

The Burning Tree

Exodus 3

Exodus 3:1a **Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian,**

By this time, forty years after Moses's arrival in Midian, Jethro had evidently succeeded his father Reuel as patriarch or priest of the clan.

Exodus 3:1b **and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.**

As we saw last time, the desert on the border of Midian was the Nafud Desert. On the far side of it is the mountain range called Horeb. The northernmost and highest peak of that mountain range is Mt. Sinai, called here the Mountain of God.

Exodus 3:2a **There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush tree.**

The Hebrew word which is translated “bush” in these verses is שֶׁנְהַ {sen·eh'}.¹ It should actually be translated “tree.” Thus, the famous “burning bush” of Exodus should actually be understood as a “burning tree” or “burning acacia tree.”

This is what the Easton Illustrated Dictionary says ² about the שֶׁנְהַ {sen·eh'}- “The wild acacia (Mimosa Nilotica), under the name of sunt, everywhere represents the seneh, or senna, of the ‘burning bush.’”

The Mimosa Nilotica (commonly known as the gum arabic tree, is also known as the African acacia or thorny acacia. It is native to Africa, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. It is filled with thorns. It isn't really related to the Australian acacia which has no thorns.

Thus, the “burning bush” was actually a “burning wild acacia tree” which as noted above is actually a tree which is filled with thorns. The wood of that tree was used in the Ark of the Covenant where it was overlaid with gold to stand for both Christ's humanity (the wood) and His deity (the gold). The fact that it was a tree, not a bush is significant. The cross is often called a “tree.” The fact that it was filled with thorns also calls attention to the tree's connection to Christ on the Cross. Below is a picture of an acacia tree in Israel as well as a picture of a typical thorny branch of that tree.

¹ From an unused root meaning “thorny.”

² Entry under “Shittah-tree.”



Acacia Arabica Tree

Exodus 3:2b **Moses saw that though the ~~bush~~ tree was on fire it did not burn up.**

The “burning tree” was a not only a type of Christ on the Cross in that it was a tree and that it was full of thorns, but in that it was burned with fire (judgment) and yet not consumed. It was a picture of the fact that even though Christ bore the judgment for our sins (the thorns), He was not consumed, but was raised from the dead. The burning tree was also a type of Christ in that it gave forth a great light.

Interestingly, the ancient Egyptians called the Acacia tree the “tree of life” because it grew in seemingly impossible places where nothing else could live. It is able to do this because the Acacia can grow an extremely deep tap root which has been found to reach as deep as 300 feet to tap into underground water.

The knowledge that this was a flaming tree, up to sixty feet high, certainly changes the scene dramatically from the one pictured in the old movie “The Ten Commandments” where Moses encountered a glowing bush.

^{s 3:3} **So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight--why the ~~bush~~ tree does not burn up.”**

Now the fact that Moses said he would “go over and see this strange sight” seems to indicate that Moses saw this sight from a distance. It seems as if the tree was burning on the Mountain of God

while Moses was with his sheep in one of the valleys at the foot of the mountain where the best water and pasturage were. Since the tree burned, but was not consumed, the burning wouldn't have given off any smoke to be seen during the daytime. I think that Moses first saw the fire at night from a distance of at least a mile. He may have even seen it for a few nights. Finally, he knew it was something extraordinary that demanded a closer look that took some effort.



Exodu

Thorny Branch of an Acacia Tree

Exodus 3:4 And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the ~~bush~~ tree, and said, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here am I.” KJV

Of course, the moment and the tree had been planned and prepared from Eternity Past. The scene was not only meant to speak to Moses, it was meant to speak to us today.

Exodus 3:5 “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”

In the culture of the Middle East in that day, and even today, the shoe is a sign of contempt or domination. You may remember the TV coverage of when Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad was pulled down. Afterward, many of the Iraqi people, over whom he had tyrannized, went up to the head of the statue and beat on it with their sandals to show their contempt.

The LORD's instruction to Moses here communicated to him the importance of his humility in the upcoming conversation.

Exodus 3:6a Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.”

This indicates that Moses was very well familiar with all the promises that the LORD had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It has always been my belief that the account recorded in the Book of Genesis had been preserved originally by Joseph. We also know that Moses's father-in-law Jethro, with whom he had lived for forty years, was described as “a priest of Midian.” The people of Midian were descended from Abraham. Jethro also must have been aware of the God of Abraham and his promises.

Exodus 3:6b At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

We aren't told exactly why Moses hid his face. Often in the ancient world, subjects were not allowed to look at the face of a King, so this could have been an automatic reflex. More likely, it was because Moses was ashamed of how much he had forgotten his people and their misery. At one time they had expected him to deliver them.

All the Wood Used in the Tabernacle and all the Items of Furniture in the Tabernacle was to be Acacia Wood

The Ark of the Covenant and its poles were to be of Acacia Wood:³

Exodus 25:10 “Have them make a chest of acacia wood--two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high.

Exodus 25:13 Then make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold.

The Table of Shewbread was to be of acacia wood:

Exodus 25:23 “Make a table of acacia wood--two cubits long, a cubit wide and a cubit and a half high.

Exodus 25:28 Make the poles of acacia wood, overlay them with gold and carry the table with them.

The frames that supported the curtains of the Tabernacle were to be of acacia wood:

³ The Hebrew word translated “Acacia” is *שִׁטָּה* {shit-tä} It means “lumber from the thorn tree.” The only thorn tree in the desert large enough to provide lumber up to thirty feet long was the acacia or *סֵנִי* {sen-eh'} out of which the LORD had spoken to Moses.

Exodus 26:15-17 “Make upright frames of acacia wood for the tabernacle. Each frame is to be ten cubits long and a cubit and a half wide, with two projections set parallel to each other. Make all the frames of the tabernacle in this way.

Exodus 026:26 “Also make crossbars of acacia wood: five for the frames on one side of the tabernacle, ^{26:27} five for those on the other side, and five for the frames on the west, at the far end of the tabernacle.

It isn't strange that the Tabernacle, which represented the coming Christ, used acacia wood to represent His humanity. The LORD had spoken out of an acacia tree. In the Tabernacle, all of the acacia wood was to be covered with gold to represent the conjoined deity of Christ to His humanity.