



Exodus - Chapter Four

- I. Exodus 1:1-18:27 - The Exodus of Israel from Egypt (continues)
- I.b Exodus 3:1-4:31 - Moses in Midian (continues/concludes)
- I.b.i Exodus 3:1-4:17 - The Burning Bush: The Call of Moses (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Four

Moses doubted that the people would believe he had been sent by God. So God demonstrated two miracles with Moses' staff turning into a snake and back to a staff, and his hand becoming leprous and being cured again. He also told Moses that he would allow him to show that the Nile waters could be turned to blood. These signs would persuade the people.

Moses then shows reluctance by stating he was not an eloquent speaker but God reassured him that he would provide the speech Moses needed. Moses then pleaded with God to send someone else, which angered God but he did state that he would allow Aaron to speak for Moses.

Moses first went to his father-in-law to seek permission to take his family to Egypt and Jethro agreed. God told Moses that he could perform the miraculous signs before Pharaoh but that God had hardened his heart so that he would not release the Israelites. As they were the firstborn of God, he would kill the firstborn of Egypt to secure the release of his people.

On the way to Egypt, God attempted to kill Moses but he was saved by the actions of his wife, who circumcised their son, which Moses should have done on the eighth day of his life. God also instructed Aaron to travel out into the wilderness to meet Moses, who instructed him with the Words of the Lord. All the Israelites believed Moses when he arrived in Egypt.

I.b.i.3 Exodus 4:1-17 - Moses' Miraculous Power

This section narrates the dialogue between God and Moses regarding the signs he will perform before Israel and Pharaoh; it is framed by explicit references that bring Moses' staff into focus (v.2 and v.17). The staff serves as a sign that God will be with Moses and will bring about what he has promised through him.

The three signs in vv.3-9 indicate the extent of the Lord's power and prefigure the realms of the plagues to come: creatures of the earth (staff to a serpent), people (Moses' hand becoming leprous), and the elements of nature (water to blood).

¹ Then Moses answered, 'But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, "The Lord did not appear to you."' ² The Lord said to him, 'What is that in your hand?' He said, 'A staff.'

Exodus 4:1-2

But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me. It was not wrong for Moses to initially ask: <<*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh*>> (Exodus 3:11b); this was a logical question considering how great the task was. Yet God answered this question more than adequately in Exodus 3:12 <<*I will be with you*>>. After that point, and in this passage, Moses' questions show unbelief more than sincere seeking. In Exodus 3:18a, God promised that the leaders of Israel would listen to Moses. He said: <<*They will listen to your voice*>>. When Moses made this protest he may as well have said, "But what if you are wrong, God?"

What is that in your hand? This reflects a precious principle regarding how God uses people, i.e. God used what Moses had in his hand. Moses' years of tending sheep were not useless. Those years had put into Moses hand things he could use for God's glory. God did not use the sceptre that was in Moses' royal hand when he lived in Egypt, but he did use the simple shepherd's staff.

God likes to use what is held in a hand:

- God used what was in Shamgar's hand (Judges 3:31).
- God used what was in David's hand (1 Samuel 17:49).
- God used the jawbone of a donkey in Samson's hand (Judges 15:15).
- God used five loaves and two fish in the hand of a little boy (John 6:9).

He said, 'A staff.' That staff of Moses would part the Red Sea. It would strike a rock and see water pour forth. It would be raised over battle until Israel won. It would be called the staff of God (v.20 and 17:9).

³ And he said, 'Throw it on the ground.' So he threw the staff on the ground, and it became a snake; and Moses drew back from it. ⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Reach out your hand, and seize it by the tail'

– so he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand – ⁵ ‘so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.’

Exodus 4:3-5

A staff turning into a snake was not a normal part of Moses’ experience, and his initial response, Moses drew back from it, is natural and sensible. However, since it is the Lord who has instructed him, the otherwise foolish response of picking up the snake by the tail becomes not only sensible but faithful as well.

The longer ending of Mark’s Gospel records Jesus stating that believers would be able to pick up snakes in this way: <<Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptised will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover’>> (Mark 16:14-18). However, one should think very carefully as to whether it would be lack of faith or common wisdom to avoid doing so unless one is absolutely certain God is giving the command to do so. Being presumptuous could be very costly!

Although God states that the signs will be given so that Israel may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers has appeared to Moses, they are also intended as confirmation to Moses himself. In light of the Lord’s gracious response to his questions, for which he has not been reproved up to this point, Moses is also responsible to act faithfully in response to what the Lord has promised about his purposes for Israel.

⁶ Again, the Lord said to him, ‘Put your hand inside your cloak.’ He put his hand into his cloak; and when he took it out, his hand was leprous, as white as snow. ⁷ Then God said, ‘Put your hand back into your cloak’ – so he put his hand back into his cloak, and when he took it out, it was restored like the rest of his body – ⁸ ‘If they will not believe you or heed the first sign, they may believe the second sign. ⁹ If they will not believe even these two signs or heed you, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.’

Exodus 4:6-9

It was restored like the rest of his body. Each of the first two signs had to do with transformation. Something good and useful, a rod or a hand, was made into something evil, i.e. a serpent or a leprous hand, and significantly, they were then transformed back again. There was a real message in the first two signs. The first said, “Moses, if you obey me, your enemies will be made powerless.” The second said “Moses, if you obey me, your pollution can be made pure.” Doubts in each of these areas probably hindered Moses, and before those signs spoke to anyone else, they spoke to Moses. This is the pattern with all God’s leaders.

The Hebrew word for leprosy covered a number of assorted infectious skin diseases much as the word cancer currently does and not just to Hansen’s disease, which is the modern definition for leprosy. Throughout the periods of the OT and NT, and in many societies even today, a leper would become a total outcast from their society.

The water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground. The third sign was simply a sign of judgement. Good, pure waters were made foul and bloody by the work of God and they did not turn back again. This showed that if the miracles of transformation did not turn the hearts of the people, then perhaps the sign of judgement would.

If they will not believe even these two signs or heed you shows that if the sign of judgement was only given when unbelief persisted in the face of the miracles of transformation right before them.

¹⁰ But Moses said to the Lord, ‘O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.’ ¹¹ Then the Lord said to him, ‘Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?’ ¹² Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.’ ¹³ But he said, ‘O my Lord, please send someone else.’

Exodus 4:10-13

O my Lord, I have never been eloquent. After these remarkably persuasive signs, Moses still objected to God’s call. Moses revealed that he was not confident with his ability to speak publicly.

Egyptian magicians acted as Pharaoh’s advisers and were known for being proud of their considerable powers of speech. When Moses protests that he is slow of speech and slow of tongue, he is raising a relevant concern if he is going to address Pharaoh and his court. However, as the Lord signified in making Moses’

hand leprous and then restoring it, he has power to work in and through that which he has created, including Moses' mouth. This can also be seen in Jeremiah's call, as recorded in Jeremiah 1:4-10.

Slow of speech is literally 'heavy of mouth.' Some believe it means that Moses spoke with a stammer, although there was no sign of this in his younger days according to the discourse given by Stephen: <<*So Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds*>> (Acts 7:22).

Who gives speech to mortals? The fact that Moses believed that he was not eloquent is completely beside the point. The God who created the most eloquent speakers ever heard was on his side.

Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? This is a dramatic statement revealing the sovereignty of God, and God revealed it in the context of an invitation to trust in him and to work with him. There is not the slightest sense of fatalism in this declaration of God's sovereignty. It is never 'God is so mighty no one can do anything,' but it is always 'God is so mighty, he can work through anyone who makes themselves available.'

Some think this is cruel of God. Nevertheless the point here was not to analyse the origin of evil, but to show that God is so mighty that he can even call the mute, deaf, and blind to do his work. Moses' perceived inadequacies did not matter at all.

O my Lord, please send someone else. Finally, Moses had run out of excuses and showed the real state of his heart. Simply, he would much rather that God send someone else. His problem was not really a lack of ability; it was a lack of willingness to go and serve God. He should have been more like the prophet: <<*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'*>> (Isaiah 6:8).

¹⁴ Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, 'What of your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad.'

Exodus 4:14

The Lord has not reproved Moses for his questions but has responded by revealing his person and purposes. When the narrative states that the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses, it indicates to the reader that Moses was also responsible for doing what God had told him. However, the Lord still accommodates Moses by granting Aaron to be his spokesman while also continuing to call him to lead Israel out of Egypt.

What of your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently. When God brought Aaron to help lead with Moses, it was an expression of his chastening to Moses, not of his approval or giving in to Moses. Aaron was more of a hindrance to Moses than a help, for he turned out to be a source of many problems for Moses. Aaron instigated the worship of the golden calf, fashioning the calf himself and building the altar himself (Exodus 32:1-6); Aaron's sons blasphemed God with impure offerings (Leviticus 10:1-7); and at on one occasion, Aaron openly led a mutiny against Moses (Numbers 12:1-8). As these episodes unfolded, Moses surely looked back at why the Lord gave Aaron to Moses as a partner - because God was angry at Moses' unwillingness.

¹⁵ You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. ¹⁶ He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him. ¹⁷ Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs.'

Exodus 4:15-17

He indeed shall speak. The instructions to Moses and Aaron here describe the responsibilities of a prophet, refer to 7:1-2, who is called to speak exclusively and exhaustively what God reveals; refer also to Deuteronomy 18:18-22 and 1 Samuel 3:17-20. Typically, a prophet is both the recipient and deliverer of God's message, but in this case Aaron is the recipient and deliverer of Moses' message. When God says that **Moses shall serve as God** to Aaron, he is calling both of these men to faithfulness in their respective roles of relating what he reveals. From his upbringing, Moses was likely already familiar with someone being the **mouth** of another person. In ancient Egypt, there was a high official called 'the mouth of the king' whose job was to mediate between the 'god' Pharaoh and the people of Egypt by speaking Pharaoh's words unaltered to the people.

I.b.ii Exodus 4:18-31 - Moses Returns to Egypt

This section is brief but significant for what it shows in the transition from Moses' exile in Midian to his return to Egypt. In each subsection there is a focus on the Lord's masterful speech or action: he informs Moses that he can return to Egypt (vv.18-20); he reminds Moses of his call before Pharaoh and foretells the outcome (vv.21-23); he seeks Moses' life (vv.24-26); and he sends Aaron to encourage and assist Moses (vv.27-31).

¹⁸ Moses went back to his father-in-law Jethro and said to him, 'Please let me go back to my kindred in Egypt and see whether they are still living.' And Jethro said to Moses, 'Go in peace.' ¹⁹ The Lord said to Moses in Midian, 'Go back to Egypt; for all those who were seeking

your life are dead.’²⁰ So Moses took his wife and his sons, put them on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt; and Moses carried the staff of God in his hand.

Exodus 4:18-20

Moses went back to his father-in-law Jethro. When the fire faded from the Burning Bush and when the voice of God was silent across the desert, then it was upon Moses to obey, and to do what God told him to do. More than one person has had a spectacular Burning Bush type experience and then gone on to live as if nothing had really happened. Did Moses have any idea what he was getting into when he agreed to take the Lord’s call? Could he see the Egyptian army closing in, and God parting the Red Sea through Moses’ hand? Could he see the song of victory, the water from the rock, the manna from heaven, the battles won through prayer? Could he see a vision of God on Mount Sinai, the voice of God from heaven, the tablets of stone, the golden calf? Could he see the tabernacle built, the priests consecrated? Could he see the spies sent forth into Canaan, the response of unbelief, and a thirty-eight year sentence to wander the wilderness? Could he see a lonely climb to the top of Mount Pisgah, where he would die looking out over the land of promise? Could he see the honour of sitting beside the Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration? Did Moses have any idea what he was getting into?

Please let me go back to my kindred in Egypt and see whether they are still living. Moses was a good example of the truth that serving God does not mean neglecting one’s employer. Moses made sure that he and his family had permission and a blessing to go. However, Moses did not really tell his father-in-law the story behind his desire to return to Egypt. Perhaps he just felt it was too fantastic, and would rather let God demonstrate his Word through fulfilling it.

²¹ And the Lord said to Moses, ‘When you go back to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.

Exodus 4:21

I will harden his heart. The heart refers to the whole of the intellect, will, and emotions from which a person acts. The various Hebrew verbs used to describe the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart all refer to a desire to act contrary to the Lord rather than in accord with him. The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is referred to throughout Chapters 4-14 with the implication that Pharaoh is answerable for his own actions. However, the Lord states here that it is his sovereign hand that ultimately governs the events. This is also indicated by the recurring *<<as the Lord had said>>*. Although one might conclude that, if God hardens someone’s

heart, the latter is not answerable for his actions, this is not the biblical view, and certainly here the narrative is also careful to point out that Pharaoh also hardened his own heart. The sinner remains responsible for his sin, as confirmed by: <<*So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, 'I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.'* So then he has mercy on whomsoever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomsoever he chooses>> (Romans 9:16-18).

²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son. ²³ I said to you, ‘Let my son go that he may worship me.’ But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son.”“

Exodus 4:22-23

Israel had been in Egypt for over 400 years and the people were enslaved for the better part of that time, which meant that, other than their flocks and herds, they had no possessions or land to pass down as an inheritance. When the Lord instructs Moses to tell Pharaoh ‘Israel is my firstborn son’ he is indicating that he has remembered his covenant with Abraham, refer to Genesis 15:13-21, and that he will bring his people to the land promised as an inheritance to their fathers as recorded in Genesis 15:16, 28:15, 48:21 and 50:24. He is also asserting that Israel’s true identity extends back to a time and relationship that predates the many years they had been in Egypt’s service – a claim that Pharaoh will ignore to the peril of his own and all of Egypt’s firstborn (12:29-32). Israel as a whole is God’s ‘son,’ and all individual Israelites are also ‘sons’ (Deuteronomy 14:1).

²⁴ On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the Lord met him and tried to kill him. ²⁵ But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin, and touched Moses’ feet with it, and said, ‘Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!’ ²⁶ So he let him alone. It was then she said, ‘A bridegroom of blood by circumcision.’

Exodus 4:24-26

The Lord met him and tried to kill him. This is a mysterious event; but it seems that God is confronting Moses - in the strongest possible way - because Moses had not circumcised his son. God demands that this be set right before Moses enter Egypt and begin to fulfil the call of God. There is often a point of confrontation in the life of the leader where God demands that they lay aside some area of compromise, and will not allow them to progress further until they do.

The events narrated in these verses are significant not only for what they tell but also for what they show. Not only has the Lord remembered his covenant promises

(2:24), but his people are also called to remember the conditions of the covenant. Moses is held responsible for the provisions of the covenant with Abraham that required him to circumcise his sons (Genesis 17:9-14). Failure to be circumcised may lead to being 'cut off', the severest form of punishment from God as seen in Genesis 17:14, Exodus 12:15, Leviticus 7:11-36 and Numbers 9:6-14. Moses' failure to circumcise his son could have led to his death, had it not been for his wife's action. Once again, Moses' life is preserved through the actions of another, this time through his wife Zipporah.

Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me! Perhaps Zipporah objected to the rite of circumcision. She was not an Israelite and may have thought it a barbaric custom. Perhaps this was why God held Moses accountable for not doing what was right, even though his wife did not like it, but disabled Moses so that Zipporah had to perform the circumcision itself. Some commentators and theologians wonder why Moses' wife seems so bitter here. Perhaps for the first time she recognised the serious nature of her husband's call and how important it was for their whole family to walk in the ways of the Lord.

²⁷ The Lord said to Aaron, 'Go into the wilderness to meet Moses.' So he went; and he met him at the mountain of God and kissed him.

²⁸ Moses told Aaron all the words of the Lord with which he had sent him, and all the signs with which he had charged him. ²⁹ Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the Israelites. ³⁰ Aaron spoke all the words that the Lord had spoken to Moses, and performed the signs in the sight of the people. ³¹ The people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had given heed to the Israelites and that he had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshipped.

Exodus 4:27-31

Aaron is sent to meet Moses at the mountain of God, which is also the place where Moses first received the call to lead Israel out of Egypt and which, when they have come out, will become a sign that it is God who has brought them out; refer to 3:1 and the comments made there.

The people believed. It happened just as God said. God had promised then they will heed your voice (3:18), and the people of Israel did - and their excitement was real as they anticipated the deliverance of the nation.

When they heard that the Lord had given heed to the Israelites. Years before when Moses offered himself as a deliverer to Israel, they rejected him. Now the time and the circumstances were right, and God's destiny for Moses' life would begin to be fulfilled.