

Exodus 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Then Moses answered, But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, The Lord did not appear to you. The Lord said to him, What is that in your hand? He said, A staff. And he said, Throw it on the ground.

So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it. But the Lord said to Moses, Put out your hand and catch it by the tail. So he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand, that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, has appeared to you.

And again the Lord said to him, Put your hand inside your cloak. And he put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow.

Then God said, Put your hand back inside your cloak. So he put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh.

If they will not believe you, God said, will listen to the first sign. They may believe the latter sign. If they will not believe even these two signs, will listen to your voice.

[1 : 11] 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. But Moses said to the Lord, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.

Then the Lord said to him, Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute or deaf or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.

But he said, O my Lord, please send someone else. Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses, and he said, Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite?

I know that he can speak well. Behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. 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 both what to do.

He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him. And take in your hand this staff with which you shall do the signs.

[2 : 26] Moses went back to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, Please let me go back to my brothers in Egypt to see whether they are still alive. And Jethro said to Moses, Go in peace.

And the Lord said to Moses in Midian, Go back to Egypt, for all the men who are seeking your life are dead. So Moses took his wife and his sons and had them ride on a donkey and went back to the land of Egypt.

And Moses took the staff of God in his hand. And the Lord said to Moses, When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power.

But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. Then you shall say to Pharaoh, Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, Let my son go, that he may serve me.

If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son. At a lodging place on the way the Lord met him and sought to put him to death.

[3 : 27] Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it, and said, Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me.

So he let him alone. It was then that she said, A bridegroom of blood, because of the circumcision.

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

And Moses told Aaron all the words of the Lord with which he had sent him to speak, and all the signs that he had commanded him to do. Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all

the elders of the people of Israel.

Aaron spoke all the words that the Lord had spoken to Moses, and did the signs in the sight of the people. And the people believed. And when they heard that the Lord had visited the people of Israel, and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshipped.

Exodus chapter 4 is one of the most puzzling chapters in the Bible. There are a lot of questions that arise from it that are not easily answered. It begins with the Lord giving three signs to Moses.

[4 : 34] These signs are for the sake of the people, as a demonstration that the Lord has actually appeared to him. First of all, there is the sign of the staff. Then there's the sign of the leprous hand.

And then finally there's the sign of the water turned to blood. God first of all asks Moses what he has in his hand. He answers a staff, and then he's instructed to throw it on the ground, after which the staff turns into a serpent, and he recoils from it.

But the Lord says to Moses to stretch out his hand and catch the serpent by the tail. And the serpent becomes a staff again in his hand. The meaning of this sign isn't immediately clear.

In chapter 7 this sign is performed before Pharaoh, and the serpent, or in that case the dragon that it's turned into, consumes the dragons that the rods of the magicians of Egypt turn into.

In that case, the emphasis is not upon getting control over the serpent again, but upon the power of the serpent, or the dragon, over others. So while the serpent is controlled, that is not the primary point.

[5 : 45] The primary point is that this staff belonging to this person can turn into this powerful creature, this powerful and dangerous creature. The fact that the word for staff is the same word for tribe might add something to the meaning here.

The tribes of Israel cast to the ground become as serpents, and Pharaoh and his men will recoil before them, and will be consumed by them ultimately. Perhaps that's the meaning of this particular sign.

It's important to remember that these signs are not just acts of power and pyrotechnics. They are actions with symbolic meaning. Actions that describe something about what's going to take place. In the second sign, Moses is instructed to put his hand into his cloak next to his bosom, and then to take it out. It becomes leprous. And then he puts it in again, takes it out again, and it is restored to full health.

What is the meaning of this sign? I'm not entirely sure, but the fact that he has to put his hand into his cloak next to his bosom suggests that the leprosy is associated with the state of the heart of the people, or whoever Moses represents.

[6 : 53] And then, as he puts it back in and it's restored, it's a change in the state of the people. Maybe that's part of what's going on here. Within the purity system of Leviticus, leprosy or corruption renders one unclean, and it separated those who suffered it from the presence of the Lord.

It's given particular attention in the book of Leviticus in chapters 13 and 14. It's important that we notice that it is spoken of in terms of a plague. Leprosy is a plague of corruption that afflicts persons and houses, and it has a similar effect to contact with a corpse, as we see in Numbers 19.

As a sign of death and uncleanness associated with separation from the presence of the Lord, Moses' sign of leprosy could have been a powerful one. As his hand touches the flesh around his heart, it turns leprous, bearing the plague of corruption.

It's a sign of Israel's state, perhaps. And when he returns his hand to his bosom and takes it out again, it's smooth and restored. So the placing of the hand upon the bosom and then moving it out suggests that the hand is reflecting the state of what it has just touched.

It's healed, while Pharaoh's heart will become more and more corrupt and hardened. And in many respects, the story of the plagues that follow is a story of the plague of corruption breaking out in Egypt, of the house of Pharaoh becoming corrupted and being condemned to destruction.

[8 : 15] Both the Israelites and the Egyptians originally manifest the plague of corruption, and they suffer the first three plagues together. However, for the last seven plague days, a distinction is made between the Hebrews and the Egyptians.

As the plague of corruption spreads among the Egyptians, while Israel, their households purified with blood sprinkled with hyssop, escaped the condemnation of Egypt through the water. It is a ritual reminiscent of the process of being brewed from leprosy.

So Israel's state is going to be dealt with. And then the final sign that Moses is given involves taking water from the Nile and pouring it on the drier ground. And this sign manifests God's power over the Nile, one of Egypt's deities and the primary source of its life.

It gave life and it gave purification. You can see that Pharaoh and his family go down to the river to wash on a number of occasions in the book of Exodus. And in turning it to blood, it becomes associated with death and defilement.

It is also having the effect of bringing to light what has been done in that river. The river covered up the crime of the slaughter of the Hebrew infants. But now as it turns to blood, it's manifesting the wickedness of what has been done.

[9 : 27] And it's making it unavoidable. The blood that has been shed in that river is coming to the surface. And no one can avoid it. To unpack the imagery of these signs a bit more, it might be interesting to look at Psalm 74 verses 11 following.

Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the fold of your garment and destroy them. Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. You divided the sea by your might. You broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan. You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. You split open springs and brooks. You dried up ever-flowing streams. It's a reference back to the event of the Red Sea crossing. And in the Red Sea crossing, there is the destruction of the serpent or the sea dragon of Egypt.

Egypt is spoken of in terms of a sea dragon in various places in the prophets. And here in the Psalms, it's also described using that sort of symbolism. It is a sea serpent that's destroyed in the waters.

[10 : 37] Whereas Israel is like a sea serpent that goes through the waters. This narrow path winding its way through the waters like a serpent on its path. And Egypt recoils at the Red Sea in the same way as Moses recoils from the serpent.

It seems to me that there's some connection here. That Israel, as it serpents its way out of Egypt, it is the serpent from which the Egyptians will recoil.

That sea dragon, that sea serpent, will be destroyed in the waters. And the serpent that God has established of his people will be led through the wilderness and brought into the promised land. So that might be part of the purpose of the signs. When these events happen in the future, it will have a confirmatory force for Moses and for the people. And I think we see that in Exodus chapter 14 verse 31.

Israel saw the great power that the Lord used against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses. This recalls the purpose of the signs for the sake of the belief of the people.

[11 : 47] You can maybe think about this in the light of Jesus' miracles, where many of his miracles and signs had their meaning and their confirmatory force retrospectively.

As in the light of the resurrection, people understood what was truly meant by what Christ had done. There was not just some sign of power, but there was some deeper meaning and significance to the action or the word that he had spoken.

The reference to God having his hand in the bosom of his garment in Psalm 74 verse 11 is an interesting detail. I'm not sure what to make of it. In the close proximity with the sign of the destruction of the serpent of Egypt, it seems to me that there might be something going on here. I'm not sure what to make of it. The broader meaning of the signs though is that God will bring to light the sin of the Egyptians. It will come to the surface and God will deal with them and it. Israel will be made powerful and dangerous in the hand of God's prophet and will ultimately defeat the sea monster of Egypt. And God will also restore the heart and the arm of his people so that they can act with power and no longer be in death and exile.

[12 : 58] Moses protests at this point that he doesn't have the skill that he needs. He's not eloquent. He's not gifted. He's not an orator. He has spent most of the last 40 years in the wilderness herding sheep.

He's probably not the person for the job. And yet God assures him that he is the one that created man's mouth. The theme of God preparing the prophet for his ministry, whether placing his words in his mouth or cleansing his lips or granting him the eloquence with which to speak, is a theme that we find in a number of places.

We see it on the day of Pentecost as God gives fiery tongues to his people so that they can speak with new fiery tongues. And we see it in the story of Jeremiah as God gives him this burning word. In the story of Ezekiel as God gives him the scroll to eat. In the story of Isaiah where his lips are cleansed with the burning coal. God is angry with Moses for his failure to trust, but he tells him that Aaron, his brother, the Levite, will come and meet him and that he will be the mouthpiece for Moses to the people and to Pharaoh.

The fact that Aaron is spoken of as the Levite here is an interesting detail. I mean, if he's Moses' brother, surely the Levite detail is extraneous and unnecessary.

[14:15] Perhaps it's worth asking what Moses knows at this point. He has been raised in the house of Pharaoh as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. And it's not necessarily the case that he knows that Aaron is his brother, his biological brother.

Maybe just the fact that he's another one of the Israelites and he's one of the Israelites himself. He knows that much. It's not clear that he knows his family relations though. Beyond the earliest period of his life when he was being nursed by his actual mother, there's no record of his connection with his people until he goes out at a later point.

In chapter 15 verse 20, Miriam is spoken of as Aaron's sister. Not Aaron and Moses' sister. There seems to be a breach in this family where the siblings didn't necessarily know each other well. They were half strangers to each other and had been raised separately. Perhaps we should think of some of the connections with the story of Joseph here. There are ways in which Moses is like Joseph, the lost son who was taken in by the Egyptians.

But Moses might also be the one who's being drawn out. Joseph is being delivered from Egypt. This is an important theme of this story. And Moses, the one who's drawn out first.

[15:28] And the fact that Midianites play an important role in chapters 3 and 4 might also draw our mind back to the story of Genesis chapter 37 where it's the Midianites who draw Joseph out of the pit.

The fact that God is choosing Moses as the one to lead the Exodus is an interesting thing to reflect upon. He could have chosen Aaron. He could have chosen one of the Israelites. But yet Moses is someone who's been raised as an Egyptian prince.

He's lived outside of Egypt for some period of time now. And he has the most tenuous relationship with the rest of his people. Beyond the fact of his birth, he is someone who has had very little connection with them.

But yet God chooses him. And it seems in part that he's the one who turns aside. He's the one who turns aside to look at the burning bush. He's the one who turns aside to look at the state of his people and to intervene for them.

He's someone who identifies with the state of the Egyptians. He's not just acting as someone with patriotic zeal, simply acting on the part of his compatriots. He's someone who can identify with Egypt.

[16:30] He's someone who's concerned for justice. And God chooses him, this figure who exists between worlds, this figure who is at once associated with Egypt and also associated with Israel.

He chooses him as the one that's going to lead the Exodus. Like Joseph, Moses is the Egyptianized son. He's the one who's been taken into the house of Pharaoh. Joseph was, as it were, the firstborn of Pharaoh, the one who was exercising the authority of the second in command in the nation.

And Moses is someone who's the son of Pharaoh's daughter. Moses goes to his father-in-law and asks, please let me go back to my brothers in Egypt to see whether they are still alive.

That inspecting of his brothers might also recall the events of chapter 37 of Genesis, where Joseph was sent out by his father to inspect his brothers to see if all was well with them.

Moses then, having returned to Midian and talked to his father-in-law, returns to Egypt. And on the way, there's a strange thing that happens. In the lodging place or the night encampment, God intercepts him and seeks to put him to death.

[17:37] This event occurs immediately after God has said, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, let my son go that he may serve me. If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.

This is anticipating the event of the Passover. And I think the event that happens in the night encampment is also an anticipation of the Passover. Just as the Passover required circumcision as a prerequisite and the display of blood, so there is God as the destroying angel, as it were, coming

to seek to kill those who are not prepared, and then this act of circumcision and the display of the blood on the legs, the legs of the house being represented by the doorposts. And that anticipates the Passover as well. Moses is entering into the land of Egypt. God is going to come near and he needs to be prepared. He also needs to identify with the Israelites. Until this point, Moses seems primarily to have been identified as an Egyptian in many respects. When he goes to Midian, he's spoken of as an Egyptian, perhaps because he's clean-shaven and speaks with the language of an Egyptian, but one way or another, he's someone who's not been identified with the Hebrews fully. And with the circumcision of his son, he identifies with his people in a new way. At this point, he meets with Aaron, who has come out to the wilderness to meet him. And the encounter with Aaron is an interesting detail.

[19 : 04] It can remind us of an earlier story that we've read, the story of Jacob. Jacob had to flee his country after he did something and his brother sought his life. He had to go to another land.

He married the daughter of someone for whom he served for a number of years. He met the daughter at a well and he prospered within the land in various ways. And then coming back to the land, he was intercepted by God who fought against him and then met with his brother in a peaceful reconciliation after many years of separation.

The story then is the story of Jacob, it's the story of Moses and it's also the story of the people of Israel. You can think of the parallels with the story of Joseph that we have identified.

At the Jabbok, the angel touched the thigh or the hip socket of Jacob and claimed Jacob in part by wounding him in that particular location, a site associated with generation.

Maybe the action of circumcision connects with that here, that there is a claim upon the generative power of Moses. One way or another, many of the details of this passage are mysterious and we are left with speculations.

[20 : 16] We cannot put too much weight on any particular reading. A question to consider. How might reading this passage against the backdrop of the book of Genesis help us to understand more of the significance of the expression Israel is my firstborn son?

