

## CHAPTER 4

**A**nd Moses answered and said, “But, look, they will not believe me<sup>1</sup>  
nor will they heed my voice, for they will say, ‘The LORD did not<sup>2</sup>  
appear to you.’” And the LORD said to him, “What is that in your<sup>3</sup>  
hand?” And he said, “A staff.” And He said, “Fling it to the ground.”  
And he flung it to the ground and it became a snake and Moses fled

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2. *What is that in your hand?* The shepherd’s staff is his familiar possession and constant practical tool. Its sudden metamorphosis into a reptile is thus a dramatic demonstration to Moses of God’s power to intervene in the order of nature that will be repeatedly manifested in the Plagues narrative. The staff itself will be wielded by Moses as a magician’s wand, and Moses’s mission to Egypt, an international capital of the technology of magic, will be implemented through the exercise of divinely enabled magic. In verse 20, the staff will be called “God’s staff,” not because it is a staff belonging to God that was given to Moses, as some scholars have contended, but because from this moment of the Horeb epiphany, the simple shepherd’s staff has been transmuted into both the theater and the conduit of divine power.

3. *Fling it to the ground.* There is an odd semantic “rhyming” in the recycling for the staff of the violent verb that Pharaoh used for the Hebrew male infants (1:22).

*it became a snake and Moses fled.* The trusty support turns into something dangerous and alien, triggering a primal fear in Moses—the very fear that is figured in the primordial reptile of the Garden story (Genesis 3:15). Although this particular transformation has the look of a conjuror’s trick (and Pharaoh’s soothsayers will replicate it), it is an intimation of the awesome power to unleash the zoological and meteorological realms that God will manifest in Egypt.

4 from it. And the LORD said to Moses, “Reach out your hand and grasp  
its tail.” And he reached out his hand and held it and it became a staff  
5 in his grip. “So that they will believe that the LORD God of their fathers,  
the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has  
6 appeared to you.” And the LORD said further to him, “Bring, pray, your  
hand into your bosom.” And he put his hand back into his bosom and  
7 brought it out and, look, his hand was blanched like snow. And He said,  
“Put your hand back into your bosom.” And he put his hand back into  
his bosom and brought it out and, look, it came back like his own flesh.  
8 “And so, should they not believe you and should they not heed the  
voice of the first sign, they will believe the voice of the second sign.  
9 And should it be that they do not believe even both these signs and do  
not heed your voice, you shall take of the water of the Nile and pour it  
on the dry land, and the water that you take from the Nile will become

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4. *grasp its tail*. As has often been noted, this is the most dangerous place to seize a venomous snake, and thus requires Moses to trust implicitly that God will keep him from harm.

6. *his hand was blanched like snow*. The Hebrew *metsora'at*, here represented as “blanched,” is rendered as “leprous” in many older translations, but the modern scholarly consensus is that what is involved is some disfiguring skin disease other than leprosy. The comparison with snow would not refer to flaking, as some have claimed, because “like snow” is a known biblical simile for total whiteness—in the case of skin, loss of all pigmentation. A skin disease will figure among the plagues with which God will strike the Egyptians, and so is the second of the two metamorphic “signs” here. God appropriately is both a sudden bringer of disease and a healer.

8. *heed the voice of the first sign*. Signs don’t have voices, but the formulation is determined by the momentum of the idiom “heed the voice.” It is a case, as Abraham ibn Ezra observes, when “Torah speaks like the language of humankind.”

9. *the water that you take from the Nile will become blood*. Thus, the enactment of this third sign coincides with the implementation of the first plague. If the metamorphoses of Moses’s own staff and hand do not convince the Hebrews, the spectacular transformation of the Nile—an Egyptian deity, as Rashi notes, and the very source of life in Egypt—will eliminate any lingering skepticism.

blood on the dry land.” And Moses said, “Please, my LORD, no man of 10  
 words am I, not at any time in the past nor now since You have spoken  
 to Your servant, for I am heavy-mouthed and heavy-tongued.” And the 11  
 LORD said to him, “Who gave man a mouth, or who makes him mute  
 or deaf or sighted or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? And now, go, and I 12  
 Myself will be with your mouth and will instruct you what to say.” And 13  
 he said, “Please, my LORD, send, pray, by the hand of him You would

The predominance of blood in this entire narrative should be observed. Moses has already spilled Egyptian blood (the phrase is not used, but it is a fixed biblical idiom for both manslaughter and murder). The Ten Plagues will begin with a plague of blood and end with one in which blood is heavily involved. On the way to Egypt (verses 24–26), Moses’s life will be saved by a rite carried out through blood. The story of liberation from Egyptian bondage is consistently imagined as a process of violent oppression to be broken only by violent counterstrokes. The portent here seems to be to turn the Nile water into blood when it is scooped up and scattered on dry land. In the event, a more cataclysmic turning of the water of the river in its channel into blood will take place. “Dry land” and “water” prefigure the Sea of Reeds miracle.

10. *heavy-mouthed and heavy-tongued*. It seems futile to speculate, as so many commentators have, whether Moses suffered from an actual speech impediment or merely was unaccustomed to public speaking. The point is that he invokes these Hebrew idioms for impeded speech—whether as hyperbole or as physiological fact scarcely matters—to express his feeling of incapacity for the mission, which is his new reason for refusal now that God has settled the question of the skepticism of the Israelites. In the subsequent narrative, Moses actually appears to be capable of considerable eloquence.

12. *I Myself will be with your mouth*. This rather unusual idiom is a way of focusing in on God’s initial promise that He will be with Moses. Since Moses has now made an issue of his mouth and tongue, God assures him that the promised divine sustaining aid will be specifically palpable in the organ of speech.

13. *send, pray, by the hand of him You would send*. The implication, of course, is: but not me. Moses resorts to this vague and slightly cryptic phrase because he doesn’t dare to say in so many words that he is still unwilling. But God immediately recognizes this as a refusal—hence the flare-up of anger in His immediate response.

14 send.” And the wrath of the LORD flared up against Moses, and He  
said, “Is there not Aaron the Levite, your brother? I know that he can  
indeed speak, and, what’s more, look, he is coming out to meet you, and  
15 when he sees you, his heart will rejoice. And you shall speak to him and  
put the words in his mouth, and I Myself will be with your mouth and  
with his mouth and I will instruct you both what you should do,  
16 and he will speak for you to the people, and so he, he will be a mouth  
17 for you, and you, you will be for him like a god. And this staff you shall  
take in your hand, with which you will do the signs.”

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14. *Is there not Aaron the Levite, your brother?* The innocent reader might be impelled to ask, “Is there?”, since no previous report of Aaron’s existence had been made. The account of Moses’s conception and birth in 2:2 is elliptic because it is made to sound as though they directly followed the marriage of his parents, whereas Moses is actually the youngest of three siblings, Miriam being the oldest.

*his heart will rejoice.* Are we to infer that the brothers had secret contact and hence an established fraternal bond during the years that Moses was growing up as the Egyptian princess’s adopted son? The narrative data provided in chapter 2 at least allow the possibility that Moses’s family could have found ways to stay in touch with him, and this in turn would explain why he felt a sense of identification with his Hebrew “brothers” when he witnessed the beating of the Hebrew slave by the Egyptian taskmaster. In any case, Aaron’s joy at the brothers’ reunion after Moses’s years as a fugitive suggests that the two will work together in fraternal unison.

16. *you will be for him like a god.* Moses will convey “oracular” messages to Aaron who will transmit them as official spokesman to the people. This rather audacious way of stating the communications relay is enabled by the fact that *’elohim*, which has the primary meaning of “god,” extends to merely angelic divine beings and even to human eminences.



And Moses went and returned to Jether his father-in-law, and he said 18  
to him, "Let me go, pray, and return to my brothers who are in Egypt  
that I may see whether they still live." And Jethro said, "Go in peace."  
And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, "Go, return to Egypt, for all the 19  
men who sought your life are dead." And Moses took his wife and 20  
his sons and mounted them on the donkey, and he returned to the land  
of Egypt, and Moses took God's staff in his hand. And the LORD said to 21  
Moses, "When you set out to return to Egypt, see all the portents that  
I have put in your hand and do them before Pharaoh. But I on  
my part shall toughen his heart and he will not send the people away.

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18. *Jether*. This is a variant form of Jethro, which is more often used in the narrative.

*return to my brothers who are in Egypt that I may see whether they still live.* Moses does not mention that he had fled Egypt for having committed a capital crime, and perhaps one may infer that he never divulged that part of his Egyptian past to his father-in-law. In the very next verse, God will give Moses assurance that he no longer is in danger of execution for the act of manslaughter. The last clause here is a pointed allusion to Joseph's anxious question to his brothers (Genesis 45:3) about whether his father is still alive: the familial bond that induced Joseph to bring his father and brothers down to Egypt will now be manifested in Moses's actions as he sets out to reverse the process, bringing his "brothers" up out of Egypt and back to Canaan. His wondering whether his brothers still live is more than a way of saying that he wants to find out how they are faring because he is aware that they have been the target of a genocidal plan.

20. *his sons*. Only one son was previously mentioned, and only one son figures in verses 24–26. Some textual critics, noting an ambiguity in early Hebrew orthography, propose "his son" as the original reading.

21. *But I on My part shall toughen his heart*. This phrase, which with two synonymous variants punctuates the Plagues narrative, has been the source of endless theological debate over whether Pharaoh is exercising free will or whether God is playing him as a puppet and then punishing him for his puppet's performance. The latter alternative surely states matters too crudely. The heart in biblical idiom is the seat of understanding, feeling, and intention. The verb rendered here as "toughen" (King James Version, "harden") has the primary meaning of "strengthen," and the most frequent synonym of this idiom as it occurs later in the story means literally "to make heavy." God needs

- 22 And you shall say to Pharaoh, "Thus said the LORD: My son, my first-  
 23 born, is Israel. And I said to you, Send off my son that he may worship  
 Me, and you refused to send him off, and, look, I am about to kill your  
 son, your firstborn.'"
- 24 And it happened on the way at the night camp that the LORD encoun-  
 25 tered him and sought to put him to death. And Zipporah took a flint

Pharaoh's recalcitrance in order that He may deploy the plagues, one after another, thus humiliating the great imperial power of Egypt—the burden of the triumphalist narrative we have already noted—and demonstrating the impotence of all the gods of Egypt. But Pharaoh is presumably manifesting his own character: callousness, resistance to instruction, and arrogance would all be implied by the toughening of the heart. God is not so much pulling a marionette's strings as allowing, or perhaps encouraging, the oppressor-king to persist in his habitual harsh willfulness and presumption.

22. *My son, my firstborn is Israel.* Framing the relationship in these terms lays the ground in measure-for-measure justice for the lethal tenth plague predicted at the end of the next verse, since Pharaoh has sought to destroy Israel.

23. *to kill your son, your firstborn.* This dire threat, to be fulfilled in the tenth plague, also inducts us to the narrative episode that follows in the next three verses, in which the LORD seeks to kill Moses, and the blood of the firstborn intercedes.

24. *on the way at the night camp that the LORD . . . sought to put him to death.* This elliptic story is the most enigmatic episode in all of Exodus. It seems unlikely that we will ever resolve the enigmas it poses, but it nevertheless plays a pivotal role in the larger narrative, and it is worth pondering why such a haunting and bewildering story should have been introduced at this juncture. There is something starkly archaic about the whole episode. The LORD here is not a voice from an incandescent bush announcing that this is holy ground but an uncanny silent stranger who "encounters" Moses, like the mysterious stranger who confronts Jacob at the Jabbok ford, in the dark of the night (the Hebrew for "place of encampment" is phonetically linked to *laylah*, "night"). One may infer that both the deity here and the rite of circumcision carried out by Zipporah belong to an archaic—perhaps even premonotheistic—stratum of Hebrew culture, though both are brought into telling alignment with the story that follows. The potently anthropomorphic and mythic character of the

episode generates a crabbed style, as though the writer were afraid to spell out its real content, and thus even the referents of pronominal forms are ambiguous. Traditional Jewish commentators seek to naturalize the story to a more normative monotheism by claiming that Moses has neglected the commandment to circumcise his son (sons?), and that is why the LORD threatens his life. What seems more plausible is that Zipporah's act reflects an older rationale for circumcision among the West Semitic peoples than the covenantal one enunciated in Genesis 17. Here circumcision serves as an apotropaic device, to ward off the hostility of a dangerous deity by offering him a bloody scrap of the son's flesh, a kind of symbolic synecdoche of human sacrifice. The circumciser, moreover, is the mother, and not the father, as enjoined in Genesis. The story is an archaic cousin of the repeated biblical stories of life-threatening trial in the wilderness, and, as modern critics have often noted, it corresponds to the folktale pattern of a perilous rite of passage that the hero must undergo before embarking on his mission proper. The more domesticated God of verse 19 has just assured Moses that he can return to Egypt "for all the men who sought your life are dead." The fierce uncanny YHWH of this episode promptly seeks to kill Moses (the same verb "seek"), just as in the previous verse He had promised to kill Pharaoh's firstborn. (Here, the more judicial verb, *himit*, "to put to death," is used instead of the blunt *harag*, "kill.") The ambiguity of reference has led some commentators to see the son as the object of this lethal intention, though that seems unlikely because the (unspecified) object of the first verb "encountered" is almost certainly Moses. Confusions then multiply in the nocturnal murk of the language. Whose feet are touched with the bloody foreskin? Perhaps Moses's, but it could be the boy's, or even the LORD's. The scholarly claim, moreover, that "feet" is a euphemism for the genitals cannot be dismissed. There are again three male candidates in the scene for the obscure epithet "bridegroom of blood," though Moses strikes me as the most probable. William H. C. Propp correctly recognizes that the plural form for blood used here, *damim*, generally means "bloodshed" or "violence" (though in the archaic language of this text it may merely reflect intensification or poetic heightening). He proposes that the deity assaults Moses because he still bears the bloodguilt for the act of involuntary manslaughter he has committed, and it is for this that the circumcision must serve as expiation. All this may leave us in a dark thicket of bewildering possibilities, yet the story is strikingly apt as a tonal and motivic introduction to the Exodus narrative. The deity that appears here on the threshold of the return to Egypt is dark and dangerous, a potential killer of father or son. Blood in the same double function it will serve in the Plagues narrative is set starkly in the foreground: the blood of violent death, and blood as the apotropaic stuff that wards off death—the bloody foreskin of the son will be matched in the tenth plague by the blood smeared on the lintel to ward off the