt to draw conclusions about the meaning of the 'Call of Moses' passage. To do this it will reflect on the theological points implied by a new proposed structure for this call passage.

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Contending with various theories of origins, interpolations, and amalgamations of various sources is not within the scope of this study. This paper treats the book of Exodus as a completed work in the form that we now have it in. In order to derive meaning from this story we will first set the limits of the passage by stressing the concentration of and repetition of terms that are key to understanding the passage and by observing the lack of the appearance of these terms in adjacent passages, while taking shifts in characters and theme into consideration for determining the structure of the passage that this paper will propose. Upon doing that we will reflect on what theological concepts are apparent from the proposed structure.

## Determining Structure

We are going to take a look at the concentration of ‘key terms’ in and around the call passage, lack of key terms before and after the passage, shifts in characters, and shifts in themes in order to derive our proposed structure.

## Concentration of Key Terms

In giving a list of ‘key terms’ one must ask the question of what makes a term ‘key’. Here we are defining a term as ‘key’ if it is especially important in understanding the passage. However, that could leave us in a circular trap because we are attempting to use key words to demarcate a passage while at the same time drawing these key words from the passage. Therefore we will start by recognizing that no matter how one sees the limits to the ‘Call of Moses’ passage, all must recognize that God’s encounter with Moses or theophany is central to Moses’ call. Thus terms that explicitly or implicitly show God’s presence would be considered key terms for this passage and we will start by examining them.

The first term that we are going to look at is *הָאָר* (*ra’ah*) whose root meaning deals with seeing. It is used 13 times between Exod 2:25-4:14, 3 times referring to the fact that the LORD appeared to Moses (3:16; 4:1, 5) and 1 time referring to the angel of the LORD appearing to Moses (3:2). These four passages make it clear that the LORD’s presence was with Moses in a way that he could ‘see’ Him.

The second term is *יָרַד* (*yarad*) has the basic meaning of to go or come down. It is used 1 time in the ‘Call’ passage in Exod 3:8 where the LORD is recorded as saying ‘and I [the LORD] have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians...’ (RSV). In trying to understand what it means for the LORD to ‘come down’, the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament has this to say: ‘A theophany is described as God coming down. He leaves his abode and comes to communicate with man either directly through the word or indirectly through some instrument. God descended on Mt. Sinai in fire (Exod 19:18; cf II Chr. 7:1) and on the tent he appeared in a pillar of cloud (Exod 40:34; Num. 12:5). . . Further God comes down to bring salvation to his people; e.g., he appeared to deliver his people from Egyptian bondage (Exod 3:8)’ (Harris, 1980, 401-402). The way this term is employed in this passage it indicates that a theophany has occurred; God is present here.

The third term *הָיָה* (*hayah*), meaning to be, is also used 13 times in Exod 2:23-4:16. Despite its frequency, it is only used 1 time in an explicit reference to God being with Moses (3:12). That being said, Durham is arguably correct when he concludes that the usage of the verb *הָיָה* in the name of the LORD as found in Exod 3:13-15 implies that God is in fact present with his people (Durham, 1982, 37-39). This increases the usage of *הָיָה* theophanically to 4 times (once in Exod 3:12 and three times in Exod 3:14).

The fourth term to be examined is *עִם* (*‘im*), translated in the RSV as ‘with’. *עִם* is used 4 times in Exod 3:12-4:15, with one explicit reference to God being with Moses in 3:12.

The fifth and final ‘key term’ that we will examine is *הָרַק* (*qarah*), used 1 time in Exod 3:18 in the perfect tense which the RSV translates as ‘met.’ *הָרַק* is used 100 times in the Old Testament with various meanings such as: to meet, to confront, to happen, and to build (with beams). When *הָרַק* is used in the sense of a human ‘meeting’ the LORD it describes an actual encounter with the LORD that can be associated with cultic practices and the receiving of new revelations (cf. Exod 19:17, Num. 23:3). Since a happening, confrontation, or construction is not occurring in these passages it seems safe to say that an actual meeting with the LORD is being described here, keeping the ‘presence of God’ motif in view.

While the first three terms are much more prominent than the last two, they are all united in revealing God’s presence with His people and are heavily concentrated in Exod 2:25-4:14, appearing 33 times with 11 of these indicating God’s presence. It is clear that the concept of God’s presence is prominent in Exod 2:25-4:14.

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## Lack of Key Terms Before and After the Unit

Now that we have examined 5 ‘key terms’ dealing with the presence of God concentrated in Exod 2:25-4:15, we will look at how often they appear before Exod 2:25 and after Exod 4:15 until Exod 7:7 (which is the latest lower limit of the ‘Call of Moses’ passage as proposed by Durham).

The term האר is used 7 times before Exod 2:25 and 8 times in Exod 4:14-7:7. However, none of the 7 occurrences before 2:25 have anything to do with God being visible, while only two of the eight occurrences after 4:14 reference the appearance of God (Exod 6:1, 3). הרי appears 1 time before 2:25 and does not appear in 4:14-7:7, with the one occurrence having nothing to do with the actions of God. היה occurs 6 times before 2:25 and 5 times in 4:14-7:7 (not counting how היה is used as part of the divine name YHWH). However none of the 6 occurrences prior to Exod 2:25 have anything to do with God being among people. Of the 5 occurrences after 4:14, only 1 (arguably 2) has to do with God’s presence, in 4:24 (and arguably in 6:28). Both בע and הרק do not appear before 2:25 or in 4:14-7:7. From this, it is evident that terms associated with God’s presence taper off outside of the block of information found in Exod 2:25-4:14.

## Shifts in Characters

The book of Exodus opens with the actions of the nation of Israel considered as a whole (1:1-7) before introducing the character of the ‘new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph’ (RSV), who is later equated with Pharaoh (v 11). From Exod 1:9-22 the passage is primarily concerned with the actions of this Pharaoh in attempting to handle the problem of the increased Israelite population with a brief mention of God blessing two Hebrew midwives who thwarted one of the Pharaoh’s plans. Exod 2:1-11 shifts scenes to look at a family who attempts to save the child Moses from Pharaoh’s most recent plot to control the Israelites, introducing a plethora of characters including Moses’ father (2:1), mother (2:1), sister (2:4), and foster mother (2:5) before focusing on the actions of Moses (2:11-22), while introducing an anonymous Egyptian (2:11-12), two Hebrew slaves (2:13-14), Moses’ father in law (2:16), Moses’ wife (2:21), and Moses’ firstborn son (2:22). From there God is re-introduced (2:23-25), which sets the stage for a long dialogue between Moses and God in which the ‘call’ of Moses actually occurs (3:4-4:17). After this there is again the involvement of several characters including some reintroductions such as Jethro (4:18), Zippo’rah (4:25), Moses’ son (4:25), and Aaron (4:27) before Moses finds himself back in Egypt (5:1).

In terms of raw narrative space, the largest unbroken section is definitely Exod 3:4-4:17 where Moses dialogues with God. It is clear that the action of the story shifts after Exod 4:17 based on the characters that are involved. That combined with the previous assertion that similar material is concentrated in Exod 2:25-4:14, while at the same time recognizing that the scene including 4:14 extends to 4:17 suggests that Exod 4:17 as the upper limit for the call of Moses unit.

## Shift in Theme

As noted in the section on Key terms, the prevailing theme of Exod 2:25-4:17 is the presence of God. Prior to 2:25, Exod 1:1-22 is primarily concerned with the fruitfulness of the Israelites, possibly an implicit allusion to God’s promises to the Patriarchs (cf. Gen. 12:2; Gen. 15:4-21; Gen. 17:2; etc.). Exod 2:1-22 follows the birth, preservation, and early life of Moses. Exod 2:23-25 introduces God as being aware of the plight of the Israelite people. In 2:25 it reads, ‘God knew their condition’ (RSV) using the Hebrew word יָדָעַ (yada’) which is a knowledge that is gained by experience (Harris, 1980, 366) implying that one of the reasons that God knew the plight of the Israelite people in addition to Him hearing ‘their cry’ is that He was actually experiencing their suffering with them. Finally, Exod 4:18-31 relates Moses’ journey back to Egypt which extends into chapter 5 with Moses’ first encounter with Pharaoh. From this we can see a definite break with the theme of God’s presence prior to 2:23 and after 4:17.

## Proposed Unit and Structure

Due to the concentration of Key terms indicating the presence of God in Exod 2:23-4:17, the lack of these terms both prior to and after this unit, the shifts in characters throughout the early chapters of the book, and the shifts in theme, we suggest that the ‘Call of Moses’ narrative should extend from Exod 2:23-4:17. While we agree with Durham’s statement regarding Exod 2:23-25, that ‘its present form is dictated by what

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precedes and follows it, and it serves quite effectively as a transition' (1982, 25) serving as a kind of 'bridge' between two units and in turn belonging to both the antecedent unit and succeeding unit, we have included it in the succeeding unit by virtue of continuous theme in contrast to the structure proposed by Childs and the SDABC.

Thus this unit, by virtue of theme, extends from Exod 2:23 to 4:17, being further broken down into the following sub-units:

1. Exod 2:23-25; God's presence among suffering Israel
2. Exod 3:1-6; God's appearance to Moses
3. Exod 3:7-12; Moses first objection and God's answer, 'I will be with you'
4. Exod 3:13-22; Moses second objection and God's answer, 'I AM WHO I AM'
5. Exod 4:1-9; Moses third objection and God's answer, 'that they may believe that the LORD...has appeared to you'
6. Exod 4:10-12; Moses fourth objection and God's answer, 'I will be with your mouth'
7. Exod 4:13-17; Moses fifth and final objection and God's answer, 'I will be with your mouth and with his mouth'

### Theological Reflection

There are numerous commentaries on both this passage and on the book of Exodus as a whole that contain a bounty of useful information and try to address issues such as authorship, origins, sources, manuscript history, historical considerations, geography, anthropology, and philosophy, which will not be dealt with in great detail here. In this section what we will focus on is how the theme of the presence of God permeates this unit and the theological implications that arise from this theme in the context of the proposed structure.

#### God's presence among suffering Israel (Exod 2:23-25)

As mentioned before, the term יָדָע, translated as 'knew' in the RSV, indicates a knowledge gained by experience. 'This root, occurring a total of 944 times is used in every stem and expresses a multitude of shades of knowledge gained by the senses. . . Yada' is used of God's knowledge of man (Gen. 18:19) and his ways (Isa. 48:8). . . The plagues of Egypt were sent so that the Egyptians might know that YHWH is God (Exod 10:2, etc.). He will destroy (Eze 6:7) and restore Israel so that they may know that he is God (Isa. 60:16)' (Harris, 1980, 366). Likewise, here God knows the condition of His people because he hears them, sees them, and experiences what they experience; God is present among His people. His presence means that God is not unaware of what is happening to His people and His awareness is what causes Him not to forget His covenant promise and to act on it.

#### God's appearance to Moses (Exod 3:1-6)

In this passage it says that 'the angel of the LORD appeared' to Moses. This raises the question as to whether it was the LORD who appeared to Moses or simply an 'angel.' Houtman sees this being as a 'messenger' perhaps divine who 'bridges' the gap between God and His creation where God is 'present' in His messenger so that later on in the passage this messenger can be referred to as the LORD Himself. Cole on the other hand takes the view that the term 'angel of the LORD' is a 'reverential synonym for God's own presence' citing precedents in Gen. 18:1 and 19:1. He further points out that 'Advanced angelology does not occur until the apocalyptic books of the Old Testament (Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah). Throughout the whole of the earlier period, it would be better to translate the word 'angel' as 'messenger' and leave it to the context to decide whether this emissary is human, superhuman, or simply a reverential way of referring to God Himself, as apparently here' (1973, 64). I lean towards Cole's interpretation as Kaiser takes the phrase as referring to the LORD for granted (1976, 315) and the SDABC points out in its comment on verse 5 that 'the place where Moses stood was holy, not because it was an old sanctuary or sacred spot previously unknown to him...but because of the presence of God' (Nichol, 1978, 510). Thus it was the LORD who was present in the bush.

There are three things that this passage teaches us about the presence of God: first, that the revelation of God's presence leads into Him calling Moses for a special task; second, as already mentioned 'Because God was present, what had been ordinary became 'holy ground'' (Kaiser, 316); third, when Moses first saw the phenomenon of the bush he said 'I will turn aside and see this great sight' (3:3; RSV) but when he realized

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what it was that he had come across ‘Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God’ (3:6; RSV). When a person, or at least when Moses, realizes that they are in the presence of God they may become afraid.

#### Moses first objection and God’s answer (Exod 3:7-12)

In Exod 3:8, the LORD makes an astonishing statement in saying that ‘I have come down to deliver’ the Israelites out of Egypt. Now that God has revealed His presence to Moses He instructs Moses to return to Egypt in order to bring out His people. ‘But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?’ (3:10; RSV). Kaiser identifies the expression ‘Who am I?’ as a Near Eastern idiom ‘that stresses the magnitude of the inequity between the agent and the mission’ (1976, 318). God’s answer ‘But I will be with you’ means as Durham points out ‘Who Moses is not the question; it is rather, who is with Moses?’ (1982, 33). The promise of God’s presence is the assurance that no matter how inadequate Moses is for the task he will be successful for it is God Himself who has ‘come down to deliver’ the people through Moses. Here God’s presence is seen as a guarantee for being able to complete the task that God Himself appointed.

#### Moses second objection and God’s answer (Exod 3:13-22)

In this passage Moses raises his second objection: ‘If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’ (3:13; RSV). What does this question mean? Does he really think that the Israelites want to know what His name is? The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT) points out that ‘the concept of personal names in the OT often included existence, character, and reputation (I Sam. 25:25)... The name chosen for a child was often descriptive of the parent’s wishes or expectations for the personality that was to mature...’ (Harris, 1980, 934) and that this concept also applies to the name of the LORD meaning that this question seeks more than just a name. That being said, what is the question asking? Cole claims that it’s asking for a fresh revelation of who God is (1973, 69); Houtman suggests that Moses is seeking to improve his credentials by showing that he has an intimate relationship with God by knowing His ‘name’ (1993, 366); Durham suggests that the question is really asking ‘what can He [God] do?’ (1982, 38). Perhaps Childs has the best answer when he says ‘this question has evoked such a long history of scholarly controversy and has been approached with so many oblique questions that it is extremely difficult to hear the text any longer within its present context. . . Certainly in its present context Moses’ question is viewed as one in a series of objections. It is part of the prophet’s resistance’ (1962, 74-75). Whatever this question actually means it’s an attempt on Moses part to escape God’s call.

The interesting part is God’s answer: ‘I AM WHO I AM’ (3:14 RSV). The phrase ‘*eyeh ’asher ’eyeh*’ has caused both translators and commentators headaches for centuries. It is clear that the name *יהוה* (*Yahweh* or *YHWH*) is a play on this phrase built off the verb *היה* (*hayah*) meaning ‘to be’. The question is what does this answer mean? Again there have been numerous interpretations of the meaning of the divine name. Could it be that God was avoiding giving a real answer to Moses’ question as Houtman suggests (1993, 367), or is it an ontological statement as proposed by SDABC (511)? Durham is probably correct when he says the ‘answer must be read not only in the context of the three-verse segment (vv 13-15) in which it is nestled, but in the context of the remainder of Exod 3’ (1982, 38-39). He goes on to point out that God’s answer harkens back His statement in Exod 3:12 where He says ‘I will be with you’. Thus Kaiser says, ‘The answer was: ‘[My name in its inner significance is] I am, for I am/will be [present]’ (1976, 321). Again God’s answer to Moses’ objection is a promise of His presence which will be enough to satisfy the objections of the Israelites should they arise. This presence is not limited to a specific period of time but it will be God’s continual presence as in verse 18 God will also meet with the elders of Israel for they will be able to claim to Pharaoh that ‘the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us’. The divine name is the promise of the continual abiding presence of God with His people.

#### Moses third objection and God’s answer (Exod 4:1-9)

Moses’ third objection is that the Israelites will not believe that the LORD appeared to him. The LORD responds by giving Moses three ‘signs’ the reason being ‘that they [Israelites] may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers...has appeared to you [Moses]’ (Exod 4:5; RSV). Commentators rightly point out that the signs were given to authenticate Moses in his office as a prophet of God (Kaiser, Childs, Durham,



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etc.); however, the signs in themselves are not what authenticate Moses. The signs prove rather that the LORD has indeed appeared to Moses which is the real authenticating credential of Moses' mission. Earlier we saw that God's presence led to Moses' call, here we see that that same presence is the authentication of Moses' mission; the signs were given as proof of the self revelation of God's presence to Moses.

#### Moses fourth objection and God's answer (Exod 4:10-12)

Most of the commentators reviewed here (Nichol, Cole, Childs, Durham) see Exod 4:10-17 as being a part of the same subunit of which I also recognize and agree with. Yet we agree with Kaiser (1976, 327-329) in splitting this subunit further into 4:10-12 and 4:13-17 by virtue of Moses' two different objections. In 4:10, Moses offers another reason why he is not qualified to go on this mission by claiming that 'I am not eloquent, either heretofore or since thou hast spoken to thy servant; but I am slow of speech and of tongue' (RSV). God responds by claiming to be the being who has 'made man's mouth' (4:11). As Cole insightfully points out 'The phrase reads, if translated literally, 'who has set a mouth in man?' The thought behind the older translations 'who has created' is not wrong...The step from this sovereignty to the thought of creation is very small indeed (although the Genesis verb 'create' is not actually used)' (1973, 75). Prior to this God revealed himself as the same God of the Patriarchs but here for the first time in Exodus is it revealed that this is the same God who is responsible for creation (at least in respect to the creation of man). This leads to Durham's observation that Moses' protest is 'not only invalid, but irrelevant (1982, 12, 14-15). Once more Yahweh declares to Moses the promise of the Presence that makes all the difference... 'I AM with your mouth.'" (1982, 49). The fact that God will be present with Moses mouth is the assurance that Moses' proposed speech problems can be overcome since this is the same God who 'made man's mouth'. God's presence comes with His credentials as the Creator God of Genesis.

#### Moses fifth and final objection and God's answer (Exod 4:13-17)

Moses' last objection is his plea, 'Oh, my Lord, send, I pray, some other person' (Exod 4:13; RSV). After God's repeated promise of His abiding presence and the full meaning of what that abiding presence means by virtue of God's creative abilities and wonderful signs imparted to Moses no wonder 'the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses'. However, God not only repeats His promise yet again in vs. 15 but He also consents to Moses' request to a degree by sending his brother Aaron along with him and granting the same promise to Aaron (vs. 15).

### Conclusion

The 'Call of Moses' is the event that drives the rest of the book of Exodus as well as the Pentateuch in general. In this survey we have shown that the overarching theme of this call narrative is that of the presence of God and by virtue of this theme we have concluded that this passage extends from Exod 2:23 to 4:17. In this passage we not only learn that God is present among His people but we also learn the significance of what His presence means. God's presence means that He is aware of what His people are experiencing (2:23-25). His presence makes things holy (3:5). The knowledge derived from His presence means that He is aware of how historical events affect His covenant promises and He will make the necessary moves to ensure that His promises come to fruition (2:23-4:17). His presence can lead to calling individuals to carry out missions on His behalf (3:7-10). At the same time His abiding presence is the guarantee that the mission will be successfully completed because it is this God who is present who is the same god who created man (4:11-12).

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Duncan Thomson is a recent graduate from AIU with a degree in Applied Theology. This article is an adaptation of an exegetical research that he did as part of his senior project while at AIU.