

The Meaning Behind "This Is a Sign for You": An Interpretation of Exodus 3:12

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Description

This article is a research project that takes the topic of The Meaning Behind "This Is a Sign for You": An Interpretation of Exodus 3:12. This interpretation provides a framework for understanding how contemporary believers can apply the message of Exodus 3:12 in their faith and daily life.

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Abstract

The interpretation of the phrase "this will be the sign to you" (Exodus 3:12, NIV) has long been debated among scholars and translators. The ambiguity of the Hebrew text, particularly regarding tense and the referent of the word "this," has led to diverse theological understandings. In the King James Version, the phrase "shall be" appears in parentheses, indicating uncertainty between present and future tense interpretations. This grammatical indeterminacy influences how translators and theologians perceive the passage's meaning and its theological implications. Consequently, a precise interpretation is crucial for grasping the author's intention and God's purpose in this dialogue with Moses. This study employs a hermeneutical approach, integrating contextual and linguistic analysis, comparison of various Bible translations, and review of major commentaries. It examines the phrase from both divine and human perspectives to uncover the intention behind God's statement and its theological significance. The findings suggest that the phrase reflects not only a grammatical or temporal nuance but also reveals a deeper theological truth—God's assurance of His presence and His purpose that the Israelites might worship Him. This interpretation provides a framework for understanding how contemporary believers can apply the message of Exodus 3:12 in their faith and daily life.

Keywords: Exodus 3:12; divine calling; manifestation of God; author's intention; translation comparison

INTRODUCTION

The narrative of Moses' calling in Exodus 3—where God speaks through the burning bush and declares, "this will be the sign to you" (Exod. 3:12)—has long served as a focal point in theological and biblical hermeneutical discourse. This passage presents notable grammatical ambiguities (particularly concerning tense), questions of lexical reference surrounding the demonstrative "this" (what or who constitutes "this"), and theological implications regarding the divine presence expressed in God's assurance, "I will be with you." These issues extend beyond translation challenges; they touch on how readers understand divine presence, prophetic vocation, and the mission of Israel's liberation from Egypt. Several scholars, for instance, have emphasized that this verse underscores God's initiative and empowering presence as foundational to human mission.

In contemporary exegetical and theological exposition, the intertwined themes of divine presence and sign form a crucial interpretive framework for understanding Moses' calling. The text is not merely concerned with the actions to be undertaken but, more profoundly, with the assurance of God's enduring presence—His promise to “be there.” Discussions surrounding Exodus 3:14—“I will be who I will be”—are often connected with the doctrine of divine simplicity (Platter, 2020, pp. 295–306). Yet, the specific phrase “this will be the sign to you” (Exod. 3:12) has received relatively little attention, particularly concerning its grammatical, contextual, and theological dimensions, as well as its implications for contemporary faith and praxis.

Scholarly engagement with Exodus 3 has largely centered on verse 14, raising three central theological questions: incomparability, intimacy, and ineffability (Platter, 2020, pp. 295–306). Graham Davies highlights how the Exodus narrative (including 3:10–12) serves as a paradigm for human agency employed within God's redemptive plan (Davies, 2016, pp. 635–637). David T. Adamo offers a contextual-cultural reading that interprets the burning bush as a manifestation of divine presence (Adamo, 2017, pp. 1–8). In contrast, Hendrik Bosman examines the dialectic of divine presence and absence within Exodus, particularly through the expression “fear of YHWH or God” (Bosman, 2013, pp. 1–13). Moreover, exegetical and linguistic studies—though rarely focused exclusively on 3:12—observe that Hebrew tense and aspect significantly influence the theological interpretation of Moses' calling, as seen in linguistic analyses of the divine name Ehyeh in Exodus 3:14 (Saner, Andrea, 2013).

Nevertheless, a distinct gap remains in the existing scholarship: few studies simultaneously address the grammatical variants (tense and syntax) in the phrase “this will be the sign to you” and its dual theological perspectives—God as the giver of the sign and Moses (or humanity) as its recipient and interpreter. Additionally, there has been limited exploration of how this phrase might inform contemporary theological reflection on mission and divine presence in the life of faith communities. Consequently, a focused linguistic analysis of the phrase “this will be the sign to you” is essential for bridging linguistic features (tense, referent, and syntax) with their theological significance.

From this review emerges a clear research gap: the absence of a comprehensive hermeneutical framework that connects the grammatical construction of Exodus 3:12 with the theological valence of divine presence and its implications for Christian calling and mission today. While the themes of divine presence and sign have been addressed broadly, no prior study has specifically examined how the grammatical structure of this phrase shapes the meaning of “sign,” and how this, in turn, reconfigures theological understandings of vocation and communal faith.

This study contributes to the field in three key ways: 1) Linguistic-Grammatical Analysis — offering a detailed examination of the phrase “this will be the sign to you” (Exod. 3:12), focusing on tense, the referent of “this,” and translation implications; 2) Dialogical Perspective — integrating a twofold perspective of the divine and human interlocutors: God as the giver of the sign and humanity as the receiver and interpreter, thereby clarifying authorial intent and the theological dynamics within the God–Moses dialogue; 3) Contemporary Theological

Application — proposing how the meaning of this sign may be re-appropriated within modern Christian communities as both assurance and challenge in relation to calling, mission, and divine accompaniment.

Thus, this study seeks not only to interpret an ancient text but also to bridge exegesis, theology, and praxis, illuminating how the grammatical and theological dimensions of Exodus 3:12 continue to speak meaningfully to the faith and mission of the contemporary church.

METHOD

This study employs an exegetical-hermeneutical approach focusing on the linguistic, contextual, and theological analysis of Exodus 3:12. This approach is chosen because the primary aim of the research is not merely to provide a historical interpretation, but to uncover the theological meaning embedded within the linguistic choices and structural features of the Hebrew text in the context of Moses' calling. The exegetical-hermeneutical method emphasizes understanding the text as the result of an interactive process between the author, the historical context, and contemporary readers (Thiselton, 2009; Welch & Palmer, 1971).

The analysis begins with a philological examination of the Hebrew phrase *וַיִּזְהַרְהוּ לְךָ הָאֵת* (*wezeh lekha ha'ot*, "and this will be the sign to you"), through interlinear reading and comparative study of various biblical translations, including the Masoretic Text, Septuagint, King James Version, New International Version, and the Indonesian Terjemahan Baru (LAI). This stage aims to identify semantic variations arising from shifts in tense and the referential function of the demonstrative "this" within the text. Subsequently, a literary and historical contextual analysis of Exodus 3:1–12 is undertaken by comparing narrative structures and inter-pericope relationships that depict Moses' calling, in order to understand the role of the "sign" within the broader theology of Exodus.

The second stage involves a theological-thematic and reflective analysis. At this stage, the researcher examines a range of modern commentaries from scholars such as Childs, Sarna, and Stuart, along with contemporary theological discussions emphasizing the dimension of divine presence, including works by Ryken and Alexander (Alexander, 2017; Childs, 1974; Ryken, 2005; Sarna, 1986; Stuart, 2006). All sources are analyzed using a comparative-interpretative method, situating each interpretation in dialogue with others to uncover both consistencies and divergences in understanding the notions of "sign" and divine presence. The analysis also considers the views of modern theologians who interpret the Exodus event as a paradigm of mission and worship (Adamo, 2017; Saner, Andrea, 2013).

The results of these comparisons are then theologically reflected upon to discern the authorial intention and the text's relevance for contemporary readers, particularly in the context of Christian faith and ministry. Through this method, the study seeks to produce a comprehensive interpretation that integrates linguistic, historical, and spiritual dimensions, offering a renewed understanding that the "sign" in Exodus 3:12 is not merely empirical evidence but an expression of God's presence—a presence that accompanies and affirms the human calling.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Historical and Structural Context of Exodus 3:12

Understanding the context of Exodus 3:12 requires examining the overall structure of the Book of Exodus. Broadly, Exodus can be divided into three major parts based on geographical location and stages of Israel's redemptive history: first, in Egypt (1:1–15:21); second, from the Red Sea to Mount Horeb (15:22–18:27); and third, around Mount Horeb (19:1–40:38). Exodus 3:12 falls within the first section, although the event of Moses' calling takes place outside Egypt—specifically in the wilderness of Midian—it still belongs to the broader narrative of deliverance that dominates this portion of the book (Brueggemann, 1997, pp. 165–167).

From a theological perspective, the Book of Exodus may be further divided according to its major thematic developments: (1) Exodus (1–18), which includes Israel's suffering, the calling of Moses, the ten plagues, and the journey to Sinai; (2) The Book of the Covenant (19–24), which records the laws and commandments of God; and (3) Worship (25–40), focusing on the construction of the Tabernacle and the proper worship of Yahweh (Cole, 1973, pp. 23–27). Exodus 3:12 specifically belongs to the section describing the calling of Moses (3:1–12), marking the beginning of divine intervention in Israel's history of salvation. Within this structure, Moses encounters God through the burning bush—a revelation that underscores God's initiative in the act of redemption (Fretheim, 1991, pp. 56–60).

Furthermore, T. Desmond Alexander highlights the literary structure of this passage as a chiasmic and dialogical pattern that reflects the tension between human doubt and divine assurance. The thematic sequence is as follows: (A) The Call of Moses (3:1–12), (B) The Name of God (3:13–15), (A') The Fulfillment of the Call (3:16–22), (C) Signs and Assurance for Moses (4:1–9), (C') Moses' Doubt of God's Reliability (4:10–12), (A'') Moses' Rejection of the Call (4:13–17), (D) Moses' Return to Egypt (4:18–23), (E) The Incident at the Inn (4:24–26), and (D') Moses' Arrival in Egypt (4:27–31) (Alexander, 2012, pp. 146–148). Accordingly, Exodus 3:12 occupies the climactic point of the first unit (A), where God responds to Moses' hesitation with the theological affirmation: "I will be with you." This divine promise of presence will later be fulfilled when Israel worships at the very mountain where Moses received his commission.

This verse, therefore, holds significant theological importance as a bridge between Moses' personal vocation and God's collective redemptive plan for Israel. As Brevard S. Childs observes, the narrative follows the divine commission pattern, in which human reluctance is met with divine assurance and authority (Childs, 1974, pp. 65–70). God not only guarantees the success of Moses' mission but also reaffirms His own identity as the center of liberating power. Thus, Exodus 3:12 is not merely a response to human doubt but a theological declaration of both the immanence and transcendence of God within the history of His people's redemption. The table below shows the formal elements of Exodus 3:1–4:17, helping readers better understand the author's thought patterns. It shows the structure of the conversation between Moses and God.

Table 1. Formal Elements in Exodus 3:1-4:17

No	Formal Elements	Exodus 3:1-4:17
1	Introductory description, third person	3:1-4a
2	Divine Call on behalf of mortals	3:4b
3	Response from recipient	3:4c
4	Divine Affirmation	3:5-6
5	God extinguishes human fear	3:5-6
6	An affirmation of His gracious presence	3:7-8a
7	Noble Word	3:8b-10
8	Recipient's request and protest	3:11
9	Continuation of the glorious Word with repetition of elements 4, 5, 6, 7, and/or 8:	
	- Noble Word	3:12
	- Protest	3:13
	- Noble Word	3:14-22
	- Protest	4:1
	- Noble Word	4:2-9
	- Protest	4:10
	- Noble Word	4:11-12
	- Protest	4:13
	- Noble Word	4:14-17

Then, let's see how the structure of the conversation between Moses and God is in verses 3:11 to 4:17. Moses continues to show his intention to reject God's call. Regarding this, it is clearly seen that God persuades Moses by explaining that there will be no problem with the reasons he mentioned. The content of this conversation can be summarized as in the following table.

Table 2. Moses Rejection and God's Response

Moses' Rejection	God's Answer
Moses is not worthy (3:11)	God will be with him (3:12)
Moses did not yet know God's name (3:13)	God reveals His name (3:14-15)
The people will not pay attention to Moses (4:1)	God will give a sign (4:2-9)
Moses was not good at speaking (4:10)	God will be with him and tell him what he said (4:12)
Moses asked God to send someone else (4:13)	God will help Moses and Aaron to speak (4:14-17)

Moses' words in Exodus 3:11, as well as 3:13, 4:1, 4:10, 4:13, continue to warn that he is not worthy of the task. So his intention was to reject God's call.

The Meaning of “This” in Exodus 3:12: Theophany or Future Fulfillment?

The interpretation of the demonstrative pronoun “this” (הַזֶּה, *zeh*) in Exodus 3:12 has been a matter of considerable debate among biblical scholars. The verse reads: “*And He said, ‘I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.’*” The central question is whether “this” refers to a present theophany—namely, God’s presence in the flames of the burning bush—or a future event—the worship of God by Israel at Mount Sinai after the exodus.

Scholars such as Brevard S. Childs, Cornelis Houtman, and Nahum M. Sarna contend that “this” does not refer to the immediate manifestation of God’s presence in the burning bush. Rather, they interpret it as an anticipatory sign whose fulfillment will occur in the future when Israel returns to the same mountain to worship Yahweh (Childs, 1974, pp. 70–72; Houtman, 1993, pp. 353–355; Sarna, 1986, pp. 47–49). This interpretation is based on the narrative logic: the exodus from Egypt and the subsequent worship at Mount Sinai are events that have not yet transpired, making it difficult to construe “this” as an immediate proof of God’s presence with Moses. Hence, these scholars regard the statement “*this shall be the sign for you that I have sent you*” and the subsequent clause “*when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain*” not as sequentially linked, but as referring to two distinct temporal events separated by a significant chronological gap.

Nevertheless, the association between God’s presence and fire is a recurring motif throughout the Old Testament. One striking parallel appears in the narrative of Gideon’s calling in *Judges 6*. When Gideon was threshing wheat in fear of the Midianites, an angel of Yahweh appeared and addressed him as a “*mighty warrior*” (Judg. 6:12). Like Moses, Gideon initially expressed doubt about his worthiness and capability to fulfill God’s mission, citing his weakness and low social standing: “*My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family*” (Judg. 6:15). Yet, as in Exodus 3:12, the divine response was identical in nature: “*I will be with you*” (Judg. 6:16). Subsequently, Gideon’s encounter culminated in a theophany through fire, when the angel of Yahweh touched the offering with a staff and fire consumed the sacrifice (Judg. 6:21).

The parallel between these two call narratives—the calling of Moses and the calling of Gideon—reveals significant theological continuity: both figures encounter divine presence through fire, both express fear and inadequacy, and both receive assurance through the divine promise of presence. Thus, it is not entirely unreasonable to interpret “this” in Exodus 3:12 as referring to a theophany manifested in fire, symbolizing the divine presence that authenticates Moses’ mission (Fretheim, 1991, pp. 61–64). However, as many scholars point out, this interpretation faces grammatical difficulties, since the demonstrative pronoun “this” would logically require a proximate referent within the same verse, and the following clause pertains to a future event rather than a present one. The juxtaposition of these two clauses without clear syntactic linkage complicates a purely theophanic reading.

To address this tension, Douglas K. Stuart offers a mediating interpretation. He divides God’s statement in Exodus 3:12 into two components: (1) the *promise of divine assistance and guidance*—“I will be with you”—and (2) the *sign of future fulfillment*—that Moses will lead the

people out of Egypt and worship at Mount Sinai (Stuart, 2006, pp. 120–122). In Stuart’s view, God’s “being with” someone signifies divine empowerment, wisdom, and providence manifested through concrete guidance and success. The sign, therefore, is not immediate but eschatological in character: its fulfillment confirms retrospectively that God’s commissioning was genuine. Moreover, Stuart interprets this worship event as not merely a spatial movement (from Egypt to Sinai) but a spiritual transformation—a progression of Israel’s faith toward deeper covenantal understanding. Although this approach does not entirely resolve the grammatical issue, it holds significant theological merit by emphasizing the role of faith required of both Moses and Israel in the process of divine deliverance.

In conclusion, while the interpretation of “*this*” in Exodus 3:12 as referring to the burning bush theophany cannot be dismissed outright, the weight of linguistic and contextual evidence supports viewing it as a future sign of fulfillment. This reading aligns with the narrative’s theological purpose: to demonstrate that divine presence—promised in the present—is confirmed through future acts of salvation. The passage thus anticipates the culmination of God’s redemptive work at Sinai, where the initial revelation of divine presence through fire finds its ultimate expression in communal worship.

Does “This” refer to worshipping God at Mount Horeb after the Exodus?

In order for “*this*” in Exodus 3:12 to refer to the Israelites worshipping God at Mount Horeb after the Exodus, the two sentences must agree in tense. If the tenses do not agree, the sentence is grammatically incorrect in a language that emphasizes the tense of the verb. From a perspective that emphasizes literary and grammatical interpretation, it is impossible to interpret “*this*” as *a theophany* that appears as a flame in a bush. Therefore, “This shall be a sign unto you” must be translated by the words “this shall be a sign unto you.” And most English versions except *Young’s Literal Translations* that are complete *literal translations* interpret it that way. Only *the King James* and *Webster’s versions* use parentheses to express ambiguity.

Table 3. Comparison of English version translations

NIV	<i>I will be with you . And this will be the sign to you</i>
ASV	<i>I will be with thee ; and this shall be the token until thee</i>
DRB	<i>I will be with you ; and this shall be the sign for you</i>
RSV	<i>I will be with you ; and this shall be the sign for you</i>
Webster	<i>I will be with thee ; and this { shall be } a token to thee</i>
KJV	<i>I will be with thee ; and this [shall be] a token until thee</i>
YLT	<i>I am with thee , and this is to thee the sign that I have sent thee</i>

In terms of such an interpretation, the sign must be worshipping God on Mount Horeb after the Israelites left Egypt. And Moses did not see the sign before fulfilling the task that God gave him but after that the success of the task could be a great and clear sign not only for Moses but also for all the people of Israel. The problem is, this sign was only possible when

Moses carried out the tasks given to him with faith and obedience. And the possibility depends on God's power to fulfill that promise. Actually this was achieved and Hebrews 11:27 records "He endured even as he saw what was not seen."

The question then arises whether any future events were ever used as 'signs' elsewhere in the Bible. To that end, the Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 may be the answer. Isaiah 7:14 *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call his name Immanuel"*. It is certain that there are cases in the Bible with a similar usage like this. However, regardless of the grammatical and literary validity, the question is whether God's answer in this verse could have given Moses confidence and courage when seen in context. The event of Moses and the Israelites leaving Egypt and returning to Mount Horeb and worshipping God a few months later would have been a "sign" that gave them strength and confidence during their 40-year journey in the wilderness. But the question is how a sign that had not yet occurred could convince Moses now.

The difference between God's and Moses' perspectives

Of course, there is a difference between the perspective of Almighty and Transcendent God and the perspective of man and God's thoughts reach a level that is unimaginable by man, man cannot understand God's wisdom and thoughts. Even if we do not know what God means beyond our level of debating the interpretation of Exodus 3:12, it is worth trying to approach it.

As shown in the conversation in Table #2, Moses kept pleading with God about the upcoming troubles and why he was not worthy to carry out the task. On the other hand, God gave him a good answer. Although He is the Creator and Ruler of all things, He did not force him but persuade him. However, in Exodus 3:12, besides God giving Moses an answer to Moses who said he could not carry out the task and he was not the right person, God gave an answer that He would be with him and gave a sign such as a promise that Moses and the Israelites would worship Him on this mountain after leaving Egypt.

Consider the nature of each conversation, not the content of the conversation here. If the question or doubt raised by Moses was in the form of asking 'how', then what God answered could be called the 'answer' or 'solution'. Moses asked 'how' and God answered 'with this solution'. However, is the sentence that the Israelites' worship of God is evidence that God is with them not interpreted in a different way than the above? After Moses received God's call, Moses and the Israelites experienced many amazing miracles; breaking the stubborn heart of Pharaoh with ten plagues, and leading the Israelites across the Red Sea and finally leaving the land of Egypt safely. All of these could be good signs for them. But why did God mention only returning to the mountain and worshipping Him as a sign? It seems that this at least means that God is very focused on this event. The book of Exodus contains the journey of saving the Israelites from the persecution and oppression of Egypt. Most people are interested in 'how' they were saved as Moses saw it. But in fact, 'how' cannot be a problem at all because Almighty God was with him. Then, isn't the part that God wants to emphasize in Exodus 3:12 the worship of Israel? Whether or not God could deliver the Israelites from the

land of Egypt was simply a matter of human interest. From God's perspective, is there sufficient reason and purpose to do so. Therefore, 'coming out of Egypt and worshiping God on this mountain' may be thought to be the goal of saving His people. And in other words, it seems possible to interpret that the purpose of salvation from Egypt was to worship God.

Philip Graham Ryken says it was God's plan from the beginning that the exodus would be for God's glory. He literally said to Moses, "You will serve the Lord on this mountain," but claims that God's plan was not just to lead His people out of Egypt, but to gather them into His presence and serve Him in worship (Ryken, 2005, p. 93). He has good reason to say that the central message of the Exodus is that we are saved to glorify God.

The Difference Between the Divine and Human Perspectives

A fundamental distinction exists between the divine perspective of the Almighty and Transcendent God and the limited perspective of humankind. The divine intellect transcends human comprehension; as the prophet Isaiah proclaims, "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,*" declares the Lord (Isa. 55:8). Human beings, bound by temporal and cognitive finitude, cannot fully apprehend the depth of divine wisdom or intention. Nevertheless, even in the face of interpretive uncertainty surrounding Exodus 3:12, it remains both meaningful and necessary to attempt a theological approach to God's revealed word.

In the dialogue between God and Moses—summarized in the corresponding exegetical framework of *Table 2*—Moses repeatedly expressed hesitation, pleading with God concerning his inadequacy and the daunting nature of the commission before him. God, however, responded with both patience and assurance. Although He is the Creator and Sovereign of all things, His response was not coercive but persuasive, appealing to Moses' faith and trust. In Exodus 3:12, God's reassurance takes two complementary forms: first, the divine promise of His abiding presence—"*I will be with you*"—and second, the granting of a sign—a promissory confirmation that Moses and the Israelites would one day worship Him on the same mountain after their deliverance from Egypt (Childs, 1974, pp. 70–72).

An analysis of the dialogical structure between Moses and God reveals that the essential issue is not the *content* but the *nature* of the exchange. Moses' repeated question—essentially "How can this be?"—elicited from God not merely an informational reply but a revelatory "solution" grounded in divine self-disclosure. From a grammatical and theological standpoint, God's promise of Israel's worship on the mountain functions as both a future-oriented sign and a theological endpoint of the Exodus narrative. Yet one may ask: why was *this* event—Israel's worship on Mount Horeb—singled out as the definitive sign of divine presence, rather than the miraculous signs and wonders that would later accompany Israel's deliverance?

Throughout Moses' mission, numerous divine acts could indeed serve as signs of God's accompaniment: the ten plagues that humbled Pharaoh, the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, and the safe deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. Each of these events testified to divine power and faithfulness. However, the explicit focus on *returning to the*

mountain to worship suggests a deliberate theological emphasis. The book of Exodus, while often perceived as a narrative of liberation from oppression, fundamentally portrays salvation as a movement toward worship. The question of *how* the Israelites were delivered, though central to human curiosity, is secondary from the divine perspective. The ultimate *telos* of deliverance lies not merely in political freedom but in the restoration of covenantal communion through worship.

From God's standpoint, therefore, the exodus was not an end in itself but a means toward a greater purpose—the *worship of Yahweh*. The statement, "*When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain,*" defines the theological axis of the entire Exodus narrative: redemption culminates in doxology. In this sense, the event of worship at Mount Horeb becomes both the proof and the purpose of divine deliverance. Salvation, in the theology of Exodus, is teleologically oriented toward worship—to be redeemed is to serve and glorify God.

Philip Graham Ryken captures this theological trajectory succinctly when he observes that "*it was God's plan from the beginning that the exodus would be for God's glory.*" According to Ryken, when God declared to Moses, "*You will serve the Lord on this mountain,*" He revealed that His purpose was not merely to free His people from Egypt, but to gather them into His presence for worship (Ryken, 2005, p. 93). Ryken thus rightly concludes that the central message of the Exodus is encapsulated in the conviction that "*we are saved to glorify God*" (Ryken, 2005, p. 93).

Consequently, Exodus 3:12 should be read not merely as a dialogue of divine reassurance but as a theological thesis: the presence of God guarantees deliverance, and deliverance finds its fulfillment in worship. The movement from bondage to worship embodies the transformation from human anxiety to divine communion, marking the Exodus as both a historical liberation and a liturgical consummation of God's salvific intent.

Another Theological Reason for God's Declaration, "I Will Be with You"

It is often proclaimed in sermons and popular theology that God called Moses because he was *the most suitable person* for the task of leading Israel out of Egypt. This interpretation, while appealing and intuitively sympathetic, reflects a human-centered perspective that assesses divine calling through the lens of human qualification. Indeed, such reasoning appears reasonable at first glance. Moses, educated in Pharaoh's palace, possessed familiarity with Egyptian culture and politics, and demonstrated passionate concern for his people, even to the point of killing an Egyptian who mistreated an Israelite (Exod. 2:11–12). Furthermore, his forty years in the wilderness as a shepherd likely provided ample time for solitude, reflection, and the cultivation of humility and endurance. From this standpoint, Moses seems ideally equipped for divine commission—a man shaped by providence and prepared by experience.

However, this interpretation only highlights the *positive dimensions* of Moses' life and character, while neglecting the deeper theological dynamics at play. The biblical narrative presents a more complex and paradoxical portrait: Moses is both called and reluctant, both prepared and inadequate. His repeated objections to God's summons in Exodus 3–4—

expressed through questions such as “*Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?*” (Exod. 3:11)—reveal not confidence, but profound self-doubt. Significantly, God’s response does not affirm Moses’ competence or suitability. God does not reply, “*You are capable, courageous, and chosen because of your preparation,*” but rather declares simply, “*I will be with you*” (Exod. 3:12) (Ryken, 2005, p. 93).

This divine response reveals a crucial theological principle: God’s calling is grounded not in human adequacy but in divine presence. In effect, God’s answer to Moses may be paraphrased as, “*Indeed, you cannot—but I will.*” The emphasis is displaced from human capacity to divine agency. If God had affirmed Moses’ natural qualifications, the result might have been misplaced confidence in human ability rather than faith in divine empowerment. The logic of grace here is consistent with a broader biblical pattern in which divine mission proceeds not from the sufficiency of the called but from the sufficiency of the Caller.

This theological principle finds resonance in the New Testament, particularly in *Matthew 19:26*. When Jesus explains the impossibility of human salvation—using the metaphor of a camel passing through the eye of a needle—He declares, “*With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.*” This statement mirrors the same divine logic evident in God’s words to Moses: salvation and redemption are never the achievements of human effort but the works of divine initiative and power. The call to faith, therefore, involves the relinquishment of self-reliance and the acceptance of divine sufficiency.

Ultimately, it is not humanity that accomplishes redemption, but God who brings it to completion according to His sovereign wisdom and power. Human agents, such as Moses, serve merely as instruments through which divine will is manifested. God’s call does not depend upon innate capability but transforms weakness into strength through His presence. Why God chooses to employ finite and fallible human beings in His redemptive plan is itself a profound theological mystery—one that transcends pragmatic explanation and points instead to the relational nature of divine purpose.

How to Interpret Exodus 3:12

Contextual Understanding of Exodus 3:12

In the narrative of Moses’ calling (Exodus 3:1–12), several contextual elements are essential for proper interpretation. God’s sudden appearance to Moses at Mount Horeb through the burning bush evokes fear and confusion. In Exodus 3:11–15, God introduces Himself to Moses as the Creator and covenantal God—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—thereby affirming His identity as the God of Israel’s ancestors. God’s plan and command (Exod 3:7–10) come suddenly and overwhelmingly to Moses, who responds by confessing his weakness and inadequacy. In response, God promises to be with Moses and gives him a sign in verse 12, assuring him of divine accompaniment and future confirmation.

The interpretive challenge lies in understanding what exactly “*this*” refers to in the verse—whether it points to the present theophany (God’s manifestation in the burning bush) or to a future sign (Israel’s worship at Mount Horeb after the Exodus).

The Meaning of “This” (zeh) and the Temporal Sign

Grammatically, the Hebrew demonstrative הַזֶּה (*zeh*) typically denotes something proximate or immediate within the discourse context. However, Exodus 3:12 presents a difficulty because the following clause refers to a future event (“when you have brought the people out of Egypt...”). Text-critical scholars have noted that this verse contains a *futuristic sign motif*, meaning that the “sign” will be realized later in history. A biblical parallel can be found in *Isaiah 7:14*, where a future event is likewise described as a sign.

From a theological perspective, this temporal tension is resolved when viewed through the doctrine of divine transcendence. God, who exists beyond the constraints of time and space, perceives past, present, and future as a unified reality. Thus, the apparent inconsistency of tense is only a human limitation. From God’s eternal perspective, the future event can legitimately serve as a sign in the present. The issue, therefore, lies not in divine expression but in human temporality.

God’s Purpose Hidden in the Exodus

A deeper theological reading reveals that the Exodus was not merely a political or physical liberation from Egyptian slavery but a movement toward the formation of a worshipping community. The event of Israel’s worship at Mount Horeb represents the true theological goal rather than simply “coming out of Egypt.” This indicates that God’s saving act is oriented toward communion and worship, not merely deliverance.

While the miracles performed during Moses’ confrontation with Pharaoh—such as the ten plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea—were more spectacular from a human standpoint, the choice of *worshipping at the mountain* as the sign suggests divine intentionality. In this light, Exodus 3:12 underscores that the purpose of salvation is the glorification and worship of God by those who have received His grace. The verse therefore encapsulates a theology of salvation oriented toward worship—salvation unto doxology.

Scholars have noted that the call of Moses (Exod 3:10–12) serves as a paradigm for divine action through human agents, emphasizing God’s sovereignty as the central subject of redemptive history. See, for example, “*The Book of Exodus: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*,” (Davies, 2016, pp. 635–637).

God as Savior and His Presence in Mission

The divine statement “*I will be with you*” (Exod 3:12) highlights the theological motif of divine presence. Although human beings are instruments in God’s salvific work, they are never the source or guarantor of that work. God grants His servants gifts and abilities, yet He remains the sovereign actor in history. Particularly in the matter of salvation, God alone is the principal agent, while human independence and personality are still respected. Thus, God’s promise to Moses reveals His character: He values and dignifies human participation while maintaining divine sovereignty. The “*sign*” in Exodus 3:12 is therefore not merely an empirical proof of divine reality but the future fulfillment of God’s relational promise—that His presence will lead to worship.

CONCLUSION

This study began by asking how a future event could serve as a present sign in *Exodus 3:12*. Through careful examination of biblical commentaries and theological reflection, it becomes evident that the verse's significance lies not in the mechanics of the sign but in the assurance of divine presence. Moses' hesitation mirrors the human struggle with inadequacy and uncertainty in responding to God's call. Yet God's reply—"I will be with you"—shifts the focus from human capacity to divine sufficiency. The true center of the narrative is not who Moses is, but who God is. The Exodus, therefore, depended not on human strength but on the sustaining presence of God who acts in history to fulfill His purpose.

Theologically, this passage affirms that divine calling rests upon faith, not self-confidence. Human wisdom and ability are secondary to trust in God's transcendent will. Faith bridges the gap between divine transcendence and human limitation, allowing believers to participate in God's redemptive work. Moreover, the ultimate goal of both the Exodus and the Christian vocation is the glorification of God. History, salvation, and calling find their meaning in this purpose. Even amid textual ambiguity and interpretive diversity, the process of engaging Scripture becomes a form of worship—an encounter with the hidden yet faithful God whose presence transforms weakness into witness and calling into communion.

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