where the last consonant is something like a dark l. A sentence in Macalister (p. 89) is also worth recalling: "The almost accidental allusion to Carianists in the history of the kings must not be overlooked."

I am grateful to G. I. Davies, J. A. Emerton and H. G. M. Williamson, who have saved me from numerous mistakes.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BURNING BUSH

The meaning given to a story when it is handed down over successive generations, in written or oral form, will often change imperceptibly. This is particularly true of stories which have a specifically ideological or religious content, for it is then in the interest of the preserving community to continue to relate the story, if it is believed to have continuing value, to their circumstances and developing understanding of themselves. A direct result of such a process is often the loss of the original meaning. It seems to me that the original significance of the curious episode of the burning bush in Exod. iii has been lost in this way.

The recovery of an original meaning will to a large extent depend on our ability to recover the original circumstances in which the story took shape, and indeed to ascertain precisely the literary type to which the story belongs. So long as the present story is regarded as being rooted, however obscurely, in the history of the presettlement era, then its true meaning, both theologically and in the history of religious thought, can only remain hidden. In this brief discussion I shall suggest a different historical context from the one normally accepted, in order to obtain a better understanding of the story.

The burning bush episode falls within the block of material usually isolated within Exod.iii as J. In an earlier discussion of the E material,1 with which we are not here concerned, I suggested that the J parts of the story do not simply constitute an alternative tradition to the E source, but instead presuppose E in its final form. E shows evidence of progressive reworking over a considerable period. J therefore must be given a later date than the final form of E. I suggested that J is in fact exilic. Now if this is a tenable position, then it follows that we should look to the conditions and concerns of the exile for an explanation of the significant features of the story.

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The relevant part of the J story is told very succinctly in Exod. iii 2, 3, 4ac, 5 (continuing in vv. 7-8, 16-18). It contains two striking features: first the mysterious bush which burns and yet is not consumed—a seeming contradiction in terms—and secondly its location on “holy ground”. These two elements require some explanation. The first may be regarded simply as an expression of the miraculous, though this hardly contributes to a serious discussion, and we should rather seek a more substantial explanation which recognizes the symbolic dimension of the image, and explains it in terms of what we know of the symbolic thinking of the ancient Near East at large, and of ancient Judah in particular. The second is the more startling when we consider that the J passage undoubtedly presumes, though it does not state, that the episode takes place in the wilderness. We may conclude this without reference to Exod. ii, but rather on the basis of J’s derivative status with regard to the E material in Exod. iii (it being therefore controlled by iii 1). It might be argued that the holiness of the place is due to its proximity to, or even identification with, the “mountain of God”. But the specific mountain location is not made explicit in J. However, to turn an old argument on its head, it is possible that the J writer, far from designating the mysterious plant (on which the botanists are still hard at work) by a conscious paronomasia on the name of Mt Sinai, which of course is the sacred mountain in the J tradition but is not named in the present context, names the plant in anticipation of its association in the reader’s ear with the mountain name. He thus gives the coded message that this place, though in the wilderness, nevertheless does not partake of the normal symbolism of the desert, but rather of that of the sacred mountain. The wilderness location of itself would in any event strike the reader as an incongruous place for the deity to reveal himself. It represented the very antithesis of holiness, and even of reality. It was a “non-place”.

In the arid climate of the Near East, any green plant is a vivid sign of life etched sharply against the dry terrain. It would be futile to try to identify with any certainty the precise area in Midian the writer had in mind, to ascertain whether trees grew there with any frequency, if at all; if we are to think of a writer living in exile, he probably had little idea of the whereabouts of Midian, and none at all of its real conditions. He was concerned rather with the image of a sterile land, in which grew this miraculous plant, the locus of a