

THE CALL OF MOSES EXODUS 3-4

We all know the story of Moses. He was born into slavery in Egypt to Hebrew parents of the tribe of Levi, rescued from death by his mother, his sister, and a daughter of Pharaoh, and raised in Pharaoh's household (Ex. 2:1-10). At about the age of forty, Moses killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave, one of his brethren by birth because he thought his people would rally to him and he would deliver them (Ex. 2:11-14, cf. Acts 7:23-25 in Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin). Once that became known and the Israelites did not embrace him, he fled for his life into Midian and became a shepherd. But, the Hebrew slavery in Egypt continued and the people cried out to God. It is noteworthy that God called the Israelites "My people."

Exodus 3:7-9 ⁷The LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings. ⁸"So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. ⁹"Now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to Me; furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them.

The Israelites are a people supernaturally created by God to be His people. Sarah was barren (Gen. 11:30), Rebekah was barren (Gen. 25:21), and Rachael was barren (Gen. 29:31). The point is, without supernatural intervention, Israel would have never existed. They are not just another nation among all the nations of the world.

Genesis 11:30 ³⁰Sarai was barren; she had no child.

Genesis 25:21 ²¹Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived.

Genesis 29:31 ³¹Now the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, and He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.

God did not create other nations the way He created Israel. Balaam recognized, by means of divine revelation, the fact Israel is not to be counted as the rest of the nations are counted; Israel is a nation apart from all others.

Numbers 23:9 ⁹“As I see him from the top of the rocks, And I look at him from the hills; Behold, a people who dwells apart, And will not be reckoned among the nations.

Israel was not reckoned among the nations then and, in God's sight, they are not reckoned among the nations today even though Israel's greatest desire is to be recognized as another legitimate nation among the nations of the world.

The Abrahamic Covenant is of significant importance in Exodus. God made promises to Abraham and to his descendants that cannot be abrogated. God promised to fulfill the stipulations of that Covenant and He will be faithful to do so. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob became the twelve tribes of Israel and the Exodus reveals the work of God as He began to fulfill His Covenant obligations to the Patriarchs and to their descendants.

Exodus 2:23–25 ²³Now it came about in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died. And the sons of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God. ²⁴So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ²⁵God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them.

At about the age of eighty, God called Moses and appointed Him to be the instrument through whom, along with his brother Aaron, He, Yahweh, would free the Hebrew slaves from Egypt and bring them into a land of their own. This was a land God had prepared for them; it was a land God was going to give them. God was going to do this with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm and accompanied by signs, miracles, and wonders.

Signs, miracles, and wonders are used to authenticate the message and the messenger. They are performed for a specific purpose; they are a revelatory act. In Egypt, the signs authenticated God as the one true all-powerful God of the universe, they authenticated the messengers, Moses and Aaron, as men of God who were authorized to speak and act on behalf of God, and the signs authenticated the message, "Let My people go!"

The background to the Exodus story begins with Abraham and the Covenant God entered with Him. God told the Patriarch that his descendants, to whom the Covenant would be extended, would be enslaved for four hundred years. At the end of that time, God would judge the nation that enslaved them and bring them into the land promised them in the Covenant.

Genesis 15:13–16 ¹³God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. ¹⁴"But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. ¹⁵"As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶"Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."

Because we are looking back at these historical events, we know how the need for the Exodus came about. God providentially arranged for Joseph to go into Egypt in order to prepare the way for his family to join him there after a famine forced them out of Canaan. This was accomplished through the nefarious, hateful deeds of his brothers, but ultimately, we know it was part of God's plan for Israel and, in hindsight, Joseph came to understand that fact.

Genesis 50:20 ²⁰"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.

In Egypt, many people were born to the Patriarchs of the twelve tribes; God was creating out of them a nation who would be the people through whom He would reveal Himself to the world. This will be revelation beyond the revelation of the creation spoken of in Psalm 19 and Romans 1. At some point, the Egyptians became alarmed at the rapidly increasing population of Hebrews and enslaved them. Joseph and the work he did for Pharaoh and Egypt years before was forgotten. At the proper time, God prepared a man to lead the people out of Egypt and into the land He promised Abraham and his descendants many years before and that man was Moses.

Certainly, God was capable of freeing the Israelites without using any man but that's not how He works. God works within the framework of history and he uses man to do it. The whole concept of the mediatorial Kingdom is God ruling through the agency of a faithful man. That began in the Garden of Eden with Adam and even though Adam proved to be unfaithful, God's plan for a

Kingdom has not changed. Over and over again in the Scriptures, God is calling on and using men to accomplish His purposes.

God's specific call to Moses came at Horeb, the mountain of God, called holy ground, where God appeared to Him in the burning bush. The angel of the Lord is variously identified as Yahweh Himself, an angel, or God the Son. My personal faith conviction is whenever there is a theophany, that is, an appearance of God to man, it is God the Son dealing with man. When it is an angel, the text makes that clear.

Exodus 3:1–2 ¹Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the Abrahamic Covenant in understanding what is taking place at this time in biblical history—and still is. God's Covenant faithfulness to the Patriarchs has never been abrogated and it never will be. By identifying Himself as the God of the Israelite fathers, God's faithfulness to the Covenant is highlighted. This is one early step in a long line of steps, some of which are going on today, to fulfill the Abrahamic Covenant.

Exodus 3:6 ⁶He said also, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

God commissioned a very reluctant Moses to be the one who would lead "My people," meaning God's people, out of Egypt.

Exodus 3:10–11 ¹⁰“Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.” ¹¹But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?”

The Bible does not specifically identify the source of Moses' reluctance to follow God's directives. Perhaps he was, with good reason, afraid. Perhaps he was comfortable with his life as a shepherd, a husband, a father, and as a member of an extended family in Midian. Perhaps it was because of his hasty, brash attempt to rescue his people that resulted in his flight from Egypt forty years earlier. The Lord does later mention that situation in an effort to give Moses some peace of mind over the mission God is assigning Him making this the most likely possibility concerning his reluctance. Moses said he was unworthy of God's call. Perhaps a combination of all these things was bothering him. What we do know is he was very reluctant, extremely close to the point of disobedience, to answer God's call on his life at this time for this mission.

God was going to give Moses a sign in order to prove God had sent him to perform this work on His behalf. The sign would authenticate God in the sight of Moses, but the sign wouldn't come to pass until after Moses had obeyed God and completed his mission by bringing the people out of Egypt. That's not the usual manner in which signs work. Signs are meant to provoke an immediate faith response; this sign was to be performed after Moses' faith response.

Exodus 3:12 ¹²And He said, “Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.”

Moses asked for God's name and received an answer. That was unusual; Jacob had asked God for His name (Gen. 32:29) and Samson's father, Manoan, had asked for a name (Judges 13:17) and neither received an answer. Perhaps it was because Moses was asking on behalf of the Israelites to whom Moses was being sent making this a much larger issue than one of satisfying Moses' curiosity, but for whatever reason God answered him.

Exodus 3:13-15 ¹³Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" ¹⁴God said to Moses, "I AM [אֶהְיֶה] WHO I AM [אֶהְיֶה]"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM [אֶהְיֶה] has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations.

Barrels of ink have been spilled by theologians attempting to explain what this name is and what it means. We have to remember that Moses was not raised in the Hebrew household of his birth; he was raised in Pharaoh's palace. It is also quite likely the Israelites had largely forgotten the knowledge of God Jacob and his sons brought to Egypt several hundred years before. As quickly as the Israelites were prone to forget God after their miraculous deliverance and after the revelations they had at Horeb, it would not be surprising if they had largely forgotten God and embraced the Egyptian deities. In Egypt, all the pagan gods had names that differentiated them one from the other. By identifying Himself as "I AM," God is rejecting any concept of identity with other gods; there are no other gods. God is not a contingent being; He exists apart from all other

things that are in existence. He exists and He is the one, true, living God. Self-existence is the essence of His being. Asking His name is beside the point; that's why He didn't answer Jacob and Manoah. It was also premature; he wasn't yet forming the nation. The name "Yahweh" does not identify God as a being; it is the name of the covenant identification He has with Israel and God made that identification with Moses here in verse 15. He is identifying Himself not only to them but with them. It is the name Israel is to use when referring to their God. Ironically, they refuse to ever say that name. Instead, they use other names such as Adonai. The important point is that He is the God of Israel. This name identifies Him with the Patriarchs, the covenants, the nation, and the Jewish people and this is specifically revealed here in verse 15. God is introducing Himself to a people who had probably largely forgotten Him and He is identifying with them as the God of the Covenant.

Christ Jesus used this name to identify Himself as the "I AM" during the time He was presenting Himself as the King to the Jewish people. The people and the authorities at that time certainly connected "I AM" with the claim to be the God of Israel and they were willing to kill anyone who used it because to claim to be the "I AM" was, in their mind, blasphemous. The truth is, for anyone other than Christ Jesus to use it, it would be blasphemy.

John 8:58–59 ⁵⁸Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am." ⁵⁹Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple.

John 10:36 ³⁶do you say of Him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?

The power Christ could wield in that name was evident in the Garden of Gethsemane. Simply saying, "I AM" caused those who were arresting Him to fall to the ground. English Bible translations add a clarifying "He" to "I AM," but that is not in the original text. The Lord identified Himself as "I AM" which is a claim to be God and as He said it, He exhibited the power of God.

John 18:5–6, 8 ⁵They answered Him, "Jesus the Nazarene." He said to them, "I am He." And Judas also, who was betraying Him, was standing with them. ⁶So when He said to them, "I am He," they drew back and fell to the ground.... ⁸Jesus answered, "I told you that I am He; so if you seek Me, let these go their way,"

The only version of the Bible I could find that records the Lord's words in John as "I AM" is in the *Complete Jewish Bible*; every other English translation I examined adds "He" to the interpretation. That's totally unnecessary and it confuses the words of the Lord for anyone reading a translation rather than reading the original Greek which is almost all of us because very few of us are capable of reading and understanding the Greek. John was clearly revealing the self-identification of Christ Jesus as deity. The name is important and the Jewish people living in the generations following Moses knew it. They wanted to kill Jesus for using that name and He used it not only in the verses we just examined, but also in John 8:24, 8:28 and 13:19.

God gave Moses his commission telling him what He was being sent to do.

Exodus 3:16–17 ¹⁶"Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, has

appeared to me, saying, "I am indeed concerned [פָּקַד] about you and what has been done to you in Egypt. 17" So I said, I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, to a land flowing with milk and honey."

The various tribes of the Israelites managed to keep their tribal identity intact throughout the time of their sojourn in Egypt. The elders of each were still leading the various families but they were not yet formed into a nation. This is a glimpse of God's sovereign work in keeping Israel intact throughout their history and especially since 70 A.D. throughout the diaspora.

The word translated "concerned" [פָּקַד] means more than what we would normally think when someone says they are concerned about someone. It means to attend with care and to take note. It refers to exercising oversight over a subordinate, either in the form of inspecting or of taking action to cause a considerable change in the circumstances of the subordinate, either for the better or for the worse [*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*]. God isn't simply concerned about the Israelites as we would think of concern; He is going to take action in order to change the situation in which they find themselves in Egypt. He is going to remove them from the affliction they were suffering in Egypt and plant them in a wonderful land where they will no longer be afflicted and will be living in a land of plenty.

By identifying Himself with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God is once again identifying Himself with the Israelites and reminding them He is the God of the Covenant made with their fathers.

Not only did God tell Moses what he was to do, but he told him what the results would be.

Exodus 3:18–22 ¹⁸“They will pay heed [שָׁמַעַ] to what you say; and you with the elders of Israel will come to the king of Egypt and you will say to him, ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. So now, please, let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.’ ¹⁹“But I know that the king of Egypt will not permit you to go, except under compulsion. ²⁰“So I will stretch out My hand and strike Egypt with all My miracles [פְּלִאָ] which I shall do in the midst of it; and after that he will let you go. ²¹“I will grant this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and it shall be that when you go, you will not go empty-handed. ²²“But every woman shall ask of her neighbor and the woman who lives in her house, articles of silver and articles of gold, and clothing; and you will put them on your sons and daughters. Thus you will plunder the Egyptians.”

The word שָׁמַעַ means to hear and to process the information that is heard but it does not necessarily suggest agreement. It could have been translated “listen.” In chapter 4, God equips Moses to deal with any unbelief the people have after he speaks to them. The elders will hear what he has to say and they will accompany Moses to speak to Pharaoh. They are to identify the God of the Hebrews as the One who has sent them to see the Egyptian king. At first, to Pharaoh, Yahweh is simply the God of the Hebrews just like there were many gods in Egypt, but Pharaoh is about to find out the particular details that define this God of the Hebrews that not only set Him apart from other gods but prove He is the only God with the power to do what He says He is about to do.

The request to go a three days’ journey into the wilderness isn’t quite what it seems to those of us who have a worldview and a mindset shaped by Western civilization [see Douglas K. Stuart, *The New American Commentary: Exodus*, pp.

124-127]. In the Semitic culture, requests are made in a restrained, suggestive manner rather than simply coming right out and asking for what you want and further, what you are actually requesting exceeds by far that which is verbally requested. In other words, Moses and the elders were requesting much more than a three days' journey and Pharaoh full well understood that. The request was really a request to leave Egypt for as long as they wanted to be gone which was permanently; they were not coming back to Egypt because God did not want them in Egypt. They were going to Mt. Horeb to worship God and they were going on to the land God was going to give them. Other commentators agree to some extent and suggest was at least some shrewd dealing going on here concerning the three days journey when the intent was to actually leave the country. Whether Pharaoh feared the loss of his slave work force, whether he wanted to confirm the supposed superiority of his pagan gods over the God of the Hebrews, or whether he feared the Hebrews would ally with an enemy and return to fight him we don't know, but whatever it was, he wasn't about to allow it to happen.

God told Moses Pharaoh would reject his request and the only way he would ever comply was under compulsion. God was going to strike Egypt with all His miracles and only after that happened would Pharaoh allow the Israelites to leave—and even then he changed his mind. God did not reveal to Moses what these miracles would be; he just told him they would happen. The word for miracle, **אֲמוּנָה**, is about more than just the act of the miracle itself. It means to have

an attitude of great surprise and wonder over a person or an event. The sense then is not just about the event itself; it is about the revelation of the God who is performing the miracle which without the power of God behind it is otherwise unexplainable and even impossible. Theologians who have a naturalistic mindset do not understand the concept of the miracles God wrought upon Egypt. Their ignorance is totally on display when they try to explain the miracles as natural phenomena. Theologians have written books trying to explain how these acts could be the result of natural forces, but that was impossible and these theologians are exhibiting unbelief. The miracles were miraculous acts of God.

Just as God promised Abraham years before, the Israelites would leave the nation subjecting them to oppression with “many possessions” (Gen. 15:14). By the time the Israelites were going to leave Egypt, the Egyptian were going to be very glad to see them go and they paid them to get out. The Israelites essentially left Egypt with the wealth of Egypt—and Egypt has never recovered.

Even though God told Moses the elders of Israel would listen to him, the possibility still existed they wouldn't really believe His message. After all, they hadn't heard from God since Joseph and Moses was probably fearful they wouldn't remember.

Exodus 4:1 ¹Then Moses said, “What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say? For they may say, ‘The LORD has not appeared to you.’”

God gave Moses three signs to use to authenticate God, to authenticate God's message, and to authenticate His messengers, Moses and Aaron.

These signs were not simply miracles with no meaning either; they each carried some significance that would not be missed. Just because people see signs performed before their eyes does not mean they will believe. For that reason, God gave Moses not just one sign but three.

The first sign was turning Moses' staff into a serpent.

Exodus 4:2–5 ²The LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" And he said, "A staff." ³Then He said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it. ⁴But the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand and grasp it by its tail"—so he stretched out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand— ⁵"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."

Notice the purpose of the sign is specifically articulated—that they may believe the message, the messenger, and the God who provided them. The serpent was almost certainly a cobra, although the text doesn't necessarily demand it, because the cobra had significance for Egypt in both positive and negative terms and Moses was immediately afraid of it. This sign wasn't used by Moses just in front of the Israelites, it was used before Pharaoh as well (Ex. 7:8-13). Moses would have been quite aware of the Egyptian reverence for the cobra; God was telling Moses that through Him, Yahweh, he would have power over this symbol of Egypt's might and strength. In terms of religious significance for Egypt, several pagan Egyptian deities were symbolized by the cobra. The guardian of Pharaoh was a cobra goddess named Renenutet and the crown Pharaoh wore had a cobra on it. Edjo was also a cobra goddess who was the patron deity of Lower Egypt where most of the Egyptians lived. On the other hand, they also

feared the cobra and with good reason; it was and still is a very deadly snake. They had magical formulas to either ward off snakes in the first place or to cure a person once bitten. In the Book of the Dead, they had a spell designed to protect the dead person from the snake of the underworld. Their pagan deity Seth had to fight a great serpent in order to protect the sun as it made its nightly circuit through the underworld. Spiritually, and the miracles God wrought in Egypt did have spiritual significance in relation to the pagan Egyptian deities, it is possible to see an implied message to Pharaoh here that Yahweh is more powerful than even a poisonous cobra, the spiritual guardian of Pharaoh, and therefore He is not a God to be provoked. These pagan serpent gods are subject to Yahweh and therefore Pharaoh is subject to Yahweh as well. The real serpent is Satan and it is very significant that a snake played such a large role in the religious life of this pagan nation and that, in turn, also makes this sign very significant.

The next sign consisted of Moses' hand being made leprous and then healed. Everyone was very afraid of leprosy; whatever it consisted of at that time, it was considered to be highly contagious and those who contracted it were isolated, shunned, and ostracized because of it. It was also incurable which makes this sign very powerful. The people had no problem understanding that God, or gods in the minds of the Egyptians, could cause people to fall ill and develop this loathsome disease, but curing leprosy was a very powerful, unheard of act.

Exodus 4:6–8 ⁶The LORD furthermore said to him, “Now put your hand into your bosom.” So he put his hand into his bosom, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow. ⁷Then He said, “Put your hand into your bosom again.” So he put his hand into his bosom again, and when he took it out of his bosom, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh. ⁸“If they will not believe you or heed the witness of the first sign, they may believe the witness of the last sign.

God's hand was often used as a metaphor for His power and might (cf. Ex. 32:11). There may be some significance to the fact that Moses' hand is the stricken member of his body that is then healed. Moses, as God's agent, would be the visible agent of God's miraculous power in the signs God used to overcome Pharaoh's resistance to God's message, “Let my people go!”

The third sign was turning some water taken from the Nile into blood. This sign was to be repeated later and in the sight of all the people of Egypt when the entire Nile and its attendant waterways were all turned to blood. The Nile had enormous sacred, spiritual significance to the Egyptians as their divine source of life and it was completely vital to sustaining Egyptian life. When poured out, blood is the symbol of death. We probably cannot imagine the alarm they felt over this.

Exodus 4:9 ⁹“But if they will not believe even these two signs or heed what you say, then you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water which you take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.”

Then Moses tried to weasel out of the commission God was giving him by virtue of the fact he was not an eloquent speaker, which, was actually untrue (cf. Acts 7:22, Moses was a man of power in words and deeds). Part of this may

have been Semitic cultural humility but part of it was the fact he didn't want to do it. In the remainder of the Pentateuch, Moses, raised as a very well educated Egyptian, does not display any handicap in making himself understood to the Israelites.

Exodus 4:10–13 ¹⁰Then Moses said to the LORD, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." ¹¹The LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? ¹²"Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say." ¹³But he said, "Please, Lord, now send the message by whomever You will."

God said He would guide Moses in the performance of his duties and He was angered at Moses' disobedient response to His command so He promised to have Aaron accompany Moses and speak for him. It is interesting to note that God said He would put the words in Aaron's mouth just as He said He was going to put them in Moses' mouth. In other words, God could have and would have spoken through Moses in a very understandable, articulate manner.

Exodus 4:14–17 ¹⁴Then 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 glad in his heart. ¹⁵"You are to speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I, even I, will be with your mouth and his mouth, and I will teach you what you are to do. ¹⁶"Moreover, 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"You shall take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs."

The concept of a prophet is that of a person who is an authorized spokesman for another. That's why God told Moses that Aaron would be his prophet to Pharaoh.

Exodus 7:1 ¹Then the LORD said to Moses, "See, I make you as God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet.

Aaron was only to speak and do what God through Moses told him to speak and do.

Before leaving, Moses went to his father-in-law as a gesture of good will, to maintain good familial relations, and as an acknowledgement of Jethro's position, to request permission to go back to Egypt.

Exodus 4:18 ¹⁸Then Moses departed and returned to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Please, let me go, that I may return to my brethren who are in Egypt, and see if they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace."

It seems to be a request for blessing which he received when Jethro said, "Go in peace."

If Moses had been afraid for his life about going back, and that is probably a good part of the reason otherwise it seems God would have had no need to bring it up, God sought to reassure him by telling him those who wanted him dead were now themselves dead and no longer a threat to Moses' life.

Exodus 4:19 ¹⁹Now the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead."

Moses begins the journey back to Egypt taking his wife and his children with him.

Exodus 4:20 ²⁰So 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.

Whether or not any significance is attached to the fact Moses' wife and children at least began the journey with him to Egypt is not clear. When he told Jethro he was returning to determine whether or not any of his brethren were still alive, he was probably referring to the Israelites in general. As far as we know, he had only one brother, Aaron.

The Lord gave Moses another preview of what was going to happen when he got back into Egypt and began to carry out his assigned duties.

Exodus 4:21–23 ²¹The 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 [קָטַף] his heart so that he will not let the people go. ²²“Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Israel is My son, My firstborn.” ²³“So I said to you, ‘Let My son go that he may serve Me’; but you have refused to let him go. Behold, I will kill your son, your firstborn.”””

Moses was told to go back to Egypt and perform the signs before Pharaoh but he was also told that the pagan king would still not let the people go.

The concept of Pharaoh's hardened heart is a difficult theological concept to grasp. Hard determinists make the claim that because God predetermines everything that happens He wouldn't let Pharaoh release the people until He had made His point to everyone concerning His awesome power, but that is overstating the case. The word קָטַף, means to make strong, but it has a wide range of uses in the Old Testament. In this context, it can also carry connotations of being callous or obdurate and it can pertain to an unwillingness to learn information with the implication that the information, if heeded, would change the response to the situation at hand. Obdurate means to stubbornly refuse to

change one's course of action. Concerning Pharaoh, all these things seem to come together to give us a picture of the situation. Pharaoh was an unrepentant pagan and he was going to reject Yahweh even when confronted with His undeniable power. He was not going to easily submit to a foreign God he never before knew. The text informs us that Pharaoh hardened his own heart against God's revelation several times of his own volition before the text ever says that God hardened his heart. We must also remember that at first the king's sorcerers were able to duplicate Moses' signs from God until they became so wonderful the sorcerers were unable to do so. They duplicated the sign of turning Moses' staff into a serpent (Ex. 7:11-12), they duplicated the sign of turning water into blood (Ex. 7:22), and they were able to conjure up frogs (Ex. 8:7). It wasn't until the plague of gnats the sorcerers were unable to duplicate the signs (Ex. 8:18) and from that point on, they were powerless and they knew they couldn't duplicate those things because only God could do the miracles being performed (Ex 8:19). The point is, their initial ability to use the dark arts to mimic the signs allowed Pharaoh to cling to his pagan belief system and to disbelieve the fact that Moses' God was anything special over and above the gods of Egypt. But Pharaoh still wouldn't believe even after they became unable to duplicate the signs and that is a sign of his callous and obdurate heart. Pharaoh was also a proud, arrogant ruler who was used to telling people what to do and enjoying instant obedience. Pharaoh was the commander-in-chief of the army, he was the chief justice of the royal court, and he was the high priest of their religion.

Pharaoh was thought to be a god Himself and he really didn't have to listen to anybody else about anything. Further, every act of rebellion and rejection against God serves to harden one's heart just a little bit more until the heart is as of stone and can no longer respond to divine revelation. Pharaoh was able to continue to harden his own heart through the seventh plague, hail, (Ex. 9:34-35) and that act seemed to have been his final volitional act. He had hardened himself so much that he had lost the ability to do otherwise.

Paul elaborated on this concept in Romans 1 when he wrote that people know God because He has placed the knowledge of Himself into the heart of every person but they suppress that knowledge in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18-32). In terms of sinful people, this situation with Pharaoh is nothing new and it is not just confined to this pagan king either. We also know that God can have mercy on whom He desires and He can harden whom He desires (Rom. 9:18 referring to this Exodus pericope) and it is not insignificant that this Scripture, in Paul's context, is referring to God's relationship with Israel.

That leads me to one final observation that we cannot discount concerning the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is the fact that this situation involving Pharaoh is a one-of-a-kind situation in which God is beginning to form Israel into the nation He created them to be. We have to be very careful about making every pericope in the Bible normative for all people for all time; that is not correct. In this case, only four times in the Bible outside of the book of Exodus does the Bible say God hardened anyone's heart and all four relate to the Exodus and to Israel

in one way or another. One of those was in connection with the conquest of the Canaanite pagans in the land (Joshua 11:20) which is part of the overall Exodus context. The other was in connection with Sihon king of Heshbon (Dt. 2:30) which was during the time of the Exodus journey to the land. The third time mentioned in the Bible, is when Israel was so hard-hearted and rebellious against God that finally, after centuries of patient endurance, He hardened their hearts as they had already hardened their hearts themselves (Is. 63:17). The fourth was in Romans 9:18 which looks back to this pericope in Exodus. We should not understand the fact of God hardening Pharaoh's heart and the hearts of the Egyptian people as normative activity on the part of God. He can do that whenever He so desires, but the biblical record does not suggest it is a common situation. God had a plan and a purpose in dealing with Israel, with Egypt and Pharaoh, and with the Canaanites in the manner He did and that should not be used to define what is normal activity on the part of God's dealings with man on a continual basis throughout history.

God's sovereignty is also an issue. Who is the all-powerful sovereign God? Is it Yahweh or is it the pagan Egyptian gods? Pharaoh hardened his own heart and God also hardened his heart in order to accomplish His divine purposes for Israel. Pharaoh was a stubborn, arrogant king who was not about to obey anyone or anything outside himself. Satan's ability to produce some false signs served to even further fool him into rejecting Yahweh. The bottom line is God

had a plan for Israel and God brought it to fruition even over the objections of a stubborn, pagan king.

God's creation of Israel to be a nation created for His purposes is reinforced when He refers to Israel as His firstborn son. In the culture of this time, the eldest son held a position of rank, privilege, and preferential status. Pharaoh's firstborn son would have been the one to inherit the throne. The Israelites had been serving a pagan people; it was time for them to instead serve their God. Because Pharaoh had been abusing Yahweh's firstborn son, his firstborn son, in turn, was going to be destroyed. Most theologians connect the slaying of all the firstborn in Egypt with this verse and that indeed happened (Ex. 12:29 during the Passover) but this verse isn't saying that. Moses was addressing Pharaoh and Pharaoh's son.

The pericope concerning the circumcision of Moses' son is difficult and there is no real consensus concerning its meaning.

Exodus 4:24–26 ²⁴Now it came about at the lodging place on the way that the LORD met him and sought to put him to death. ²⁵Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and threw it at Moses' feet, and she said, "You are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me." ²⁶So He let him alone. At that time she said, "You are a bridegroom of blood"—because of the circumcision.

For whatever reason, one of Moses' sons, presumably the youngest one, was not circumcised on the eighth day. This was probably due to opposition from Zipporah because apparently in the Midianite culture circumcision was a rite of marriage and not a rite of birth. For the Israelites, this was a violation of the Abrahamic Covenant punishable by cutting off the uncircumcised one which most

interpret to be death [C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1:143]. God was going to kill Moses for this breach of the Covenant presumably because he was going to Egypt to establish Passover, participation in which required circumcision, and to lead God's circumcised people out of Egypt while he was in a state of disobedience. The prophet of the God of the Covenant should certainly be a faithful adherent to Covenant requirements! This was obviously an unacceptable situation because circumcision was the sign of the Covenant and the mark of inclusion within the Covenant community. Moses was apparently incapacitated in some way by God so Zipporah performed the circumcision. There are many opinions about the meaning of this pericope some of which are elaborate and fanciful and opinions are all over the place. Constable thought these verses illustrate a very important principle: before God will use a person for a public ministry they must first be obedient to God at home [Thomas L. Constable, *Thomas Constable's Notes on the Bible*, 1:191]. The problem with that thought is that God has to work with imperfect, sinful people all the time or nothing would get done through people, including His people.

It is possible Zipporah was so angry over this she left Moses and went back to her father. We know that at some time she did return to Midian because she was taken by her father to reunite with Moses after the Exodus out of Egypt (Ex. 18:1-6) and there is no record of her presence in Egypt but that is an argument from silence and she could have been there. Moses may have sent his family

back to Jethro from Egypt because of the danger they faced staying there with Moses. We only know she went back at some point.

God told Aaron to go and meet Moses in the wilderness where Moses explained God's plan to his brother.

Exodus 4:27–28 ²⁷Now 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. ²⁸Moses 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.

Moses and Aaron went to Egypt where they met with elders of the tribes of Israel.

Exodus 4:29–31 ²⁹Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the sons of Israel; ³⁰and Aaron spoke all the words which the LORD had spoken to Moses. He then performed the signs in the sight of the people. ³¹So the people believed; and when they heard that the LORD was concerned about the sons of Israel and that He had seen their affliction, then they bowed low and worshiped.

The first thing of note is that Moses and Aaron were obedient and went to Egypt as commanded by Yahweh. Once there, they spoke all the words of the Lord to the people. They didn't change God's Words in order to supposedly interpret them or to fit some preconceived notion they had about freeing the people; they spoke God's Words to the people. That is a good example for us today: speak God's words to people. Whether or not the people immediately believed is not stated. The signs were given to Moses for use if the people didn't believe the message he brought to them. Since he performed the signs, it is likely they were skeptical at first but the signs accomplished their purpose. They authenti-

cated Moses and his message as God's messengers and the Israelites believed.

Jesus did the same thing in the gospel of John.

John 20:30–31 ³⁰Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

The purpose of signs is to bring about belief and that happened here. The people believed.

This suggests an application we can take from this event. The Israelites became believers yet these very same people would die in the wilderness for their rebellion and unbelief for refusing to enter the land God was giving them (Num. 14-15). God forgave them but they still suffered temporal punishment; they would not enter the land and they would die in the wilderness. This is the difference between justification salvation and sanctification salvation. Most people today believe these Israelites were unbelievers who went to Hades for their unbelief but that isn't true. The people believed and were justified but they failed in terms of their temporal, experiential sanctification when they rebelled against God and disbelieved His promise to get them safely settled into the land and they suffered temporal punishment for their failure. The same situation is recorded for our benefit in the New Testament concerning the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) and the deaths of some believers in Corinth who were unworthily partaking of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:27-32). We always have to remember that eternal life is granted at a moment in time when a per-

son places their faith/trust/belief in Christ Jesus. In this case, the Israelites were granted eternal life when they believed in this God, Yahweh, who was revealed to them in Word and deed through the prophets Moses and Aaron. Sanctification then, is the life of the believer that should be lived out in faithfulness and obedience but short of glory can never be perfect. The fact the Israelites believed is significant and their worship of Yahweh is an indication they believed.