



## God's Plan

**TEXT: Exodus 3 & 4**

Big Idea: God delivers and calls people for his purposes.

### **STUDY**

\*\*\* Before interacting with this guide, all leaders should study the referenced texts using the HEAR Method. It's also important to encourage your group members to read the text using the HEAR Method. \*\*\*

H: Highlight, or take note of, things in the passage that stick out to you as you read.

E: Explain what the passage means by asking simple questions of the text:

- **Why was this written?**
- **To whom was it originally written?**
- **How does it fit with the verses before and after it?**
- **Why did the Holy Spirit include this passage in the book?**
- **What is He intending to communicate through this text?**

A: Apply the text to your life. What does God want you to learn from this text?

R: Respond to God in prayer.



## **Text**

**Read the scripture below. Use this copy to make observations, ask questions, and ask how God might be challenging you to move in response to his word.**

### **The Burning Bush**

**3 Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. 3 And Moses said, “I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.” 4 When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” 5 Then he said, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” 6 And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.**

**7 Then the Lord said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, 8 and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 9 And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. 10 Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” 11 But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” 12 He said, “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”**





**13** Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” **14** God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I am has sent me to you.’” **15** God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people 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 thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.**16** Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, “I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, **17** and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.”’ **18** And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and 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 let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. **20** So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go. **21** And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, **22** but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians.”

### **Moses Given Powerful Signs**

**4** 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.’” **2** The Lord said to him, “What is that in your hand?” He said, “A staff.” **3** 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. **4** 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— **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.” **6** 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.<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> "If they will not believe you," God said, "or listen to the first sign, they may believe the latter sign. <sup>9</sup> If they will not believe even these two signs or listen to your voice, 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."

<sup>10</sup> But Moses said to the Lord, "Oh, 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." <sup>11</sup> 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? <sup>12</sup> Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak." <sup>13</sup> But he said, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else." <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him. <sup>17</sup> And take in your hand this staff, with which you shall do the signs."

### **Moses Returns to Egypt**

<sup>18</sup> 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." <sup>19</sup> And the Lord said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead." <sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the



Lord, Israel is my firstborn son, 23 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."

24 At a lodging place on the way the Lord met him and sought to put him to death. 25 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!" 26 So he let him alone. It was then that she said, "A bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision.

27 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. 28 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. 29 Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the people of Israel. 30 Aaron spoke all the words that the Lord had spoken to 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 people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped.



## Lesson

### **Point No. 1: God's power works through weak vessels.**

It's almost comical how much Moses objects to God's calling in this text. Five times Moses offers questions to God in objection to his calling. The objections seem to center around a sense of his own inadequacy.

He can't speak. He has so many doubts. How can he be sure?

A sense of inadequacy before God isn't a bad thing. Remember, we are before a holy and dangerous God. However, there is a type of inadequacy that becomes disobedience if we allow it to stand between us and obeying God's call. Moses has ventured into a disobedient inadequacy here.

Because of this disobedience, Moses misses the bigger picture that God is trying to communicate. God is choosing Moses because he is inadequate, not in spite of his inadequacy.

Why?

God is out to prove a point. God is about to get glory over all of Egypt. God is about to show himself to be the one true King of the Universe. The last thing he needs in this moment is a man standing in the way stealing the glory that is due to His name. So, God chooses Moses, a weak vessel. He chooses a man who can't speak so that when he does everyone will know that God is the one speaking.

God uses the weak to shame the strong. This is the way God works.

Discuss:

How does it encourage you to know that God uses weak vessels?





Have there been times in your life when you've been tempted to let your inadequacy come in between you answering God's call?

## **Point No. 2: God delivers by coming to his people.**

The gospel shines through in this passage in the way that God comes to save his people.

God tells Moses that he sees his people's suffering. Now, he plans to come down to his people.

This is an important statement from God because it sets the pattern for how God delivers his people.

God sees. God comes.

This is how it must be! The Israelites would never make it up to God. If there is going to be salvation, it's going to happen by God coming to them.

Enslaved people. Broken people. Hurting people. Need a God to come to them. That's what God did for the people of Israel.

We need the same kind of salvation.

We are broken, enslaved, and hurting. There is no way we can be good enough to make it to God on our own. If we are going to be saved, it's going to be because God comes to us.

He did just this in Jesus. We needed deliverance and Jesus Christ came down and led us out of our Egypt.

This is grace. We can't save ourselves, so God saves us.

Discuss: What is grace? Why is it important to understand that God saves us by grace, not our own effort?



### **Point No. 3: God wants total obedience.**

This section of scripture closes with one of the strangest passages in all of scripture. God has finally convinced Moses to go and accommodate his weaknesses. As he is on the way though, God tries to kill him!

What a turn of events! The question is: why was God so angry that he would change his plans and come to kill Moses?

Whatever the reason, it had to do with Moses' failure to circumcise his son. It seems that Moses, the person who was supposed to carry the message of God's salvation to Israel and not being faithful enough to make sure his family carried the sign of God's faithfulness. God was not willing to use Moses if he wasn't going to be faithful in the most basic ways.

This brings a major point to light: in order to be used by God, you do not have to be extraordinarily gifted, but you do have to be obedient.

Moses wasn't gifted and didn't have all the answers, but that's not what threatened his ability to be used. What almost killed him was the fact that he wasn't willing to obediently do as God has asked.

Again, this is good news, and bad, for us. We don't have to be gifted to be used by God, but we better be willing to be obedient.

Discuss: Are there times when you are tempted to overlook the seriousness of obedience to God? How do we make sure we are taking God's call to obedience seriously?



## Leader Guide

### Summary

Moses meets God. What an honor? However, God had more planned for Moses than an introduction. This is Moses' call to step into the plan of God and play a part in the kingdom of God. So, God lays out the plan for Moses. It's the whole "Pharaoh, Pharoah let my people go" speal that we heard in VBS.

You might think that Moses would be jacked up to receive such a call! You would be wrong! Moses is not excited at all. In fact, he's terrified and almost flat out refuses. Why? Because he thinks he isn't good enough for this task. He's so consumed with worry that he misses God's promise, "I will be with you."

Eventually, Moses concedes and the second greatest rescue operation of all times begins. God is going to get his people from bondage. We call it the second greatest, because this is only a prequel to the real rescue. This time God is coming down and using Moses to save people from Egypt. The next time God comes, he's coming himself, and he's coming to save people from hell.



## Commentary

### Tyndale Old Testament Commentary

#### c. Meeting with God (3:1–4:31)

**3:1–6.** The vision of God. **1.** *Moses was keeping* the flock. The Hebrew suggests that this was his habitual occupation. There is no hint in the Bible that Midian was a copper-mining group, or that the Kenites were travelling blacksmiths, although both these views are favourites with modern scholars, and tempting archaeologically. There were certainly copper-mines in the Arabah south of the Dead Sea, and Israel in the wilderness is credited with making numerous copper objects (**Exod. 35ff.**), but further than this biblical tradition does not go.

*The west side of the wilderness:* Hebrew *'aḥar*, ‘back, behind’. This must be ‘west’ from the Midianite point of view, and therefore it may be a Midianite term. As usual in Semitic thought, one faces east when giving compass directions; ‘behind’ is therefore ‘west’. *Horeb, the mountain of God:* or possibly ‘Horeb, the great mountain’, using a common Semitic idiom to describe great size or force (cf. Arabic usage). Those who use the conventional critical symbols to describe the presumed source of the Pentateuch claim that ‘Horeb’ is found in the Elohist and Deuteronomistic material, while ‘Sinai’ is the name used in Yahwistic and Priestly material. We do not know why the two names are used, seemingly interchangeably. It has been suggested that Horeb is a part of Sinai, but this is pure guess-work. Horeb is demonstrably Semitic, probably meaning ‘desert’ or ‘desolation’. It is conceivable that it was the Semitic name for the non-Semitic place-name Sinai. Sinai must be an old name, and is probably connected etymologically with the desert of Sin nearby. It is doubtful etymology, however, to link the name either with *sēneh* (Heb. ‘thornbush’), or *Sin*, the Accadian moon god. More serious, apart from the question of its name, is the fact that we do not know where ‘God’s mountain’ (the popular term, as used in this verse) was. Was it within the Sinai Peninsula? If so, was it in the south (the traditional area) or in the north east among the mountains of Seir, overlooking the oasis of Kadesh Barnea, where Israel made her tribal centre for so long? Or was it in the mountains of Arabia, to the





north east of the Gulf of Aqaba? The general geographic details in the Bible seem to point to the southern area: and the traditional site of Ġebel Mûsa, ‘Moses’ mountain’ (7,467 feet), has much to commend it, though others will prefer the higher peaks nearby. It is noteworthy that, as in the exile in Babylon, this most striking event of Israel’s faith took place on foreign soil (cf. Abram’s call) and that later Israel seems neither to have known, nor cared, exactly where it was. Neither is there any suggestion of later pilgrimage to it, with the possible exception of the journey of Elijah (1 Kgs 19). Israel, however, knew that ‘God’s mountain’ lay somewhere to the south of Canaan. This is clear from the descriptions of God as coming to the help of his people from Paran or Seir or other vaguely defined mountains to the south (Deut. 33:2). This is in marked contrast to the Canaanite view, by which the gods lived on a mountain in the far north.

There is no evidence in biblical thought that the Israelites even considered that God lived at Sinai. Rather Sinai was the place at which he had shown himself to Moses (Exod. 3:2) and upon which he would later give the law to his people (Exod. 3:12). Sinai could therefore be said, in modern terminology, not so much to *be* God’s mountain as to *become* God’s mountain, because of what he did and said there: this is a dynamic not a static concept. God, in early days, might be worshipped at any place where he had appeared (Exod. 20:24), and Sinai is yet another example of this. True, there are numerous later Nabataean inscriptions in the area of Sinai, indicating that at least subsequently it was considered a holy mountain. On these grounds it has been claimed that it may already have been a holy place to the Midianites. This we can neither prove nor disprove, in view of the total lack of evidence. Moses at least did not come to the mountain with any religious intention, according to the text, but purely to pasture his flock.

2. *The angel of the Lord*: literally ‘messenger of YHWH’.<sup>4</sup> As verse 4 speaks of God himself calling to Moses out of the bush, ‘angel’ here is probably only a reverential synonym for God’s own presence, as in the patriarchal stories (Gen. 18:1; 19:1). Driver has some wise comments on this verse, quoting Davidson. Advanced angelology does not occur until the apocalyptic books of the Old Testament (Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah). Throughout the whole of the earlier period, it would be better to translate the word ‘angel’ as ‘messenger’ and leave it to the context to decide whether this emissary is human, superhuman, or simply a reverential way of referring to God himself, as apparently here. *In a flame of fire*. There may be a deliberate reminiscence of the Genesis story, where the



angel beings that guard the tree of life have flaming swords ([Gen. 3:24](#)). Fire is a symbol of God's presence when he descends on Sinai too ([Exod. 19:18](#)), as often in the Bible. [Exodus 13:21](#) speaks of God's guiding and protecting presence as a 'pillar of fire'. Perhaps the basis of this symbolism lies in the purificatory, as well as the destructive, properties of fire ([Deut. 4:24](#)); the metal refiner was a familiar sight in the ancient world ([Mal. 3:2](#)). Normally, however, fire seems to speak of God's holiness and, in particular, his anger in relation to sin ([Exod. 19:18](#); [32:10](#)).

*A bush.* This word appears also in [Deuteronomy 33:16](#), which clearly derives from this passage. 'Who dwells in the bush' ought not therefore to be seen as independent belief that God lived in that bush or its immediately surrounding area, but simply as a reference to God's local Self-manifestation on this occasion. What exactly did Moses see? Was it a supernatural vision (as in the case of some prophets, e.g. [Ezek. 1](#)) or was it an actual physical phenomenon? If the latter, did he see a bramble bush literally blazing in the desert; or the shrub called 'burning bush', in brilliant flower; or the sunset light falling full on a thorn bush and producing the effect of flames? All have been suggested in turn. It does not matter: whatever it was, God used Moses' initial curiosity to attract him to the place. The true revelation, however, was not the burning thorn bush, but God's word that came to Moses there.

**4. *God called to him.*** This is better than 'God called him'. The whole concept of Christian calling derives from the belief that God has communicated with us personally, and has called us by name. If we forget this, the doctrine of election can become unrelated to our obedience, and so impersonal, abstract and forbidding.

**5. *Do not come near.*** This should be translated 'stop coming near, as you are doing' (cf. [John 20:17](#)). God does not ultimately forbid men to approach him: but Moses is not yet ready, for he does not recognize the presence or nature of God. There will be times later when Moses will 'come near', to intercede for others ([Exod. 32:30](#)), and his greatest prayer will be to have this vision of God. *Take off your sandals.* This is still one of the Asian signs of worship. There are two possible origins of this mark of reverence. First, it may be the sign of acceptance of a servant's position, for a slave usually went barefoot ([Luke 15:22](#)). Secondly, it may be a relic of very early days when men laid aside all covering and pretence to approach their god. Hence early Sumerian priests performed their duties naked, although the Israelite priest always wore a linen kilt, for modesty's sake (cf. [Exod. 20:26](#)).



Bare feet, considered as a symbol, are not so appropriate for those who live in cold northern winters. *Holy ground*: made holy by the presence of God, and by the Self-revelation that he will make there. This is preferable, as stated above, to assuming that it was already a Midianite holy mountain, or even that it was a Midianite ‘holy bush’. Had it been, the son-in-law of Midian’s priest would surely have known all about it. ‘Holy’ bushes and trees are common throughout the world, from the old sacred trees of Canaan to the sacred banyans of India today, but this concept is not Israelite. Israel’s concept of holiness was not only dynamic but moral: it was constituted not only by the active revelation of God, but by the nature of the One who so revealed himself. This is the first occurrence of the word ‘holy’ in the Bible, and it is significant that the concept is linked with God.

**6. *The God of your father.*** The Samaritan text reads the plural ‘fathers’, referring to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as in the second half of the verse. This is certainly the general sense: the stress is not on Amram or even on Abraham, but on ‘the God of the fathers’.<sup>5</sup> This is a most important point and, if accepted, will affect exegesis of subsequent passages. Moses brings no new or unknown god to his people, but a fuller revelation of the One whom they have known. Not even Paul’s words to the Athenians on the Areopagus are a fair parallel here ([Acts 17:23](#)). The only true parallel is the continuing Self-revelation made by God in later centuries, culminating in the coming of Christ. Yet in its day the Mosaic revelation, while a fulfilment of patriarchal promises, was as new and shattering to Israel as the coming of the Messiah was later to prove to be.

**3:7–12. God’s call and God’s promise.** **7. *Taskmasters*:** almost ‘oppressors’; *nōgēs* is an interesting Semitic word, which appears in modern form as the title for the Emperor of Ethiopia (the ‘Negus’).

**8. *A land.*** This was part of the great promise to Abraham ([Gen. 13:15](#)). God meets us initially where we are, at our recognized point of need, however shallow, and from this he leads us on to acknowledgment of needs at a deeper level. God promised a childless man a son; a landless nomad a country; an unknown man fame ([Gen. 12:1–3](#)). Nor were these unworthy promises, for, in laying hold of these, Abraham was, at a deeper level, longing for the things that only God can give to man: continuity, stability, identity, as we might put them in modern terms. *Flowing with milk and honey*: ‘oozing’ would be a better translation. This is a dairyman’s metaphor: the drops of milk ooze from the animal’s teats, so full of





milk is she. This description of Canaan is a pastoralist's dream. Milk, curds, cheese and honey are not the produce of closely settled arable country. Cf. [Isaiah 7:22](#), where 'curds and honey' are the product of an area that has reverted from tilth to pasture, because of war. The phrase is a frequent and probably proverbial description in the Pentateuch of the hill country of Canaan, and is an accurate one, when Canaan is compared with the more arid country of Sinai or even with oases like Kadesh-barnea. The milk would be largely from sheep and goats. *Honey* (Heb. *dēbaš*) seems always in the Bible to mean honey from bees. Honey in Arabic is '*asal: dibs* to the Arab is sweet grape syrup, boiled to the consistency of fruit squash, so some have suggested this as the meaning of the Hebrew here. But the grape belongs to the life of cultivation, not primitive pastoralism: hence its avoidance by the Nazirite ([Num. 6:3](#)) and Rechabite ([Jer. 35:6](#)). Further, there is no evidence that Israel ever made such grape syrup.

*The Canaanites.* There follows a standard popular description of 'pre-war Canaan', not a scientific ethnography. The classic expression of the list is in [Deuteronomy 7:1](#), where there are seven peoples mentioned, made up by the addition of the Girgashites. Since this is the sacred number of seven, it may signify the totality of peoples; but [Genesis 15:19](#) gives the fullest list, with ten nations. Perhaps there is a reminiscence of the Egyptian way of describing their enemies in general as the 'nine bows', i.e. nine hostile nations. It is, however, important to realize that these 'nations' of Canaan are not mutually related to each other, as Israel's twelve tribes were. They may have shared a common cultural and religious pattern, but that is all. There is no evidence that they shared common historical traditions, in the way that Israel's tribes did: nor indeed have we evidence to show that they even lived in distinct and separate areas. *Canaanite* was the term still used long afterwards by the Phoenicians to describe themselves: it may mean 'traders'. *Hittites* probably means immigrant groups from the old Hittite empire in the north: it can hardly mean Hittites by blood (cf. [Gen. 23](#)). Sihon and Og, the semi-settled kings of east Jordan, are called *Amorite* ([Num. 21:21](#)); so is the coalition of five kings in the Judean hills ([Josh. 10:5](#)). By origin the word *amurru* means 'Westerner' and was given originally by the settled Mesopotamians to their nomadic neighbours to the west. *Perizzite* may be 'villager', perhaps used in a derogatory sense like modern 'pagan', but the suffix may be of Hurrian origin (cf. 'Kenizzite'). *Hivites* appear to be confused in the manuscripts with 'Horites'. If so, they would preserve the name, if not the blood, of the Hurrian conquerors of half a millennium before. The usual Egyptian name for Canaan (Khuru) seems derived from this





group. The Gibeonite confederacy is described as Hivite ([Josh. 9:7](#)). *Jebusites* are the aboriginal inhabitants of Jebus or Jerusalem (also called Amorites, [Josh. 10:5](#)). It is hard to see why they should be singled out, unless it is because they remained unconquered till David's day ([2 Sam. 5](#)). The Jebusites at least cannot have been a distinct racial grouping. Ezekiel certainly regards them as a mixture of Amorite and Hittite elements ([Ezek. 16:3](#)) and this seems very likely, from their position. In Joshua's day, they form part of the southern Amorite confederacy. Normally the Canaanites are the inhabitants of the western plains and valleys, while the Amorites loosely occupy the central mountain range, and northern Transjordan.

**10. *I will send you.*** [Davies](#) points out that this is the apostolic commission of Moses. There is no contradiction between God's announced intention of working in person and his sending Moses: God normally works through the willing obedience of his servants, accomplishing his will. This passage may well have been in Christ's mind when he gave a similar apostolic commission to his disciples in New Testament days ([John 20:21](#)).

**11. *Who am I?*** This is not an existential question, but an expression of disbelief (cf. [Judg. 6:15](#)). Moses, unlike his early days in Egypt, has learnt to distrust himself so thoroughly that he will incur God's anger ([Exod. 4:14](#)). Self-distrust is good, but only if it leads to trust in God. Otherwise it ends as spiritual paralysis, inability and unwillingness to undertake any course of action. Moses, like Elijah ([1 Kgs 19](#)), is a picture of a man who has had a 'nervous breakdown', and is now unwilling to work for God at all.

**12. *I will be with you.*** The phrase 'I will be' (Heb. *'ehyeh*) is almost certainly a play on YHWH, God's name, explained in verses [14](#) and [15](#). The only way to bring out the play on words in English would be to translate 'I, God, will be with you'. God answers Moses' objection as to his own inadequacy in two ways. First he promises his own presence; secondly he gives Moses a sign or proof that he is with him. After this Moses has no right to protest further. It is now no longer lack of self-reliance (which is good), but lack of faith (which is sin). *This shall be the sign for you.* In spite of various more sophisticated interpretations, the simplest explanation of the 'proof' seems best. The freed nation of ex-slaves will worship God one day at this very mountain of Sinai. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating, as we say. It will be the success of Moses' mission that will show beyond contradiction that God was indeed with him and had sent him. Such signs always follow faith. Meanwhile Moses must go forward in faith: this is typical of the whole



biblical approach to signs. The great covenant and the law-giving at Sinai was thus the fulfilment of this sign ([Exod. 19](#) onwards). This promise alone explains the insistence of Moses to pharaoh that Israel must keep a festival to YHWH in the desert ([Exod. 5:1](#)); only so can it be fulfilled.

**3:13–22.** God tells his name. **13.** *What is his name?* Some commentators stress the use of *mâ*, ‘What?’ in this instance, rather than the idiomatic *mî*, ‘Who?’ They regard it as a question dealing more with God’s nature than with his mere title. We cannot assume that the Israelites were ignorant of the titles of the God worshipped by their patriarchal ancestors, and presumably also worshipped by them during their stay in Egypt (but see Joshua’s blunt words in [Josh. 24:14](#)). It is true that the word translated *God* could also be translated as ‘gods of your fathers’: but the singular possessive suffix in ‘his name’ shows that only one God is in question. [Exodus 6:3](#) shows that Israel was quite aware that the patriarchs used the name El-Shaddai (*rsv* ‘God Almighty’) for God (cf. the proper name Ammi-shaddai in [Numbers 1:12](#)), along with many other titles. So the question of the Israelites does not spring from ignorance, nor is it a trick question framed to test Moses’ knowledge of the traditions of his own people. To ask the question, ‘Under what new title has God appeared to you?’ is equivalent to asking, ‘What new revelation have you received from God?’ Normally, in patriarchal days, any new revelation of the ancestral God will be summed up in a new title for him ([Gen. 16:13](#)) which will in future both record and recount a deeper knowledge of God’s saving activity. We may therefore assume that, in asking this question, they were expecting a new title for the patriarchal God.

**14.** *I am who I am* (Heb. *’ehyeh ’ăšer ’ehyeh*): possibly ‘I will be what I will be’. This pithy clause is clearly a reference to the name YHWH. Probably ‘Yahweh’ is regarded as a shortening of the whole phrase, and a running together of the clause into one word. The clause certainly contains the necessary vowels, and the consonants come close enough. Indeed *’ehyeh* (‘I am’ or ‘I will be’) is given as a form of God’s name in the second half of this verse. But this is almost certainly a Semitic punning assonance in explanation of the name, rather than the name itself, which appears in verse **15**. *’Ehyeh*, for instance, is never used as part of a proper name in the Old Testament. [Davies](#) rightly points out that since this is the only place in the Old Testament where there is any explanation of the meaning of the name YHWH, we ought therefore to take very seriously the association with ‘being’ which is clearly stated here. However, [Noth](#) rightly remarks that this is not ‘pure being’ in



a philosophical sense, but ‘active being’ in terms of revelation. Granted, however, the general connection with ‘being’, what is the exact meaning? Simplest of all, does it mean that God exists, as opposed to idols without being? Along these lines, Hyatt sees ‘I am He who is’ as a possible translation: he also sees [Hosea 1:9](#) as a possible reference to this meaning (in a negative sense). Does it mean ‘I am incomparable, inscrutable to human eyes’ ([Exod. 33:19](#))? This, though true, would hardly be a further revelation. Or does it mean ‘I will only be understood by my own subsequent acts and words of revelation’? This would seem to fit the biblical pattern, for in all subsequent Israelite history God would be known as the One who brought Israel from Egypt ([Exod. 20:2](#)). The revelation of the name therefore is not merely a deep theological truth; it is a call to the response of faith by Moses and by Israel.

**15. The Lord.** Here the full form of the divine name is used, YHWH, usually represented as Lord (in capitals) in English versions. The pious Jew of later years was reluctant to pronounce God’s name lest he incur the penalty for taking the name of YHWH in vain ([Exod. 20:7](#)). He therefore read the vowels of *’ādōnāy* ‘my Lord’, with the consonants of YHWH, so producing the hybrid ‘Jehovah’ in English.<sup>6</sup> This commentary follows one standard practice of writing God’s name as YHWH, in capitals without the vowels. Readers may please themselves as to whether they pronounce it as Lord, Jehovah or Yahweh. Perhaps the easiest way to understand what the name YHWH meant to the Jews is to see what it came to mean, as their history of salvation slowly unrolled. It ultimately meant to them what the name Jesus has come to mean to Christians, a ‘shorthand’ for all God’s dealings of grace.

**16. Elders.** This is the mention in Israel of what was a common institution in rural Semitic society. Thanks to the traditional advice of Jethro ([Exod. 18:21](#)), ‘elders’ were later to become an important part of Israel’s judicial system. No doubt tribalized Midian was so ruled already. [Numbers 11:16ff.](#) contains the account of the sharing of the Spirit’s gifts with this group. *I have surely visited you* (*av*, *rv*). The meaning is *observed* (*rsv*), ‘noted’, but always with a view to action. Driver translates ‘shown practical interest in’. The verb is often used in the Bible of God’s saving activity towards his people. See [Genesis 21:1](#); and [Luke 1:68](#), where the Hebraic tinge has entered the Greek. ‘Visit’ gives a wrong impression in modern English, as though God paid a brief call and then departed. The same root appears in connection with the Israelite officials of [5:6](#).





**18. *The God of the Hebrews.*** The name YHWH would mean nothing to pharaoh: the ‘gods of the Hebrews’ (for he would probably so understand the ‘plural of majesty’) would be meaningful. Indeed, this very terminology occurs in treaties of the time, not of course with reference to Israel, but in the wider context of Habiru groups further north. *Met with us.* If correct, this almost suggests hostile confrontation. So pharaoh may have understood it, from his experiences of the vagaries of Egyptian gods: so Moses may have been content for him to understand it, in order to convey the necessity of the coming sacrifice. It could, however, simply mean sudden unexpected meeting (cf. [Exod. 1:10](#), ‘if war befall us’).

*A three days’ journey into the wilderness.* There are three possibilities here: either Sinai was regarded as a three-day march from Goshen by the direct road; or else Moses is using a ruse to escape from Egypt; or else ‘three days’ is used loosely of a vague period of time. The first would be impossible unless, with some scholars, Sinai be placed at Ġebel el-Halal, on the ‘way of Shur’, in a straight line between Goshen and Kadesh.<sup>7</sup> Even then, only unencumbered adults could make the journey in three days. The third is quite possible: ‘yesterday and the third day back’ is the usual Hebrew phrase for ‘previously’ ([Exod. 5:7](#)). It is the second that poses the moral problem: did Moses ever intend to return? Abraham and Jacob ([Gen. 12](#) and [27](#)) and many other biblical characters lied to attain their purposes, although they are never commended for it, and in these two cases the Bible makes plain the harvest of suffering that deceit brings. But there is no necessity to assume actual deceit by Moses. True, it is unlikely that he ever intended to return, else he would not have pressed for women and children, flocks and herds, to accompany the men on this journey ([Exod. 10:9](#)). That pharaoh never expected them to return is clear from his violent reaction. The whole process is in fact a complicated piece of Oriental bargaining, like Abraham’s conversation with Ephron the Hittite ([Gen. 23](#)). Moses’ demand for complete freedom, though couched in polite words, is there from the start. Pharaoh gradually raises his offers: sacrifice within Egypt ([Exod. 8:25](#)); not too far away ([Exod. 8:28](#)); adult males alone may go ([Exod. 10:11](#)); all but the flocks may go ([Exod. 10:24](#)). To make a moral issue of such bargaining, or to use it as an ethical yardstick, is to misunderstand Eastern customs. This is a gusty folk narrative, like that of Jacob and Laban ([Gen. 30](#)): we may pass moral judgments on it, but it is doubtful if the original narrator did. This was not the purpose of the story. Some commentators have felt that Moses deliberately made the demand as low as this in order to give pharaoh every chance of granting it. If he was so stubborn as to refuse even this, there was no hope: he was without excuse.





*Sacrifice.* **Davies** and others stress that Moses proclaims a *ḥag*, ‘a pilgrimage feast’ to a holy site. But the Hebrew verb here is *zābah*, the ordinary word for sacrifice, with no necessary location implied. Presumably the reference is to the covenant sacrifice at Sinai (**Exod. 24**). The whole event will be a vindication of **Exodus 3:12**, where ‘serve’ has probably a sacrificial nuance.

**19. Unless compelled:** so the **lxx**, reading ‘*im lō*’ for *wēlō*’. But the older translation could stand, if the text is understood as ‘no, not even when smitten heavily’ referring to pharaoh’s stubbornness.

**20. Wonders:** *niplā’ôt* is perhaps the nearest Hebrew word etymologically to ‘miracles’, but its connotation is very different. We think of ‘miracle’ as a transcending, suspension or reversal of the natural order. The Hebrew thinks of it as a marvellous use of the natural order, by the God who created it and controls it. In one sense, therefore, the Hebrew did not distinguish between the ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’, for all was God’s work. The plagues of Egypt are the series of ‘wonders’ meant here, although the crossing of the sea and desert sustenance and guidance are other examples.

**22. Despoil the Egyptians.** Of course the ornaments were not ‘borrowed’ from the Egyptians (**av**), but ‘asked’, so that moral indignation is again out of place. **Daube**, partly on the basis of this passage, sees the whole of the exodus story as told in language appropriate to the freeing of the Hebrew slave, described in **Deuteronomy 15:12–18**. He must not be sent out ‘empty-handed’ (verse **21**): he must be compensated for his years of slavery. So Israel must be compensated for her trials in Egypt: so too, when Christ triumphs over death, he showers gifts on his freed people (**Eph. 4:8**). It is hard to say which came first. Either the process of manumission of a Hebrew slave affected the language here, or else Israel’s foundation experience of salvation affected her formulation of the slave laws later. The first view is quite unexceptionable, provided that we do not say that the process of manumission actually created the facts of the exodus story.

**4:1–9. The three signs. 1. YHWH did not appear.** Moses accepted the reality of the revelation of God: but will his people do so? The promised sign of sacrifice at God’s mountain will not be enough for them, for it demands initial faith (like the sign of Christ’s resurrection, **Matt. 12:39**) and that very faith they will not have. He pleads for signs at a lower level, signs that may induce faith if not create it, and validate his call in the eyes of



Israel. John the Baptist was never given the power to perform ‘signs’ of this sort ([John 10:41](#)); Christ refused to do them ([Matt. 12:39](#)), but many Old Testament characters were granted such validating evidence (e.g. [Isa. 7:11](#)). This passage does not necessarily imply that Israel already knew the name of YHWH. The narrator or Moses may simply be using the new name to denote the familiar patriarchal God ([Exod. 6:3](#)). As the sentence is a strong denial, we might paraphrase by saying ‘our ancestral God never appeared to you’. Moses is still thinking of that bitter experience of [Exodus 2:14](#), ‘Who made you a prince and a judge?’

2. *A rod.* Probably the familiar shepherd’s crook of [Psalm 23:4](#). In verse [20](#) it is called God’s rod, as being used in signs, and in [Exodus 7:9](#) it is used by Aaron. Those who trace sources emphasize the point that in the J tradition, it is a shepherd’s rod in Moses’ hand; in the E stream, it is a miraculous ‘God’s rod’ (verse [20](#)), while in priestly material, it is a staff in Aaron’s hands ([Exod. 7:9](#)). Such apparent ‘inconsistencies’ are however only verbal, natural to oral tradition, and only assure us that we have independent witnesses to the trustworthiness of the tradition.

3. *A snake or serpent:* *nāḥāš*, the usual Hebrew word. [Numbers 21:9](#) uses this word as explanation of the ‘seraph’, or serpent, that attacked Israel in the wilderness, and of which an image was to be put on a pole, but the incident is not a true parallel. [Exodus 4:30](#) refers to the actual performance of this (verse [3](#)) and the other signs in the presence of the Israelites (apparently by Aaron rather than Moses). In [Exodus 7:9, 10](#) Aaron performs this sign again, this time before the unbelieving pharaoh. There, however, the Hebrew word used for snake is *tannin*, which might well mean a lizard or even young crocodile ([Driver](#)), appropriate on the Nile bank.

9. *If they will not believe even these two signs*, then a third more impressive sign is given. These three may well be taken together, as of a similar type. They are all three signs of a more superficial nature, and designed to promote belief. Israel they convince ([4:31](#)); to pharaoh, they are unconvincing ([7:13, 23](#)). There is no direct evidence of the use of the sign of leprosy before pharaoh, but see the story of Miriam’s leprosy and healing in [Numbers 12](#). What the exact nature of these signs was, we cannot now say. We can tell how they are described in Scripture, and how therefore they must have appeared: a rod turned into a snake, a leprous hand healed, water turned into blood. Some take them literally, as what we would call supernatural manifestations of God’s power. Others seek to find God, the Lord



of nature, working in what we would call natural ways. Others regard them as spiritual metaphors. The last we may rule out at once: metaphors would never convince oppressed slaves, let alone pharaoh. Some outward signs there must have been, whether the first or second explanation is correct, or whether indeed the truth lies in a combination of the two. Probably we do wrong to draw any such distinction between the two: it certainly would not have occurred to a Hebrew to do so. However God chooses to work, whether through his created world or independently of it, it is his work and, like Israel, we must bow our heads and worship (verse 31).

**4:10–17.** Aaron, Moses' mouth-piece. **10.** *Or since thou hast spoken.* There is an implicit criticism of God here. Not even the meeting with God has given the lacking gift of eloquence. Compare **Exodus 5:23** for a similar rebuke. Such an attitude to God is culpable, but very natural and common, not least among the saints of the Old Testament covenant (Jeremiah, the psalmist and Job are noted instances). Like Peter's failings, these lovable faults bring them very close to us, since we see ourselves only too clearly in them. *I am slow of speech:* lit. 'heavy of mouth'. This vividly expresses the frustration of the man who knows that he cannot speak (cf. Paul in **2 Cor. 10:10**, for a similar rueful admission). We are never told that Moses' self-estimate was incorrect. He is blamed for making excuses, not necessarily because the reasons given are untrue, but because they indicate lack of faith. Moses expresses the same sense of inadequacy by referring to his 'uncircumcised' lips in **Exodus 6:12**, which **Driver** explains as 'lips which speak with difficulty', although the idea may be rather 'unclean lips', as in **Isaiah 6:5**.

**11.** *Who has made man's mouth?* The phrase reads, if translated literally, 'who has set a mouth in man?' The thought behind the older translations 'who has created' is not wrong. God in sovereign power divides his gifts among men as he chooses. The step from this sovereignty to the thought of creation is very small indeed (although the Genesis verb 'create' is not actually used). The thought of creation is specially appropriate here, since it is God the Creator, the Lord of nature, who will give Moses the signs as credentials. *Or seeing.* Some want to correct the text so as to read 'lame' by altering two consonants (*piṣṣēah* instead of *piqqēah*) on the grounds that the other three conditions are physical disabilities. But it is equally possible that the words are to be read as two pairs: 'sighted' and 'blind' would go well together and mean, by the Hebrew idiom, 'all men' (cf. 'good and evil' in **Gen. 2:17**).





**13.** *Send ... some other person.* This is the true meaning of the polite Hebrew phrase, ‘send now by the hand that you will send’ (cf. [av](#), [rv](#), [neb](#)), and it is therefore not surprising that God’s anger was aroused. The phrase in itself is typically Semitic, when further particularization is either impossible or undesirable (cf. note on [Exod. 33:19](#)).

**14.** *Aaron, your brother, the Levite:* ‘brother’ is in the literal sense here. Elsewhere it can be understood as ‘fellow clansman’ or even ‘fellow Israelite’ (cf. [Lev. 19:17](#)). ‘The Levite’ seems an odd way for one member of Levi’s tribe to be described to another member of the same tribe, unless it was Aaron’s common nickname to distinguish him from various other Aarons in Egypt. Perhaps it is a later title for Aaron unconsciously used by the story-teller here, just as Moses’ later surname was ‘the servant of YHWH’ ([Deut. 34:5](#)) or ‘the man of God’ (title of [Ps. 90](#)). [Driver](#) suggests that ‘Levite’, if it had the technical priestly sense of ‘teacher’, might in itself convey the idea of the ability to speak, in this context. *He is coming out to meet you.* [Exodus 4:27](#) refers to this. Possibly Aaron was bringing the good news of [Exodus 2:23](#), that the older ‘pharaoh of the oppression’ was dead. Events were to show the new pharaoh to be no better: but at least Moses was no longer a ‘wanted man’. [Exodus 4:19](#) does not necessarily mean a direct revelation from God to Moses. It could refer to a message or visit from Aaron, bringing the news (cf. [4:27](#)), though this is not the most natural explanation. The thought seems to be rather the ‘timing’ of God, by which Moses and Aaron were independently led to this meeting. Cf. the meeting of Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch in [Acts 8:26, 27](#).

**15.** *I ... will teach you.* The Hebrew word for ‘teach’ contains the same root as *tôrâ*, ‘instruction’, especially used in later times as a title for the law of Moses. There may be a hint of the later meaning here.

**16.** *A mouth ... as God.* ‘Mouth’ is for ‘mouth-piece’. Elsewhere the relationship between Moses and Aaron is compared to that between God and prophet ([Exod. 7:1](#)): for the prophet, God must ‘put the words in his mouth’ (verse [15](#)).

**4:18–20.** Moses leaves Midian. **18.** Moses must first drive the flocks back to Jethro, wherever the Midianite settlement was (was it only a seasonal camp?). Then, unlike Jacob ([Gen. 31](#)), he obtains his father-in-law’s permission to depart with wife and family, who seem, in patriarchal days, still to have been considered as under the father-in-law’s



authority (cf. the position of the wife of the married slave who wishes to leave his master, [Exod. 21:4](#)).

**19. *All are dead.*** God's word to Moses, however conveyed, is couched in language that is echoed in [Matthew 2:20](#), with reference to Herod's death. As Moses is also God's chosen instrument, and has had a miraculous deliverance from death, the parallel is the more appropriate. Presumably *in Midian* is used loosely, to cover Sinai as well (as not being in Egypt).

**20. *His sons.*** By an easy correction (*běnō* for *bānāyw*) some editors would read the singular 'son', since only Gershom has been mentioned as yet ([Exod. 2:22](#)). But, although unmentioned, Eleazer must have been already born ([Exod. 18:4](#)) and, if so, the plural is more appropriate. Here is an earlier 'holy family' going by donkey to Egypt (cf. [Matt. 2:13](#)).

**4:21–23. Israel, God's first-born. 21. *I will harden his heart.*** This sometimes appears to us as a moral problem, but unfairly, because the Bible uses, side by side, three different ways of describing the same situation, with no sense of internal contradiction. Three different Hebrew verbs are used, but there is no essential difference in their meaning. Sometimes it is said that God hardens pharaoh's heart, as here. Sometimes pharaoh is said to harden his own heart, as in [Exodus 8:15](#). Sometimes the position is described neutrally, by saying that pharaoh's heart was hardened, as in [Exodus 7:13](#). Even to the Western scholar, it is a problem of theological interpretation, not one of history and fact. No-one doubts that pharaoh was stubborn, that he had an iron will and purpose, that he found it impossible to change his pattern of thought and adjust to new ideas. These and more are all implied in the biblical 'hard-hearted', which does not refer to emotion, as in English, but to mind, will, intelligence and response. Often 'dull-witted' would be a good translation. Different theological schools have battled over this passage in past centuries. Paul (in [Rom. 9:14–18](#)) uses it as an example not only of the absolute power and inscrutable will of God, but also of his merciful dealing with men. Paul, at the last, must find refuge in the knowledge of the absolute justice of God, as all of us must. However, the Hebrew writer did not even see a problem here. To him, God was the first cause of everything, without in any sense denying the reality, and moral responsibility, of the human agent involved. To see this ambivalence as the mark of two conflicting sources is to come perilously close to ignoring Hebrew psychology. The same train of thought will allow the Hebrew to see the crossing of



the Red Sea as due to God's sovereign action, and yet as due to a conjunction of tide and wind ([Exod. 14](#)). These are not mutually exclusive explanations, nor even equally valid alternative explanations. To the Hebrew they are essentially the same explanation, phrased differently. [Driver](#) says: 'The means by which God hardens a man is not necessarily by any extraordinary intervention on His part; it may be by the ordinary experiences of life, operating through the principles and character of human nature, which are of His appointment.' This is thoroughly Hebraic. A similar example of Semitic thought-form is to be found in the Lord's stated reason for couching truth in parables ([Mark 4:12](#)).

**22, 23. *My first-born.*** This is the first introduction of the 'first-born' theme in the book (cf. [Gen. 22](#)). Passover, unleavened bread and the redemption of Israelite first-born are inextricably linked with the events of Exodus (cf. [Exod. 11:4](#) for reappearance) and therefore doubtless in Israel's religious thought afterwards. The connection is very simple and patterned on the 'lex talionis', a fundamental principle of Hebrew law ([Exod. 21:23](#)). Israel, considered collectively, is God's first-born,<sup>8</sup> presumably as being his chosen people and as 'first-fruits' of all the peoples ([Jer. 31:9](#); [2:3](#)). If pharaoh will not give God's first-born up to God, to whom all first-born belong in any case, then pharaoh's own first-born must die instead. Since 'Israel' is collective here, it is reasonable to suppose that 'pharaoh' is also a collective term; thus 'your first-born' includes all the first-born in the land. Otherwise we should have to assume that the original reference was to pharaoh's son alone and no others. 'First-born' also conveys the thought of 'the choicest' in Egypt: this would again include a wider circle than pharaoh's immediate family.

**4:24–26. Moses, the 'blood bridegroom'.** This is an obscure passage, even to early Jewish commentators, yet its very obscurity and the problems that it raises show it to be a genuine piece of Mosaic tradition (cf. [Gen. 6:1–4](#)). It is connected with the necessity of circumcision, the 'covenant sign' given by God to Abraham and his descendants ([Gen. 17:10](#)), which Moses' son apparently did not yet bear, perhaps owing to his birth in Midian (but see [Jer. 9:25, 26](#) for circumcision in these areas). At all events, its acceptance on this occasion is another forging of the link between the new revelation at Sinai and the 'God of the fathers', since circumcision was the patriarchal sign. Compare the ceremonial circumcision of the generation born in the desert, before embarkation on the 'holy war' against Canaan ([Josh. 5:7](#)). Circumcision is a symbol of putting away all that is displeasing to God, and of dedication to God for the task ahead. But this dedication to God is only





man's response of obedience to God's prior grace and calling ([Gen. 17:10](#)). True circumcision is an inward, not an outward, matter ([Jer. 9:26](#); [Rom. 2:29](#)). It had of course, like much of the Mosaic law, great hygienic value, although this was presumably unknown to the original recipients. That circumcision was widely practised in other surrounding countries need not disturb us: not the nature of the sign, but the thing signified, is important.

**24. *A lodging place:*** a 'caravanserai' where travellers may camp for the night. Such an 'overnight camp' or 'halting place', always by water, is not an anachronism, provided that we rid our minds of the modern associations of the 'inn' of the older translations. The 'good Samaritan' found a more sophisticated version on the Jericho road ([Luke 10:34](#)). A larger group would have pitched a 'caravan camp', but this is a lonely traveler, with his wife and child. *Sought to kill him.* 'Him' is ambiguous, and could refer to either Moses or Gershom; the natural presumption would, however, be Moses. On the other hand, if the 'him' refers to Gershom, then there is a closer link with the context (death of the first-born), as showing how Moses' first-born nearly died. Some have assumed that Moses, like his son, did not bear the sign of the covenant on his body, but this is unnecessary (Moses was a baby in a Hebrew home) and unlikely in view of the known Egyptian practice. In any case he was struck down by some dangerous sickness or other blow as the sign of God's displeasure.

**25. *A flint.*** This is the flint knife used in [Joshua 5:2](#), showing the archaic nature of the custom. Such stones are common in the desert. Perhaps the stone knife, as a natural object, uncontaminated by human hand, is more fit for God's service. For the same reason YHWH's altar must be unhewn natural stones ([Exod. 20:25](#)). At best, men can only mar God's creation by their workmanship. *Touched Moses' feet with it:* see modern translations and footnotes. This is a better translation than the old 'cast it at his feet'. However, the Hebrew does not contain the word 'Moses', but simply says 'his feet', leaving the identity of the person unsolved.

**26. *A bridegroom of blood.*** The exact meaning of the phrase, in the original context, is now lost to us. Later the phrase was sometimes used of the circumciser: but this may be purely a late development, based on this text. [Davies](#) well says that the point here is the necessity of circumcision, and not the 'when' or 'upon whom' it is practiced.



**4:27–31.** The mission begins. **27.** *The wilderness:* better ‘the grazing land’. Aaron now receives his revelation, ensuring that the two brothers meet halfway between Egypt and Midian at the holy mountain. This has suggested to some that Israel, even when in Egypt, was aware of this sacred place. Moses’ experience at the lodging place must have taken place between Midian and the mountain: this certainly would support the eastward position of Midian, on whichever side of the gulf it was.

**30.** *Aaron spoke all the words.* Aaron, as promised, is Moses’ spokesman and, presumably as such, does the ‘signs’ before Israel. It is assumed, but not stated, that Israel was unbelieving at first. They certainly showed unbelief later, on many occasions.

**31.** *They heard:* better, ‘they rejoiced’ (with the alteration of one letter in the unpointed text), following **lxx**. This makes better sense, as their response of joy to the ‘gospel’, now preached to them, and confirmed by such signs.

## Matthew Henry’s Commentary

### Chapter 3

As prophecy had ceased for many ages before the coming of Christ, that the revival and perfection of it in that great prophet might be the more remarkable, so vision had ceased (for aught that appears) among the patriarchs for some ages before the coming of Moses, that God’s appearances to him for Israel’s salvation might be the more welcome; and in this chapter we have God’s first appearance to him in the bush and the conference between God and Moses in that vision. Here is, I. The discovery God was pleased to make of his glory to Moses at the bush, to which Moses was forbidden to approach too near (v. 1–5). II. A general declaration of God’s grace and good-will to his people, who were beloved for their fathers’ sakes (v. 6). III. A particular notification of God’s purpose concerning the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt. 1. He assures Moses it should now be done (v. 7–9). 2. He gives him a commission to act in it as his ambassador both to Pharaoh (v. 10) and to Israel (v. 16). 3. He answers the objection Moses made of his own unworthiness (v. 11, 12). 4. He



gives him full instructions what to say both to Pharaoh and to Israel (v. [13–18](#)). 5. He tells him beforehand what the issue would be (v. [19](#), etc.).

### Verses [1–6](#)

The years of the life of Moses are remarkably divided into three forties: the first forty he spent as a prince in Pharaoh's court, the second a shepherd in Midian, the third a king in Jeshurun; so changeable is the life of men, especially the life of good men. He had now finished his second forty, when he received his commission to bring Israel out of Egypt. Note, Sometimes it is long before God calls his servants out of that work which of old he designed them for, and has been graciously preparing them for. Moses was born to be Israel's deliverer, and yet not a word is said of it to him till he is eighty years of age. Now observe,

I. How this appearance of God to him found him employed. He was keeping the flock (tending sheep) near mount Horeb, v. [1](#). This was a poor employment for a man of his parts and education, yet he rests satisfied with it, and thus learns meekness and contentment to a high degree, for which he is more celebrated in sacred writ than for all his other learning. Note, 1. In the calling to which we are called we should abide, and not be given to change. 2. Even those that are qualified for great employments and services must not think it strange if they be confined to obscurity; it was the lot of Moses before them, who foresaw nothing to the contrary but that he should die, as he had lived a great while, a poor despicable shepherd. Let those that think themselves buried alive be content to shine like lamps in their sepulchres, and wait till God's time come for setting them on a candlestick. Thus employed Moses was, when he was honoured with this vision. Note, (1.) God will encourage industry. The shepherds were keeping their flocks when they received the tidings of our Saviour's birth, [Lu. 2:8](#). Satan loves to find us idle; God is well pleased when he find us employed. (2.) Retirement is a good friend to our communion with God. When we are alone, the Father is with us. Moses saw more of God in a desert than ever he had seen in Pharaoh's court.

II. What the appearance was. To his great surprise he saw a bush burning, when he perceived no fire either from earth or heaven to kindle it, and, which was more strange, it did not consume, v. [2](#). It was an angel of the Lord that appeared to him; some think, a created angel, who speaks in the language of him that sent him; others, the second person,





the angel of the covenant, who is himself Jehovah. It was an extraordinary manifestation of the divine presence and glory; what was visible was produced by the ministry of an angel, but he heard God in it speaking to him. 1. He saw a flame of fire; *for our God is a consuming fire*. When Israel's deliverance out of Egypt was promised to Abraham, he saw a burning lamp, which signified the light of joy which that deliverance should cause ([Gen. 15:17](#)); but now it shines brighter, as a flame of fire, for God in that deliverance brought terror and destruction to his enemies, light and heat to his people, and displayed his glory before all. See [Isa. 10:17](#). 2. This fire was not in a tall and stately cedar, but in a bush, *a thorny bush*, so the word signifies; for God chooses the weak and despised things of the world (such as Moses, now a poor shepherd), with them to confound the wise; he delights to beautify and crown the humble. 3. *The bush burned, and yet was not consumed*, an emblem of the church now in bondage in Egypt, burning in the brick-kilns, yet not consumed; perplexed, but not in despair; cast down, but not destroyed.

III. The curiosity Moses had to enquire into this extraordinary sight: *I will turn aside and see*, v. 3. He speaks as one inquisitive and bold in his enquiry; whatever it was, he would, if possible, know the meaning of it. Note, Things revealed belong to us, and we ought diligently to enquire into them.

IV. The invitation he had to draw near, yet with a caution not to come too near, nor rashly.

1. God gave him a gracious call, to which he returned a ready answer, v. 4. When God saw that he took notice of the burning bush, and turned aside to see it, and left his business to attend it, then God called to him. If he had carelessly neglected it as an *ignis fatuus*—*a deceiving meteor*, a thing not worth taking notice of, it is probable that God would have departed, and said nothing to him; but, when he turned aside, God called to him. Note, Those that would have communion with God must attend upon him, and approach to him, in those ordinances wherein he is pleased to manifest himself, and his power and glory, though it be in a bush; they must come to the treasure, though in an earthen vessel. Those that seek God diligently shall find him, and find him their bountiful rewarder. *Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you*. God called him by name, *Moses, Moses*. This which he heard could not but surprise him much more than what he saw. The word of the Lord always went along with the glory of the Lord, for every divine vision was designed for divine revelation, [Job 4:16](#), etc.; [32:14–15](#). Divine calls are then effectual, (1.) When the



Spirit of God makes them particular, and calls us by name. The word calls, *Ho, every one!* The Spirit, by the application of that, calls, *Ho, such a one! I know thee by name*, [Ex. 33:12](#). (2.) When we return an obedient answer to them, as Moses here, “*Here am I, what saith my Lord unto his servant? Here am I*, not only to hear what is said, but to do what I am bidden.”

2. God gave him a needful caution against rashness and irreverence in his approach, (1.) He must keep his distance; draw near, but not too near; so near as to hear, but not so near as to pry. His conscience must be satisfied, but not his curiosity; and care must be taken that familiarity do not breed contempt. Note, In all our approaches to God, we ought to be deeply affected with the infinite distance there is between us and God, [Eccl. 5:2](#). Or this may be taken as proper to the Old-Testament dispensation, which was a dispensation of darkness, bondage, and terror, from which the gospel happily frees us, giving us boldness to enter into the holiest, and inviting us to draw near. (2.) He must express his reverence, and his readiness to obey: *Put off thy shoes from off thy feet*, as a servant. Putting off the shoe was then what putting off the hat is now, a token of respect and submission. “The ground, for the present, is *holy ground*, made so by this special manifestation of the divine presence, during the continuance of which it must retain this character; therefore tread not on that ground with soiled shoes.” *Keep thy foot*, [Eccl. 5:1](#). Note, We ought to approach to God with a solemn pause and preparation; and, though bodily exercise alone profits little, yet we ought to glorify God with our bodies, and to express our inward reverence by a grave and reverent behaviour in the worship of God, carefully avoiding everything that looks light, and rude, and unbecoming the awfulness of the service.

V. The solemn declaration God made of his name, by which he would be known to Moses: *I am the God of thy father*, v. [6](#). 1. He lets him know that it is God who speaks to him, to engage his reverence and attention, his faith and obedience; for this is enough to command all these: *I am the Lord*. Let us always hear the word *as the word of God*, [1 Th. 2:13](#). 2. He will be known as the God of his father, his pious father Amram, and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, his ancestors, and the ancestors of all Israel, for whom God was now about to appear. By this God designed, (1.) To instruct Moses in the knowledge of another world, and to strengthen his belief of a future state. Thus it is interpreted by our Lord Jesus, the best expositor of scripture, who from this proves that the dead are raised, against the Sadducees. *Moses*, says he, *showed it at the bush* ([Lu. 20:37](#)), that is, God there



showed it to him, and in him to us, [Mt. 22:31](#), etc. Abraham was dead, and yet God is the God of Abraham; therefore Abraham's soul lives, to which God stands in relation; and, to make his soul completely happy, his body must live again in due time. This promise made unto the fathers, that God would be their God, must include a future happiness; for he never did anything for them in this world sufficient to answer to the vast extent and compass of that great word, but, having prepared for them a city, he is not ashamed to be called their God, [Heb. 11:16](#); and see [Acts 26:6, 7; 24:15](#). (2.) To assure Moses of the fulfillment of all those particular promises made to the fathers. He may confidently expect this, for by these words it appears that God remembered his covenant, ch. [2:24](#). Note, [1.] God's covenant-relation to us as our God is the best support in the worst of times, and a great encouragement to our faith in particular promises. [2.] When we are conscious to ourselves of our own great unworthiness we may take comfort from God's relation to our fathers, [2 Chr. 20:6](#).

VI. The solemn impression this made upon Moses: He *hid his face*, as one both ashamed and afraid to look upon God. Now that he knew it was a divine light his eyes were dazzled with it; he was not afraid of a burning bush till he perceived that God was in it. Yea, though God called himself *the God of his father*, and a God in covenant with him, yet he was afraid. Note, 1. The more we see of God the more cause we shall see to worship him with reverence and godly fear. 2. Even the manifestations of God's grace and covenant-love should increase our humble reverence of him.

### Verses [7–10](#)

Now that Moses had put off his shoes (for, no doubt, he observed the orders given him, v. [5](#)), and covered his face, God enters upon the particular business that was now to be concerted, which was the bringing of Israel out of Egypt. Now, after forty years of Israel's bondage and Moses's banishment, when we may suppose both he and they began to despair, they of being delivered and he of delivering them, at length, the time has come, even the year of the redeemed. Note, God often comes for the salvation of his people when they have done looking for him. *Shall he find faith?* [Lu. 18:8](#).

Here is, I. The notice God takes of the afflictions of Israel (v. [7, 9](#)): *Seeing I have seen*, not only, *I have surely seen*, but I have strictly observed and considered the matter. Three things God took cognizance of: 1. *Their sorrows*, v. [7](#). It is likely they were not permitted to





make a remonstrance of their grievances to Pharaoh, nor to seek relief against their task-masters in any of his courts, nor scarcely durst complain to one another; but God observed their tears. Note, Even the secret sorrows of God's people are known to him. 2. Their cry: *I have heard their cry* (v. 7), *it has come unto me*, v. 9. Note, God is not deaf to the cries of his afflicted people. 3. The tyranny of their persecutors: *I have seen the oppression*, v. 9. Note, As the poorest of the oppressed are not below God's cognizance, so the highest and greatest of their oppressors are not above his check, but he will surely visit for these things.

II. The promise God makes of their speedy deliverance and enlargement: *I have come down to deliver them*, v. 8. 1. It denotes his resolution to deliver them, and that his heart was upon it, so that it should be done speedily and effectually, and by methods out of the common road of providence: when God does something very extraordinary he is said to *come down* to do it, as [Isa. 64:1](#). 2. This deliverance was typical of our redemption by Christ, in which the eternal Word did indeed come down from heaven to deliver us: it was his errand into the world. He promises also their happy settlement in the land of Canaan, that they should exchange bondage for liberty, poverty for plenty, labour for rest, and the precarious condition of tenants at will for the ease and honour of lords proprietors. Note, Whom God by his grace delivers out of a spiritual Egypt he will bring to a heavenly Canaan.

III. The commission he gives to Moses in order hereunto, v. 10. He is not only sent as a prophet to Israel, to assure them that they should speedily be delivered (even that would have been a great favour), but he is sent as an ambassador to Pharaoh, to treat with him, or rather as a herald at arms, to demand their discharge, and to denounce war in case of refusal; and he is sent as a prince to Israel, to conduct and command them. Thus is he taken from *following the ewes great with young*, to a pastoral office much more noble, as David, [Ps. 78:71](#). Note, God is the fountain of power, and the powers that be are ordained of him as he pleases. The same hand that now fetched a shepherd out of a desert, to be the planter of a Jewish church, afterwards fetched fishermen from their ships, to be the planters of the Christian church, *That the excellency of the power might be of God*.

Verses [11–15](#)



God, having spoken to Moses, allows him also a liberty of speech, which he here improves; and,

I. He objects his own insufficiency for the service he was called to (v. 11): *Who am I?* He thinks himself unworthy of the honour, and not *par negotio*—*equal to the task*. He thinks he wants courage, and therefore cannot go to Pharaoh, to make a demand which might cost the demandant his head: he thinks he wants skill, and therefore cannot bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt; they are unarmed, undisciplined, quite dispirited, utterly unable to help themselves; it is morally impossible to bring them out. 1. Moses was incomparably the fittest of any man living for this work, eminent for learning, wisdom, experience, valour, faith, holiness; and yet he says, *Who am I?* Note, The more fit any person is for service commonly the less opinion he has of himself: see [Judge. 9:8](#), etc. 2. The difficulties of the work were indeed very great, enough to startle the courage and stagger the faith of Moses himself. Note, Even wise and faithful instruments may be much discouraged at the difficulties that lie in the way of the church's salvation. 3. Moses had formerly been very courageous when he slew the Egyptian, but now his heart failed him; for good men are not always alike bold and zealous. 4. Yet Moses is the man that does it at last; for God gives grace to the lowly. Modest beginnings are very good presages.

II. God answers this objection, v. 12. 1. He promises him his presence: *Certainly I will be with thee*, and that is enough. Note, Those that are weak in themselves may yet do wonders, being strong in the Lord and in the power of his might; and those that are most diffident of themselves may be most confident in God. God's presence puts an honour upon the worthless, wisdom and strength into the weak and foolish, makes the greatest difficulties dwindle to nothing, and is enough to answer all objections. 2. He assures him of success, and that the Israelites should serve God upon this mountain. Note, (1.) Those deliverances are most valuable which open to us a door of liberty to serve God. (2.) If God gives us opportunity and a heart to serve him, it is a happy and encouraging earnest of further favours designed us.

III. He begs instructions for the executing of his commission, and has them, thoroughly to furnish him. He desires to know by what name God would at this time make himself known, v. 13.



1. He supposes the children of Israel would ask him, *What is his name?* This they would ask either, (1.) To perplex Moses: he foresaw difficulty, not only in dealing with Pharaoh, to make him willing to part with them, but in dealing with them, to make them willing to remove. They would be scrupulous and apt to cavil, would bid him produce his commission, and probably this would be the trial: “Does he know the name of God? Has he the watch-word?” Once he was asked, *Who made thee a judge?* Then he had not his answer ready, and he would not be nonplussed so again, but would be able to tell in whose name he came. Or, (2.) For their own information. It is to be feared that they had grown very ignorant in Egypt, by reason of their hard bondage, want of teachers, and loss of the sabbath, so that they needed to be told the first principles of the oracles of God. Or this question, *What is his name?* amounted to an enquiry into the nature of the dispensation they were now to expect: “How will God in it be known to us, and what may we depend upon from him?”

2. He desires instructions what answer to give them: “*What shall I say to them?* What name shall I vouch to them for the proof of my authority? I must have something great and extraordinary to say to them; what must it be? If I must go, let me have full instructions, that I may not run in vain.” Note, (1.) It highly concerns those who speak to people in the name of God to be well prepared beforehand. (2.) Those who would know what to say must go to God, to the word of his grace and to the throne of his grace, for instructions, [Eze. 2:7; 3:4, 10, 17](#). (3.) Whenever we have any thing to do with God, it is desirable to know, and our duty to consider, what is his name.

IV. God readily gives him full instructions in this matter. Two names God would now be known by:—

1. A name that denotes what he is in himself (v. [14](#)): *I am that I am*. This explains his name *Jehovah*, and signifies, (1.) That he is self-existent; he has his being of himself, and has no dependence upon any other: the greatest and best man in the world must say, By the grace of God *I am what I am*; but God says absolutely—and it is more than any creature, man or angel, can say—*I am that I am*. Being self-existent, he cannot but be self-sufficient, and therefore all-sufficient, and the inexhaustible fountain of being and bliss. (2.) That he is eternal and unchangeable, and always the same, yesterday, to-day, and for ever; he will be what he will be and what he is; see [Rev. 1:8](#). (3.) That we cannot by searching find him out. This is such a name as checks all bold and curious enquiries concerning God, and in effect





says, *Ask not after my name, seeing it is secret*, **Jdg. 13:18**; **Prov. 30:4**. Do we ask what is God? Let it suffice us to know that he is what he is, what he ever was, and ever will be. *How little a portion is heard of him!* **Job 26:14**. (4.) That he is faithful and true to all his promises, unchangeable in his word as well as in his nature, and not a man that he should lie. Let Israel know this, *I AM hath sent me unto you*.

2. A name that denotes what he is to his people. Lest that name *I AM* should amuse and puzzle them, he is further directed to make use of another name of God more familiar and intelligible: *The Lord God of your fathers hath sent me unto you* (v. **15**): Thus God had made himself known to him (v. **6**), and thus he must make him known to them, (1.) That he might revive among them the religion of their fathers, which, it is to be feared, was much decayed and almost lost. This was necessary to prepare them for deliverance, **Ps. 80:19**. (2.) That he might raise their expectations of the speedy performance of the promises made unto their fathers. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, are particularly named, because with Abraham the covenant was first made, and with Isaac and Jacob often expressly renewed; and these three were distinguished from their brethren, and chosen to be the trustees of the covenant, when their brethren were rejected. God will have this to be his name for ever, and it has been, is, and will be, his name, by which his worshippers know him, and distinguish him from all false gods; see **1 Ki. 18:36**. Note, God's covenant-relation to his people is what he will be ever mindful of, what he glories in, and what he will have us never forget, but give him the glory of: if he will have this to be his memorial unto all generations, we have all the reason in the world to make it so with us, for it is a precious memorial.

## Verses **16–22**

Moses is here more particularly instructed in his work, and informed beforehand of his success. 1. He must deal with the elders of Israel, and raise their expectation of a speedy removal to Canaan, v. **16, 17**. He must repeat to them what God had said to him, as a faithful ambassador. Note, That which ministers have received of the Lord they must deliver to his people, and keep back nothing that is profitable. Lay an emphasis on that, v. **17**: *"I have said, I will bring you up;* that is enough to satisfy them, *I have said it:"* hath he spoken, and will he not make it good? With us saying and doing are two things, but they are not so with God, for he is in one mind and who can turn him? *"I have said it, and all the world cannot gainsay it. My counsel shall stand."* His success with the elders of Israel would be good; so he is told (v. **18**): *They shall hearken to*



*thy voice*, and not thrust thee away as they did forty years ago. He who, by his grace, inclines the heart, and opens the ear, could say beforehand, *They shall hearken to thy voice*, having determined to make them willing in this day of power. 2. He must deal with the king of Egypt (v. 18), he and the elders of Israel, and in this they must not begin with a demand, but with a humble petition; that gentle and submissive method must be first tried, even with one who, it was certain, would not be wrought upon by it: *We beseech thee, let us go*. Moreover, they must only beg leave of Pharaoh to go as far as Mount Sinai to worship God, and say nothing to him of going quite away to Canaan; the latter would have been immediately rejected, but the former was a very modest and reasonable request, and his denying it was utterly inexcusable and justified them in the total deserting of his kingdom. If he would not give them leave to go and sacrifice at Sinai, justly did they go without leave to settle in Canaan. Note, The calls and commands which God sends to sinners are so highly reasonable in themselves, and delivered to them in such a gentle winning way, that the mouth of the disobedient must needs be for ever stopped. As to his success with Pharaoh, Moses is here told, (1.) That petitions, and persuasions, and humble remonstrances, would not prevail with him, no, nor a mighty hand stretched out in signs and wonders: *I am sure he will not let you go*, v. 19. Note, God sends his messengers to those whose hardness and obstinacy he certainly knows and foresees, that it may appear he would have them turn and live. (2.) That plagues should compel him to it: *I will smite Egypt*, and then he will *let you go*, v. 20. Note, Those will certainly be broken by the power of God's hand that will not bow to the power of his word; we may be sure that *when God judges he will overcome*. (3.) That his people should be more kind to them, and furnish them at their departure with abundance of plate and jewels, to their great enriching: *I will give this people favour in the sight of the Egyptians*, v. 21, 22. Note, [1.] God sometimes makes the enemies of his people, not only to be at peace with them, but to be kind to them. [2.] God has many ways of balancing accounts between the injured and the injurious, of righting the oppressed, and compelling those that have done wrong to make restitution; for he sits in the throne judging right.



This chapter, I. Continues and concludes God's discourse with Moses at the bush concerning this great affair of bringing Israel out of Egypt. 1. Moses objects the people's unbelief (v. 1), and God answers that objection by giving him a power to work miracles, (1.) To turn his rod into a serpent, and then into a rod again (v. 2–5). (2.) To make his hand leprous, and then whole again (v. 6–8). (3.) To turn the water into blood (v. 9). 2. Moses objects his own slowness of speech (v. 10), and begs to be excused (v. 13); but God answers this objection, (1.) By promising him his presence (v. 11, 12). (2.) By joining Aaron in commission with him (v. 14–16). (3.) By putting an honour upon the very staff in his hand (v. 17). II. It begins Moses's execution of his commission. 1. He obtains leave of his father-in-law to return into Egypt (v. 18). 2. He receives further instructions and encouragements from God (v. 19, 21–23). 3. He hastens his departure, and takes his family with him (v. 20). 4. He meets with some difficulty in the way about the circumcising of his son (v. 24–26). 5. He has the satisfaction of meeting his brother Aaron (v. 27, 28). 6. He produces his commission before the elders of Israel, to their great joy (v. 29–31). And thus the wheels were set a going towards that great deliverance.

### Verses 1–9

It was a very great honour that Moses was called to when God commissioned him to bring Israel out of Egypt; yet he is with difficulty persuaded to accept the commission, and does it at last with great reluctance, which we should rather impute to a humble diffidence of himself and his own sufficiency than to any unbelieving distrust of God and his word and power. Note, Those whom God designs for preferment he clothes with humility; the most fit for service are the least forward.

I. Moses objects that in all probability the people would not *hearken to his voice* (v. 1), that is, they would not take his bare word, unless he showed them some sign, which he had not been yet instructed to do. This objection cannot be justified, because it contradicts what God had said (ch. 3:18), *They shall hearken to thy voice*. If God says, *They will*, does it become Moses to say, *They will not*? Surely he means, “Perhaps they will not at first, or some of them will not.” If there should be some gainsayers among them who would question his commission, how should he deal with them? And what course should he take to convince them? He remembered how they had once rejected him, and feared it would be so again. Note, 1. Present discouragements often arise from former disappointments. 2.





Wise and good men have sometimes a worse opinion of people than they deserve. Moses said (v. 1), *They will not believe me*; and yet he was happily mistaken, for it is said (v. 31), *The people believed*; but then the signs which God appointed in answer to this objection were first wrought in their sight.

II. God empowers him to work miracles, directs him to three particularly, two of which were now immediately wrought for his own satisfaction. Note, True miracles are the most convincing external proofs of a divine mission attested by them. Therefore our Saviour often appealed to his works (as [Jn. 5:36](#)), and Nicodemus owns himself convinced by them, [Jn. 3:2](#). And here Moses, having a special commission given him as a judge and lawgiver to Israel, has this seal affixed to his commission, and comes supported by these credentials.

1. The rod in his hand is made the subject of a miracle, a double miracle: it is but thrown out of his hand and it becomes a serpent; he resumes it and it becomes a rod again, v. 2–4. Now, (1.) Here was a divine power manifested in the change itself, that a dry stick should be turned into a living serpent, a lively one, so formidable a one that Moses himself, on whom, it should seem, it turned in some threatening manner, *fled from before it*, though we may suppose, in that desert, serpents were no strange things to him; but what was produced miraculously was always the best and strongest of the kind, as the water turned to wine: and, then, that this living serpent should be turned into a dry stick again, this was the Lord's doing. (2.) Here was an honour put upon Moses, that this change was wrought upon his throwing it down and taking it up, without any spell, or charm, or incantation: his being empowered thus to act under God, out of the common course of nature and providence, was a demonstration of his authority, under God, to settle a new dispensation of the kingdom of grace. We cannot imagine that the God of truth would delegate such a power as this to an impostor. (3.) There was a significance in the miracle itself. Pharaoh had turned the rod of Israel into a serpent, representing them as dangerous ([ch. 1:10](#)), causing their belly to cleave to the dust, and seeking their ruin; but now they should be turned into a rod again: or, thus Pharaoh had turned the rod of government into the serpent of oppression, from which Moses had himself fled into Midian; but by the agency of Moses the scene was altered again. (4.) There was a direct tendency in it to convince the children of Israel that Moses was indeed sent of God to do what he did, v. 5. Miracles were for signs to those that believed not, [1 Co. 14:22](#).



2. His hand itself is next made the subject of a miracle. He puts it once into his bosom, and takes it out leprous; he puts it again into the same place, and takes it out well, v. 6, 7. This signified, (1.) That Moses, by the power of God, should bring sore diseases upon Egypt, and that, at his prayer, they should be removed. (2.) That whereas the Israelites in Egypt had become leprous, polluted by sin, and almost consumed by oppression (a leper is *as one dead*, Num. 12:12), by being taken into the bosom of Moses they should be cleansed and cured, and have all their grievances redressed. (3.) That Moses was not to work miracles by his own power, nor for his own praise, but by the power of God and for his glory; the leprous hand of Moses does for ever exclude boasting. Now it was supposed that, if the former sign did not convince, this latter would. Note, God is willing more abundantly to show the truth of his word, and is not sparing in his proofs; the multitude and variety of the miracles corroborate the evidence.

3. He is directed, when he shall come to Egypt, to turn some of the water of the river into blood, v. 9. This was done, at first, as a sign, but, not gaining due credit with Pharaoh, the whole river was afterwards turned into blood, and then it became a plague. He is ordered to work this miracle in case they would not be convinced by the other two. Note, Unbelief shall be left inexcusable, and convicted of a wilful obstinacy. As to the people of Israel, God had said (ch. 3:18), *They shall hearken*; yet he appoints these miracles to be wrought for their conviction, for he that has ordained the end has ordained the means.

#### Verses 10–17

Moses still continues backward to the service for which God had designed him, even to a fault; for now we can no longer impute it to his humility and modesty, but must own that here was too much of cowardice, slothfulness, and unbelief in it. Observe here,

##### I. How Moses endeavours to excuse himself from the work.

1. He pleads that he was no good spokesman: *O my Lord! I am not eloquent*, v. 10. He was a great philosopher, statesman, and divine, and yet no orator; a man of a clear head, great thought, and solid judgment, but had not a voluble tongue, or ready utterance, and therefore he thought himself unfit to speak before great men about great affairs, and in danger of being run down by the Egyptians. Observe, (1.) We must not judge of men by the readiness and fluency of their discourse. Moses was *mighty in word* (Acts 7:22), and yet not



eloquent: what he said was strong and nervous, and to the purpose, and distilled as the dew (**Deu. 32:2**), though he did not deliver himself with that readiness, ease, and elegance, that some do, who have not the tenth part of his sense. St. Paul's speech was contemptible, **2 Co. 10:10**. A great deal of wisdom and true worth is concealed by a slow tongue. (2.) God is pleased sometimes to make choice of those as his messengers who have fewest of the advantages of art or nature, that his grace in them may appear the more glorious. Christ's disciples were no orators, till the Spirit made them such.

2. When this plea was overruled, and all his excuses were answered, he begged that God would send somebody else on this errand and leave him to keep sheep in Midian (v. **13**): "Send by any hand but mine; thou canst certainly find one much more fit." Note, An unwilling mind will take up with a sorry excuse rather than none, and is willing to devolve those services upon others that have any thing of difficulty or danger in them.

II. How God condescends to answer all his excuses. Though *the anger of the Lord was kindled against him* (v. **14**), yet he continued to reason with him, till he had overcome him. Note, Even self-diffidence, when it grows into an extreme—when it either hinders us from duty or clogs us in duty, or when it discourages our dependence upon the grace of God—is very displeasing to him. God justly resents our backwardness to serve him, and has reason to take it ill; for he is such a benefactor as is before-hand with us, and such a rewarder as will not be behind-hand with us. Note further, God is justly displeased with those whom yet he does not reject: he vouchsafes to reason the case even with his froward children, and overcomes them, as he did Moses here, with grace and kindness.

1. To balance the weakness of Moses, he here reminds him of his own power, v. **11**. (1.) His power in that concerning which Moses made the objection: *Who has made man's mouth? Have not I the Lord?* Moses knew that God made man, but he must be reminded now that God made man's mouth. An eye to God as Creator would help us over a great many of the difficulties which lie in the way of our duty, **Ps. 124:8**. God, as the author of nature, has given us the power and faculty of speaking; and from him, as the fountain of gifts and graces, comes the faculty of speaking well, the *mouth and wisdom* (**Lu. 21:15**), the *tongue of the learned* (**Isa. 50:4**); he *pours grace into the lips*, **Ps. 45:2**. (2.) His power in general over the other faculties. Who but God *makes the dumb and the deaf, the seeing and the blind*? [1.] The perfections of our faculties are his work, he makes the *seeing*; he formed the eye (**Ps. 94:9**); he opens the understanding, the eye of the mind, **Lu. 24:45**. [2.] Their





imperfections are from him too; he make the *dumb*, and *deaf*, and *blind*. Is there any evil of this kind, and the Lord has not done it? No doubt he has, and always in wisdom and righteousness, and for his own glory, **Jn. 9:3**. Pharaoh and the Egyptians were made deaf and blind spiritually, as **Isa. 6:9, 10**. But God knew how to manage them, and get himself honour upon them.

2. To encourage him in this great undertaking, he repeats the promise of his presence, not only in general, *I will be with thee* (ch. **3:12**), but in particular, *“I will be with thy mouth,* so that the imperfection in thy speech shall be no prejudice to thy message.” It does not appear that God did immediately remove the infirmity, whatever it was; but he did that which was equivalent, he taught him what to say, and then let the matter recommend itself: if others spoke more gracefully, none spoke more powerfully. Note, Those whom God employs to speak for him ought to depend upon him for instructions, and *it shall be given them what they shall speak*, **Mt. 10:19**.

3. He joins Aaron in commission with him. He promises that Aaron shall meet him opportunely, and that he will be glad to see him, they having not seen one another (it is likely) for many years, v. **14**. He directs him to make use of Aaron as his spokesman, v. **16**. God might have laid Moses wholly aside, for his backwardness to be employed; but he considered his frame, and ordered him an assistant. Observe, (1.) Two are better than one, **Eccl. 4:9**. God will have his two witnesses (**Rev. 11:3**), that out of their mouths every word may be established. (2.) Aaron was the brother of Moses, divine wisdom so ordering it, that their natural affection one to another might strengthen their union in the joint execution of their commission. Christ sent his disciples two and two, and some of the couples were brothers. (3.) Aaron was the elder brother, and yet he was willing to be employed under Moses in this affair, because God would have it so. (4.) Aaron could speak well, and yet was far inferior to Moses in wisdom. God dispenses his gifts variously to the children of men, that we may see our need one of another, and each may contribute something to the good of the body, **1 Co. 12:21**. The tongue of Aaron, with the head and heart of Moses, would make one completely fit for this embassy. (5.) God promises, *I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth*. Even Aaron, that could speak well, yet could not speak to purpose unless God was with his mouth; without the constant aids of divine grace the best gifts will fail.

4. He bids him take the rod with him in his hand (v. **17**), to intimate that he must bring about his undertaking rather by acting than by speaking; the signs he should work with



this rod might abundantly supply the want of eloquence; one miracle would do him better service than all the rhetoric in the world. *Take this rod*, the rod he carried as a shepherd, that he might not be ashamed of that mean condition out of which God called him. This rod must be his staff of authority, and must be to him instead both of sword and sceptre.

### Verses 18–23

Here, I. Moses obtains leave of his father-in-law to return into Egypt, v. 18. His father-in-law had been kind to him when he was a stranger, and therefore he would not be so uncivil as to leave his family, nor so unjust as to leave his service, without giving him notice. Note, The honour of being admitted into communion with God, and of being employed for him, does not exempt us from the duties of our relations and callings in this world. Moses said nothing to his father-in-law (for aught that appears) of the glorious manifestation of God to him; such favours we are to be thankful for to God, but not to boast of before men.

II. He receives from God further encouragements and directions in his work. After God had appeared to him in the bush to settle a correspondence, it should seem, he often spoke to him, as there was occasion, with less overwhelming solemnity. And, 1. He assures Moses that the coasts were clear. Whatever new enemies he might make by his undertaking, his old enemies were *all dead, all that sought his life*, v. 19. Perhaps some secret fear of falling into their hands was at the bottom of Moses's backwardness to go to Egypt, though he was not willing to own it, but pleaded unworthiness, insufficiency, want of elocution, etc. Note, God knows all the temptations his people lie under, and how to arm them against their secret fears, [Ps. 142:3](#). 2. He orders him to do the miracles, not only before the elders of Israel, but before Pharaoh, v. 21. There were some alive perhaps in the court of Pharaoh who remembered Moses when he was the son of Pharaoh's daughter, and had many a time called him a fool for deserting the honours of that relation; but he is now sent back to court, clad with greater powers than Pharaoh's daughter could have advanced him to, so that it might appear he was no loser by his choice: this wonder-working rod did more adorn the hand of Moses than the sceptre of Egypt could have done. Note, Those that look with contempt upon worldly honours shall be recompensed with the honour that cometh from God, which is the true honour. 3. That Pharaoh's obstinacy might be no surprise nor discouragement to him, God tells him before that he would *harden his heart*. Pharaoh had



hardened his own heart against the groans and cries of the oppressed Israelites, and shut up the bowels of his compassion from them; and now God, in a way of righteous judgment, hardens his heart against the conviction of the miracles, and the terror of the plagues. Note, Ministers must expect with many to labour in vain: we must not think it strange if we meet with those who will not be wrought upon by the strongest arguments and fairest reasonings; yet our judgment is with the Lord. 4. Words are put into his mouth with which to address Pharaoh, v. 22, 23. God had promised him (v. 12), *I will teach thee what thou shalt say*; and here he does teach him. (1.) He must deliver his message in the name of the great Jehovah: *Thus saith the Lord*; this is the first time *that* preface is used by any man which afterwards is used so frequently by all the prophets: whether Pharaoh will hear, or whether he will forbear, Moses must tell him, *Thus saith the Lord*. (2.) He must let Pharaoh know Israel's relation to God, and God's concern for Israel. *Is Israel a servant? is he a home-born slave?* Jer. 2:14. "No, *Israel is my son, my firstborn, precious in my sight, honourable*, and dear to me, not to be thus insulted and abused." (3.) He must demand a discharge for them: "*Let my son go*; not only my servant whom thou hast no right to detain, but my son whose liberty and honour I am very jealous for. It is my son, my son that serves me, and therefore must be spared, must be pleaded for," Mal. 3:17. (4.) He must threaten Pharaoh with the death of the first-born of Egypt, in case of a refusal: *I will slay thy son, even thy firstborn*. As men deal with God's people, let them expect to be themselves dealt with; with the froward he will wrestle.

III. Moses addresses himself to this expedition. When God had assured him (v. 19) that the men were dead who sought his life, immediately it follows (v. 20), *he took his wife, and his sons*, and set out for Egypt. Note, Though corruption may object much against the services God calls us to, yet grace will get the upper hand, and will be obedient to the heavenly vision.

#### Verses 24–31

Moses is here going to Egypt, and we are told,

I. How God met him in anger, v. 24–26. This is a very difficult passage of story; much has been written, and excellently written, to make it intelligible; we will try to make it improving. Here is,





1. The sin of Moses, which was neglecting to circumcise his son. This was probably the effect of his being unequally yoked with a Midianite, who was too indulgent of her child, while Moses was too indulgent of her. Note, (1.) We have need to watch carefully over our own hearts, lest fondness for any relation prevail above our love to God, and take us off from our duty to him. It is charged upon Eli that he *honoured his sons more than God* ([1 Sa. 2:29](#)); and see [Mt. 10:37](#). (2.) Even good men are apt to cool in their zeal for God and duty when they have long been deprived of the society of the faithful: solitude has its advantages, but they seldom counterbalance the loss of Christian communion.

2. God's displeasure against him. He met him, and, probably by a sword in an angel's hand, sought to kill him. This was a great change; very lately God was conversing with him, and lodging a trust in him, as a friend; and now he is coming forth against him as an enemy. Note, (1.) Omissions are sins, and must come into judgment, and particularly the contempt and neglect of the seals of the covenant; for it is a sign that we undervalue the promises of the covenant, and are displeased with the conditions of it. He that has made a bargain, and is not willing to seal and ratify it, one may justly suspect, neither likes it nor designs to stand to it. (2.) God takes notice of, and is much displeased with, the sins of his own people. If they neglect their duty, let them expect to hear of it by their consciences, and perhaps to feel from it by cross providences: for this cause many are sick and weak, as some think Moses was here.

3. The speedy performance of the duty for the neglect of which God had now a controversy with him. His son must be circumcised; Moses is unable to circumcise him; therefore, in this case of necessity, Zipporah does it, whether with passionate words (expressing her dislike of the ordinance itself, or at least the administration of it to so young a child, and in a journey), as to me it seems, or with proper words—solemnly expressing the espousal of the child to God by the covenant of circumcision (as some read it) or her thankfulness to God for sparing her husband, giving him a new life, and thereby giving her, as it were, a new marriage to him, upon her circumcising her son (as others read it)—I cannot determine: but we learn, (1.) That when God discovers to us what is amiss in our lives we must give all diligence to amend it speedily, and particularly return to the duties we have neglected. (2.) The putting away of our sins is indispensably necessary to the removal of God's judgements. This is the voice of every rod, it calls to us to return to him that smites us.



4. The release of Moses thereupon: *So he let him go*; the distemper went off, the destroying angel withdrew, and all was well: only Zipporah cannot forget the fright she was in, but will unreasonably call Moses *a bloody husband*, because he obliged her to circumcise the child; and, upon this occasion (it is probable), he sent them back to his father-in-law, that they might not create him any further uneasiness. Note, (1.) When we return to God in a way of duty he will return to us in a way of mercy; take away the cause, and the effect will cease. (2.) We must resolve to bear it patiently, if our zeal for God and his institutions be misinterpreted and discouraged by some that should understand themselves, and us, and their duty, better, as David's zeal was misinterpreted by Michal; but if this be to be vile, if this be to be bloody, we must be yet more so. (3.) When we have any special service to do for God we should remove as far from us as we can that which is likely to be our hindrance. *Let the dead bury their dead, but follow thou me.*

II. How Aaron met him in love, v. 27, 28. 1. God sent Aaron to meet him, and directed him where to find him, in the wilderness that lay towards Midian. Note, The providence of God is to be acknowledged in the comfortable meeting of relations and friends. 2. Aaron made so much haste, in obedience to his God, and in love to his brother, that he met him *in the mount of God*, the place where God had met with him. 3. They embraced one another with mutual endearments. The more they saw of God's immediate direction in bringing them together the more pleasant their interview was: they *kissed*, not only in token of brotherly affection, and in remembrance of ancient acquaintance, but as a pledge of their hearty concurrence in the work to which they were jointly called. 4. Moses informed his brother of the commission he had received, with all the instructions and credentials affixed to it, v. 28. Note, What we know of God we should communicate for the benefit of others; and those that are fellow-servants to God in the same work should use a mutual freedom, and endeavour rightly and fully to understand one another.

III. How the elders of Israel met him in faith and obedience. When Moses and Aaron first opened their commission in Egypt, said what they were ordered to say, and, to confirm it, did what they were ordered to do, they met with a better reception than they promised themselves, v. 29–31. 1. The Israelites gave credit to them: *The people believed*, as God had foretold (ch. 3:18), knowing that no man could do those works that they did, unless God were with him. They gave glory to God: *They bowed their heads and worshipped*, therein expressing not only their humble thankfulness to God, who had raised them up and sent



them a deliverer, but also their cheerful readiness to observe orders, and pursue the methods of their deliverance.