

Stick With It

Exodus 4:10-17

Dr. Pierre Cannings

I. Anyone But Me vs. 10-13

a. My inadequacies

- i. It may be that at that time he did not feel a weakness in this area, nor was he addressing Pharaoh—from whom he had fled! The author has not hinted that Moses suffered from any natural disabilities up to this point. In fact, given his favored upbringing and that God made him a “favored child” (2:2), one might have expected that he would have developed superior speech and communication ability orally as well as in writing. .
- ii. He claims to have been “unskilled of lips” in 6:12, 30 (lit. “uncircumcised of lips”). The two assertions taken together compound his problem, for this verse seems to refer more to the ability to handle his speech with diplomatic skill before Pharaoh, while 6:12, 20 seem to refer to a natural handicap of some kind. However, his final descriptive phrase (יֵצֵ, “in fact”) may be another way of saying what he says elsewhere, “in fact, I am slow and hesitant in my speech.” Since Yahweh does not deny that he has a speech or diplomatic communication problem in the following verses, it seems possible that the issue Moses raises should be taken as a real one and not a devious excuse.
- iii. This claim of inadequacy is a recurring one in OT passages having to do with God’s call and commission (cf., e.g., Judg 6:14–15; 1 Sam 10:20–24; 1 Kgs 3:5–9; Isa 6:5–8; Jer 1:4–10
- iv. Whatever its connection to prophetic and royal traditions of the word and the messenger, it's more important rootage is in the OT pattern of the weak become strong, the least become great, the mean become mighty, the last become first (cf., e.g, Judg 6:11–24; 1 Sam 16:1–13; 17:19–54; Amos 7:14–15; Isa 6:1–13; Jer 1:4–19; and even Isa 52:13–53:12 Gen 18:27: I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes
- v. (Abraham)Exod 4:10: I have never been eloquent ... I am slow of speech and tongue. (Moses)1 Sam 9:21: Saul answered, “But am I not a Benjamite, from the smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why do you say such a thing to me?”1 Sam 18:23: David said, “Do you think it is a small matter to become the king’s son-in-law? I’m only a poor man and little known.”

vi. All of these parallels point to the simple fact that Moses was not speaking literally here but figuratively, responding to a great assignment⁷ 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.

vii. Speech

1. Words referring to speaking, mouth, Moses as spokesman for God (לְאֱלֹהִים) are found nine times in this section (ten times if אָמַר is counted). But both here and in vv. 13–17 human weakness gets too much press over Yahweh’s ability to compensate for these frailties.
2. if Moses actually either had a speech defect or was incompetent as a public speaker or had forgotten his Egyptian

b. Creator

i. Created

1. Who Made -. Yahweh asks rhetorically who it is that enables each person to possess or to lack the necessary abilities to speak (דַּבֵּר), to see (רָעָה), to hear (שָׁמַע): a mouth to speak *or* the inability to use it; the inability to hear and hence to respond to what one sees
2. He is the source of this ability in human beings. He grants to each person a mouth, eyes, and ears as he sees fit, but he can also control and change a person’s abilities at any time. The prophets and Jesus performed these same marvels (cf. Matt 11:1–6). Yahweh’s answer this time is swift and assertive.
3. The answer reveals that Yahweh is the Creator God (the word describing humankind is אָדָם), not merely the God of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and of individual persons. The same God is God of both creation and covenant. “Who?” (מִי) is clearly Yahweh himself. Who he is (Exod 3:14) continues to be revealed even more intimately. He will be with Moses, for he is the Creator of Moses and sustains all of his functions. Is anything too hard for Yahweh (cf. Gen 18:14)?
4. This underlying theme is, of course, the key to v 11. Yahweh has made the mouth of man, and Yahweh withholds or gives the ability to communicate. אֵלֶּם “mute” literally means “tongue-tied,” that is, able to understand but not able to speak, which is what Moses is claiming about himself.
5. This *hieros logos* might seem to be tailored to the ritual protest Moses had just made, in that God referred to his control over human ability to speak. However, the fact that God also cited his control over human ability to hear and to see (v. 11)—

ii. Presence

1. Yahweh's point is that even if he does have a deficiency, that is no reason not to go, as explained in the following verses and as follows from what has already been revealed about Yahweh ("I will be with you," 3:12).
 2. Yahweh's answer to Moses' protest shows the protest to be not only invalid, but irrelevant. Once more (3:12, 14–15), Yahweh declares to Moses the promise of the Presence that makes all the difference:
- iii. Now Go
1. Go –
 - a. God's answer is enough, and his "Now" (וְעַתָּה), a strong logical marker this time, emphasizes that fact. Moses can give no possible objection to Yahweh's assertion this time. So God commands, "So go!"
 - b. "Now go!" (לֵךְ) and the emphatic "I myself" (v. 12, אֲנִי) were already tinged with urgency and a sense of impatience on Yahweh's part.
 2. Teach
 - a. "I will instruct you" (וְהוֹרִיתִיךָ). The statement is significant for the author's message in Exodus. It contains the root ירה, from which the word Torah (תּוֹרָה) comes. Torah means instruction and eventually comes to mean not only the entire Sinai covenant or the book of Deuteronomy, but the Pentateuch itself—the Torah. All
- c. Please Lord
- i. Send the message by whomever you will
 1. Even after assurances from "the Lord of All," Moses politely begs out of the charge (Exod 3:10)
 2. Moses' failure to follow on his initial "Here am I" (3:4, הִנְנִי) becomes blatantly evident now. His בִּי, "as for me," foreshadows his refusal to go in v. 13 and constitutes with its use there a veiled fifth excuse, "Please send someone else."
 3. a somewhat elliptical expression unattested elsewhere in the Bible and one apparently designed to mean, "I don't want to do it" but worded as neutrally and non-offensively as possible.
 4. He did not. Instead, he actually asked that God send someone else to do the job—in other words, he tried to refuse to accept the call

II. Still You vs. 14-16

- a. The Anger of the Lord
 - i. It is clear that Yahweh's anger against Moses was potentially destructive and, at the least, extremely serious, yet the consequences are surprisingly

restrained. Moses' anger against Pharaoh (11:8), when he refused to send forth (חלץ) the children of Israel, was likewise threatening with grave consequences. Here we find Moses unwilling to let Yahweh send (חלץ) him so that he can command Pharaoh to send forth Israel

- ii. Yet Yahweh does not destroy Moses but again patiently addresses his weakness, for which he was more than able to compensate—in fact, Moses was to go in the might of Yahweh
 - iii. Yahweh's plan for his "favored child" (2:2), whom he has preserved and for whom he has provided is rejected. Many more times Moses and Yahweh will face each other. God's response is divine anger toward a rebellious servant
 - iv. Yahweh does not, however, consume Moses with his anger, but goes a second (or a fifth) mile with him. He will give Moses human aid as well as his own presence. It is an affront to God that his presence is not sufficient, but Yahweh relents and gives Moses a companion to help him. Yahweh's omniscience is evident when he asserts that he knows all about Aaron
- b. Aaron is coming Out to Meet you
- i. Aaron – Clearly God had visited Aaron in Egypt and instructed him to go out of Egypt to meet Moses.
 1. the provision of Aaron his "Levite brother" was the result of anger but rather that it was the result of grace.
 2. Here Moses' brother Aaron is provided unexpectedly as a helper to Moses (so Zipporah, as well, in another sense helped Moses continue his ministry [4:24–26])
 3. It was to Moses that he delivered his name (יהוה), not Aaron. We are not told how and when exactly, but we know that God had been behind the scenes all along, for he has seen, heard, come down, and known what was going on concerning his people (cf. 2:24–25; 3:7–8).
 4. He will eventually become the first high priest in Israel. The message to Israel will be unequivocally from God, not merely men; therefore, Yahweh sets up the line of authority and communication as Yahweh > Moses > Aaron > the people of God.
 5. Aaron's involvement in the coming events is adequately explained as a result of God's reluctant but divine appointment. Aaron, "the Levite," has the necessary family lineage to serve in his future capacity as high priest of Israel. Yahweh, who had already arranged for their meeting, mercifully and patiently meets Moses' personal inadequacies
 6. The meaning of the expression "he will certainly speak" indicates the willingness of Aaron to speak (so Ramban, 50) and seems to agree with the emphasis upon his joyful alacrity to do so. It also implies "he indeed can speak" as well; that is, he is a capable and

perfected speaker. The grammatical construction indicates that he is in fact on the way. Yahweh knew what the result of the encounter with Moses would be from the start.

c. Speak to Him

i. I am still speaking to you only

1. Moses will speak to Aaron, and put the message into his mouth; Yahweh will be with *both* mouths, instruct *both* servants; and Aaron's speaking will be *for* Moses—*he* will function as Moses' mouth, and Moses will be as a god

ii. I will be with your mouth

1. God informs Moses that he himself will be with his mouth (cf. v. 16) and with Aaron's mouth. The purpose of this is, as God said earlier in v. 12, to instruct (יִרְה) them in what they should say. But first Moses is to place the words into Aaron's mouth. The entire verse is an emphatic assertion that *God will be the ultimate author* of what is said and done. They are his agents, and the personal gifts and character of each speaker is carefully respected, safeguarded, and employed by Yahweh. Their individual functions and their individual abilities are each preserved accordingly. This indicates clearly that God did not destroy or remove their minds and even the idiosyncrasies of his messengers.
 - a. Again the writer emphasizes Moses' involvement in God's work, asserting "you yourself" (cf. v. 15) will be to him as God as "I myself" am with you and him.
 - b. Moses becomes more and more dominant "as God" (Exod 7:1–2) when the narrative progresses. The use of לְאֱלֹהִים, "as God," with reference to Moses' function is unique (cf. Exod 7:1).
 - c. 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. Thus God was the revealer; Moses, the prophet; and Aaron, the public repeater, an arrangement not unlike that in the modern church involving God, the Scriptures as the location of his word, and the preacher as the public repeater

2. And His mouth

- a. It is not said that Aaron will speak to Pharaoh for Moses in this verse, but to the Israelites (cf. Exod 4:30; 7:1–2). The wisdom of having Aaron talk to the elders of the Israelites is evident, for they would know and trust him and his intentions toward them. As Moses was God’s mouthpiece to Aaron, so Aaron would be the mouthpiece to the people. Moses is to deliver the plan of God to Aaron. This is an interesting trio of messengers; the word of God is “filtered” through two distinct layers of human personalities before it reaches his people.

iii. I will teach you what you are to do

1. The intimacy of this assertion about Moses here is indicated by Exod 6:7, where Yahweh asserts that he will take Israel to him as a people and he will be to them (as) God (לְאֱלֹהִים) a goal God has asserted already in Gen 17:7, 8; 28:21. This almost uncanny nearness of Moses to Yahweh constitutes his special position

d. His role

- i. He will speak for you to the people
- ii. He will be as a Mouth

e. Your Role

- i. You will be as God to him

III. Still Your Job v. 17

a. Take in Your Hand

b. This Staff

- i. With You will perform signs
- ii. This time Yahweh will instruct them what “to do” (v. 15), merely instructing them to “take this staff in your hand with which you will perform the signs” (אֶת־הַמַּטֵּה; cf. vv. 20, 21, 28, 30). It is not Moses’ bravery that stands out, but rather his reluctance to go, whether because of insecurities or genuine humility (Num 12:3). Yahweh’s patience is on display most of all (Exod 34:6–7), *and* his willingness to deal with and meet every proposed opposition of his chosen (Exod 2:2) servant—even after he has said “I will be with you” (3:12), as if his presence were not enough.
- iii. God’s instruction to Moses to take the staff in his hand is central, for by it Moses was to perform two of the specific signs, as needed, before the Israelites to cause them to believe (Exod 3:16; 4:1, 5, 8, 9: cf. v. 30). The staff referred to is not associated with Aaron, which is clear since only Moses is addressed and present before God in this monologue. But the function of the staff will be expanded greatly in the plagues, when

Yahweh deals with Pharaoh through Moses and Aaron. For it is not just any staff that Moses will use, but the staff God himself has designated; therefore, it can also be referred to as the staff of God (Exod 4:20; 17:9).

- iv. The staff is the ultimate immediate reassurance, in this final set of *hieroi logoi*, of God's presence with Moses as he enters upon the challenging task to which he has been called
- v. Although Moses' staff had potentially all the uses categorized above, it had yet another that elevated its importance far beyond that of any other staff. By divine designation it became not merely Moses' staff but God's.
- vi. Did Moses' staff have power in itself? Not at all. Its power, and every aspect of its effectiveness, came from God's use of the staff in Moses' (or Aaron's) hand as a symbol of the divine authority, supremacy, and presence. The miraculous staff was designated to convince Moses and Aaron, then the Israelite leadership, and in turn Pharaoh, and finally the nation of Israel of God's sovereign control in his plan to liberate his people from their bondage. It becomes progressively clear that the staff was not really Moses' or Aaron's (or anyone else's) but God's.

4:10 Moses' failure to follow on his initial "Here am I" (3:4, הִנְנִי) becomes blatantly evident now. His אֲנִי, "as for me," foreshadows his refusal to go in v. 13 and constitutes with its use there a veiled fifth excuse, "Please send someone else." Literally אֲנִי is an inclusio with its use in v. 13. Evidently, Moses' not being a man of words was not a problem earlier in Egypt (2:14). However, his only recorded overt speech before this encounter with Yahweh was "Why are you striking your own kinsman?" (2:13) and "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land" (2:22). It may be that at that time he did not feel a weakness in this area, nor was he addressing Pharaoh—from whom he had fled! The author has not hinted that Moses suffered from any natural disabilities up to this point. In fact, given his favored upbringing and that God made him a "favored child" (2:2), one might have expected that he would have developed superior speech and communication ability orally as well as in writing. Moses' replies, beginning with Exod 3:4, have demonstrated a powerful dialogue with Yahweh. So, his assertion "Nor from the time since you spoke to your servant" is perhaps suspect.²⁸¹² His attempt to rescue his brethren did not involve words, but his own power and authority, which were inadequate (2:12).²⁸²³

God is telling him to speak for him before Pharaoh. Moses' resistance is still perhaps understandable, but we have no evidence by which to discover the extent of his claim. He claims to have been "unskilled of lips" in 6:12, 30 (lit. "uncircumcised of lips"). The two assertions taken together compound his problem, for this verse seems to refer more to the ability to handle his speech with diplomatic skill before Pharaoh, while 6:12, 20 seem to refer to a natural handicap of some kind.²⁸³⁴ However, his final descriptive phrase (אֲנִי, "in fact") may be another way of saying what he says elsewhere, "in fact, I am slow and hesitant in my speech." Since Yahweh does not deny that he has a speech or diplomatic communication problem in the following verses, it seems possible that the issue Moses raises should be taken as a real one and not a devious excuse.²⁸⁴⁵ The challenge of the office of a diplomatic messenger was great and known elsewhere in the ancient Near East. Hallo believes the phrase describing Moses' problem is an old Near Eastern expression, and notes:

The idiom is rooted in Near Eastern literature. In one of the earliest Sumerian epics, a central role is played by the messenger whose "mouth was too heavy" to repeat a message verbatim, leading by necessity to the invention of (letter-) writing. An essay

¹²⁸² N. Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot Exodus*, trans. A. Newman (Jerusalem: Haomanim Press, 1993), 122.

²²⁸³ Ramban, 49, feels this is a cautious acceptance by Moses: "Send by anyone you will send" means "I will go if I must."

³²⁸⁴ Isaiah's problem, "unclean of lips" (Isa 6:5), was a moral/ethical/priestly/religious issue before Yahweh, definitely not a physical defect. Jeremiah 1:4–14 records Jeremiah's plea, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child" (נִיב). Yahweh puts his word into his mouth, providing content and the ability to deliver the words simultaneously.

⁴²⁸⁵ Cf. L. I. Rabinowitz, "Moses the Inarticulate." *DD* 12 (1983/84): 121–22. He holds that Moses' problem was real. It was up to Aaron to "formulate" the content for acceptable delivery.

describes a poor student as one who is (too) heavy for Sumerian, he cannot move his tongue correctly.²⁸⁵⁶

In later Akkadian literature, the “heavy mouth” became a recognized medical phenomenon and the beginning (hence: title) of an entire treatise on pathology. The unusual construction in the Heb. text, **דָּבַר** followed by **מִן** three times, is unique (cf. 1 Chr 11:2). Moses practically illustrates his inability to speak before Yahweh by his use of this clumsy, repetitive syntax.²⁸⁶⁷ Gewalt, with others, argues that Moses’ problem was rather a feeling of inadequacy, both here and in 6:12, 30.²⁸⁷⁸ It is a false dilemma to think that Moses could not have been weighed down by both problems.

Yahweh’s point is that even if he does have a deficiency, that is no reason not to go, as explained in the following verses and as follows from what has already been revealed about Yahweh (“I will be with you,” 3:12). Moses was incapable of carrying out Yahweh’s charge, unless he would give him the needed words and teaching—and the needed signs for the Israelites. But in the end, it will be Pharaoh’s heart that is made heavy, dull, obstinate by Yahweh, not his own messenger’s speech (cf. 7:14; 8:11, 28; 9:7; 10:1). That Moses was underrating himself was probably a good thing.²⁸⁸⁹ He became famous for his humility (Num 12:3) and, as already noted, neither long before, nor more recently, nor in his following verbal performances does he show himself an incapable speaker. He is rather, as Stephen says (Acts 7:22), powerful in words and deeds.

4:11 Yahweh gives his answer (v. 11a), and his reply to Moses’ objection is more than adequate. Yahweh asks rhetorically who it is that enables each person to possess or to lack the necessary abilities to speak (**דָּבַר**), to see (**רָעָה**), to hear (**שָׁמַע**): a mouth to speak or the inability to use it; the inability to hear and hence to respond to what one sees.²⁹⁹⁰ Yahweh himself has used all of these human gifts figuratively speaking (e.g., Exod 2:23–25). He has seen, he has heard, he has spoken. He is the source of this ability in human beings. He grants to each person a mouth, eyes, and ears as he sees fit, but he can also control and change a person’s abilities at any time. The prophets and Jesus performed these same marvels (cf. Matt 11:1–6). Yahweh’s answer this time is swift and assertive.

The answer reveals that Yahweh is the Creator God (the word describing humankind is ²⁹¹⁰¹**יְהוָה** not merely the God of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and of individual

⁵²⁸⁶ For the above material, see William W. Hallo, *The Book of the People* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 48–49. J. H. Tigay, “Heavy of Mouth and Heavy of Tongue: on Moses’ Speech Difficulty,” *BASOR* 231 (1978): 57–67; A. W. Sjöberg, “The Old Babylonian Eduba,” in *Sumerological Studies*, Jacobsen AS 20 (1976): 159–79. Cf. also notes and commentary to Exod 6:12, 30.

⁶²⁸⁷ Fischer, *Jahwe Unser Gott*, 187–88.

⁷²⁸⁸ D. Gewalt, “Der ‘Sprachfehler’ des Moses,” *DBAT* 27 (1991): 8–16, esp. 8–9.

⁸²⁸⁹ Cf. Fischer, *Jahwe Unser Gott*, 186–92, esp. 91–92. He concludes that there is obviously a misunderstanding between what Moses thinks of himself in Exod 4:10 and what he is.

⁹²⁹⁰ S. Speier, “חֲקֵי Ex IV 11,” *VT* 10 (1960): 347. S. T. Lachs, “Exodus IV 11: Evidence for an Emendation,” *VT* 26 (1976): 249–50.

¹⁰²⁹¹ Cf. translation note to this verse above.

persons. The same God is God of both creation and covenant. “Who?” (מי) is clearly Yahweh himself. Who he is (Exod 3:14) continues to be revealed even more intimately. He will be with Moses, for he is the Creator of Moses and sustains all of his functions. Is anything too hard for Yahweh (cf. Gen 18:14)?

4:12 God’s answer is enough, and his “Now” (ועתה,²⁹¹¹²) a strong logical marker this time, emphasizes that fact. Moses can give no possible objection to Yahweh’s assertion this time. So God commands, “So go!” This conversation is over. But in fulfillment of his name and character Yahweh promises that he will be with Moses’ mouth and will teach him both the content and manner in which he should speak. This verse serves as a parenthesis enclosing the material from 3:12, “I will be with you” and 4:12, “I will be with your speech,” but does not yet exhaust the way in which Yahweh will be with his messenger and his people.

Yahweh’s assertion that he will instruct Moses uses the phrase “I will instruct you” (וְהוֹרִיתִיךָ). The statement is significant for the author’s message in Exodus. It contains the root ירה, from which the word Torah (תּוֹרָה) comes. Torah means instruction and eventually comes to mean not only the entire Sinai covenant or the book of Deuteronomy, but the Pentateuch itself—the Torah. All of this came to be attributed to Moses, its fountainhead, essential author, and propagator. Other inspired hands through the inspiration of God’s Spirit undoubtedly worked in it (e.g., Josh 24:26), and Moses himself certainly used sources. It is with Moses, however, and his God-inspired activity that the original genius and inspiration of the book of Exodus, indeed the entire Torah, lies.

The verbal uses of ירה are seven in Exodus (4:12, 15; 15:4, 25; 19:13; 24:12; 35:34).²⁹¹²³ Yahweh becomes the supreme Teacher of Israel (cf. esp. 24:12) and Moses is blessed with the same wisdom (Deut 9) and passes it on to Joshua.²⁹¹³⁴ Here Yahweh teaches Moses what to say; in 4:15 he teaches him what to do. The noun, Torah, the collected body of all of God’s teaching through Moses, is described eventually as “the way of Yahweh” (דֶּרֶךְ יְהוָה, Exod 18:10; Deut 5:33; 10:12; 11:22; 32:4). In Gen 46:18 Jacob sent Judah ahead of him to get directions (ירה) on the way to Goshen.

God has given his answer. Now Moses should go.

4:13 But Moses does not go. As a clear marker of this section, “As for me” serves as an inclusio (v. 10), as does אֲדֹנָי, which could contextually be translated as “O Lord of All” after the stress on the Creator God in the previous verse.²⁹¹⁴⁵ “Please” (נָא) is a strong entreaty in this case. “Anybody else you would send” reads “by the hand of” and employs the word hand for the tenth time²⁹¹⁵⁶ in Yahweh’s dialogue with Moses in this chapter. Even after assurances from “the Lord of All,” Moses politely begs out of the charge (Exod 3:10). It will ultimately be his hand, however, that is employed twice to effect the ninth plague, the last one caused through Moses, Yahweh’s servant.

¹¹²⁹² Cf. translation and note to this verse.

¹²²⁹³ Ironically, the root is used to describe Yahweh’s casting of Pharaoh into the Reed Sea (15:4; cf. 1:22).

¹³²⁹⁴ The gift of teaching/instructing was given to Bezalel and Oholiab also (Exod 35:34).

¹⁴²⁹⁵ *IBHS* 123–24.

¹⁵²⁹⁶ Cf. commentary and notes. at 3:8 and 4:17.

This verse also serves as a transition to vv. 14–17, for it raises a new expectation in the reader: “What will Yahweh say now?” (cf. Durham, 50).

Biblical Theology Comments

See comments on 4:14–17.

Application and Devotional Implications

14 And so the anger of Yahweh burned hot²⁹¹⁶⁷ toward Moses,²⁹¹⁷⁸ but he said, “Is there not Aaron your brother, the Levite?²⁹¹⁸⁹ I know that he will certainly speak,³⁰¹⁹⁰ and in fact³⁰²⁰¹ he himself³⁰²¹² is on his way³⁰²²³ to meet you, and will see you and rejoice³⁰²³⁴ over it.³⁰²⁴⁵ **15** So you speak to him and place³⁰²⁵⁶ the words in his mouth, and I myself³⁰²⁶⁷ will be with your speech³⁰²⁷⁸ and with his speech, and I will instruct³⁰²⁸⁹ you with respect to what³¹²⁹⁰ you should do.³¹³⁰¹ **16**

¹⁶²⁹⁷ The term *וַיִּחַר* is a qal impf. 3 m. sg. > *חרה* + *waw* consec., “burn, become hot.”

¹⁷²⁹⁸ The term *בְּמִשְׁפָּהוּ*.

¹⁸²⁹⁹ An important qualification for Aaron and the first use of his name, which occurs at least 110x in Exodus. Cf. Exod 2:1 where the Levitical lineage of Moses is introduced. This is the only use of the term “the Levite” (*הַלֵּוִי*) in the OT. See commentary. O. Loretz has argued that this expression is a gloss. F. Andersen, however, considers it syntactically sound. The need for the writer to clarify who Aaron was is vital here and presupposes the author’s knowledge of Aaron’s importance in the later narrative of the book.

¹⁹³⁰⁰ Heb. *דִּבֶּר יְדַבֵּר*, “speaking he will speak,” an emphatic construction of inf. abs. + finite verb form.

²⁰³⁰¹ The term *וְגַם* is an emphatic use of the particle, rather than “and also.”

²¹³⁰² The term *הִנֵּה-הוּא*, “he himself,” highlighting Aaron.

²²³⁰³ Qal act. ptc. m. sg. > *יצא* preceded by *הִנֵּה-הוּא* indicates the immediateness of the situation.

²³³⁰⁴ Qal pf. 3 m. sg. > *שמע* + *waw* consec.

²⁴³⁰⁵ Heb. “will rejoice in his heart” (*בְּלִבּוֹ*). Heart/s become(s) an important issue in Exodus, especially the heart of Pharaoh. The *sp* has an alternate form for the word translated “heart,” *בְּלִבּוֹ*, but the meaning is the same. See commentary. The word heart is found 117x in the Pentateuch: Genesis sixteen times; Exodus forty-seven; Leviticus three; Numbers five; Deuteronomy forty-six. Cf. esp. Gen 6:5, 6; Exod 6:5.

²⁵³⁰⁶ The term *וַיִּשְׁמַע* is a qal pf. 2 m. sg. > *שָׁמַע* + *waw* conversative. The same word used of God’s establishing humankind’s natural features in v. 11 above. This heightens the actions of Moses that parallel Yahweh’s.

²⁶³⁰⁷ Emphatic use of pronoun, *אֲנֹכִי*, as in v. 2.

²⁷³⁰⁸ Lit. “with your mouth,” as with Aaron’s mouth (*פִּי*).

²⁸³⁰⁹ The term *וְהוֹרִיתִי* is a qal pf. 1 common sg. > *ירה* + *waw* consec. Cf. v. 12 above and notes and commentary.

²⁹³¹⁰ Cf. *IBHS* 502 (§31.2a), n17.

³⁰³¹¹ Heb. *וַיִּשְׁמַע* has a *nun* ending that may be emphatic or merely an ancient ending that fell away later. Cf. *GKC* 158 (§58I). This is most likely a paragogic *nun* that does carry contrastive

Then he will speak for you to the people. And so he will function for you as a mouth,³¹³¹² and you yourself³¹³²³ will be to him as God.³¹³³⁴ **17** And you will take this staff³¹³⁴⁵ in your hand, with which you will perform the signs.”³¹³⁵⁶

Commentary

The four verses in this section flow naturally from the preceding section, and they contain the final objection to Yahweh’s call/commission.³¹³⁶⁷ Four or five objections constitute an extended component of this call narrative (3:1–4:17) of a deliverer/prophet. This necessitates extended reassurances and signs of Yahweh’s presence for Moses and the people.³¹³⁷⁸ Above, Yahweh’s “Now go!” (הֲלֵךְ) and the emphatic “I myself” (v. 12, אֲנִי) were already tinged with urgency and a sense of impatience on Yahweh’s part. Verse 14 picks up this tone.

It is amazing that the extended call narrative now ends with *the anger of Yahweh* and *no formal acceptance* by his servant Moses, yet we know that Moses went. Yahweh is apparently irresistible, and he has articulated manifold ways *how* he will be with Moses (cf. 3:12). On the other hand, this outcome makes it clear that the exodus event would not have occurred in the way it did if Yahweh had not orchestrated and performed it.

The “anger of Yahweh” (אַף יהוה) is found in this form fourteen times in the Pentateuch.³¹³⁸⁹ This is its first occurrence. The exact words (וַיִּחַר־אַף מִשָּׁה) are found describing Moses in Exod 32:19, after he had seen the people’s sin concerning the golden calf. A parallel between Moses’

qualities in this context. Yahweh will be the one to deliver the message to be spoken whatever the situation. Cf. the summary statements in *IBHS* 517 (§31.7.1b). This use of the impf. carries the sense of obligation in this context; cf. *IBHS* 508 (§31.4g).

³¹³¹² Lit. “will be for you as (ל) a mouth (פה).”

³²³¹³ An emphatic use of the 2 m. sg. independent pronoun.

³³³¹⁴ The LXX renders this as “and you shall be to him with respect to the things pertaining to God” (σὺ δὲ αὐτῷ ἔσῃ τὰ πρὸς τὸν θεόν). The Vg. is similar: *tu autem eris ei in his quae ad Deum pertinent*, “You, moreover, will be to him in these things which belong to God.” Both of these struggle to render the MT, which seems to be making a more bold statement. See commentary. Cf. Heb 5:1 in the NT, where the high priest is the one who serves in respect to things that relate to God. Moses’ function approaches that of high priest as well as prophet.

³⁴³¹⁵ The term מִטָּה, “staff, rod.”

³⁵³¹⁶ Heb. הָאוֹתוֹת. See 3:12 and commentary on 4:8 above as well as notes. Cf. vv. 20, 18, 30.

³⁶³¹⁷ The MT has a space here indicating a pause and transition to a new subject. Durham views vv. 14–17 as a later addition placed here to promote Aaron, but as clearly secondary to Moses. However, this is, as he notes, pure theory. If the antiquity of both Moses and Aaron is accepted, the section is not an intrusion but a vital insight into the original relationship of Moses/Aaron and their relationship to Yahweh and the staff in Moses’ hand. Cf. Fischer, *Jahwe Unser Gott*, who sees a natural and coherent movement through vv. 10–17.

³⁷³¹⁸ This makes Moses’ call narrative easily the longest and most extensive example of this genre/form in the OT.

³⁸³¹⁹ Exodus once, Numbers eight times, Deuteronomy five times. The word אָף only is found forty-two times (3 × 14).

and Yahweh's reactions is clearly part of the writer's purpose when dealing with this topic of anger in Exodus and in other aspects of Moses' behavior as well. Anger (אָ) is used nine times in Exodus, six times referring to Yahweh's anger and three times to Moses' anger, and is distributed as follows:

4:14	וַיִּחַר-אַף יְהוָה ("the anger of Yahweh became hot") Against Moses
11:8	בְּחַרְי-אָף ("hot with anger"—Moses') Against Pharaoh
15:7	חַרְיִךְ with 2 m. sg. suf. ("Your heat"—Yahweh's) Against Pharaoh and Egypt
22:23	אֲפִי וְחַרְהָ with 1 common sg. suf. ("My anger will burn"—Yahweh's) Against Israelites who oppress The poor
32:10	אֲפִי וַיִּחַר-אֲפִי with 1 common sg. suf. ("My anger will burn against them"—Yahweh's) Against Israelites
32:11	אֲפִי וַיִּחַרְהָ with 2 m. sg. suf. ("Your anger burns"—Yahweh's) Against your people
32:12	אֲפִי מִמִּחְרוֹן with 2 m. sg. suf. ("from the head of Your anger"—Yahweh's) Against your people
32:19	וַיִּחַר-אַף מִשָּׁה ("the anger of Moses became hot") Against the rebellious Israelites
32:22	אֲלֵ-יְהוָה אֵף אֲדֹנָי ("Do not be hot with anger, my lord"—Moses') Against Aaron

It is clear that Yahweh's anger against Moses was potentially destructive and, at the least, extremely serious, yet the consequences are surprisingly restrained. Moses' anger against Pharaoh (11:8), when he refused to send forth (חָלַף) the children of Israel, was likewise threatening with grave consequences. Here we find Moses unwilling to let Yahweh send (חָלַף) him so that he can command Pharaoh to send forth Israel. It is no wonder that when Yahweh's anger burns against the people for rebellion (32:10), Moses is *there* for *them* (Exod 32:32). He had jeopardized the entire program of Yahweh's deliverance of his people now and even earlier (2:11–12). The wordplay, the irony, and most of all the reality of the situation is evident. Exodus 15:7 celebrates in poetry the anger of Yahweh, which was sent forth (חָלַף) to devour Egypt like stubble (שָׂשׁ; cf. Exod 5:12), so the absence of אָ here is not surprising. Yahweh's special care for the stranger (גֵּר), widow (אַלְמָנָה), and orphan (יָתוֹם) is such that should Israel oppress or humiliate these disadvantaged social groups his anger will burn against them and repay them with poetic justice (22:20–23). Finally, chap. 32 mentions the anger of Yahweh three times and Moses' anger twice in the incident concerning the golden calf. Yahweh's anger is mentioned sparingly in Exodus, but each time it is used in a context of grave circumstances. Moses did not know the catastrophic consequences of his refusal to go (חָלַף)/be sent (חָלַף)—the people of Yahweh would not have been brought to birth after the travail they had passed through in Egypt.

Yet Yahweh does not destroy Moses but again patiently addresses his weakness, for which he was more than able to compensate—in fact, Moses was to go in the might of Yahweh. Words referring to speaking, mouth, Moses as spokesman for God (לְאֵלֵהִים) are found nine times in this section (ten times if אָמַר is counted).³²³⁹⁰ But both here and in vv. 13–17 human weakness gets too much press over Yahweh’s ability to compensate for these frailties.

The mention of Aaron, the Levite, brings in the second person Yahweh will employ to free his people to be “as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (19:6). He will eventually become the first high priest in Israel. The message to Israel will be unequivocally from God, not merely men; therefore, Yahweh sets up the line of authority and communication as Yahweh > Moses > Aaron > the people of God.

This time Yahweh’s command “Go!” is conspicuously lacking. It is assumed by the reader and implied by the writer that this command is not necessary. This time Yahweh will instruct them what “to do” (v. 15), merely instructing them to “take this staff in your hand with which you will perform the signs” (אוֹתוֹת; cf. vv. 20, 21, 28, 30). It is not Moses’ bravery that stands out, but rather his reluctance to go, whether because of insecurities or genuine humility (Num 12:3). Yahweh’s patience is on display most of all (Exod 34:6–7), and his willingness to deal with and meet every proposed opposition of his chosen (Exod 2:2) servant—even after he has said “I will be with you” (3:12), as if his presence were not enough.

The intensity of Yahweh’s concern permeates this section since it is a monologue, not a dialogue. The reader knows Moses is going to Egypt and Yahweh has taken over and is in charge. The anger of Yahweh is, however, not irrational, but subject to him and directed to his covenantal goals. He completes his plans; he does not abort his purposes or destroy his servant:

- v. 14a, The anger of Yahweh burns hot toward Moses—he said:
Yahweh’s Prior Preparations
- v. 14b, I have prepared Aaron, the Levite, to joyfully assist you
Yahweh’s Instructions
- v. 15a, , (You) speak to him
Place the words in his mouth
Yahweh’s Presence Promised
- v. 15b, I will be with your mouth and his mouth
- v. 15c, I will teach (יְרֶה) you what to do (עֲשֶׂה)
Result
- v. 16a, He will speak to the people
-He is a messenger for you
-You are as God to him
Signs to Do
- v. 17, Take this staff (cf. vv. 20, 21, 28, 30) to do the signs (³²⁴⁰¹אוֹתוֹת)

³⁹³²⁰ The word דָּבַר five times + פָּה four times = nine times. If אָמַר, which is part of the introductory formula, is counted, there are ten references.

⁴⁰³²¹ Durham, 48, calls this an uneasy composite, but purposeful in its order. These verses are usually assigned to J or E, with v. 17 usually going to E. Source division is unclear here and hardly helpful in interpreting the passage. The material about Aaron is often considered a later

4:14 Yahweh's plan for his "favored child" (2:2), whom he has preserved and for whom he has provided is rejected. Many more times Moses and Yahweh will face each other. God's response is divine anger toward a rebellious servant, whether by design or otherwise, by whom he would fulfill his covenant to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and deliver their descendants. But Moses does not want to go. By contrast, Abraham, his father in faith, had been willing to sacrifice his own son in faithful obedience to Yahweh (Gen 22:2).

Yahweh does not, however, consume Moses with his anger, but goes a second (or a fifth) mile with him. He will give Moses human aid as well as his own presence. It is an affront to God that his presence is not sufficient, but Yahweh relents and gives Moses a companion to help him. Yahweh's omniscience is evident when he asserts that he knows all about Aaron. The author's knowledge of this also shows his unique position as a narrator before Yahweh, since his anger burns against anyone who would misrepresent him (Job 42:8; Rev 22:18–19).

Evidently, Moses' former objection (v. 10) was a real one for Moses, even if not sufficient for him not to accept Yahweh's charge to go alone to rescue Israel. In addition, Aaron's involvement in the coming events is adequately explained as a result of God's reluctant but divine appointment. Aaron, "the Levite," has the necessary family lineage to serve in his future capacity as high priest of Israel. Yahweh, who had already arranged for their meeting, mercifully and patiently meets Moses' personal inadequacies. The writer's description of Aaron as "the Levite" presupposes his importance later as the first high priest of the line of Levi.³²⁴¹² For an author-editor who knew the events as this one does, it was important for him to place Aaron in a proper perspective for his later involvement in Israel. The writer traces accurately the providential acts of God and foreshadows later developments in the actions of Yahweh with his people. Aaron is a capable speaker. The meaning of the expression "he will certainly speak" indicates the willingness of Aaron to speak (so Ramban, 50) and seems to agree with the emphasis upon his joyful alacrity to do so. It also implies "he indeed can speak" as well; that is, he is a capable and perfected speaker. The grammatical construction indicates that he is in fact on the way. Yahweh knew what the result of the encounter with Moses would be from the start.

The interesting comment that Aaron will rejoice (lit. "rejoice in his heart") to meet with Moses is touching and hints at a filial relationship that existed between Moses and Aaron.³²⁴²³ It also raises several interesting issues. Clearly God had visited Aaron in Egypt and instructed him to go out of Egypt to meet Moses. The writer is, however, concerned with Moses, the deliverer,

addition by adherents of the Documentary Hypothesis (cf. Hyatt, 83). Whatever the original sources were, the author-compiler has presented them in a continuing ongoing narrative that completes the "call narrative" of Moses.

⁴¹³²² Cassuto, 50, sees a wordplay on the word "Levite" from a root meaning "joined to." The root and meaning of the word are, however, dubious. Cf. Gen 29:34; Num 18:2, 4. If Cassuto is right, the meaning certainly fits the context. Cf. BDB 532. It seems at least as likely that the description of Levi as "the Levite, the one and only," is preferable. There were probably other Aarons. This is much like the designation of Isaac as the one and only son of Abraham in Gen 22:2, although it is expressed differently there.

⁴²³²³ Aaron's deference to Moses, calling him "lord" (Exod 32:22; Num 12:11), indicates his recognition of Moses' special call and placement in God's economy. It is not an indication that Aaron was now Moses' blood brother. Cf., however, Hyatt, 63.

not Aaron in these early episodes. It was to Moses that he delivered his name (יהוה), not Aaron. We are not told how and when exactly, but we know that God had been behind the scenes all along, for he has seen, heard, come down, and known what was going on concerning his people (cf. 2:24–25; 3:7–8).

The condition of a person's heart is a major concern in the Pentateuch (forty-six times in Deuteronomy), especially in the primeval history (Gen 1–11; esp. 6:5; 8:21) and in Mosaic Yahwism (Exod 20:17; Deut 4:29; 5:29; 6:5, 6; 10:12, 16; 11:13, 18; 13:3; 26:16; 30:2, 6, 10, 14; 32:46 et al.).³²⁴³⁴ Even Yahweh's heart is grieved by the corruption of the heart of his crowning creation (Gen 1:26–28; 6:6; Psa 8). After declaring the utter corruption of the human heart in Gen 6:5, the author-editor of the Pentateuch states Yahweh's demand that his people love him with their whole heart as the most important aspect of a relationship with him,³²⁴⁴⁵ clearly an impossibility from the side of humankind alone. The mention in this verse of a heart that rejoices, as Aaron's does, is a refreshing, positive statement about human nature. Yahweh's plan is to solve the problem of the corruption of the human heart in its universal reality (Gen 6:5) through his chosen vehicle to the world, Israel.

The word לב, "heart," is found in Exodus forty-seven times. Its first occurrence is in this verse, where it describes Aaron's heart. His heart response contrasts with Pharaoh's heart in the coming narratives. Pharaoh's heart is heavy (כִּבְד), dull, and stubborn, unwilling to set (שׂים) itself on anything Yahweh says or does (Exod 4:21; 7:23; 9:21). Aaron's heart is mentioned here and three more times in an emphatic triad (Exod 28:29, 30), where he joyfully, it is clear, bears the names of the twelve tribes of Israel before Yahweh into the holy of holies.³²⁴⁵⁶ The author consciously prepares for those verses emphasizing the quality of Aaron's heart.³²⁴⁶⁷ His heart also foreshadows the "willing heart" of the Israelites to contribute the materials and to build the tabernacle where Yahweh will dwell (e.g., 25:2; 35:29). Israel's heart and Aaron's heart, as noted earlier, contrast with Israel's forced labor expended on the store cities of Pharaoh. Appropriately, it is Pharaoh's heart³²⁴⁷⁸ and the heart of his Egyptian servants that are buried in the "heart" of the sea (Exod 15:8, בְּלִבַּיִם).

4:15 Yahweh reveals the inner attitude of Aaron toward Moses and the entire dilemma facing them. His instructions are clear. God informs Moses that he himself will be with his mouth (cf. v. 16) and with Aaron's mouth. The purpose of this is, as God said earlier in v. 12, to instruct (יְרֶה) them in what they should say. But first Moses is to place the words into Aaron's mouth. The entire verse is an emphatic assertion that *God will be the ultimate author* of what is said and done. They are his agents, and the personal gifts and character of each speaker is carefully respected, safeguarded, and employed by Yahweh. Their individual functions and their

⁴³³²⁴ See Exod 4:21; 7:3 for a summary of the use of "heart" in Exodus. Cf. also Exod 25:8.

⁴⁴³²⁵ The center of both the Torah in the OT and the gospel of Jesus Christ in the NT.

⁴⁵³²⁶ Documentarians usually give this verse to E (and J), while the verses in 29:29, 30 are given to P. But it is clear that in the overall narrative plan of Exodus the author-compiler sees an essential relationship between these materials.

⁴⁶³²⁷ Cf. Exod 4:21; 25:8. Thus again a major thematic word runs across the hypothetical sources of J, E, P, etc. J would be the basic source in this instance, preparing for the appointment of Aaron to bear Israel before Yahweh on his heart.

⁴⁷³²⁸ See v. 21 and notes there.

individual abilities are each preserved accordingly. This indicates clearly that God did not destroy or remove their minds and even the idiosyncrasies of his messengers.

At the same time the use of the word **דַּבַּר** by the author-editor, in “and place the words,” grants to Moses a similar function to the one Yahweh has as he enables his servants to speak. This third use ties this assertion closely to v. 11, which had indicated that Yahweh was the one who enabled persons to see, hear, and speak (cf. also v. 16 below).

4:16 Aaron is appointed to deliver God’s message to the Israelites, after being informed by Moses. It is not said that Aaron will speak to Pharaoh for Moses in this verse, but to the Israelites (cf. Exod 4:30; 7:1–2). The wisdom of having Aaron talk to the elders of the Israelites is evident, for they would know and trust him and his intentions toward them. As Moses was God’s mouthpiece to Aaron, so Aaron would be the mouthpiece to the people. Moses is to deliver the plan of God to Aaron. This is an interesting trio of messengers; the word of God is “filtered” through two distinct layers of human personalities before it reaches his people. Again the writer emphasizes Moses’ involvement in God’s work, asserting “you yourself” (cf. v. 15) will be to him as God as “I myself” am with you and him.

Moses, as the human source of God’s words, is so dominant that what Aaron has to say to Pharaoh is not recorded; rather, Moses becomes more and more dominant “as God” (Exod 7:1–2) when the narrative progresses. The use of **לְאֱלֹהִים**, “as God,” with reference to Moses’ function is unique (cf. Exod 7:1).³²⁴⁸⁹ It is the only time in the OT that the term applies to a specifically named human person. It clearly presents Moses’ special relationship to God. His closeness to Yahweh is celebrated in Exodus and throughout the Pentateuch (cf. esp. Num 12:6–8). In Num 12:9 the author-editor asserts that the anger of Yahweh burned (**וַיַּחַר אֵף יְהוָה**) against Miriam and Aaron when they challenged the unique status of Moses. Moses has been appointed to this position of standing in God’s place toward Aaron here and toward Pharaoh in Exod 7:1 by Yahweh. Here Moses functions as God (**לְאֱלֹהִים**), and there it is asserted “I have established (**נָתַתִּי**) you God (**אֶלֹהִים**) to Pharaoh,” an important position for Moses, since he will be dealing with the Egyptian god Horus incarnate in Pharaoh.³³⁴⁹⁰ A battle between God/gods, not merely between mortals, looms in the distance.

The intimacy of this assertion about Moses here is indicated by Exod 6:7, where Yahweh asserts that he will take Israel to him as a people and he will be to them (as) God (³³⁵⁰¹**לְאֱלֹהִים**), a goal God has asserted already in Gen 17:7, 8; 28:21. This almost uncanny nearness of Moses to Yahweh constitutes his special position. The calling of the special child (Exod 2:2) is becoming clear. In these verses and in 10–13 the coming “Ten Words” (Exod 20:1–17) of Yahweh are perhaps foreshadowed, for they are God’s words. Moses offers no new excuses or rebuttals. Like Jeremiah later (Jer 20:7, 9), he is overpowered.

⁴⁸³²⁹ Fischer, *Jahwe Unser Gott*, 199, lists these other similar references in the OT: 1 Sam 28:13 (but the ptc. **עֲלֵי** is in the m. pl.); Psa 45:7, where the king is addressed as God; Psa 82:6. Genesis 1:26–28 and Psa 8 speak of the likeness of people to God because they are made in his image (a little less than God).

⁴⁹³³⁰ Hoffmeier, “Arm of God,” 379.

⁵⁰³³¹ The term occurs six times in Genesis: 17:7, 8; 28:21; 39:9; 40:8; 46:1. Three of these anticipate Exod 6:7. It is found in Exodus nine times, with various meanings.

4:17 God’s instruction to Moses to take the staff in his hand is central, for by it Moses was to perform two of the specific signs, as needed, before the Israelites to cause them to believe (Exod 3:16; 4:1, 5, 8, 9: cf. v. 30). The staff referred to is not associated with Aaron, which is clear since only Moses is addressed and present before God in this monologue. But the function of the staff will be expanded greatly in the plagues, when Yahweh deals with Pharaoh through Moses and Aaron. For it is not just any staff that Moses will use, but the staff God himself has designated; therefore, it can also be referred to as the staff of God (Exod 4:20; 17:9). Yet in the plagues Aaron’s staff is used as well, but only at the command of Yahweh *through Moses*. The involvement of Aaron’s staff in the plagues is perhaps a foretaste of what happens to it later when it buds to confirm his authority as high priest (Num 17; esp. vv. 8, 9). Whatever staff is employed, Moses is the human agent through whom God commands its use, not Aaron.

The word translated “staff” (מִטָּה) is found twenty-one times (3 × 7) in Exodus, possibly indicating the completeness of God’s power over any opposition. Its distribution seems to be orderly and conveys a message:

Exodus	4:2–9	7:8–13	7:14–1 0:29	14:16	17:5–9
	4x	5x	9x	1x	2x

It is used nine times in episodes leading up to the plagues, fourteen times before Pharaoh and the Egyptians, nine times in the plagues, ten times in the plagues plus the exodus itself. It is used twelve times after the episodes leading up to the plagues, for a total of twenty-one uses. These numbers bear theological significance.

When Moses left Midian he took the “staff of God” in his hand; when he uses it for the last time in Exodus (17:9) it is called “the staff of God.” His last use of the staff reverses the first plague of water turned to blood for the Egyptians, for he strikes a bone-dry desert rock to bring forth pure drinking water in the midst of the desert for his people. Of the twenty-one references to the staff, twelve are to Moses’ staff (including God’s staff), while seven are to Aaron’s staff (used only at the command of Moses; cf. Aaron’s staff that budded in Num 17:8, 9). Two references indicate the staffs of the Egyptian magicians, which were devoured by Aaron’s staff. Clearly Aaron’s staff is involved, but is there really confusion as to whose staff is used when (see 7:8–13; 7:14–29; 14:16; 17:5–9)? In Exod 4:2–20 the staff is God’s staff in its supernatural qualities, but, in fact, to Moses it is merely his shepherd’s staff.³³⁵¹²

There are no new words in vv. 15–17 that have not occurred already in 3:1–4:14, strongly indicating the close of the section.³³⁵²³ Thus ends Yahweh’s appearance and encounter with Moses, an appearance that eclipses the theophanies granted to the fathers in both its splendor and in Moses’ checkered response. Moses now qualifies to stand among those to whom Yahweh has appeared (cf. Exod 4:1), not in himself but because of Yahweh’s incredible patience

⁵¹³³² See additional summary and material at Exod 7:8, etc., as noted above, esp. 7:8–13. Also see Exod 4:30, where the context indicates clearly that it is Moses’/God’s staff involved, not Aaron’s, unless Aaron incorrectly reported the “words” of Moses to the people (4:27–30a).

⁵²³³³ Cf. Fischer, *Jahwe Unser Gott*, 23–24.

as he has called, rebuked, supported, and still has enabled and equipped his faltering servant-hero to perform his divine calling.

Biblical Theology Comments

The exodus of Israel from Egypt, as announced here, is clearly the work of God (Gen 15:13–14; 50:24–25), and it fulfills and shapes the contours of his covenantal plans for his people. The people cannot rescue themselves, and Yahweh’s chosen deliverer (Exod 2:10), after four impassioned pleas on his part to recuse himself from the task, a task that Yahweh vehemently now assigns to him, goes reluctantly, but only after Yahweh convinces him to go and simultaneously orders him to go—to deliver Yahweh’s people from Egypt (3:10; 4:15–17). As a result, in essence, at the Reed Sea it was God who delivered his people and a large “mixed multitude” into his freedom to come to himself (cf. Exod 19:4).

Moses’ misguided and poorly timed attempt to deliver his people earlier (2:11–14) weighs heavily on him, but the oppression stemming from his earlier failure is overcome with the assurance that God himself will be with him (3:12), just as he has unfailingly been with the fathers and their descendants all along.

The author-editor displays the character of God for us in this intense encounter with his chosen deliverer. Moses is determined not to go, but Yahweh is determined to respond to the pain of his people and their cries and to deliver them. He will do so because he is moved by compassion to do so, and in order to show himself a faithful God who maintains his covenant promises with the fathers, as Deut 7:8 informs us. Yahweh acts on behalf of his people because he loved the fathers and hence their offspring. God’s love motivates the execution of this difficult task, one of the greatest of the *magnalia dei* that Yahweh performs to bring not only his people but the Egyptians as well to a knowledge of who he is.

Verse 15 reveals further how Yahweh’s presence will be with Moses (and in fact with Aaron): “and I myself will be with your speech and with his speech, and I will instruct you with respect to what you should do.” God’s presence with Moses (v. 12) is evident in both what Moses and Aaron say and do. Divine involvement in the process of the exodus is ubiquitous. The staff that God instructs Moses to take with him is an additional extension of God’s presence among his people. The staff displays God’s superiority, power, and ability over the ruses and machinations of the Egyptians, and over nature itself as nature responds in honor to its Creator.

Application and Devotional Implications

Moses later recounts all that Yahweh told him to do before Pharaoh, and he happily narrates the “gospel” of the exodus event to his father-in-law in the vicinity of Sinai (Exod 18:7–12). He speaks what God instructed him to say and continues to do so by recounting what God has done—he has freed his people. Israel has been rescued from the house of slavery.

Jesus received his word to speak from his God and Father; he did not speak his own words, but the words of his Father (John 7:16–17), for he spoke as God instructed him to (John 12:49), and he announced deliverance to his people; his words were from the Father (John 12:50). His followers then and now are enabled to speak the words of the Father, through his Spirit, even in times of persecution (Matt 10:19–20). God, through the Holy Spirit, instructed Paul to preach

the gospel in Macedonia—the gospel that announced freedom and liberation from the bondage of sin, death, and the devil; rescue was now available to those who would respond to the message in faith (Acts 16:9). Paul, who was charged to speak the gospel of freedom (Rom 1:1–4) was moved by God through the Spirit to do so. He did not speak on his own (Eph 6:20; Phil 1:14) and, like Moses, his message did not rely on his own ability to persuade (1 Cor 2:4). God’s people, a kingdom of priests unto God, continue to preach and rely on God’s power in the Spirit today.⁵³

Comment

10 Moses’ protest that he is not a “man of words” is keyed both to what Yahweh has asked him to do and to the larger contexts of prophetic (Beegle, *Moses*, 76–80) and perhaps even royal (Porter, *Moses and Monarchy*, 8–11) symbolism. What Moses is to undertake involves above all a persuasive communication of what has happened to him and is about to happen to the sons of Israel, to the elders, the people, and to Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Moses claims inadequacy in speech, and his claim is wittily, perhaps even disrespectfully comprehensive: his condition, he says, is one of long standing, persistent right up to the moment of this confrontation with Yahweh, and still just as much in evidence. One almost has the impression that Moses is producing a last and best excuse, playing a trump card, pushing his argument as far as it will go. In effect, he says, “You are indeed all that you claim. But I am the same old Moses, ‘heavy-lipped and thick-tongued.’ ” Literally, Moses claims to have a heavy (כבד) mouth and a heavy tongue.

This claim of inadequacy is a recurring one in OT passages having to do with God’s call and commission (cf., e.g., Judg 6:14–15; 1 Sam 10:20–24; 1 Kgs 3:5–9; Isa 6:5–8; Jer 1:4–10; see also Habel, *ZA*⁵⁴ 77 [1965] 316–23). Whatever its connection to prophetic and royal traditions of the word and the messenger, its more important rootage is in the OT pattern of the weak become strong, the least become great, the mean become mighty, the last become first (cf., e.g., Judg 6:11–24; 1 Sam 16:1–13; 17:19–54; Amos 7:14–15; Isa 6:1–13; Jer 1:4–19; and even Isa 52:13–53:12). This pattern is a metaphor of theological assertion in the Bible, and everywhere it occurs, its fundamental message is the same: God’s word, God’s rule, God’s teaching, God’s deliverance come not from man, no matter who that man may be, but from God. Even the election of Israel makes this point. Indeed that election is probably the most convincing of all the occurrences of the pattern.

11–12 Yahweh’s answer to Moses’ protest shows the protest to be not only invalid, but irrelevant. Once more (3:12, 14–15), Yahweh declares to Moses the promise of the Presence that makes all the difference: עַם־פִּי אֶהְיֶה “I AM with your mouth.” This same declaration is repeated in the Aaron-section (vv 14–16) with regard to both Moses’ mouth *and* Aaron’s mouth (v 15). Indeed, it is the important motif that makes the two answers to Moses’ complaint one

⁵³ Eugene Carpenter, *Exodus*, vol. 1, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 259–274.

⁵⁴ *ZAW Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

answer. What Moses and Aaron are to say and how they are to say it, in the accomplishment of *Yahweh's* purpose, will be to *Yahweh's* credit, not theirs. At the crucial moments he will be with them, working out his purpose.

This underlying theme is, of course, the key to v 11. *Yahweh* has made the mouth of man, and *Yahweh* withholds or gives the ability to communicate. אִלֵּם “mute” literally means “tongue-tied,” that is, able to understand but not able to speak, which is what Moses is claiming about himself. With this condition deafness is compared, and parallel to this pair is set their visual counterpart, נִקְפָּה literally, “having open eyes” (but perhaps not using them?), and the opposite, blindness (cf. Speier, *V⁵⁵T* 10 [1960] 347). There is thus no need to consider פָּקַח “seeing” out of place in this sequence and in need of emendation (as, e.g., to פִּטְחָה “lame”; Lachs, *V⁵⁶T* 26 [1976] 249–50). The sequence is carefully designed, with Moses’ protest as a point of departure, to declare yet again that *Yahweh* will be present with Moses and will see that both Moses’ mouth and his own plan work properly.

13 Thus to *Yahweh's* repeated and emphatic assertion of Presence, “I AM with (or I will take care of) your mouth,” and his promise to teach or reveal to (hiphil of יָרָה) Moses what he is to speak, Moses replies with deferential resignation, “Sorry, Lord—pray send whomever you want to send.” This verse makes perfect sense as it stands if it is taken as a response to vv 11–12 instead of as a transition to vv 14–16, which supplies a similar response, though one adding Aaron to the narrative. This addition is the contribution of a later hand, and its insertion here and elsewhere creates a variety of problems of sequence, not least of which is the problem of who owns and who wields the staff symbolizing God’s power.

14–17 The difference in the role of Aaron in the narrative portions of the Book of Exodus and in the texts that are concerned primarily with cultic matters, in the Books of Leviticus and Numbers as well as Exodus, is well known and much studied (cf. Cody, *OT Priesthood*, 146–74). It has occasioned a series of theories, dealing with the triumph of an Aaronide priesthood over an earlier Zadokite priesthood (North, *ZA⁵⁷W* 66 [1954] 191–99); the early role of the Aaronides as the keepers of a calf-cult at Bethel (Mauch, “Aaron,” *ID⁵⁸B* 1:1–2); the difference between a tribe of Levi and a levitical priesthood (Westphal, *ZA⁵⁹W* 26 [1906] 227–30); and even the “two Aarons” of the Bible, Aaron the “co-leader” and Aaron the preeminent priest (Rivkin, “Aaron, Aaronides,” *IDBSu⁶⁰p*, 1–3).

A theory generally accepted in most of this research concerning Aaron is that a wide recognition of Aaron as the priest *par excellence* came late in OT history, certainly after the Exile, but far enough ahead of the final formation of the books of the tetrateuch to permit the insertion of pro-Aaron material at selected appropriate points. The section at hand presents such a point, though one at which the role of Aaron is promoted not exclusively, but in association with and clearly secondary to that of Moses.

⁵⁵*VT Vetus Testamentum*

⁵⁶*VT Vetus Testamentum*

⁵⁷*ZAW Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

⁵⁸*IDB Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*

⁵⁹*ZAW Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

⁶⁰*IDBSup Supplementary volume to IDB*

Thus Aaron is presented as Moses' brother; he is expressly called הלוי "the Levite" in a manner suggesting more than mere tribal ancestry; and he is promised, as Moses is, Yahweh's Presence with his mouth and Yahweh's instruction as to what he is to speak. Even so, in order that Moses' own preeminence not be compromised, Aaron is put in a relationship to him clearly similar to the relationship Moses has to Yahweh: Moses will speak to Aaron, and put the message into his mouth; Yahweh will be with *both* mouths, instruct *both* servants; and Aaron's speaking will be *for* Moses—*he* will function as Moses' mouth, and Moses will be as a god (or God: לאלהים) to him. It is a remarkable struggle with the tension between the two figures, and one that leaves no doubt about Aaron's submission to Moses, just as the preceding paragraph leaves no doubt about Moses' submission to Yahweh.

The resolution of the Moses-Aaron tension helped to locate this passage here instead of somewhere else, and made possible, perhaps even necessary, the assertion of Yahweh's Presence. The postscript about the staff, which may originally have come after what is now v 13, stands as an ambiguous conclusion to the expanded section, and is equally applicable to both Moses and Aaron as wielders of the staff symbolizing Yahweh's power.

Explanation

What this section comes finally to say to us about the mouth of Moses is that Yahweh who made it and who makes it work will be present with it and will instruct its speaking. Even when Aaron speaks as Moses' mouth, this will no less be so. Moses' specific reference to a particular weakness is beside the point, irrelevant to the subject.

That subject is Yahweh and Yahweh's Presence. Moses' lack of eloquence, or for that matter, Aaron's abundance of it, are not the point. Yahweh, the "I AM," is with Moses and with Moses' mouth, with Aaron's mouth, and he will also be with the sons of Israel in Egypt as with the Pharaoh and his people, to see his purpose brought to fulfillment.

The mouth of Moses may well be heavy and clumsy, slow and halting in speech. It would not matter if it were dumb altogether, and Aaron's mouth, as well. Yahweh will be there, and Yahweh will take responsibility for both the message and the messengers. The staff in the hands of Moses and Aaron is a symbol of this powerful Presence.⁶¹

⁶¹ John I. Durham, [*Exodus*](#), vol. 3, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1987), 49–51.

4:10 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"?⁷⁶²⁵ 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 18:27: I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes. (Abraham)

Exod 4:10: I have never been eloquent ... I am slow of speech and tongue. (Moses)

1 Sam 9:21: Saul answered, "But am I not a Benjamite, from the smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why do you say such a thing to me?"

1 Sam 18:23: David said, "Do you think it is a small matter to become the king's son-in-law? I'm only a poor man and little known."

1 Sam 24:14: "Against whom has the king of Israel come out? Whom are you pursuing? A dead dog? A flea?"

1 Sam 26:20: Now do not let my blood fall to the ground far from the presence of the LORD. The king of Israel has come out to look for a flea—as one hunts a partridge in the mountains."

2 Sam 9:8: Mephibosheth bowed down and said, "What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?"

2 Kgs 8:13: Hazeal said, "How could your servant, a mere dog, accomplish such a feat?"

⁶²⁷⁵ Lit., "I have a heavy mouth and a heavy tongue." Cf. D. Gewalt, "Der Sprachfehler Moses," *DBAT* 27 (1991): 8–16; J. Tigay, "'Heavy of Mouth' and 'Heavy of Tongue': On Moses' Speech Difficulty," *BASOR* 231 (1978): 57–67. Tigay's survey of the possible meanings of Moses' ritual protest rules out the idea that he was trying to claim that he had forgotten his Hebrew and affirms that "slow of speech and tongue" can certainly mean having a speech defect—but it does not literally need to mean that. Moses did not start his ritual protests with the claim to have a speech problem, which, if real, might have been a genuine cause (at least in his mind) for disqualification from the assignment to which he was being called. It was in fact the fourth excuse/objection (after 3:11, 13; 4:1) he raised, showing that he was once again "reaching" for yet another way to "object" (again, we contend, formally only, for purposes of modesty) to the call.

1 Kgs 3:7: You have made your servant king ... I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. (Solomon)

Isa 6:5: Woe is me!... For I am a man of unclean lips. (Isaiah)

Isa 56:3: And let not any [official] complain, "I am only a dry tree."

Jer 1:6: Ah, Sovereign LORD, ... I do not know how to speak; I am only a child. (Jeremiah)

1 Cor 2:3: I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. (Paul)

Eph 3:8: Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me. (Paul)

1 Tim 1:15: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. (Paul)

Heb 13:22: Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written you only a short letter.

Of particular interest for their close parallels with Exod 4:10 are Saul's claim to be obscure in origin when he was in fact from a prominent family (1 Sam 9:21); David's claim to be a nobody when in fact he was already a popular war hero (1 Sam 18:23); Hazael's claim to be no better than a dog when he was in fact already a major leader in Syria (2 Kgs 8:13); Solomon's assertion that he was only a child when in fact he probably was at least thirty years old at the time he became king (1 Kgs 3:7); and Paul's claim to be the lowest of the low among God's people (Eph 3:8; 1 Tim 1:15) when in fact he was an influential apostle. The closest parallel of all is that of Jeremiah's protest (Jer 1:6), in which he claimed to be unable to talk, something he then did quite eloquently for the next forty-one years.

All of these parallels point to the simple fact that Moses was not speaking literally here but figuratively, responding to a great assignment⁶³⁷⁶ 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.

4:11–12 This *hieros logos* might seem to be tailored to the ritual protest Moses had just made, in that God referred to his control over human ability to speak. However, the fact that God also cited his control over human ability to hear and to see (v. 11)—issues not in dispute since Moses did not claim to have any hearing or vision problem—shows that it is more a general encouragement for Moses, his protest having been figurative rather than literal. The promise of help in knowing what to say and how to say it (v. 12) is relevant to any prophetic call

⁶³⁷⁶ Cf. J. Cohen, "The Call of Moses" *JBQ* 20 (1991–1992): 256–61; H. Schmid, "Die Berufung des Mose," in *Mose: Überlieferung und Geschichte*, BZAW 110 (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1966), 27–38, and esp. Gewalt, "Der 'Sprachfehler' des Mose," 8–16. Gewalt shows how the interpretation that Moses had a speech defect developed throughout history even though nothing about a speech defect is indicated in the text.

since what prophets do above all things is *say* what God teaches them to say.⁷⁶⁴⁷ The NIV’s “I will help you speak” (*’ānōkî`ehyeh ’im pîkā*, v. 12) means literally “I will be with your mouth” and is exactly what God promised to both Moses and Aaron in v. 15. In light of the absence of any concern about Aaron’s ability to speak publicly, this is simply further evidence that Moses likewise had no speech defect.⁷⁶⁵⁸ As the giver of all gifts, God knows people’s gifts and calls them to his service—and supports them in it—accordingly.

4:13 The NIV idiomatically renders Moses’ request here, which is literally, “[He said]⁷⁶⁶⁹ ‘Please, my lord, send by you will send,’ ”⁸⁶⁷⁰ a somewhat elliptical expression unattested elsewhere in the Bible and one apparently designed to mean, “I don’t want to do it” but worded as neutrally and non-offensively as possible. The same sort of sense might be implied in English by: “With all due respect, sir, you must know someone who’s available to send.”

This final protest of Moses represents a dramatic departure from all four of his previous protests (3:11, 13; 4:1, 10), which had the style of ritual, nonliteral demurrers. If Moses were to continue that pattern he would here say something else about his unworthiness and/or the magnitude of the challenge. He did not. Instead, he actually asked that God send someone else to do the job—in other words, he tried to refuse to accept the call. Among the various call narratives in the Bible⁸⁶⁸¹ there is only one other in which a prophet attempted to refuse to accept a call from God: that of Jonah. In Jonah’s case the pattern is similar to that found here in Exod 4:

God calls prophet to preach in a foreign land	Exod 3:4–10	Jonah 1:1–2
Prophet tries to refuse	Exod 4:13	Jonah 1:3
Divine death penalty nearly imposed during travels	Exod 4:24	Jonah 1:4–15
Prophet learns his lesson	Exod 4:25	Jonah 2:1–10 [also 1:12]

⁶⁴⁷⁷ In several other prominent prophetic call narratives, the prophet is also given explicit assurance of God’s control over speech and of help for the prophet’s speaking per se; e.g., “I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be silent and unable to rebuke them, though they are a rebellious house. But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth and you shall say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says.’ Whoever will listen let him listen” (Ezek 3:26–27); “Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, ‘Now, I have put my words in your mouth’ ” (Jer 1:9).

⁶⁵⁷⁸ As Childs (*Exodus*, 70) points out, the verb “to speak” (*dbr*) and the noun “mouth” (*peh*) each occur seven times in the immediate context as a necessary function of the subject matter rather than as a contrived pattern.

⁶⁶⁷⁹ The NIV supplies “Moses” here for clarity.

⁶⁷⁸⁰ בִּי אֲדַבֵּר שְׁלֹחַ-אֶזְרָא בְּיַד-תְּשַׁלַּח.

⁶⁸⁸¹ Cf. N. Habel, “The Form and the Significance of the Call Narratives,” *ZAW* 77 (1965): 297–323.

God spares him	Exod 4:26	Jonah 1:17
God renews the call	Exod 4:27–28	Jonah 3:1
Prophet finally cooperates with calling	Exod 4:29–30 et passim	Jonah 3:3–4
Call comes to successful fruition	Exod 4:31 et passim	Jonah 3:5–10

Jonah is a much smaller book than Exodus, and it is therefore understandable that the pattern would be rather more compactly presented in Jonah than in Exodus, where various more grand issues are also in play. It need not be assumed that the story of Jonah is modeled on that of Moses; rather, each story proceeds logically from the facts: if God is determined to use a prophet he will indeed do so, and woe to the prophet who tries to avoid his calling.⁸⁶⁹²

4:14–17 The NIV has made translation assumptions in v. 14 that are only one set of possibilities for accurately representing the sense of the original. In fact, the first part of the verse probably is better translated: “Even though⁸⁷⁰³ the LORD was angry with Moses, he said, ‘Is not Aaron your Levite brother?’⁸⁷¹⁴ I know ...’ ” In other words, the verse appears to assert that Moses’ protest in v. 13 was not acceptable to God but rather aroused his anger, and yet the verse does not necessarily go on to assert that the provision of Aaron his “Levite brother” was the result of anger but rather that it was the result of grace.

⁶⁹⁸² Cf., e.g., “But if I say, ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,’ / his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. / I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot” (Jer 20:9); “But I am full of the wrath of the LORD, and I cannot hold it in” (Jer 6:11); “I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor 9:16); “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent” (Luke 4:43).

⁷⁰⁸³ On simple prostatic juxtaposition of clauses as a means of representing the concessive (“even though, although, even if”), cf., e.g., וַיִּכַּר יוֹסֵף אֶת־אָחָיו וְהֵם לֹא הִכִּירוּ (“Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him,” Gen 42:8); וַאֲדַבֵּר אֲלֵיכֶם וְלֹא שָׁמַעְתֶּם (“So I told you, but you would not listen,” Deut 1:43); וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נִשְׁבְּעוּ לָהֶם וַיִּבְקֵשׁ שָׂאוּל לְהַכֹּתָם (“Although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had tried to wipe them out,” 2 Sam 21:2 NRSV).

⁷¹⁸⁴ The NIV “What about your brother, Aaron the Levite?” assumes from the context that the question must be equivalent to “Have you thought about your brother, Aaron the Levite?” But this fails to recognize that the question in the Hb. has all the earmarks of a simple “polar” interrogative (see *IBHS* §40.3), that Moses did not use הלא elsewhere in the Pentateuch to mean “what about” or the like, and, moreover, that the Hb. word order does not allow for the translation “Aaron the Levite.” Indeed, the Hb. word order, הלא אַהֲרֹן אֶחִיךָ הַלֵּוִי, separates “Aaron” from “the Levite” so that unless an audacious instance of hypallage be alleged, the meaning must be “Is not Aaron your Levite brother?”

This is, again, not unlike the situation of Jonah, whose refusal to obey God's command to preach repentance to Nineveh aroused God's anger but who nevertheless experienced God's grace in the form of the large fish that unexpectedly appeared to keep him from drowning. Here Moses' brother Aaron is provided unexpectedly as a helper to Moses (so Zipporah, as well, in another sense helped Moses continue his ministry [4:24–26]). Moses presumably had no way of knowing before this that Aaron had set out to find him, but the idea that Aaron would do at least some of the speaking once they were in Egypt, so that the hostility generated by that speaking would not fall exclusively on Moses, must have been welcome encouragement indeed. In other words, Aaron was provided as a cospeaker for Moses, not because Moses could not speak well but because of the encouragement Aaron would bring to Moses in the daunting task of facing the hostility of the pharaoh of Egypt.⁸⁷²⁵

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. Thus God was the revealer; Moses, the prophet; and Aaron, the public repeater, an arrangement not unlike that in the modern church involving God, the Scriptures as the location of his word, and the preacher as the public repeater. Although at first Aaron primarily would have repeated verbatim what God had said to Moses and would not have expounded upon it as does the modern preacher, the role of priest certainly involved teaching in the sacred assembly, as a number of subsequent texts demonstrate.⁸⁷³⁶

Verse 17 highlights the importance of Moses' staff, an object that plays a significant role in the exodus story. The staff is the ultimate immediate reassurance, in this final set of *hieroi logoi*, of God's presence with Moses as he enters upon the challenging task to which he has been called.

Excursus: Moses' Staff

⁷²⁸⁵ Cf. Jesus' sending the disciples and apostles out two-by-two rather than all alone (Mark 6:7; Luke 10:1).

⁷³⁸⁶ E.g., 2 Kgs 17:27 NRSV: "Then the king of Assyria commanded, "Send there one of the priests whom you carried away from there; let him go and live there, and teach them the law of the god of the land"; 2 Chr 15:3 NRSV: "For a long time Israel was without the true God, and without a teaching priest, and without law"; Ezek 22:26 NRSV: "Its priests have done violence to my teaching and have profaned my holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them"; Mic 3:11 NRSV: "Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price."

In ancient Palestinian-Israelite society, one's staff was an essential personal possession, a means of protection and identification and even a symbol of one's power.⁸⁷⁴⁷ Various Hebrew terms are translated "staff." It is possible to use them rather interchangeably here in light of their semantic overlap and render them all with the English word "staff" just as "rod," "staff," "big stick," and "walking stick" can all be used largely interchangeably in English. From the point of view of identifying oneself, a staff was in certain ways the equivalent in ancient culture of what a passport, wallet, or driver's license would be today.⁸⁷⁵⁸ From the point of view of protection, it was the ancient equivalent of what a sidearm would be today. From the point of view of its function as a symbol of one's personal power, a modern analogy might be one's photo ID pass or even, in some situations, one's parking pass. It is likely that women often carried staffs; however, as it happens, the only references to staffs in the Bible involve men.

A staff was so basic and prized a possession that it might be the mentioned metaphorically as the only thing a person possessed, or the first thing in a short list of very basic possessions, as reflected in Gen 32:10 ("I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups") or Luke 9:3 ("Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money").

In many cases a person's staff apparently was carefully carved with various markings and/or words to make it uniquely identifiable both by the owner and by others who might be familiar with the owner.⁸⁷⁶⁹ An example of this practice is reflected in Gen 38:18 ("He said, 'What pledge should I give you?' 'Your seal and its cord, and the staff in your hand,' she answered"; cf. Num 17:2, 9; 2 Kgs 4:29).

The habit of carrying a staff may have originated in connection with its usefulness as both a weapon and a tool, that is, as a weapon against wild animals and human foes and as a tool for keeping animals under one's control or manipulating objects:

Num 22:27: When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam, and he was angry and beat her with his staff.

1 Sam 14:27: But Jonathan ... reached out the end of the staff that was in his hand and dipped it into the honeycomb. He raised his hand to his mouth.

⁷⁴⁸⁷ J. Currid derives the Hb. word for "staff" used most often in the present context (מִטָּה) from the Egyptian word for staff (*mdw*) and supports his etymological contention by showing that both words have essentially the same range of meaning: shepherd's staff, walking stick, and symbolic indication of power (either magical power or the power of a divinity; "The Rod of Moses," *BurH* 33 [1997]: 107–14).

⁷⁵⁸⁸ Thus misuse of a staff was a serious offense, akin to but potentially worse than forgery, depending on the circumstance, as Moses learned when he used God's staff without authorization in Num 20:1–13 (see J. Kok, *The Sin of Moses and the Staff of God: A Narrative Approach* [Assen: Van Gorcum, 1997]).

⁷⁶⁸⁹ In this regard a staff could function somewhat in the manner that a seal did, under certain conditions (cf. Exod 28:11, 21; 1 Kgs 21:8; Neh 9:38; L. G. Herr, "Seal," *ISBE* 4.369–75).

1 Sam 17:40: Then [David] took his staff in his hand ... and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.

Mark 15:19: Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him.

Ps 23:4: Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, / I will fear no evil, for you are with me; / your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Staffs also could be used as crutches. Although the modern style of crutch, with a padded support under the arm and a place to grip with the hand, was unknown in Bible times, one's staff provided a workable substitute, as seen in Gen 47:31 ("Israel worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff") and Exod 21:19 ("the one who struck the blow will not be held responsible if the other gets up and walks around outside with his staff"; cf. Isa 36:6; Ezek 29:6).

For those with a degree of societal power, a staff was an accoutrement that shared by association, and thus represented, their authority:

Gen 49:10: The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.

Num 17:2–3, 7, 10: Speak to the Israelites and get twelve staffs from them, one from the leader of each of their ancestral tribes. Write the name of each man on his staff. On the staff of Levi write Aaron's name, for there must be one staff for the head of each ancestral tribe ... Moses placed the staffs before the LORD in the Tent of the Testimony ... The LORD said to Moses, "Put back Aaron's staff in front of the Testimony, to be kept as a sign to the rebellious."

Num 21:18: Nobles with scepters and staffs ...

Judg 5:14: From Makir captains came down, from Zebulun those who bear a commander's staff.

Matt 27:29: And then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him.

Jer 48:17: How broken is the mighty scepter, how broken the glorious staff!

In Zech 11 the prophet exploits two common uses of the staff—the practice of using a staff to control sheep and the function of a staff to signal authority—to symbolize God's judgment for covenant-breaking (Zech 11:7–14: "Then I took two staffs and called one Favor and the other Union, and I pastured the flock.... I took my staff called Favor and broke it, revoking the covenant I had made with all the nations.... Then I broke my second staff called Union, breaking the brotherhood between Judah and Israel").

Although Moses' staff had potentially all the uses categorized above, it had yet another that elevated its importance far beyond that of any other staff. By divine designation it became not merely Moses' staff but God's. In Exod 4 this fact becomes

progressively evident, beginning with the first mention of the staff as something to which God called special attention (Exod 4:2, “Then the LORD said to him, ‘What is that in your hand?’”) and continuing through the account of how God invested the staff with supernatural power (beginning with 4:4; but esp. 4:17, “But take this staff in your hand so you can perform miraculous signs with it”) to the climactic description of the staff as “the staff of God” [worded more naturally, “God’s staff”] in 4:20.

At God’s command the staff functioned integrally in Moses’ first miracle-making encounter with Pharaoh (7:9ff.; note especially the ambiguity of Moses’ language when he said in 7:17, “This is what the LORD says: By this you will know that I am the LORD: With the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water of the Nile, and it will be changed into blood”—almost as if Moses stood for God not merely in speech but also in body). The staff figures prominently in the initiation of various plagues (9:23; 10:13), the miracle at the Red Sea (14:16), and the miraculous provision of water in the wilderness near Sinai (17:5). Moses on one other occasion called his staff “God’s staff” [NIV “the staff of God”], that is, in 17:9 (“Moses said to Joshua, ‘Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands’”). Since in the context Moses himself was speaking to Joshua of the staff as “God’s staff” rather than “my staff,” it would seem possible that this term (*matṭēh hā’ēlōhîm*) may have become the term the leaders themselves used to refer to the staff.

Moses was hardly the only Israelite leader, however, who carried a staff. Indeed, we must inquire about the significance of “Aaron’s staff,” which is also mentioned in the Pentateuchal narrative on a number of occasions, particularly Exod 7–8 and Num 20. A careful examination of all references to this staff indicates that it too functioned as “God’s staff,” that both Aaron and Moses used it at various times, and that when Moses used it the staff could be called “his [Moses’] staff,” suggesting that Moses and Aaron functioned so closely as a team that their roles vis-à-vis the staff are not distinct enough to require much differentiation in the narrative. Thus Aaron’s staff could become a snake in the same manner that Moses’ staff could (Exod 7:8–13) and was employed in the initiation of the first plague (7:14–24, mentioned four times; note that “the staff that was changed into a snake” in v. 15 is technically ambiguous as to ownership; it could refer to the immediately preceding story, involving Aaron’s staff, or to the story of chap. 4, involving Moses’ staff). Not all the other plague stories mention the use of a staff, but among those that do, Aaron’s staff was used to initiate plagues two (8:5) and three (8:16–17), whereas Moses’ was used in plagues seven (9:23) and eight (10:13).

The account in Num 20:1–13 of water from the rock at Meribah mentions Moses’ taking “the staff from the LORD’s presence” (v. 9), also simply called “his [Moses’] staff” (20:11), and using it in the miraculous production of water. This staff is surely the same one that had been put specially in the Lord’s presence, that is, Aaron’s staff⁷⁷⁰ as featured in the story of Num 17. Aaron’s staff was used to demonstrate God’s favor on both the house of Levi and Aaron’s leadership, and it was put “in front of the Testimony

⁷⁷⁰ Thus the reference in Heb 9:4, “Which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant.”

to be kept as a sign” (Num 17:10). The fact that it is called “his [Moses’] staff” three chapters later (Num 20:11) seems to show the lack of concern to differentiate the staffs of Moses and Aaron, which may well stem from the fact that either staff was ultimately God’s so that the human owner or user matters little. Both Isaiah and Micah refer to Moses’ staff, in its role as God’s staff, in their prophecies (Isa 10:26: “The LORD Almighty will lash them with a whip, as when he struck down Midian at the rock of Oreb; and he will raise his staff over the waters, as he did in Egypt”; Mic 7:14: “Shepherd your people with your staff, the flock of your inheritance, which lives by itself in a forest, in fertile pasturelands. Let them feed in Bashan and Gilead as in days long ago”).

A noteworthy parallel to the miracle-working staff of Moses/Aaron is that of the angel’s staff in Judg 6:21 (“With the tip of the staff that was in his hand, the angel of the LORD touched the meat and the unleavened bread. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread”). Thus is portrayed for the reader the fact that even an angel, when he assumed human form, carried a staff, as virtually all male humans did, and could use it much as God’s prophets did. Much later, Elisha employed his staff in a similarly miraculous way to effect a healing, even at a distance (2 Kgs 4:29, “Elisha said to Gehazi, ‘Tuck your cloak into your belt, take my staff in your hand and run.... Lay my staff on the boy’s face’ ”). This use of a staff as a healing token finds a parallel in some Akkadian incantation texts, where the “staff” is sometimes mentioned as an instrument by which are exorcised *asakku* demons, who cause fevers and other diseases.⁷⁸⁹¹

Did Moses’ staff have power in itself? Not at all. Its power, and every aspect of its effectiveness, came from God’s use of the staff in Moses’ (or Aaron’s) hand as a symbol of the divine authority, supremacy, and presence. The miraculous staff was designated to convince Moses and Aaron, then the Israelite leadership, and in turn Pharaoh, and finally the nation of Israel of God’s sovereign control in his plan to liberate his people from their bondage. It becomes progressively clear that the staff was not really Moses’ or Aaron’s (or anyone else’s) but God’s.⁷⁹

⁷⁸⁹¹ J. H. Walton, V. H. Matthews, and M. W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000).

⁷⁹ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 133–142.