

Exegetical Notes, Exodus 4:1-17 “More Excuses”

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Exodus 4:1-17 (*In Exodus 3. Moses was called by God to return to Egypt to bring the Hebrews out of bondage there. Moses objected to God’s call explaining that he was not qualified nor was he spiritual enough to do what God asked. God then explained the plan he had for Moses more fully. In these verses, Moses continues to object to God’s call.*)

Verse 1

Moses answered, “What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, ‘YHWH did not appear to you?’”

- See Exodus 3:16-18. There, God has already told Moses that the elders of Israel, and through them the whole nation, would listen to him. They would believe that YHWH had appeared to him and had sent him to them.
- Therefore, by raising this question, Moses is indicating that he has either not heard God or doubts God’s word.

Verse 2-5

Then YHWH said to him, “What is that in your hand?” “A staff,” he replied. YHWH said, “Throw it on the ground.” Moses threw it on the ground and it became a snake, and he ran from it. Then YHWH 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 YHWH, “is so that they may believe that YHWH, the God of their fathers -- the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob -- has appeared to you.”

- In response to Moses’ question, God gives Moses three signs that will prove that God has indeed visited him and sent him to them.
- God told Moses to throw his staff, the stick that he used to help herd the sheep, onto the ground. When Moses did, the staff became a snake

and Moses was frightened. God then told Moses to pick up the snake by the tail. When Moses obeyed, the snake became a staff again.

Verse 6-8

Then YHWH said, “Put your hand inside your cloak.” So Moses put his hand into his cloak, and when he took it out, it was leprous, like 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 YHWH said, “If they do not believe you or pay attention to the first miraculous sign, they may believe the second.”

- Then God instructed Moses to put his hand in his cloak. Moses did and when he took his hand out of his cloak it was covered with leprous sores. Leprosy is a disease that was greatly dreaded by ancient people. It was a disease that ate the flesh and was believed to be highly contagious. Today, we have drugs that can treat this disease, and we know that its cause is poor diet. However, in Moses’ time, to be leprous was considered a terrible curse.
- God then told Moses to put the leprous hand back into his cloak. Moses did and this time, when he took his hand out of his cloak, it was cured.
- Apparently, Moses was to have the ability to recreate these miraculous signs at will to convince the Hebrews that God had visited him and sent him to them.

Verse 9

“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.”

- Just in case he needs it, Moses is armed with a third miraculous sign. He will have the ability to turn river water drawn from the Nile into blood just by pouring it out on the ground.
- There are several possible explanations for God having given Moses these tools to use to convince the Hebrews after having told Moses that he need not worry because the elders would believe him.
 1. These signs were part of God’s plan from the beginning. He always intended to give Moses these signs so as to convince the elders. However, God did not review them with Moses when He reviewed the plan.

2. These signs were given for Moses' benefit as much as to convince the people. The signs were actually given to Moses to reassure Moses that God was able to provide for him in every situation.
3. Moses actually angered God by not taking God at his word. So these signs became necessary because Moses was not fully willing to trust the Lord's provision. In Exodus 4:28, Moses told his brother that God had "commanded him" to perform signs and in 4:29, Moses uses the signs even before they are needed to convince the people. These facts indicate that Moses had made himself dependent upon these signs and limited his success to them, when in truth all he needed to do was trust God.

Verse 10

Moses said to YHWH, "O 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."

- Moses now gives his fourth excuse for not being able to do as God requested of him. He is not "eloquent" and/or is "slow of speech" and "tongue." Scholars suggest several ways of understanding this excuse:
 1. Moses may not be able to speak well in public. He may not be able to speak impressively on the spot.
 2. Moses may not speak Hebrew well or may speak Hebrew with an Egyptian accent which would make him suspect to the Hebrews.
 3. Perhaps Moses stuttered.

Regardless of the actual problem, Moses' objection is that he is not qualified to do what God is asking him to do. See Exodus 3:11. This time he is disqualified because of some problem relating to his ability to speak.

Verse 11-12

YHWH said to him, "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, YHWH? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say."

- In response to the fourth excuse, God reminds Moses that he is the one who provided humans with their mouth, their eyes, etc. He reminds Moses that he can make a mouth work or stop working. He promises to provide the words Moses will need to say at the moment

when Moses needs to say them. Again, the point of God's remarks is that all Moses needs to do is trust God for God will help Moses with his mission.

- In making this promise to Moses, God again urges him to take the first step, to "GO!"

Verse 13

But Moses said, "O Lord, please send someone else to do it."

- At last we come to the heart of the matter. Moses does not want the assignment. All of the previous excuses were just attempts to avoid this basic fact. Moses, simply, does not want to play the part God has chosen for him to play.
- As we shall see, Moses is free to make this decision. However, it does carry consequences.

Verse 14-16

Then YHWH'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 his heart will be glad when he sees 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."

- The consequence of Moses' constant refusal to trust God in this matter is God's anger which now flares. See Psalm 34:6-7. Our refusal to depend upon the provision of God, which Moses is refusing to do, will cause God's anger to flare against us at some point.
- Again, God reassures Moses that the current problem is already resolved in God's plan. God has already made preparation for Moses' speech problem, His brother Aaron, who is eloquent, is already on his way seeking Moses. He will be Moses' spokesperson. God has already provided the answer to each of Moses' objections. Moses need fear nothing in accepting this assignment for YHWH will take care of his every need. God has overlooked nothing. Moses only needs to trust YHWH.
- The line "*He will speak to the people for you, ..., and as if you were God to him,*" is a very pointed remark. The relationship between Moses and Aaron is a picture of what the relationship between God and Moses should be, but is not. It is a picture of what our

relationship to God should be. We should trust God as absolutely as Aaron trusted Moses.

Verse 17

“But take this staff in your hand so you can perform miraculous signs with it.”

- God’s final remark to Moses’ excuses is also very pointed. He knows that Moses has far more faith in miracles than he does in God’s provision. So he points out Moses’ problem by turning Moses’ attention to the staff that he can turn into a snake. This staff is Moses’ security blanket, not the provision of the Lord.

(There is one other interesting point of note in this text. Throughout this passage when God speaks of himself or when the author of the passage speaks of God, the name used is always YHWH, the name that God gave to Moses to give to the Hebrews, See Exodus 3:14. However, Moses refuses to use that name. Whenever Moses refers to God he calls him, Lord. See verses 10 and 13. Moses has been told what he should call God, but even in this he resists the will of God.)

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *More Excuses*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)