

The Burning Bush (Ex 3:1–6): A study of natural phenomena as manifestation of divine presence in the Old Testament and in African context

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The purpose of this article is to attempt to sketch a new reading of Exodus 3:1–6 in African context. After the analysis of the text and various interpretations of the burning bush, this article attempts to survey the various uses of the word fire/lightning/thunder in the Old Testament and in African indigenous religious tradition (Yoruba tradition). In this case, the legends of Sango, the Yoruba Divinity, are important examples of interpreting the existence of fire/lightning/thunder as a sign of God's presence. Although the meaning of fire/lightning/thunder in the Old Testament and African traditions is very similar, the author does not subscribe to the notion that African Christianity and African traditional religion are the same. However, the similarity has some important implications for African Christianity despite the differences.

Introduction

'... and behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed'.

Ancient texts need to be read anew. The very meaning given to any story when it is handed down from generation to generation, whether in written or oral form, will always change along the way (Wyatt 1986:361–364). That is reflected in the interpretation of Exodus 3:1–6. It has been read over generations with different interpretations, some absurd and others making some senses. There are so many interpretations of the burning bush passage, but there are very few interpretations that take seriously the African context. In fact, there is some negligence of the application of African Biblical Hermeneutic(s) to Exodus 3:1–6.¹

The purpose of this article is to attempt to sketch a new reading of Exodus 3:1–6 in the African context. This study will attempt to survey the various uses of the word 'fire' in the Old Testament and in the African indigenous religious tradition. It will further attempt to examine the critical analysis and various interpretations of this ancient text.

Critical analysis and interpretation of Exodus 3:1–6

Critical analysis

The location of the events in Exodus 3:1–6 appears to be problematic because there is no such event mentioned in the New Kingdom Egyptian sources. Several attempts to locate the event during the period of Ramses II have faced insurmountable difficulties (Finkelstein 2007:41–45). More interesting is that there is no trace of the early presence of the Hebrews in Egypt. According to Mazar, 'there is no direct evidence of the Israelite sojourn in Egypt and the Exodus that can be extracted from archaeology' (2007:57–65). However, Redford believes that the possibility that Exodus preserves and ancient memories of great events that took place earlier (Redford 1992) cannot be ruled out. The Egyptian sources might have refused to mention this event in Exodus probably because it will be considered a defeat or humiliation for them. However, the story in the book of Exodus concerning the Hebrews building a city of Ramses may reflect the huge building operation of the 13th century during the mighty pharaohs of the 19th Dynasty who built a new city called Pi-Ramses very close to Avaris in the inscriptions of pharaohs Seti I and Ramses II (1300–1250) (Matthews & Moyer 2012:50; Mazar 2007:57–65). The theme of escape to the Sinai Desert was also not something unknown during this period if one considers the Papyri which

1. African Biblical Hermeneutics is reading the ancient text with African worldview. It is a rereading of the scripture with a premeditated Afrocentric context (Adamo 2016:3). What it does is that it uses liberation as a crucial hermeneutics and mobilises indigenous cultural materials for theological enterprises (Sugirtharajah 1999:11). African Biblical Studies is 'postmodern, post-colonial in its aim to celebrate the local and use the local to interpret the Bible' (Adamo 2015a:31–52; 2015b:1–18; 2016:3).

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describe small groups of slaves escaping to the Sinai Desert from Egypt (Mazar 2007:57–65). The dating of this event is scarce and not certain. What appears to be the only documentary evidence of Israel in Egypt is the victory stele called inscription of Merneptah dated at 1208 BCE (Matthew & Moyer 2012:50–51).

There are two revelations or vision accounts on mountain Sinai in Exodus. The first one is in Exodus 3–4 and the second one is in Exodus 19–34. The scene of the two accounts is Mount Horeb and Sinai which appears to be the same location. The first account refers to the mountain as ‘Horeb’ but the second account calls it ‘Sinai’. In the first one in Exodus Chapters 2–4, there is a wordplay when the Hebrew word for bush (הַבִּשְׁמֶט) is used for Sinai.² The Hebrew word הַבִּשְׁמֶט means bush which refers to a particular bramble. Among Jews and Christians, it has a biblical representation of the ‘numinosity of God’ (Black & Rowley 2001; Cheyne & Black 1903).³ There was an appearance of the angel of the Lord to Moses on Mt. Horeb in a flame of fire out of a bush, burning with fire but the bush was not consumed and Moses saw it.

It was suggested that there is a combination of two traditions that were generally independent and it is likely that the theophany in Chapters 3–4 was not part of the exodus story (Collins 2003:111). Evidence of two sources (J and E) that were combined together abounds, according to Collins (2003:109–110). Other source critics divide Exodus 3:1–6 to following units: E (vv.1, 4b, 6) and J (vv.2–3, 4a, 5) (Hamilton 2011:49).

Chapters 3 and 4 appear to be transitional providential events that push Moses into the wilderness where he would spend most of his life (Longman 2006:70). In Chapter 3, Moses became aware of the nature of God and the nature of his mission to be God’s agent of deliverance.

The narrative of the entire exodus is full of legendary details (Collins 2004:119). Therefore, very little can be said of the entire exodus as history, it is ‘likely that some historical memory underlies the story’ (Collins 2004:119). Whatever the situation, whether historical or not, it is difficult to deny that exodus story became the foundation of Israel’s faith. It is more important than any other biblical story for the establishment of Israelite and Jewish identity. Not only that it has served as a paradigm of liberation for various movements in history, it has been repeated over and over again in all the strands of biblical literature.

In Chapter 3:2, the phrase ‘The LORD’s angel showed himself to ...’ occurs in the Old Testament only here and in Judges 6:12; 13:2. In Exodus 3:3, the verb הִרְאֶה ‘to see’ appears first in the *Niphal* with Yahweh as its subject and later in the *Qal* with Moses as its subject. Such a variation in the verb ‘see’ within

2.The actual location of Sinai is disputed, with some locating it in Midian, the east of the Gulf of Aqaba and others in Jebel Musa in the Sinai Peninsula. John J Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (2004:111).

3.It was debated whether the word *seneh* originated from the word ‘sinai’ and that if so, the word *seneh* may be a copiest error from sinai.

the same verse in Exodus 3:2 helps the reader to hear this very incident through the objective eyes of the narrator who is aware of who is in the bush from the beginning of the story and through the subjective eyes of the participants who was not aware of the divinity in the bush (Hamilton 2011:43).

Fire is frequently used as a medium by which God shows himself in the scripture as said above. It always does two things: It either destroys (as in the case of Sodom and Gomara) or purifies (as is in Isaiah 6). In Exodus Chapter 3, fire purifies the bush and the land. הִרְאֶה followed by הִנֵּה [he looked and behold] is a formula that allows the narrator to look through the eyes of the character and presents what he sees (Hamilton 2011:11).

There are two Hebrew words used for bush in the Bible, הַבִּשְׁמֶט (Gen 21:15) and הַבִּשְׁמֶט (Ex 3:2). One thing must be noticed, it is the fire and not the LORD which caught Moses’ attention. Whenever God wants to say something to the individual, he always arrests that individual attention with something spectacular. That is why Moses called the sight, ‘this great sight’, that is, ‘incinerating bush’, ‘this mysterious phenomena’ (Hamilton 2011:47).

According to Hamilton, the word Elohim is a kind of catchall designation for all heavenly beings (God/god/gods/angels). From the text, and from the narrator’s view, the voice from the bush is the LORD’s. But from the Moses’ view, it is the voice of some unknown Elohim, possibly the Lord’s angel.

In verse 3 and 4, the repetition of Moses! Moses! has certain significance. Hamilton calls it ‘an emphatic vocative for an intensity’ (Hamilton 2011:44).

The word הִנֵּה [here I am] is an important word for total submission and love.⁴ The last part of 3:5 includes a *cosus pendens*, ‘the spot on which you are standing’, followed by a nominal clause in which predicate precedes the resumptive subject pronoun הוּא אֶדְמַת־קֹדֶשׁ [it’s a holy ground]. What appears to be the purpose of such construction is for emphasis for the predicate (Hamilton 2011:44). One of the characteristics of God is to show up unexpectedly and unannounced and unbidden. Such is the case for this incident.

The command, do not come closer, is close to Moses’ final encounter with the awesome and glorious God after the completion of the tabernacle in Exodus 40:35. The reason for this command is the awesome holiness of God which purifies that ground.⁵ The first thing that God discloses to Moses is the holiness of the ground. ‘The divine presence in holiness is potentially dangerous’. Moses was asked to remove his

4.This is evident in the following passages in Genesis 22:1 in Abraham to God; 2:11 in the case of Abraham to the angel; Jacob to the angel in 31:11; God in Jacob to God in 46:2; Samuel to the Lord or Eli in 1 Samuel 3:4, 5, 6,8,16 and Isaiah to Isaiah 6:8 indicate a total submission.

5.Note that holiness language is somewhat absent in the book of Genesis, except in God’s sanctification of the Sabbath in Genesis 2:3. It is very difficult to say why holiness language is remarkably absent in Genesis compared to the book of Exodus. In Genesis, it is used only in two places (Gn 2:3 and 38:21). In Genesis, no one is to be called holy or even challenged to be holy even though the words ‘righteous’ and ‘blameless’ are used (Gen 6:9) but no שָׁדֵךְ.

sandals from his feet and come no further. God's self-revelation to Moses is motivated by the compassion for his people suffering in exile in Egypt, and he wants to deliver them by using Moses. When Moses asks the name of the speaker, the speaker revealed his name to Moses. This name was translated as 'Yahweh' of which its traditional connection is the verb *הָיָה* meaning 'to exist'. The name is regarded as the supreme name of God and the highest disclosure of the divine nature to humanity prior to the incarnation (Davis 2006:442).

It is the presence of the Lord that made the ground to be holy, that is, it is the theophanic divine manifestation that makes the land to be holy. The holiness manifested upon the land because of the presence of the divine manifestation shows that God can do anything at anytime, anywhere and with anybody no matter how filthy the person or place is.

There are four suggested reasons why Moses was asked to remove his shoes (Hamilton 2011:44):

1. Shoes are inherently unclean or impure and since Moses on a holy ground, nothing unholy can enter the presence of God.
2. Shoes are for protection from dust and injury and such is not in the holy presence of the holy One.
3. Removal of shoes is a sign of respect for the holy. Many African indigenous churches remove their shoes before entering their churches.
4. The order to remove shoes shows the idea of a host inviting his guest as an act of gracious hospitality. Moses is a guest of God.

In Chapter 3:6, Moses' curiosity and fearfulness are established. Despite this curiosity and fearfulness, he was not tight-lipped. He was also argumentative and brash despite the fact that he was scared. It is not unusual for God to identify himself with people as it is in verse 6: 'I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'.

Various interpretation of Exodus 3:1–6

In terms of Christian exegesis, Exodus 3 has a long and detailed history. According to Davis, the meaning of this text seems to be that God has called Moses into a relationship to himself which is triggered by Moses' curiosity about something extraordinary (Davis 2006:439–448).

According to Philo of Alexandria, the burning bush is an example of providential protection of the Hebrew nation because the bush burned, but was not consumed. The bush referred to the Hebrew and the angel in the bush represents God's providence while the fire protects the bush (Hebrews) by consuming those who sought to destroy them (Langston 2006:44). Exodus Raba 2.5 continued this nationalistic interpretation by saying that 'the thorn bush, being the lowliest of all trees reflects Israel's poor condition in Egypt'

and it demonstrated Israel's relationship with the nations as both beneficial and destructive' (Langston 2006:44; Johanna Exodus Rabin nod:2.5). According to Rabbi Johanna, 'Israel protected the world through its suffering', and the thorn bush also symbolises divine protection for the Jews living among hostile nations (Johanna Exodus Raba nod:2.5).

During the patristic period, the 4th century bishop of Milan, the burning bush was connected to the Holy Spirit. The burning bush represents God's intention to destroy 'sin and dispense grace' (Milan 1955:112 cited in Langston 2006). Chrysostom (347–407 CE) says that the bush represents the resurrection of the Jews and as the bush burned without being consumed, so also Jesus died but death did not overcome him. Although Gregory of Nyssa (335–395) saw the burning bush as representing Mary's virginity, Augustine equated the burning bush's thorn with the sinners and the bush with the Jewish people, while the angel in the bush was Jesus (Langston 2006:46). The late Medieval Midrash Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer equated the nations with the thorn bush and the fire with Israel (Langston 2006:46). Abbot Suger saw the church as the burning bush, mediating and dispensing the divine, 'Just as the bush is seen to burn yet is not burned, so he who is full of this fire Divine burns with it yet is not burned' (Langston 2006:46).

In the middle ages, Jewish commentators took good care to deal with the presence of both angel and God in the bush. *Targum Neofit* speaks of the various Shekinah dwelling in the bush. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* characterised Mt. Horeb as the 'Mountain on which the Glory of the LORD was revealed' and the angel of the Lord in the fire as Zagnugel. Exodus Rabbah identified the angel as Michael and Gabriel (2.5). *Targum Onqelos* mentioned Horeb as the mountain of God where the glory of the Lord was revealed and an angel of the LORD resided in the bush while the Lord spoke to Moses (2.5). *Exodus Rabbah* continued that at first, an angel descended as an intermediary and then the Shekinah later conversed with Moses (2.5). The Jewish's attempt to distinguish from the presence of God and the angel in the bush were not mere semantic game but a reflection of a response to the divine. The burning bush, as a powerful symbol, represents God's miraculous energy, sacred light, illumination and the burning heart of purity, love and clarity to both Jews and Christians. It also represents Moses' reverence and fear before the divine presence, according to Langston (2006:48).

According to Janzen, the bush is emblematic of the descendants of the Jews ancestors suffering under the fiery trials imposed on them by the Egyptians (2002:119–127). The fire is the persecution by the Egyptians and the 'bush that remains intact in the face of the flames may be symbolic of the people of Israel surviving oppression' (Sarna 1991:14).

To Robinson, what is important in the burning bush is the messenger in the flame of fire. It portrays Yahweh as 'an attractive but formidable deity who was in control of the forces of nature and revealed himself definitively on Sinai' (Robinson 1997:107–122). It is a potent symbol of the constant

presence of the ever-living God (Robinson 1997:107–122). Wyatt sees the wilderness as a symbol of Babylon that even there the presence of Yahweh brings the exile, some hope in despair because Yahweh reveals himself against all odds. The bush is a symbol of 'life and divine grace' (1986:361–364). Noth considers the burning bush as a sign of a divine presence (Noth 1962:39). Terence E Fretheim believes that the messenger of God who appears in the flame of fire is, in fact, God himself and the bush is indeed 'a divine attention-getting device' (1990:54–55). Harris and Platzner see the voice from the fire as a transforming symbol of divinity and that the divine presence of the divinity made the place to be holy (2008:159). The entire event in the wilderness is interpreted as God's self-disclosure to Moses (Birch et al. 2005:105–106).

Some modern and sceptical scholars believe that Moses must have been under the influence of hallucinogenic substance when he witnessed the burning bush (<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/E>).⁶ According to Benny Shannon, a Professor of Cognitive Philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem propounded so much a controversial theory that Moses must have used drugs. ABC News as reported by Simon McGregor-Wood said:

Moses and the Israelites was on drugs, says Benny Shanon, an Israeli Professor of cognitive philosophy. Writing in the British Journal Time and Mind, he claims Moses was probably on psychedelic drugs when he received the Ten Commandments from God. The assertions give a whole new meaning to Moses being on Mount Sinai. According to Shanon, a professor at Hebrew University, two naturally existing plants in the Sinai Peninsula have the same psychoactive components as ones found in the Amazon jungle and are well-known for their mind-altering capabilities. The drugs are usefully combined in a drink call *ayahuasca*. (McGregor-Wood 2008)

Shannon told Israel Radio in an interview on Tuesday, 05 March 2008, that:

As far as Moses on Mount Sinai is concerned, it was either a supernatural cosmic event, which I don't believe, or a legend, which I don't believe under the effects of narcotics (McGregor-Wood 2008). Abc news further reported that 'The description in the *Book of Exodus* of thunder, lightning and a blaring trumpet, according to Shanon, are the classic imaginings of people under the influence of drugs'. As for the vision of the burning bush, well obviously, that too was a drug-fueled hallucination, according to Shanon. 'In advanced *foof yahuasca inbriation*' he wrote, 'the seeing of light is accompanied by profound religious and spiritual feelings'. Shanon admits he took some of these drugs while in the Amazon in 1991. 'I experienced visions that had spiritual-religious connotations', he said.

The burning bush which does not consume itself has also been said to symbolically represent the sun, an unquenchable fire which burns without ceasing (Hamilton 2011:44).

The burning bush is also used as the basis of several symbols. For example, it is the symbol of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, which uses the Latin motto *Ardens sed virens*, meaning

⁶<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/E>. It was believed that it was certain plant which is usually found in the Negev and Sinai areas which Moses took. Shanon (1992). Ofri Ilani and Haaretz (2008)

Burning but flourishing. The same logo is used from the separated Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster. The burning bush is also the symbol for the Presbyterian Church in Canada, Presbyterian Church in New Zealand and the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. *The Burning Bush* is the name of Far Eastern Bible College's theological journal. The logo of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America is also an image of the Burning Bush with the phrase 'and the bush was not consumed', in both English and in Hebrew.

Fire/lightning/thunder in the Old Testament as manifestations of the divine presence

A close examination of Exodus 3:1–6 shows that the words 'fire', 'land' and 'bush' are important words in the passage. However, the word 'fire' appears to connect the whole episode. Therefore, I will survey the word fire/lightning/thunder in the Old Testament as evidence of the manifestation of divine presence.

Fire is defined as 'The product of burning which produced heat, light, and flame', and it is one of the earliest human discoveries possibly as a result of lightning (<http://www.bible-history.com/faussets/F/Fire:1-6>). Fire/lightning/thunder has been an object of human worship both in the Bible and African religious tradition. Perhaps, it may be because of the belief that fire/lightning/thunder is supernatural and divine in origin. It has been 'a consistent element' in God's relationship with his people. It has been a means of demonstrating his power of approval or disapproval (Gn 15:17; Ex 3:2; 19:18 and 24:17).

Fire/lightning/thunder as a theophany of existence communicates the very presence of the divine in the Old Testament. This is quite evident in the story of the burning bush in Exodus 3:1–6. In Exodus 9:23–25 when Moses stretched his staff toward heaven, the Lord sent down a fire in form of thunder and lightning as it had never happened in Egypt because it became a nation and it destroyed human beings, plants and every tree in the field. In Exodus 19:16–18, Yahweh descended on Mt. Sinai in the form of fire, lightning and thunder. This event also was reflected in Deuteronomy 4:11–15, 33, and 36.

Although it is difficult to distinguish God's presence from his glory because God's glory is also a figure of his divine presence, many passages mentioned fire as synonymous to his glory. In Exodus 20:18 and 24:17 when the people saw thunder and lightning and Mt. Sinai was on smoke they were afraid because the glory of the Lord looked like 'a consuming fire'. This can be compared with Leviticus 9:23–24 and Deuteronomy 5:24.

The word 'fire' in the Old Testament in Hebrew is *עש*. It is one of the most important and common words for fire in the Old Testament. This word occurs about 400 times in the Old Testament with the exclusive sense of fire (Renn 2006:386).

It is used both literally and metaphorically. There are many passages in the Old Testament where שָׂרַף is used in its literal sense of fire in the numbers of contexts which is purely mundane. Examples of these uses are in Genesis 22:6, 7; Judges 9:15; Psalm 66:12; Isaiah 44:16; Jeremiah 36:23 and Ezekiel 15:4. שָׂרַף is also used as an agent of military destruction as is in I Samuel 30:1; 2 Samuel 14:30; I King 9:16 (Renn 2005:386). It is also used as a means of destroying idols and destruction of the city of Jerusalem as in 2 Kings 19:18; I Chronicles 14:12; Isaiah 37:19; and Nehemiah 1:3, 2:3, 13:17. It is commonly associated with Levitical sacrifices as in Exodus 29:14; Leviticus 4:7; Numbers 6:18. In the literal sense, it was part of Elijah's sacrifice on Mt. Carmel against the prophet of Baal.

שָׂרַף is also used as a reference to idolatrous worship and in human sacrifices as is in Exodus 32:20, 24.

שָׂרַף is also used in a large number of contexts as instrument of divine judgement as is in Genesis 19:24 concerning the destruction of Sodom and Gomara. Leviticus 10:1–2 discusses the execution of Nadab and Abihu. Numbers 16:35 discusses the deaths of Korah and his family. The destruction of Jerusalem by fiery fire is mentioned in Jeremiah 34:2, 39:8, 52:13; Lamentation 2:3; Ezekiel 5:4, 16:41; 2 Kings 25:9; and 2 Chronicles 36:19. In many places, Yahweh condemns the wicked to fiery deaths in Psalms 11:6, 68:2; Isaiah 30:32, 66:15; Jeremiah 50:32; Ezekiel 28:18; and Zechariah 9:18. God also punished the people of the covenant who disobeyed his covenant in Psalm 78:21; Isaiah 1:7, 30:14; Jeremiah 4:4; Ezekiel 20:47; Hosea 8:14; and Micah 1:4,7 by fire. שָׂרַף is to destroy all traces of pagan worship and culture in Deuteronomy 7:25, 9:21; Joshua 6:24; and Judges 1:8.

שָׂרַף is metaphorically used in the contexts where a supernatural fire is seen as part of the theophanic revelation as in Exodus 3:2 where Moses and the burning bush are mentioned and as in Exodus 13:21 concerning the pillar of fire in the wilderness (Renn 2005:386). שָׂרַף is also used symbolically as strong passion and extortion as in Psalm 39:3; Jeremiah 20:9; and Lamentation 1:13 and the promise of deliverance from the judgement of fire as in Zechariah 2:5, 3:2 and symbolically representing the Day of Yahweh as in Joel 2:30 and Zachariah 12:6.

Another important Hebrew term meaning 'set on fire' is שָׂרַף . It is a verb that appears about 12 times in the Hebrew Bible and the usage is predominantly metaphorical (Renn 2005:386). It has the meaning 'set on fire' in the contexts depicting the wrath of God as in Deuteronomy 32:22; Psalms 97:3; Joel 1:19; and Malachi 4:1. Psalms 104:4 mentions שָׂרַף in reference to Yahweh's majesty. The latter prophetic literature also mentions fire in the context of the 'Day of Yahweh'.

Another important Aramaic term is נִרְיָ and is mentioned about 17 times to denote fire of a furnace and visionary fire of divine revelation as in the apocalyptic literature of Daniel 3:22, 7:9–10. It is also used in Daniel 3:6ff to mean 'fiery' fire. All these references are in the contexts of the furnace to which

Daniel's three friends were thrown and were miraculously delivered (Renn 2005:387).

All the various uses of the three Hebrew words שָׂרַף , לָהֵט , נִרְיָ , though in different contexts and literature, still jointly refer to divine presence to punish, deliver or accept his people and their actions. The three words appear in the biblical narrative, prophetic and poetic literature.

Fire/lightning/thunder in African religious tradition (Yoruba of Nigeria)

In African indigenous tradition, the word for fire is *ina*. In Yoruba legends, Sango is the god of *ina*, thunder and lightning. There are legends concerning the origin of fire which are built around *Sango*. This popular legend claims that Sango was once a human being, the son of *Oranyan* who was a brave warrior (Daramola & Jeje 1995:284–287). Sango was said to be a mysterious child at his birth. His mother died immediately after his birth, and he was thrown into the thrash and somebody called *Ekun* had picked him up from the thrash and had taken care of him (Oladele et al. 1986: 64–65). When his father came back from the battle front, he heard that a man called *Ekun* picked him up and took care of him. His father got him back from *Ekun*, and Sango eventually became the fourth Alaafin of Oyo in Nigeria (Awolalu 1979:33–38).

There are many legends associated with Sango, and each of these legends tried to explain how Sango became apotheosised and then associated with the god of lightning and thunder (Awolalu 1979:33–38).

One version of the story says that Sango discovered a charm for calling down from heaven lightning and thunder and one day he went to a nearby hill to try the charm (Awolalu 1979:33–38). The charm worked perfectly well but made lightning to destroy Sango's own palace, his children and wives. He was so horrified by the calamity and as a result, he hanged himself.

Another version says that Sango's wives, Oya, Osun and Oba, gave him too much trouble. His people also complained about his tyranny (Daramola & Jeje 1995:284–287). When he was tired of the domestic and state troubles, he rode his horse to the forest. His people looked for him in vain in the forest but could not find him. They called him in the forest urging him 'to come back home'. He answered them from the distance, 'I will not come back to you; I will now rule you unseen' (Awolalu 1979:33–38). The legend says that Sango went to the sky by a chain and started manifesting his rule by lightning and thunder.

The most popular of the legends, which his devotees disagree with, is that Sango was a tyrannical and powerful ruler with various magical arts. Whenever he addressed his subjects, fire and smoke came out of his mouth and nostrils and that

instilled fear into his subjects (Ademiluka 2007:277; Daramola & Jeje 1995:284–287). Sango had two courtiers, Timi and Gbonkaa who were too troublesome for him to control. Sango set them against each other hoping that they will destroy each other. Unfortunately, it was only Timi who was killed by Gbonkaa (Daramola & Jeje 1995:284–287). Sango then ordered that Gbonkaa be killed by fire. They threw him into the fire but Gbonkaa came out of the fire unhurt. As a result, Sango was afraid and fled to exile. On his way to the exile, he discovered that his followers, especially his wives, dissented him. He then committed suicide by hanging on a tree called *Ayan* in *Koso* (Adepegba 2008:119–119). However, the dead body of Sango was not found. What was seen is the rope protruding from the earth and that led the followers of Sango to conclude that Sango did not die but became a god (Ilega 2000:119–120).

When the news went round, Sango's opponents ridiculed his followers and sang, *Oba so*-the king hanged himself. In order to retaliate, Sango's followers went to procure a charm to attract lightning and thunder to bring lightning disaster on the opponents of Sango who ridiculed him in Oyo town and its environs. As a result of the charm, many houses and people got burnt in Oyo (Daramola & Jeje 1995:286). When they consulted the oracle and discovered that it was Sango who brought the fire calamity on Oyo because they alleged that *Oba so* [the king hanged himself]. They were told that the solution was to declare openly that *Oba ko so* [the king did not hang himself] and bring propitiatory sacrifices to appease Sango. They brought sacrifices to the alleged place where the king hanged himself and proclaimed *Oba ko so* [the king did not hang]. Since then, the place where they made the sacrifice became the shrine of Sango worshippers and was named *Koso*. Thus, Sango who was once a human being became deified and worshipped as king and god till today, especially among the Yoruba.

There is a belief that there are counterparts of Sango, called *Jakuta* and *Oramfe*, who lived before Sango. But they are one and the same divinity who performed the same function of discharging the wrath of the Supreme Being (Olodumare) on evil people. That is why Sango is also referred to as *Jakuta*, the one who fights with stone (Daramola & Jeje 1995:284–287). Thus, Sango is believed to be the divinity that is the manifestation of the wrath of Olodumare, the Supreme Being (Idowu 1962:89–95).

Below is Sango's Praise name:

<i>On'-le ina!</i>	The Lord of the house of Fire
<i>A da'ni ni 'ji</i>	One who causes sudden dread
<i>Ina osan!</i>	Noonday fire!
<i>Ina gun ori ile fe 'feju</i>	Fire that mounts the roof and becomes glaring flame!
<i>Ebiti re fi se gbi</i>	The murderous weight that strikes the ground with a resounding force (Idowu 1962:95)

Sango's devotees also remember Sango as god of justice and fair play. He hates stealing, lying, witchcraft and sorcery despite the tyranny and high handedness when he was reigning as the king of Oyo. The devotees believe that whenever there is thunder and lightning, it was Sango's visitation. They, therefore, hailed him *Kabiesi* [Hail your majesty!] as the paramount king is hailed in Yoruba land. It is believed that Sango is the messenger of God called Olodumare, who rewards the wicked accordingly. Whenever lightning or thunder strikes a house or a person, it is believed by the Yoruba that the house and the people living there must be wicked. The diseased must only be buried in the bad forest by the priest of Sango, called *Magba*. If thunder and lightning destroy a house such a house must not be used by the owner until proper sacrifices are offered because Sango has taken possession of the house.

The belief that Sango can possess a person and that person is *Elegun Sango*, who becomes the mouth piece of Sango (like a prophet), is very strong among the Yoruba of Nigeria. The possessed person can do many extra-ordinary things such as 'sitting on an iron spear point, passing a sharp-edged knife through his tongue, carrying a pot of life coals on his head, eating fire and similar actions without getting hurt' (Awolalu 1979:37). The *Elegun Sango* usually wears a red cloth and plats his hair like that of a woman. In the midst of dancing and singing, he hears the message of Sango and relates it to the people. During Sango festival, barren women request for children, other asked for riches and other blessings. Children given by Sango are given special theophoric names such as *Sangoyomi*-Sango delivers me; *Sangoseyi*, Sango provides this; *Sangowole*-Sango has come home; *Sangotunde*-Sango has come back; and others.

The most important and undeniable fact is Sango legends demonstrated that fire/lightning/thunder is a symbol and an attribute of the divine presence (Sango) in judgement, in salvation and in destruction.

The implication to African Christianity

In both traditions, as Yahweh is alleged to be God of consuming fire in the Old Testament, so also Sango, the Yoruba god or divinity is also a consuming fire, according to the Yoruba legends.

In fact, many African indigenous churches are influenced by the event in Exodus and the legend of Sango to see God/god as God of fire. However, as God of Israel is God of wrath, so also is God of mercy. The Yoruba god, Sango, god of lightning and thunder is both god of wrath and mercy because he is alleged to provide children and riches to those who asked and devoted to him.

As Yahweh God of Israel is seen as God of justice so also the devotees of Sango see him to be god of justice and fair play who hates lying, deceit and cheating. This could form the background to essential African theology before the advent of Christianity.

It is no doubt that this event of a fire on Mt. Horeb has an influence on many African indigenous churches. One church in Nigeria took the name 'Mountain of Fire Ministries'⁷ with the characteristic of raining fire on the supposed enemies and the wicked ones in their church prayers. A typical usual example of prayer is:

My enemies die by fire!

While the congregation answers, fire! Fire! Fire! Fire!

African indigenous churches in Nigeria were influenced by the events in Exodus 3:1–6 where Moses was told to remove his shoes, that Mt. Horeb is a holy ground, and therefore, they made it mandatory that no one should enter their churches with shoes on because their church is also a holy ground where Yahweh dwells. They may also be influenced by the fact that the place where Sango hanged, is considered a holy ground and became the shrine for Sango worshippers. Examples of these churches are Cherubim and Seraphim, Celestial Church of Christ and Mountain of Fire Ministries founded by Yoruba ministers.

An examination of the use of fire in the Old Testament and African tradition (Yoruba of Nigeria) and various interpretation of the burning bush shows that fire is an important instrument for communicating divine actions to human. Both traditions also show that natural phenomenon is important to reveal the presence of God/god.

It is my opinion that the legends of Shango and his divine presence in fire/lightning/thunder has and can serve as *preparation* for biblical teaching/preaching about the nature of Yahweh in Africa. The majority of African Christians do not have a problem with the interpretation of the burning bush in Exodus 3:1–6, as many Western scholars have problems with the interpretation of the entire events as a manifestation of the divine.

Natural phenomenon (fire/lightning/thunder) as evidence of the presence of the divine in both the Old Testament and African religious tradition may help African Christians to understand the Bible better especially the imprecatory Psalms (e.g. Ps 35 and 109) (Adamo 2008:576).⁸

The interpretation of the event in Exodus 3:1–6 and Yoruba religious tradition (Yoruba) as representing the presence of the divine means that God can use any natural phenomenon for his self-disclosure at any time.

Care must be taken in the comparison because African indigenous religion and African Christianity are not the same. Similarity does not mean the same thing or dependence. If care is not taken, it may result to syncretism. Even though there are similarities as described above, there are also

7.The Mountain of Fire Ministry was established in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1989 by a Yoruba man, Daniel Kolawole Olukoya. They called themselves prayer warriors. Everything must be by fire.

8.Some of the imprecatory Psalms are considered as a cursing or violent Psalms, but in African indigenous tradition, they are not considered so but as a defence against enemies.

differences. Although Yahweh is God, Sango, the Yoruba god, was originally a human being with a dubious character before it was later deified. It was a shame that led Sango to commit suicide. The worship of Sango is not the same with Yahweh worship. Before the Sango became deified, fire in Sango worship was also to scare and instil fear in the worshippers. Finally, Sango is one of the African divinities and cannot lead anyone to God.

Conclusion

I have discussed above the various interpretations of Exodus 3:1–6 by many scholars. Since the days of Philo of Alexandria, this passage has been given a nationalistic interpretation representing the Hebrew/Jews protection for their suffering in Egypt and Babylon. It was also suggested that it represents the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ and even Virgin Mary and the church. Although the event was also interpreted to represent the sun, it has been said to be a hallucination because of drugs in the wilderness. It has even become several names of churches and seminaries. However, many have hit the nail on the head by interpreting it as God's self-disclosure or the presence of the divinity which has been my focus of interpretation.

An examination of what fire/lightning/thunder represents in the Old Testament and in African tradition (Yoruba of Nigeria) has confirmed that the burning bush is an important instrument for communicating the divine presence to human beings. Both traditions also show that natural phenomenon is an important instrument to reveal the presence of God/god. In both traditions, fire is used as an instrument to express the wrath of the God/god in the form of fire/lightning/thunder in Yoruba tradition. According to the understanding of the use of fire/lightning/thunder, the Yoruba interprets fire/lightning/thunder as a means of punishing the wicked ones and whoever lightning and thunder hits, is considered to be wicked and such a person is not buried normally but by the priest of Sango, who is a god of fire. The interpretation of fire/lightning/thunder as a symbol of God's presence in African religious tradition (Yoruba) confirms the burning bush in Exodus 3:1–6 as representing the divine presence, Yahweh, God of Israel.

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