

Comments on Exodus 4

The general intention of this chapter is to present Moses as a reluctant and imperfect leader, who nearly got his calling from the Lord permanently retracted in a lethal way. At no point is Moses presented as anything other than a deeply flawed man who wants nothing to do with the position of extraordinary power and responsibility he is called to.

Given the potential for abuse and the penchant for people to heap both adulation and scorn on such prominent persons, Moses is making it clear he wanted nothing to do with any of this. There is nothing in the text to suggest Moses was exceptionally righteous and therefore worthy, of that he is a self-promoting malignant narcissist seeking power and authority over Israel.

The text indirectly comments on significant social issues surrounding the prophetic calling. There is a lot of tension between the prophet and the people, with the people having many reasons to reject the prophet. Moses previously tried to use his position inside the Egyptian hierarchy to help the Israelites, and it backfired spectacularly, forcing him to flee for his life (cf. 2:11-15). Now the Lord wants to send him back, and Moses is very reluctant.

Moses has experienced this theophany, but no other Israelite has, so why would they believe him? A man who is an outcast from Egypt and was not raised as an Israelite and has been living among the Midianites and married a Midianite woman is going to go to a people who he never really was a part of and try to lead them.

Moses cannot even speak well, which is the prophet's primary calling, to speak for the Lord. How can he be a charismatic leader of a new nation when he falters when speaking publicly. Wouldn't that be an embarrassment to the Lord, to pick a mouthpiece that stutters?

1 And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The Lord hath not appeared unto thee. 2 And the Lord said unto him, What is that in thine hand? And he said, A rod. 3 And he said, Cast it on the ground. And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from before it. 4 And the Lord said unto Moses, Put forth thine hand, and take it by the tail. And he put forth his hand, and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand: 5 That they may believe that the Lord God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath appeared unto thee. 6 And the Lord said furthermore unto him, Put now thine hand into thy bosom. And he put his hand into his

bosom: and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous as snow. 7 And he said, Put thine hand into thy bosom again. And he put his hand into his bosom again; and plucked it out of his bosom, and, behold, it was turned again as his other flesh. 8 And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe thee, neither hearken to the voice of the first sign, that they will believe the voice of the latter sign. 9 And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe also these two signs, neither hearken unto thy voice, that thou shalt take of the water of the river, and pour it upon the dry land: and the water which thou takest out of the river shall become blood upon the dry land.

v1-9 After the call is extended in the previous chapter, Moses points out the Israelites will not take him at his word and believe him when he tells them what the Lord has just said to him (v. 1). The Lord gives him three miraculous signs to perform in front of them to convince them of the truth of his claims (v. 5, 8): rod to serpent (v. 2-4), affliction and cure of disease (v. 6-7), water to blood (v. 9).

The three miracles presented in v. 1-9 are specifically for the Hebrews, not the Egyptians. The first and third miracle are repeated for the Egyptians, but the second is not.

The first miracle is meant to show the Lord has power over Egypt, using Egyptian symbols, the staff and the serpent. Pharaoh uses these as symbols of the power and protection he ostensibly enjoys from divine endorsement and that he is to provide protection and power over the people of Egypt for their benefit. When Moses undermines Pharaoh's legitimacy by violating his symbols, the Hebrews immediately understand what is implied. The Hebrew's God is greater than Pharaoh's god, and the Egyptian gods cannot protect either Pharaoh or Egypt from the Hebrew's God.

The second miracle is meant to show them the Lord can curse with disease or heal from it. This specific miracle is not repeated on the Egyptians, it is primarily meant for the Hebrews. The Lord is hinting at the tension of the covenant relationship between Himself and them (cf. Lev. 26, Deut. 28). He can afflict them or heal them, either is trivially easy for Him, they have to choose which they want with their hand. They can choose to be healed by their God or they can choose to be cursed by their God. Plagues five and six are disease on the Egyptians and cattle, but they are different from this specific sign.

The third miracle is to show the Lord has control over life and death. The Nile represents life to Egypt, and the Lord has power to turn that life into death. That the water is turned to blood is tied to the symbolism from Gen. 9:4, which is tied

later into 29:12. Whether the water is turned into literal blood or not is irrelevant, the symbolism is of life versus death. If the water was massively overpopulated with red dinoflagelates and that caused death, that would be good enough for the symbolism.

The third miracle would also be recalling Pharaoh's command to throw all Israelite baby boys into the Nile (cf. 1:22). The Lord comes to recompense Pharaoh for murdering the Lord's firstborn (cf. 4:22) by murdering his firstborn son. This is effectively the Lord letting Moses and the Israelite leaders know He has not forgotten what Pharaoh did to the baby boys of Israel. The Judgement against Pharaoh is infanticide, and the penalty is death.

These three miracles meant to convince the Israelites are foreshadowing the imminent conflict with Egypt in general and Pharaoh in specific. The Lord isn't just convincing Israel with these three signs, He is also showing Moses His power over creation is extraordinary and the conversation from the preceding chapter is backed by more than just talk. If there were any doubt in Moses about the Lord's ability to take on the Egyptians, this would be a very personal and immediate way to dispel those doubts. That is the point of these miracles. People have doubts when they anticipate conflict and hardship, they question if things really will get better, and have to be convinced it will be worth it. Moses comes offering freedom for Israel, but it comes through conflict with Egypt. Can Moses and the Lord really deliver? These signs are meant to convince Moses and the Israelite people they can. Without this kind of persuasion, why would the Israelites even consider going against the formidable military might and lethal threat of Pharaoh and Egypt?

10 And Moses said unto the Lord, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue. 11 And the Lord said unto him, Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the Lord? 12 Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say.

13 And he said, O my Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom thou wilt send. 14 And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses, and he said, Is not Aaron the Levite thy brother? I know that he can speak well. And also, behold, he cometh forth to meet thee: and when he seeth thee, he will be glad in his heart. 15 And thou shalt speak unto him, and put words in his mouth: and I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what ye shall do. 16 And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people: and he shall be, even he shall be to thee

instead of a mouth, and thou shalt be to him instead of God. 17 And thou shalt take this rod in thine hand, wherewith thou shalt do signs.

v10-17 The Lord addresses Moses' primary concern that the elders of the Israelite will not believe him when he tells them he is the Lord's prophet (v. 1-9), so now Moses gives a secondary concern. Moses says he is not good at public speaking, implying he is not a fit spokesman for the Lord. The Lord should have someone eloquent (v. 10). The Lord brushes away this concern, saying He is the creator of mankind and can take care of any of these shortcomings (v. 11) and will tell Moses what to say (v. 12).

Despite having his concerns resolved, Moses asks the Lord to send someone else besides himself (v. 13). The Lord gets angry with Moses and sort of, but not really, gives him what he asks for without releasing him from the original commission. Moses says his older brother Aaron is on the way to meet him (v. 14), and Aaron is good at public speaking, so Moses will have Aaron to act as the spokesman (v. 15-16), but Moses is still the Lord's prophet (v. 17).

v13 The KJV translation is poor. Compare [other translations](#) for the meaning. Moses is saying, "Please send someone else who is better suited."

v13-17 This conversation between Moses and the Lord is the Lord letting Moses know He will not retract the commission of being the Lord's prophet. Moses is asking for a complete retraction. He is not saying Israel doesn't need to be saved, or that the Lord cannot do it, he just doesn't want to be involved at all. He would rather stay in Midian and keep on being a shepherd.

The Lord makes it clear he will not retract the commission and the larger plan is already underway, as Aaron has already left to come and meet him. If he doesn't want to do the speaking, then he can teach Aaron what to say, just like the Lord just taught him what to say, and then the Lord will endorse and commission Aaron the same as He endorses and support Moses. But, Moses is still the one in charge, and is the Lord's prophet.

This conversation is the Lord explaining to Moses that someone has to do this job. Moses not doing the job means someone else is doing the job. If Moses acts selfishly and refuses, then someone else will have to do it. Moses understands this, relents and stops making excuses, knowing that

passing the buck is no longer an option.

So why doesn't Moses just refuse at this point? Because his internal sense of justice and duty (cf. 2:11-13, 2:17) is strong enough that he is unwilling to afflict someone else with the difficulties he knows he is about to face. Does Moses trust in the Lord? Yes, that is not the issue here. Moses can foresee how bad this is going to be, and would prefer someone else do it, someone better suited. And the Lord is telling him he is the one who is best suited, and him passing it off onto someone else will just cause that someone else to be in a worse position than he is. There is no one better suited than Moses, and that is why he was chosen.

The Lord pulling Aaron in as spokesman would put him close enough to Moses to make him realize that shedding responsibility onto others directly affects those others as well. Here is his own brother now being pulled into something he presently knows nothing of, and now Moses has to take the responsibility of teaching Aaron what to say and dealing with him while performing in his prophetic calling. Moses doesn't want to be prophet, but he also knows the Lord needs someone to be prophet, and anyone other than him is not the Lord's first choice.

Why is Moses the Lord's first choice? Because he has experience living as an Egyptian, and a Hebrew, and a Midianite. And, he has a strong sense of justice that compels him to action.

v14-31 These verses form a loose inverted parallelism that help interpret some of the obscurities, as follows (NASB):

A - 14 Then the anger of the Lord burned against Moses, and He said, "Is there not your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he speaks fluently. And moreover, behold, he is coming out to meet you; when he sees you, he will be overjoyed. 15 So you are to speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I Myself will be with your mouth and his mouth, and I will instruct you in what you are to do. 16 He shall speak for you to the people; and he will be as a mouth for you and you will be as God to him. 17 And you shall take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs."

B - 18 Then Moses departed and returned to his father-in-law Jethro, and said to him, "Please, let me go, that I may return to my brothers who are in Egypt, and

see if they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace." 19 Now the Lord said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead." 20 So Moses took his wife and his sons and mounted them on a donkey, and returned to the land of Egypt. Moses also took the staff of God in his hand.

C - 21 And the Lord said to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go. 22 Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the Lord says: "Israel is My son, My firstborn. 23 So I said to you, 'Let My son go so that he may serve Me'; but you have refused to let him go. Behold, I am going to kill your son, your firstborn."'"

C - 24 But it came about at the overnight encampment on the way, that the Lord met Moses, and sought to put him to death. 25 So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and threw it at Moses' feet; and she said, "You are indeed a groom of blood to me!" 26 So He left him alone. At that time she said, "You are a groom of blood"—because of the circumcision.

B - 27 Now the Lord said to Aaron, "Go to meet Moses in the wilderness." So he went and 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 that He had commanded him to do.

A - 29 Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the sons of Israel; 30 and Aaron spoke all the words which the Lord had spoken to Moses. He then performed the signs in the sight of the people. 31 So the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord was concerned about the sons of Israel and that He had seen their affliction, they bowed low and worshiped.

Note the C sections both deal with the issue of the firstborn, Israel the firstborn of the Lord versus the firstborn of Egypt.

Moses leaving Gershom uncircumcised means he is at risk of being killed as an Egyptian, not preserved as an Israelite.

18 And Moses went and returned to Jethro his father in law, and said unto him, Let me go, I pray thee, and return unto my brethren which are in Egypt, and see whether they be yet alive. And Jethro said to Moses, Go in peace. 19 And the Lord said unto Moses in Midian, Go, return into Egypt: for all the men are dead which sought thy life. 20 And Moses took his wife and his sons, and set them upon an ass, and he returned to the land of Egypt: and Moses took the rod of God in his hand.

21 And the Lord said unto Moses, When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand: but I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go. 22 And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the Lord, Israel is my son, even my firstborn: 23 And I say unto thee, Let my son go, that he may serve me: and if thou refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay thy son, even thy firstborn.

24 And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him. 25 Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. 26 So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision.

v18-26 Recognizing his departure leaves his father-in-law without a shepherd for his sheep, Moses requests leave from Jethro to return to Egypt to see if his family is still alive, and Jethro consents without hard feelings (v. 18). The Lord lets Moses know there is no institutional memory of his former actions (cf. 2:11-15), he is no longer under threat from Egyptian authorities, so it is safe to return (v. 19). Moses packs up his family and starts to travel back to Egypt, with the staff the Lord (v. 20).

The Lord reminds Moses how things are going to go: Moses is to go to Egypt, perform the miracles in front of Pharaoh, who will reject the request to let Israel go (v. 21). Moses will tell Pharaoh that Israel is the Lord's firstborn son (v. 22) and if he doesn't release Israel then the Lord will kill Pharaoh's first born son (v. 23).

As the family is traveling from Midian to Egypt, they stop at night to camp and the Lord arrives to kill Moses (v. 24). Moses' wife Zipporah circumcises her son, because Moses hasn't (v. 25). The Lord relents, Moses is spared, because Zipporah did what Moses should have done (v. 26).

v18 Moses is the sheep herder for Jethro's flocks. Before Moses' arrival, Jethro's daughters are the ones herding the sheep, and having difficulty doing so (cf. 2:16-17, 3:1). There is nothing to suggest there are any other men involved. Moses'

departure would present a significant problem to Jethro, as Jethro would either need to send daughters back out to tend the sheep or he would need to find other men to take over for Moses.

Moses' conversation with Jethro shows Moses' humility in recognizing the hardship his new calling will impose on Jethro. Yes, the Lord has called Moses to do some great thing, but there is a significant local impact to those immediate around Moses as well. Jethro's consent to release Moses from his current responsibilities suggests wisdom and inspiration on his part as well, as he is not acting selfishly (ct. Laban in Gen 29.).

The statement made by Moses to Jethro did not say anything about the theophany he just had, he is simply asking to return to Egypt to see if his family is still alive. Contrast this with Moses' meeting with Aaron in v. 28. This suggests Moses is uncomfortable or unwilling to talk about the matter with Jethro. Upon being reunited, Jethro certainly accepts the extraordinary deliverance as an act of Providence by the Lord and celebrates with him (cf. 18:1-12). We know Reuel/Jethro is "the priest of Midian" when Moses first meets him (cf. 2:6), so Jethro is a religious man. Why then wouldn't Moses share this with Jethro? Because of his humility? Because he fears failure? We are left to guess.

According to D&C 84:6, Moses received the Melchizedek Priesthood from Jethro. Unfortunately, there is nothing anywhere in Scripture or Smith's comments indicating when this occurred. It might have occurred at this point in time, or when they were reunited after the Exodus (cf. 18:1-12).

v20 "and Moses took the rod of God in his hand", Moses himself has accepted the calling the Lord has given him, and the staff he used to formerly tend sheep with is now representative of his new calling by the Lord. Moses is now committed. He is no longer a shepherd, he is a prophet of the Lord.

v21-23 These verses present the subject of 3:13-22 in a more practical linear format, without any of the overarching theology of the preceding text. The Lord is giving him the run down step by step.

Note the Lord is emphasizing the difference between the firstborn status of Israel and the firstborn status of the Egyptian. Israel will be delivered by the Lord while the firstborn of Egypt is killed.

v24-26 The meaning of these verses is obscure. The IV/JST emends the passage significantly, giving a much plainer reading, as follows (differences in bold):

24 And it came to pass **that the Lord appeared unto him as he was** in the way, by the inn. The Lord **was angry with Moses, and his hand was about to fall upon him** to kill him; **for he had not circumcised his son.**

25 Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and **circumcised** her son, and cast **the stone** at his feet, and said, Surely thou art a bloody husband unto me.

26 **And the Lord spared Moses and let him go because Zipporah, his wife, circumcised the child.** And she said, Thou art a bloody husband. **And Moses was ashamed, and hid his face from the Lord, and said, I have sinned before the Lord.**

Smith adds explanatory glosses and moves the text around a bit in v. 26. The ambiguity in v. 25 of what Zipporah throws at Moses' feet is resolved. You could arrive at the same reading as Smith offers in his rendering, but the ambiguity in the text offers other possible conclusions, some of which are pretty tortured.

The issue here is clearly that of circumcision, and Moses' failure to circumcise his son. At this point Moses and Zipporah only have one son, the second son is introduced later in 18:1-6.

Why Moses didn't circumcise Gershom is unclear, we only know he didn't. The obvious implication is Moses is a man without a clear national identity. He was born an Israelite, raised an Egyptian (cf. 2:19), tried to protect his Israelite brothers from Egyptian violence and was rejected, fleeing both and was now living among Midianites as one of them. This interaction makes it clear that Gershom is an Israelite, that Moses is an Israelite, the mother's lineage doesn't apply, and the Lord's expectation is Moses is to live and behave as an Israelite. How could Moses expect anything else, being called as the Lord's prophet? In defense of Moses, he wasn't raised among the Israelites and didn't marry into an Israelite family. It seems unlikely Moses received much Israelite cultural immersion throughout his life.

Zipporah's interceding at this point raises questions over

who can perform the circumcision. Moses is faulted for not performing it on his son, but Zipporah's performing it on his behalf is acceptable. Clearly, a mother can circumcise a son, even when she isn't an Israelite. But, ideally, the Israelite father should circumcise his own sons.

The theological issue driving the Lord's lethal threat to Moses is that of the preceding verses (cf. 21-23). The Lord had just explained to Moses there is a clear differentiation between Egyptian and Israelite as to who is His firstborn and who isn't, with the firstborn of the Egyptian under threat of death. If Moses didn't consider himself to be an Israelite, then his firstborn son Gershom was subject to the Lord's lethal threat against the Egyptians, not the Lord's protection of the Israelites.

Moses failed to understand the practical reality of what he was literally walking into. Moses is going into a head-to-head conflict with Pharaoh over which nation is going to be publicly humiliated. Either Egypt gets to keep murdering and oppressing Israelites as slaves for Egyptian benefit, or the Israelites get to leave Egypt with Pharaoh's power figuratively and literally crushed. Moses is going into a life and death conflict with Pharaoh over Egypt versus Israel, and he doesn't yet grasp the very personal and very real implications it will have on every single family among both the Israelites and the Egyptians. Every man, woman and child among both populations is about to be thrown into tumult with their lives at stake.

This is the Lord's way of making Moses and Zipporah choose whether they are Israelite or not. They cannot be disinterested third-party Midianites in this conflict between Israel and Egypt. They are either Israelite or Egyptian, and the Lord makes it clear to both of them they are Israelites.

v24 "And it came to pass by the way in the inn", a poor translation. A better translation would be "At a night encampment on the way" (JPS).

v25 This verse references the circumcision of a single son, Gershom. We do not hear about Eliezer until after the Exodus when Zipporah and sons are reunited (cf. 18:1-6), suggesting that once they arrived in Egypt and things got heated, then Moses sent the pregnant Zipporah back to her father in Midian to protect her from what was about to happen.

27 And the Lord said to Aaron, Go into the wilderness to meet Moses. And he went, and met him in the mount of God, and kissed him. 28 And Moses told Aaron all the words of the Lord who had sent him, and all the signs which he had commanded him.

29 And Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the children of Israel: 30 And Aaron spake all the words which the Lord had spoken unto Moses, and did the signs in the sight of the people. 31 And the people believed: and when they heard that the Lord had visited the children of Israel, and that he had looked upon their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped.

v27-30 The Lord tells Moses' older brother Aaron to go and meet Moses in the desert. They meet at Mount Horeb, and it is a joyful reunion (v. 27). Moses tells Aaron all of the details of the theophany of the preceding chapters (v. 28), who believes them.

Moses and Aaron travel from Horeb to Egypt and meet with the elders of Israel (v. 29). Aaron relates all of the things the Lord said to Moses on Mount Horeb, and he, presumably Moses, performed all of the signs the Lord told him to (v. 30). The elders of Israel accept and believe what they have been told, recognize the God of the fathers has seen their plight, and humble themselves, bowing low in respect, dedication and honor to the Lord (v. 31).

While this is a joyous reunion between Moses and Aaron, Moses certainly would have realized that his initial unwillingness to accept the prophetic call is what necessitated Aaron's calling as Moses' mouthpiece (cf. v. 14-16). Instead of Aaron being just another Israelite on the sidelines, he is front and center in the middle of the conflict, because of Moses.

v27 What kind of relationship Moses had with his biological family while in Egypt we have no details about. Miriam and Aaron must have known about Moses, but after Moses is fully adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, we have no idea what happens between him and his biological family. We might conclude from the present joyful reunion that they had some sort of relationship, as Aaron and Moses are happy to see each other, but that is purely speculation.

Aaron must have been spiritually inclined, as he received some sort of revelation from the Lord, accepted it as genuine, and acted upon it. He then believes everything Moses relates to him, and accepts the role and responsibilities of being Moses' assistant.

v28 Unlike the conversation with Jethro (cf. v. 18), here Moses fully discloses all of the details of the theophany. Given Aaron's commission, Moses telling him everything is expected. Aaron is about to plunge into conflict with Moses against Pharaoh and Egypt, so he needs to be fully aware of what they are about to do.

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