

Study Notes: Exodus 4:1-17
June 28, 2026: “Send Someone Else!”
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Moses answered, “What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you?’” Then the LORD said to him, “What is that in your hand?” “A staff,” he replied. The LORD said, “Throw it on the ground.” Moses threw it on the ground and it became a snake, and he ran from it. Then the LORD said to him, “Reach out your hand and take it by the tail.” So Moses reached out and took hold of the snake and it turned back into a staff in his hand. “This,” said the LORD, “is so that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has appeared to you.”

- When Moses was commissioned by God to lead the Israelites, His initial response questioned his qualifications as a leader (Exodus 3:11). God responded by assuring Moses that He would be with him (Exodus 3:12). Moses questioned God’s identity, and in response, God revealed the divine name of YHWH (Exodus 3:13-15). YHWH has just revealed more details of His plan to Moses (Exodus 3:16-21), and in response, Moses questions what will happen if the people don’t believe that YHWH actually appeared to Him.
 - The New American Commentary notes, “Moses was not doubting God’s promise, but he certainly was afraid the Israelites would doubt it.”
- In response, YHWH gives a sign to Moses with the staff that is in his hand. When Moses throws his staff on the ground, it becomes a snake, which Moses runs from. YHWH instructs Moses to take the snake by the tail, and it becomes a staff again. The Faithlife Study Bible adds, “God does not deny Moses’ concern; rather, He equips him with a means to answer the inevitable question.”
 - The New American Commentary explains that the staff has greater significance than just being a sign, “There is, however, a greater import to the use of the staff than derives merely from its availability: this is the beginning of the development of the concept that Moses’ staff symbolized Yahweh’s power, a concept that culminates in Moses’ holding up the staff at the Battle of Rephidim as a symbol of God’s throne”
- YHWH offers this sign so the people would believe that YHWH has appeared to Moses. This sign will be used not only before the Israelites, but also before Pharaoh as well. The images of the rod and the snake convey meaning to the Egyptians. The Faithlife Study Bible explains, “The rod and serpent were two symbols well recognized in Egypt: the rod was a symbol of authority; the snake was the patron deity (goddess) of Lower Egypt (the Delta region).”

Then the LORD said, “Put your hand inside your cloak.” So Moses put his hand into his cloak, and when he took it out, the skin was leprous—it had become as white as snow. “Now put it back into your cloak,” he said. So Moses put his hand back into his cloak, and when he took it out, it was restored, like the rest of his flesh. Then the LORD said, “If they do not believe you or pay attention to the first sign, they may believe the second. But if they do not believe these two signs or listen to you, take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground. The water you take from the river will become blood on the ground.”

- Along with the sign of the staff, YHWH offers a second and third sign. The second sign involves Moses putting his hand in and out of his cloak. When Moses puts his hand in first, it will come out appearing leprous. When he puts his hand in a second time, it will be restored.
 - The New American Commentary makes note that while leprosy referred to a number of conditions, this sign involves a serious condition: “Any small or ordinary skin annoyance would hardly be of any ‘sign’ value for Moses to show to the people. It must pose a greater threat to the life and health of Moses if the instantaneous cure is also to reflect the greatness and majesty of God’s power. The significance of this power to take away the health of the body and then to restore it again so that the affected part is “like the rest of his flesh” (*kib^eśārô*) is to warn Pharaoh that this God who has sent Moses has the power to inflict or to save what he will with just a word or a gesture from his ambassador.”
- If neither the staff or leprous hand sign convinces the people, Moses is given a third sign. This sign involves Moses taking water from the Nile. When the water from the Nile is poured on the ground, it will become blood.
 - The sign of the blood testifies to both the sin of the Egyptians, but also to the power of God, as the Nile was deified by the Egyptians. This sign shows God’s power over Egypt.
- The New American Commentary reflects on this section of Scripture, and its application, “How gracious God is in responding to questions human beings may consider to be real and legitimate roadblocks to faith, even though there is enough basis for action in God’s word alone! Similarly, Jesus in essence said, “Believe me for my word’s sake or [for the more tough-minded who must see, feel, and touch in order to believe] believe me for my work’s sake” (cf. Jn 14:10–11).”

Moses said to the LORD, “Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.”

The LORD said to him, “Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.”

- After being given the signs, Moses offers yet another objection. His objection involves his inability to speak well.
 - The Faithlife Study Bible explains Moses' objection in greater detail, "Moses' claim to be an inept speaker may have substance, since God does not rebut his argument. Later in this verse, Moses argues that he is "heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" (*khevad-peh ukhevad lashon*). Elsewhere, he claims to have "uncircumcised lips" (6:12, 30). The precise nature of his speech difficulty is unknown. Moses might have had a speech impediment—perhaps stuttering—or he may have doubted his fluency in the Egyptian language after living for many years in Midian."
- YHWH responded to Moses by asking Moses who made the mouth, and gave people abilities. This rhetorical line of questioning directly refutes Moses' objection that he is not qualified. Rather than Moses' speech being a curse or a result of sin, it will be used by YHWH for His purposes.
- Again, the YHWH tells Moses that He will help Moses and teach him what to say. Much like Moses' initial objection, the YHWH responds with a *hieros logos* or Holy Word, confirming His presence and help.

But Moses said, "Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else."

- For the third time, Moses directly objects and questions the call of God. This does not include the times that Moses questions whether or not the people will believe that he has been sent by God. This objection is groundless and is akin to Moses saying, "Anyone but me!"
- The New American Commentary explains that Moses' first objections may have simply been acts of humility; however, this last is not: "This final protest of Moses represents a dramatic departure from all four of his previous protests (3:11, 13; 4:1, 10), which had the style of ritual, nonliteral demurrers. If Moses were to continue that pattern, he would here say something else about his unworthiness and/or the magnitude of the challenge. He did not. Instead, he actually asked that God send someone else to do the job—in other words, he tried to refuse to accept the call."

Then the LORD's anger burned against Moses and he said, "What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you, and he will be glad to see you. You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do. He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him. But take this staff in your hand so you can perform the signs with it."

- In response to this groundless objection, YHWH is angry with Moses. However, in His anger, the YHWH offers an option to Moses. YHWH will use Aaron, Moses' brother, as the mouthpiece to speak. Moses will be responsible for speaking to Aaron as God has spoken to Him.
- Moses is still to take the staff and be the one who will perform signs for the people. The New American Commentary explains, "Verse 17 highlights the importance of Moses' staff, an object that plays a significant role in the exodus story. The staff is the ultimate immediate reassurance, in this final set of *hieroi logoi*, of God's presence with Moses as he enters upon the challenging task to which he has been called."