

EXODUS

Chapter 1

Verses 8-22

Beginning explains how Israel came under Egyptian bondage. The rapid population growth was a fulfilment of God's covenant with Abraham, but it also led to trouble with the Egyptians. God had foreseen this when he first spoke to Abraham (Genesis 15:13).

Joseph probably came to power during the time of the Hyksos (Asiatic) Pharaoh's (1750 – 1550 BC) probably around 1700-1650 BC, and after they were overthrown a hatred of foreigners is understandable. Also it's very understandable that the new leaders wouldn't like those who served the old leaders in a senior capacity.

Although the Exodus is the central event of Israel's history it is very difficult to define where and when it took place. The most likely period is the first half of the 13th century BC because (i) the Israel stele of Pharaoh Merneptah claims that he subdued Israel in Canaan in around 1209 BC, thus the Exodus must have taken place at least some fifty or sixty years before that, and (ii) the store city of Raamses referred to in Exodus 1:11 is most likely Pi-Rameses built by Rameses II just after 1300 BC and the Exodus must have taken place after that.

Verse 10 suggests that Egyptian policy was to limit population growth and stop the Israelites becoming even more numerous. The NIV translation "to leave the country" could better be rendered "to dominate the land" or "take possession of the land".

Verse 11 – the Pharaoh's proposal was accepted. The Israelites became a suppressed race – slave labour.

Verses 12-13 The oppression policy backfired – instead of reducing the Israelite population it kept increasing. The opposition was increased, but it had the opposite effect of what would be expected.

Verse 14 The Egyptians kept increasing heir oppression. "work" Hebrew root word abad later used for service to Yahweh – at this point Israel was under the control of Pharaoh.

Verses 15-22 Much time has elapsed. Now begins the penultimate stage of the forced population control program—directly killing Israelites. It is not quite the ultimate stage because the pharaoh was at this point trying to get Israelites themselves (i.e., midwives) to kill Israelites (i.e., male newborns) subtly, whereas the ultimate state comes with v. 22, where children are killed openly by Egyptians themselves.

These verses are about Moses – he was endangered by the birth control programme but was saved. Recent archaeological evidence supports this as graveyards consisting almost entirely of females has been found.

The midwives were probably named as heroines in Israel's early history because they helped defeat Pharaoh's objectives. Their names mean Dawn or Fair and Fragrant or Splendid. They were surely just the senior midwives.

Verse 19 the midwives have prepared a reply which may not have been entirely a lie.

Verse 22 the final stage of the genocide, no more subterfuge. The Nile was like a sewer and took away anything that wasn't wanted. It was also the giver and taker of life.

Later God would kill lot's of Egyptian boys (Pharaoh's army) by drowning them in the Red Sea.

Chapter 2

Verses 1-15

Verse 1

Shows that Moses was a Levite – very appropriate for his future calling to provide religious and spiritual leadership.

Verse 2

Could better be translated she wanted or longed to keep him [her son]

Verse 3

Hebrew word *tebah* best translated *ark* rather than basket – this word is only elsewhere found in the Genesis accounts of the flood. Clearly there is a strong likeness between Moses and Noah – they were both rescuers.

This ark was made of papyrus (as perhaps were many items of furniture in Egypt since virtually all of the population lived close to the Nile, where papyrus grew abundantly; wood was very costly, available mainly by importation by sea). It may have been a piece of storage furniture that Moses' parents already owned or that they bought for this new, special purpose. Jochebed's special contribution was sealing it with tar (bitumen/asphalt, abundant in many places in Egypt) and pitch (a term used for various sorts of tar mixtures and tarry substances, possibly plant sap, though less likely actual tree sap in light of the paucity of larger trees in Egypt). Nothing in the text suggests that this was an especially brilliant or especially desperate method of attempting to hide a baby—only that Moses' mother was doing her best to protect him.

Verse 4

This introduces Miriam. The family was together in protecting Moses. Miriam was probably older than Aaron (who was 3 at this time) – Exodus 7:7. Miriam was probably between 6 and 12 (older and she'd have been expected to work younger and incapable of participating as she did).

Verses 5-6

Moses is discovered, but God delivers him in a wonderful way. The Nile was sacred for the Egyptians, no doubt that's why Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe in it. Her recognition that Moses was a Hebrew boy (*yeled*, which the NIV unfortunately neuters both times in this verse to "baby") probably was predicated on four things at least: the general physical differences between Hebrews and Egyptians, the type of baby clothes used, the fact that her discovery occurred in an Israelite settlement area, and the general situation (the need to hide Israelite baby boys but not Egyptian baby boys).

Verses 7-8

Miriam controlled the action: she apparently didn't run when the Egyptian women arrived but remained at her post and affected curiosity when the baby was found. She must have been close enough to the action to overhear the princess's various expressions of concern for the boy (e.g., "He's crying!" "He must be hungry!" "I can't leave him like this!"), and Miriam wisely volunteered a wet nurse she knew well (her own mother). The turning point of the story is contained in a one-word command, that of the princess: "Go"! With that decision of the king's daughter, Moses' protection was assured.

Verses 9-10

God's special provision for Moses cannot be missed. The baby boy once in grave peril received royal protection, his own mother raised him in his early years, she was actually paid to care for him, and the princess formally adopted him as evidenced by her giving him an Egyptian name. Pharaoh's daughter didn't seem to worry about contradicting her Father's orders, she had no hesitation in doing what she did.

The boy must have remained with his mother at this stage (and there's no question of her being invited into Pharaoh's household) – Pharaoh's daughter says take the boy away *hiphil of halak*. Normally babies were nursed for several years before weaning.

Moses is eventually adopted into Pharaoh's household, but Moses probably continued to have contact with his family. He's given a common name meaning "son" or "to beget a son" because it sounds something like *mōšēh*, the active participle of the verb *māšāh*, "draw out," which connects to the circumstances of Moses' discovery and being "drawn out" of the water.

Verses 11-12

The story jumps ahead 36 or so years. His childhood and adolescence had nothing to contribute to the story, so it's skipped over (note how Jesus' childhood and adolescence were skipped over in the gospels).

These two verses explain how Moses had by this time identified with the Israelites over against the Egyptians and how his zeal against the oppression of his people got him into trouble. This was his first attempt at delivering his people—acting alone and in secret and relying on his own strength and wisdom—and though it failed miserably, it certainly shows the strength of Moses' sentiments on behalf of his people. Twice in v. 11 the phrase *'eḥāyw*, "his own people" (lit., "his brothers"), serves to orient the reader to the fact that Moses saw himself by this point as an Israelite, not an Egyptian.

There appears to be thus some degree of premeditation in Moses' act, as indicated in the statement that "he looked this way and that" (NIV "glancing" gives the incorrect impression that Moses did the whole thing on the spur of the moment). Hiding the man in the sand would be a rather natural thing to do since burying a body is the fastest, best way to conceal it in a part of the world characterized by little foliage, a largely flat terrain, and plenty of sand.

Verses 13-14

Tell us why Moses had to leave Egypt. In hindsight Moses could admit to weakness: not only the weakness of being afraid, but also the weakness of being rejected by the man who said, "Who made you ruler and judge over us?"—clearly an expression of resentment against this johnny-come-lately styling himself as a defender of the Hebrews. It is not difficult to

imagine why Moses was disliked or why the news about his murderous act had spread so far so fast: an Egyptian overseer was missing, an investigation probably was underway or soon would be, and there was every likelihood that the Hebrews would be blamed and severely punished for the overseer's murder. Such a situation would become the talk of the community and would easily surface someone's admission, "I saw who did it!" What Moses had tried to do had, from his people's point of view, backfired. He had taken matters into his own hands, and his arrogance in doing so probably was going to get a lot of people in trouble.

The Hebrew who in this instance spoke back to him, however, in effect anticipated the later attitude of the leaders of the Hebrews, who would repeatedly look at what Moses was trying to do as damaging to their interests, in spite of the fact that Moses would intend it as deliverance (5:19–21; Exod 17:3; Num 14:2; Deut 1:27). This is in the nature of leadership: the best attempts to help are sometimes faulty in themselves, yet even when proper and magnanimous, they can provoke the resentment of those who fail to appreciate how they are being led. As would often be the case with Jesus, Moses was here not recognized/accepted readily by his own people. He eagerly wanted to help them; they were suspicious that he represented trouble.

Verse 15

Moses was in danger of death at various times by various persons. The earlier story of his rescue as a baby reflects a general attempt to kill Israelite male children, Moses included. Now he is sought for murder by a presumably enraged Pharaoh, since testimony during the investigation of the crime must have pointed directly to Moses, and the king could hardly have been unmoved by the implications of a turncoat Hebrew-raised-as-an-Egyptian now killing Egyptian work supervisors! Later, Moses would be threatened with death from his own people (e.g., Exod 17:4), and his firstborn son, threatened by God himself (see comments on 4:24–26).

But, it's all part of God's plan.

Where, then, could he go that would be relatively safe from Egyptian influence, relatively hospitable to an Israelite (speaking a related language and sharing some customs), and relatively easy to get to from northeast Egypt, where his flight originated? Even in the short time Moses probably had to gather his things and flee, the answer must have seemed obvious to him: Midian. The Midianites were descended from Abraham through his wife Keturah (Gen 25:2) and occupied sparsely (i.e., to the extent that such regions can support population) portions of the central and northern Sinai peninsula in addition to their main location, northwestern Arabia, so that Midianites could be encountered in that day from the Arabian gulf in the south to the plains of Moab in the north. Though the Midianites in most of their history were enemies of the Israelites (as were most other Semitic groups as well), a single Israelite on the run from Egypt, a country that had often tried to dominate the Midianites, would not necessarily represent a threat but perhaps even something of a kindred spirit. Moreover, the relatively independent and isolated Midianites were just the sort of people to seek refuge among for a fugitive like Moses.

The final clause, "where he sat down by a well," brings the story to a specific location, where the fugitive, looking for some place to settle, will have yet another opportunity to intervene in a dispute on behalf of the oppressed and in so doing will also begin to meet those with whom he will live and work for the next forty years. In the largely barren Sinai wilderness, a well was a necessity for human and domesticated animal life, a meeting place, a community

center; roads led to it, and travelers sought it out. For Moses, “a certain well” would be the beginning point of a new life.

Verses 16-25

Verses 16-19

Having to flee from Egypt hadn't blunted Moses' for intervening against injustice. He acted even though alone and with the odds against him. He may have had Egyptian military training, certainly he was physically strong enough to drive off the shepherds and do the work that seven girls were planning to do.

Verses 20-22

An invitation to dinner leads to betrothal and we jump ahead in time to the birth of Moses' first son.

From Moses' point of view, he was now permanently separated both from what he regarded as his homeland, Egypt, and also from the people he now identified with as his own, Israel. Consider, then, the spiritual challenge that was his. He was a failure as a deliverer of his people, a failure as a citizen of Egypt, unwelcome among either of the nations he might have called his own, a wanted man, a now-permanent resident of an obscure place, alone and far from his origins, and among people of a different religion (however much or little Midianite religion may have shared some features with whatever unwritten Israelite religion existed at this time).

Verses 23-25

We've concluded the introduction and now the focus turns back towards Egypt.

First, the pharaoh who sought Moses' life had died. This would make possible Moses' return to deal with the Egyptian leadership no longer as a criminal fugitive (cf. this assurance in 4:19) but as a prophet of the true God.

Second, the change in government produced no relief for the Israelites, whose painful slavery continued unabated. Their misery is emphasized noticeably by four terms, two of them verbs (“groaned,” “cried out”) and two nouns (“cry,” “groaning”), constituting four different vocabulary words in the Hebrew, even though represented in the NIV by what would seem to be only two terms (“groan,” “cry”). The double use of the expression “because of their slavery” reinforces this, with the intention that the reader must not miss the severity of Israel's miserable situation.

Third, the people of Israel began to pray. That is the point made by the language in v. 23 (“cried out ... their cry ... went up to God”) and v. 24 (“God heard their groaning”). This description of their prayer is central. However little the Israelites knew about God at this stage, they were praying to him. Later, in Deut 26:7, Moses summarized: “Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression.” The exodus did not come about simply because people were in trouble; it was the result of a prayer of lament for rescue to the only one who could actually do something about it. As Jesus taught, the one who knows all needs before they are prayed for nevertheless expects them to be prayed for (Matt 6:5–8, 32).

Fourth, God “remembered his covenant.” The word *bĕrit* (“covenant”) occurs twenty-five times in Genesis; this is its first occurrence in Exodus. The covenant in question is usually referred to as the “Abrahamic covenant” because it was made initially to Abraham and then simply renewed, without change in essentials, to both Isaac and Jacob. Here the statement “remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob” is worded in such a way as to emphasize that renewal to each subsequent generation. God’s promises never stopped being valid even though the Israelites have had to wait 430 years.

Fifth, God was closely interested in his people and in the process of making himself known to them. Moses now mentioned God again for the first time since the account of the midwives in 1:17–20—not because God had been disinterested or irrelevant but as a way of heightening the fact that God alone was the Israelite’s hope in this situation. The best reading of the original, “God looked on them and made himself known to them,” (better than the NIV) sets the scene for what follows. God was initiating the process of deliverance, and the circumstances of both Moses and Israel were about to change. Implicitly, the theological issue here is not whether or how people suffer; the issue is: does suffering go unnoticed? If it does not—and indeed the one doing the noticing is the true, omnipotent, and loving covenant God—his people can properly surmise that their suffering may well be part of a plan, that it is a suffering with a distinct beginning and end, a hardship understood by and watched over by a sovereign who will not let it continue without good purpose and result.

Chapter 3

Now we’re going to look at God’s call to Moses.

Moses’ life was divided into three periods each of 40 years, the first 40 he spent in Pharaoh’s court, the second 40 in the desert and the third 40 as leader of the Israelites. Where chapter 3 commences he has just spent the last 40 years in God’s school of the desert – he must have felt totally abandoned by God and totally useless to him. In Egypt Moses had learned about worldly leadership, in the desert he has learned about spiritual leadership. So his time in the desert has not been wasted and God is now about to call him back to his deliverance ministry.

Let that be a lesson and a comfort to us all. God can use us even after we’ve failed him and He can even make use of all our failures in His plans. So we mustn’t give up when we fail, but repent and remain open to God’s leading.

Verse 1

We see that Moses was now so closely identified with his own ethnic people, that he was willing to serve as a shepherd, a position that no Egyptian would ever have agreed to serve in because shepherding was loathsome to the Egyptians. The fact that he was tending his father in law’s flock suggests that he had not come into substantial means of his own. Here we also see that Moses was in a very remote place – the far side of the desert. Apparently he had gone West from Midianite territory, many days or probably weeks away from home to enable his sheep to take advantage of the high grassy slopes on Mount Horeb. This was very unusual for Arab shepherds in those times, but Moses was a good shepherd and God had led him to his Holy mountain.

Verses 2-3

God loves to appear to us in unexpected places and in unexpected ways and he often appears when we’re engaged in the ordinary things of life. There’s no indication that God had ever

previously spoken to Moses during the 14,000 days he'd already spent in the desert, but now verse 2 tells us that an angel of God appeared to Moses whilst he was tending his sheep in this remote place. The angel appeared in flames of fire from within a bush – although the second part of verse 2 and verse 3 tell us that Moses didn't immediately realize what was happening. He knew it was something unusual because the bush, which the Hebrew word tells us was a very small thornbush, didn't burn up, ordinarily it would have burnt up in a minute or so, but Moses didn't yet know that this was an appearance of God. God doesn't fully reveal himself to us, but he does reveal himself to us in some fashion.

Fire is a common and useful image of our God, it's frequently a sign of God's presence. God wants to set His church on fire. His Holy Spirit came in tongues of fire at the first Pentecost which started off the church. Fire brings light, a light that enables us to see God. But fire does more than that. Malachi 3:2 says that "[God] will come like a refiners fire". In Biblical times a refiner put metal into a furnace and heated until it melted and all the dross and impurities came to the surface and the refiner would skim these off. The refiner would do this again and again, up to seven times, until the metal was clean and pure. He would know it was pure when he could see his face reflected in the molten metal. In the same way God refines us in his fire until he can see his image in us. Moses was refined in the fire of the desert and alienation from everything he had known. God will use the trials in our lives to refine us too.

Now God's call is a call to turn aside, to turn aside from our complacency and past failings, and here Moses decided to turn aside and go closer to see what was happening. As he made this very initial response to God's call, God revealed himself further. That's the way God works, as we respond to his call he draws us further in to his plans and purposes.

Verse 4

God calls out to Moses in what was apparently an audible voice "Moses, Moses" and Moses replied "here I am". Notice that repetition of Moses' name by God. In ancient Semitic culture that repetition of the name was a way of expressing affection and friendship, so Moses realised he was being addressed by someone who loved him and cared about him.

Verse 5

God then teaches Moses something about the Holy nature of his presence in verse 5 even before God reveals exactly who he is. Moses has to take off his sandals, which in Semitic culture was done as an acknowledgement of a superior person when you entered their dwelling. In Eastern cultures, the removal of shoes to enter a Temple is also an admission of personal defilement and conscious unworthiness to stand in the presence of a Holy God. God knows that the Israelites will have to learn about his Holy nature from Moses in due course and he's also marking out Sinai and Horeb as "his place", so the very ground is Holy. We need to remember that our God is a Holy God and he wants us to honour that.

Verse 6

In verse 6 God finally tells Moses who he is – the mighty Yahweh, God of Moses' people and Moses hides his face. Later, God would allow Moses to see him in part – but not yet.

Verses 7-10

God then turns to matters which had been very much on Moses' heart in Egypt – the bondage and slavery of his people. In verse 7 God says that he has seen their misery, heard their cries and is concerned about their suffering. God is reassuring Moses that he has been watching

this situation and that he is very much aware of what is happening. In this present fallen broken world, God does allow evil and suffering. But, God does care about the bad things happening in our lives, he does care about our suffering, even if he doesn't always act immediately – remember at this point the Israelites have been suffering in slavery for hundreds of years. We should never doubt God's steadfast love for us even in the darkest days. Corrie Ten Boom's sister Betsie never doubted God's love even when she was starving and being beaten, beaten literally to death, in a German concentration camp. Corrie writes "May God grant you never to doubt his victorious love – whatever the circumstances." Returning to verse 7, at this point Moses is probably thinking that's wonderful, God knows what's happening – maybe God will finally do something!

Then in verse 8 God tells Moses that he is going to rescue the Israelites and deliver them into a wonderful place – the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey – in fulfilment of God's covenant promises to Abraham. A land flowing with milk and honey speaks of God's provision for his people, because in those times animal products like milk and honey were seen as "free gifts" of animal and insect as opposed to grain which was seen much more as a product of human labour. At this point Moses is probably thinking "That's wonderful, thank you Lord! But, now comes the sting in the tail as Moses gets his marching orders, look at verse 10:

"So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." (Exodus 3:10 NIV)

Moses himself has to bring about the release of the Israelites. No doubt Moses had been thinking about the situation of the Israelites for years, probably he had been praying for his people. This tells us something important about prayer, sometimes God may use US to provide the answer, or at least to be part of the answer to our prayers.

Verse 11

Verse 11 is often misinterpreted, because the sense of it doesn't really come across in English. But in Hebrew, Moses' "Who am I" (*mi'ānōkî in the Hebrew*) is really a polite acceptance of an honour rather than an attempt to decline it. There is a parallel with the call of Gideon in Judges 6.

Verse 12

God's reply in verse 12 both promises help and guidance (I will be with you) and also promises success (when you have brought these people out). The "you will worship God" at the end of verse 12 is also important because in the Hebrew the "you" is in the plural – so God is saying that all the people will worship him, all will come to faith in the great I AM. There's also a bit of a play on words here between the "am I" of Moses and the "I am" of God that we turn to next – the "am I" of Moses can achieve nothing, but the "I am" can do everything.

Verses 13 – Chapter 4:9

Verses 13-15

Moses does now start to protest a little bit and asks God what he should tell the Israelites God's name is. He's actually saying "who are you really" and "by what authority do I go". In verse 14 God responds tell them I AM WHO I AM. In fact the Hebrew here could also be translated "I will be who or what I will be" – God is a dynamic God – and the I AM of the Hebrew could also be rendered "I cause to be". God's saying I am the one true God who can be whatever he wills, your authority is that of the one true God, the one who caused

everything to be. In verse 15 God states his full name – Yahweh – that’s always rendered as LORD in small capitals in our modern Bibles. It’s not completely clear from scripture whether this name of God had been known to previous generations of the Patriarchs – but God is leaving Moses in no doubt here. Now names were of huge significance to the Egyptians who believed that the name of a God encapsulated his essential nature. Egyptian magical texts talk about the significance of knowing a God’s secret name which conferred power on the user, but our God is not constrained by pagan myths – his name is no secret, he freely reveals it.

Verse 16-18

In verses 16 and 17 God tells Moses how to summarise his mission for the Israelites and predicts their acceptance in verse 18. Verse 18 appears to recommend a rather devious way of presenting their request to Pharaoh, because they don’t really want to go on a three day retreat, they want to leave permanently. But, people of Eastern cultures use suggestive, gentle, restrained, and limited ways of making requests as opposed to simply coming right out and asking for what they want. We sometimes do that in English. So, “How much money do you have on you?” is actually a way of indicating, “I’m planning to borrow some money from you.” and we do it a lot with requests for time; “Have you got a second?” is not literal at all but really is a way of saying, “I’d like to take an indefinite amount of your time.” This is how “Let us take a three-day journey” functions in the speech Moses and the elders of Israel were to make to Pharaoh. The time they’re told to request is tiny compared to the time actually expected. “Three-day journey” was an idiom in the ancient world for “a major trip with formal consequences.” Pharaoh would have heard it that way and would also have heard it as meaning “We want to leave Egypt for however long we choose.”

Verses 19-22

So, we have to understand Pharaoh’s refusal of their request later in the Exodus story in that light. He knew full well that they were asking to leave permanently with all their possessions. Thus, it’s no surprise that in verse 19, God predicts that Pharaoh will not accept the departure of the Israelites without compulsion and that God promises in verse 20 to strike the Egyptians through Moses so as to eventually cause Pharaoh to accept. Finally in verses 21 and 22 God tells Moses that he will make the Egyptian people favourably inclined towards the Israelites and that they will leave Egypt with many riches that the Egyptian people will give them.

Here we leave Moses in his encounter with God. He hasn’t yet accepted God’s call, but we know that he will eventually accept it and lead his people to the gates of the Promised Land. We don’t know why God chooses to work with and through people in this way, but we do know that he does. God has also called us. Just before his ascension Christ commanded his disciples to go out and bear his message as Luke records in Acts 1:8:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8 NIV)

we are Christ’s disciples so this command applies to us. Just as God commanded Moses “now go” he commands us to go now and tell the world who he is, the one true mighty God who made everything in the universe, and that this God hears and sees and above all cares and wants to lead us out of our slavery and bondage to sin and into the Promised Land of eternal life with him.

Chapter 4

Moses again protests about his call, but God encourages him.

Verse 1

In Moses' first two protests (certainly the first in verse 11) were formal, he now betrays uncertainty. God responds by giving him miraculous signs to prove his credentials. Moses wasn't really doubting God's promises, but he's certainly afraid that the Israelites will doubt him.

Verse 2-5

Moses seems to welcome this sign, quickly obeying all God's commands even when he has to grab a snake that he's run from. I don't think we should see the snake as symbolic of Satan. This is the beginning of God establishing that Moses' staff symbolizes his power.

Verses 6-8

Now God gives a backup miracle. This alone shows that God knows that the Israelites will find it hard to believe Moses. Skin diseases included under the English translation leprosy included not only leprosy itself but a variety of other skin diseases that were feared by the Israelites. They made great efforts not to come into contact with them.

For Moses to say, in effect, "Look what Yahweh can do with disease!" was virtually to ask, "Can any god you've been worshiping heal like this?"

Verse 9

This third proof-of-commission sign is of a grander sort: it anticipates the first plague (7:14–24) in which water—mainly from the Nile in the case of the plague—is turned into blood, hinting at the fact that God had in store some serious threats to unleash upon the Egyptians, which he would first demonstrate, through this sample, to his own people. The third sign, in other words, was not so much about Moses as it was about Egypt, and specifically the Nile. For God's servant Moses to demonstrate through this simple act God's power over the Nile would be to demonstrate God's power generally over Egypt and the Egyptians *a fortiori*.

Chapter 4: 10-23

Verse 10

Moses' statement in this verse has generated much misunderstanding on the part of those who have not recognized it as a ritual protest, and it has thus often been taken literally, as if Moses actually either had a speech defect or was incompetent as a public speaker or had forgotten his Egyptian. In fact, Moses did a huge amount of speaking in the remainder of the Pentateuchal narrative and law, yet nowhere did he reveal the slightest speech hesitancy or inability to make himself understood. Why, then, did he make the claim to be "slow of speech and tongue"? The answer lies not in physiology but in culture—in the style of ancient Near Eastern "exaggerated humility," often employed in situations where one is appealing for help or mercy from someone else or showing one's mannerly self-deprecation at being given a great assignment. The following are among the parade examples of this style in the Bible: Gen 18:26: I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes. (Abraham)

All of these parallels point to the simple fact that Moses was not speaking literally here but figuratively, responding to a great assignment with the proper sort of exaggerated humility

and self-effacement expected and valued in his culture. There is no evidence anywhere in the Bible that he had any lack of skill in speech, public or private—and overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Verses 11-12

This is both an answer to Moses and a general encouragement (since God also mentions his power over human sight and hearing).

Verse 13-14

No loner a ritual protest – but we can't evade God's calling remember Jonah. That's why God is now angry with Moses. However, the NIV mistranslates v14, it might better be rendered:

“Even though the Lord was angry with Moses, he said, ‘Is not Aaron your Levite brother? I know ...’”

God's still responding in grace even though he's not pleased.

Verses 15-17

Verse 15 makes clear that both Moses and Aaron would speak for God, and this was in fact the case. Moses eventually did the vast majority of the speaking, with virtually no mention made of Aaron's public speaking beyond the early chapters of Exodus—but at first Aaron was either speaking for him or with him (4:30; 5:1). Presumably, as Moses' courage and faith increased, the need for Aaron's close collegial support and/or public representation of his brother lessened. Verses 15 and 16 together also suggest that, from the first, Moses was the true prophet (the one into whose mind God placed his words with the intent that they be passed on to others) and that Aaron was Moses' spokesperson rather than a direct recipient of God's revelation.

Verse 18

Moses returns to Egypt. He's really seeking a blessing from Jethro. As a son-in-law he would desire the blessing of his wife's father, both because he was taking Zipporah with him (4:20) and because he owed decades of hospitality to this Midianite priest. Otherwise, Moses' language was more a matter of politely informing Jethro of his intentions (“let me go back to my own people in Egypt”) and providing a socially appropriate reason (“to see if any of them are still alive”).

Verses 19-20

Moses life would no longer be in danger in Egypt, he was no longer a fugitive criminal.

Verses 21-23

Here God links his firstborn son, Israel, with the firstborn of Pharaoh.

The firstborn son in the ancient world was the one specially favored with inheritance, the one who would represent the father in many ways as he came into maturity and the father gave him more and more responsibility. Moreover, in ancient Israelite society the firstborn son, as the firstfruits of a marriage, was devoted to God—he belonged specially to God and could not even be taken and raised by his parents without the payment of a special redemption or “buy back” fee that symbolized the family's recognition that the son was by rights Yahweh's and not theirs (see comments on 13:2, 13). Until entering into his special, double inheritance (Deut 21:17), the firstborn son “served” his father. The verb in 4:23 of the NIV translated as “worship” (“Let my son go that he may worship me”) is *abad*, normally translated as “work,

serve” elsewhere. The Israelites had been serving Pharaoh; now God told Pharaoh that the Israelites were going to serve *him*. Their liberation came not in being freed from having to work but in being freed from working for the wrong master.

With the statement in v. 21, “I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go,” God introduced a new detail into the assignment, that of his own divine causation of Pharaoh’s stubbornness, but not a new expectation. He had already warned Moses that Pharaoh would be highly resistant (3:19–20). The reader might at first blush think that God was here announcing to Moses that he was going to frustrate Moses’ efforts. In fact, it was just the opposite. By indicating that he would control Pharaoh’s resistance to the exodus, God assured Moses that he was totally in control of Pharaoh in every way, able to make him resist as long as necessary even during a buildup of increasingly painful plagues and then make him give up and let the Israelites go at the moment of God’s choosing (which was already the essential message of 3:19–20).

Verses 24-26

This is complicated and I'm just going to give you a brief outline. Moses's son Gershom had clearly not been circumcised (Moses is inserted by the NIV it's not in the original Hebrew) and God wasn't going to allow Moses to take on his important mission in Egypt without rectifying his son's circumcision status. Zipporah would have known how to do this having grown up in household of a Midianite priest because the Midianites practised circumcision.

The Egyptians practiced a partial circumcision, involving cutting only a small amount of the foreskin, a practice considered so illegitimate by the Israelites that it could be called “the reproach of Egypt” (Josh 5:9). If Moses had followed this sort of approach in circumcising Gershom, thinking that it fulfilled Yahweh’s expectations, he would have been quite mistaken and still would have been in defiance of Yahweh’s will, even if he himself had been fully and properly circumcised prior to his marriage to Zipporah.

Zipporah touched the foreskin of Gershom to Gershom’s *genitals* from which it had just been removed. “Feet” (*rēgālîm*) is one of several Hebrew euphemisms for “genitals”.

Moses may have failed God in two ways: he had not himself been fully circumcised according to the expectations implicit in Gen 17:10–14 until such time as his marriage to Zipporah, but far more importantly, he had not circumcised or at least not adequately circumcised one of his sons, likewise in violation of those expectations—both very serious sins of omission.

The consequence of failure to be circumcised is “to be cut off” from the holy people (Gen 17:14). This is just what God threatened to make happen in Gershom’s case according to v. 24. Fortunately, Zipporah saved her son from such a fate by saying and doing the right thing, as best she knew how.

The fact that Zipporah had time to do the right thing and remove the danger shows that somehow she was warned and given time to act. The specifics of that warning are not provided in the narrative, but the grace of God is implied clearly in the fact that by acting, Zipporah prevented a serious consequence, so the little story ends happily.

Verses 29-31

Moses was an outsider, but Aaron was probably an Israelite elder. This is probably why God gave him a role and why his role is so much more prominent initially. He gradually becomes less to the fore as Moses becomes known.

The Israelites probably had very limited knowledge of Yahweh prior to this, certainly they didn't know his name or that they were to be his chosen people.