

Confusion, Obedience, and God's Sovereignty: Moses and His Return to Egypt (Exodus 4:18-31)

“Sin is the dare of God's justice, the rape of His mercy, the jeer of His patience, the slight of His power, and the contempt of His love.” ~ John Bunyan

I. Investigation: An Examination of Exodus 4:18-31

A. Introduction

The Book of Exodus now brings closure to Moses' life in the land of the Midianites and concludes this chapter with Moses returning to Egypt. What would seem to be a smooth transition after God's directive on Mt. Sinai is a passage of scripture replete with questions. In fact, 4:24-26, creates one of the most problematic passages in the entire canon. One commentator writes concerning this passage: “Few texts contain more problems for the interpreter than these few verses which have continued to baffle throughout the centuries” (Childs, *Exodus*, 95). As we attempt to address the problematic issues with these verses from Exodus 4, we will discover a God who unequivocally demands holiness, graciously grants forgiveness, and mercifully uses humans for His glory.

B. The Return to Egypt (4:18-23)

v. 18 - In interacting with his father-in-law, Moses remains silent concerning his encounter with God on Mt. Sinai. Not only does Moses omit this vital information, he is less than honest with Jethro concerning his reason for returning to Egypt.

Why did Moses not tell the truth?

v. 19 - The reference of Pharaoh's death serves as “an announcement that the promise of deliverance was starting to come true” (Ryken, *Exodus*, 126).

v. 20 - Having left Egypt empty-handed, Moses returns with a family, and most importantly, the presence and power of God—as seen in the reference to the “rod of God”!

vv. 21-23 - The fulfillment of God's words transpire via the plagues. As noted by one commentator, “Moses does not object upon hearing this revelation. He certainly does object, repeatedly, when God calls him to go to Egypt” (Hamilton, *Exodus*, 78).

The signs and wonders were not only used to convince the Israelites of God's presence, they were also used to harden the hearts of the Egyptians. An important theme seen in the Book of Exodus is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

One commentator writes, “In the dispute about the question to whom Israel belongs and who is her legitimate ruler, Pharaoh or Yahweh, Yahweh at last will show that he has intimate emotional ties with

Israel. Pharaoh had better know that to Yahweh, Israel is not just his own people, they are also dear to him . . . Pharaoh is going to be hit at his most sensitive spot, the spot where he has touched Yahweh himself, in the love for his firstborn” (Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:430) (cf. Hos 11:1 - “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”).

B. The Bloody Bridegroom (4:24-26)

This portion of Exodus serves as one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the Bible. Confusion centers upon the following:

- Whom does God seek to put to death, Moses or one of his sons?
- If it is Moses, why would God want to kill the man whom he just appointed as deliverer of the Israelites?
- What has transpired that God should seek to kill Moses (or one of his sons)?
- How does Zipporah know what needs to be done in order to prevent God’s wrath? And why does this hinder the Lord from taking a life?
- Whose feet does Zipporah touch?
- What does the phrase “bridegroom of blood” mean? And to whom is Zipporah addressing?
- What is the reason for this passage?

v. 24 - The “him” most likely refers to Moses. If the referent was one of Moses’ sons, then we would have expected Moses to perform the circumcision. The Lord “held” Moses, which speaks of a hostile grasp—a death grip!

Yahweh’s encounter with Moses was similar to the Angel of the Lord wrestling with Jacob in Genesis 32.

vv. 25-26 - According to Genesis 17, every male child was to be circumcised on the eighth day. Failure to do so, resulted in being “cut off” from God’s people.

“ . . . if Moses was to carry out the divine commission with success, he must first of all prove himself to be a faithful servant of Jehovah in his own house . . . Moses had probably omitted circumcision simply from regard to his Midianitish wife, who . . . disliked this operation; he had been guilty of a capital crime, which God could not pass over in the case of one whom He had chosen to be His messenger, to establish His covenant with Israel” (Keil and Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 1:459).

Whom does Zipporah circumcise? While their first-born, Gershon, is often argued, Zipporah did not circumcise both sons. Most likely the oldest son was already circumcised, but not the youngest (Exod 18:3-4). This interpretation also makes sense if Zipporah was disgusted with the rite.

“bloody bride-father / groom to me” - Two common interpretations of this phrase are as follows:

- Zipporah is speaking to Moses and indicating that the act has saved Moses’ life. It was seen as a verbal vendetta at Moses (i.e., “bloody bride-groom to me”).
- Zipporah is speaking to Yahweh and indicated her disgust at God for this grotesque operation (i.e., “bloody bride-father to me”).

“his feet” - Often the term “feet” can refer to genitals, but is probably not the case here. The immediate context seems to suggest one of the following renderings:

- Zipporah touched the feet of her youngest son. Thus, the blood demonstrated that her son was ritually pure.
- Zipporah touched Moses’ feet, indicating that the act was finished.
- Zipporah placed the bloody tissue at the Lord’s feet out of anger because of the following three reasons: (1) it was God who had demanded the ritual; (2) if God liked the bloody prepuce, He should have it!; (3) She was angry that God should want to take her husband’s life over this ritual (for further discussion, cf. Allen, “The ‘Blood Bridegroom’ in Exodus 4:24-26,” *Bib Sac* 153 [1996]: 259-69). The Greek translation of the Old Testament takes this view. Likewise, early Rabbinic writings support this position (e.g., Targum of Onkelos reads: “Then she said, ‘Were it not for the blood of this circumcision, my husband would have merited execution.’”).

At this point, it seems that Zipporah took the children and returned to her father (cf. Exod 18:1-5).

C. Moses, Aaron, and the Elders (4:27-31)

vv. 27-31 - Aaron, not Moses, conveys the Good News to the elders. The Elders would have been far more receptive to Aaron, the respected and well-known Levite (cf. Janzen, *Exodus*, 46).

II. Intersect

A. As head of the home, we, as men, have a responsibility to lead spiritually. Even if you are single, you can lead as an example of one who exhibits godly manhood.

Ephesians 5:25-28; 6:4 -

B. The Lord takes His commandments seriously. Failure to adhere to God’s Word nearly cost Moses everything, including His life!

Isaiah 40:8 -

C. Despite our failures as fathers, husbands, and single men, the Lord forgives, extends grace, and still chooses to use us.

Lamentations 3:22-23 -

“Make up your spiritual accounts daily; see how matters stand between God and your souls (Psalm 77:6). Often reckonings keep God and conscience friends. Do with your hearts as you do with your watches, wind them up every morning by prayer, and at night examine whether your hearts have gone true all that day, whether the wheels of your affections have moved swiftly toward heaven.”

~ Thomas Watson