

Exodus Chapter 4

1. וַיַּעַן מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר וַיהוָה לֹא-יִאֱמִינוּ לִי וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹלִי כִּי יֹאמְרוּ לֹא-נִרְאָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ יְהוָה:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
But Moses spoke up and said, "What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: The LORD did not appear to you?"	Moshe spoke up, he said: But they will not trust me, and will not hearken to my voice, indeed, they will say: YHWH has not been seen by you...	And Moses answered and said, "But, look, they will not believe me nor will they heed my voice, for they will say, The Lord did not appear to you."	And Moses answered, and he said, "And here, they won't believe me and won't listen to my voice, because they'll say, YHWH hasn't appeared to you!"

Friedman

they won't listen to my voice. Moses' third response is surprising because he appears to doubt, even to contradict, what God has already told him explicitly. YHWH instructs him to gather the elders of Israel and tell them that their ancestors' God has appeared to him and is going to take them out of Egypt, and YHWH informs him directly that "They'll listen to your voice" (3:18). God then goes on for five verses with details of what Moses should say to the king of Egypt, what the king's response will be, what YHWH will do in return, and how Israel will leave and despoil Egypt. But Moses, appearing to have missed the content of these last five verses, questions the earlier point, the last point that directly referred to him himself. He says, "And here, they won't believe me and won't listen to my voice" (4:1). This can also be understood to mean "And *what if* they will not believe me and will not listen to my voice." Even on this understanding, it is remarkable. Either way, it is depicting Moses as questioning what God has just told him. When God Himself tells a human, "They'll listen to you, we do not normally expect the human to say, "But what if they don't?" Again YHWH does not answer the question but instead responds directly to the problem at hand. That is, instead of telling Moses what to do if they do not listen, God gives Moses three miraculous signs, which will guarantee that they *will* listen.

2. וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה (מִזֶּה) [מֵה־זֶה] בְּיָדְךָ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
The LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" And he replied, "A rod."	YHWH said to him: What is that in your hand? He said: A staff.	And the Lord said to him, "What is that in your hand?" And he said, "A staff."	And YHWH said to him, "What's this in your hand?" And he said, "A staff."

Alter

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. וַיֹּאמֶר הַשְּׁלִיכֵהוּ אֶרְצָה וַיִּשְׁלֹכֵהוּ אֶרְצָה וַיְהִי לְנָחָשׁ וַיִּנָּס מֹשֶׁה מִפָּנָיו:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
He said, "Cast it on the ground." He cast it on the ground and it became a snake; and Moses recoiled from it.	He said: Throw it to the earth! He threw it to the earth, and it became a snake, and Moshe fled from its face.	And He said, "Throw it to the ground." And he threw it to the ground. And it became a snake! And Moses fled from it.	And He said, "Fling it to the ground." And he flung it to the ground and it became a snake and Moses fled

Alter

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 fearsome power to unleash the zoological and meteorological realms that God will manifest in Egypt.

4. וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה שְׁלַח יָדְךָ וְאַחֲז בְּזַנְבוֹ וַיִּשְׁלַח יָדוֹ וַיַּחֲזֵק בּוֹ וַיְהִי לְמִטָּה בְּכַפּוֹ:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
Then the LORD said to Moses, “Put out your hand and grasp it by the tail”—he put out his hand and seized it, and it became a rod in his hand—	YHWH said to Moshe: Send forth your hand! Seize it by its tail! —He sent forth his hand and took hold of it, and it became a staff in his fist—	And YHWH said to Moses, “Put out your hand and take hold of its tail.” And he put out his hand and held onto it, and it became a staff in his hand.	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 in his grip.

Fox
Send forth: Or stretch out

Alter
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.

5. לְמַעַן יֵאֱמִינוּ כִּי־נִרְאָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתָם אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
“that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of	so that they may trust that YHWH, the God of their fathers,	“So that they will believe that YHWH, their fathers’ God, Abraham’s God, Isaac’s God,	“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, did appear to you.”	the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzhak, and the God of Yaakov, has been seen by you.	and Jacob’s God, has appeared to you!”	Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.”
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6. וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לוֹ עוֹד הִבֵּאתָ יָדְךָ בְּחִיָּקוֹךָ וַיָּבֵא יְדוֹ בְּחִיָּקוֹ וַיּוֹצֵאֶהָ וְהִנֵּה יָדוֹ מְצֻרֶעֶת כַּשֶּׁלֶג:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
The LORD said to him further, “Put your hand into your bosom.” He put his hand into his bosom; and when he took it out, his hand was encrusted with snowy scales!	YHWH said further to him: Pray put your hand in your bosom! He put his hand in his bosom, and then he took it out, and here: his hand had <i>tzaraat</i> like snow!	And YHWH said to him further, “Bring your hand into your bosom.” And he brought his hand into his bosom. And he brought it out; and here, his hand was leprous like snow!	And the LORD said further to him, “Bring, pray, your hand into your bosom.” And he put his hand back into his bosom and brought it out and, look, his hand was blanched like snow.

Alter

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.

7. וַיֹּאמֶר הַשֵּׁב יָדְךָ אֶל־חֵיקְךָ וַיָּשֻׁב יָדוֹ אֶל־חֵיקוֹ וַיּוֹצֵאֵה מִחֵיקוֹ וְהָיָה־שָׁבָה כְּבָשָׂרוֹ:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
And He said, "Put your hand back into your bosom."—He put his hand back into his bosom; and when he took it out of his bosom, there it was again like the rest of his body.—	Now he said: Return your hand to your bosom! He returned his hand to his bosom; then he took it out of his bosom, and here, it had returned [to be] like his flesh.	And He said, "Put your hand back to your bosom." And he put his hand back to his bosom. And he brought it out from his bosom; and here, it had gone back like its flesh.	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. וְהָיָה אִם־לֹא יִאֱמִינוּ לָךְ וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ לְקוֹל הָאֵת הָרִאשׁוֹן וְהָאֲמִינִי לְקוֹל הָאֵת הָאַחֲרוֹן:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
"And if they do not believe you or pay heed to the first sign, they will believe the second.	So it shall be, if they do not trust you, and do not hearken to the voice of the former sign, that they will put their trust in the voice of the latter sign.	"And it will be, if they won't believe you and won't listen to the voice of the first sign, then they'll believe the voice of the latter one.	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.

Alter

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. וְהָיָה אִם־לֹא יִאֱמִינוּ גַם לְשֵׁנֵי הָאֵתוֹת הָאֵלֶּה וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ לְקוֹלְךָ וְלִקְוֹתָ מִמִּימֵי הַיָּאֵר וְשִׁפְכָתָ הַיַּבֻּשָׁה וְהָיוּ הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר תִּקַּח מִן־הַיָּאֵר וְהָיוּ לְדָם בַּיַּבֻּשָׁת:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
And if they are not convinced by both these signs and still do not heed you, take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and it—the water that you take from the Nile—will turn to blood on the dry ground.”	And it shall be, if they do not put their trust in even these two signs, and do not hearken to your voice, then take some of the water of the Nile and pour it out on the dry-land, and the water that you take from the Nile will become blood on the dry-land.	And it will be, if they also won't believe in these two signs and won't listen to your voice, then you'll take some of the water of the Nile and spill it on the dry ground. And it will be water that you'll take from the Nile, and it will become blood on the dry ground.”	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 blood on the dry land.”

Fox

blood: Since the Nile was regarded as divine by the Egyptians, not only would such a plague be miraculous and devastating, but it would also be a direct swipe at the Egyptian religion.

Friedman

two signs. The two signs are that the staff becomes a snake and his hand becomes leprous as snow. Why these two things? They foreshadow coming events: the snake on a pole (Num 21:5-9) and Miriam's being leprous as snow (Num 12:10).

Alter

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. 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. וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה בִּי אֲדֹנָי לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אָנֹכִי גַם מִתְּמוֹל גַּם מִשְׁלָשִׁים גַּם מֵאָז דִּבַּרְתָּ אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ בִּי כְבֹד־פֶּה וּכְבֹד לְשׁוֹן אָנֹכִי:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
But Moses said to the LORD, "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."	Moshe said to YHWH: Please, my Lord, no man of words am I, not from yesterday, not from the day-before, not [even] since you have spoken to your servant, for heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue am I!	And Moses said to YHWH, "Please, my Lord, I'm not a man of words. Neither yesterday nor the day before — nor since you spoke to your servant! Because I'm heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue."	And Moses said, "Please, my LORD, no man of 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."

Fox
no man of words am I: Yet this is exactly the quality that Moshe's mission requires! (Greenberg 1969). Similarly, Jeremiah (1:6) seeks to evade the call, although his refusal is based more on inexperience than on lack of eloquence.

heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue: The nature of Moshe's speech impediment is not clear. Curiously, writes Buber (1988), it is the stammerer whose task it is to bring down God's word to the human world.

Friedman
I'm not a man of words. These words, Moses' fourth response, will reverberate at the beginning of Moses' last speech. (See the comment on Deut 1:1.)

heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue. This is frequently taken to mean some kind of speech defect. It is frequently translated as "slow of speech"; and a famous midrash goes so far as to recount the origin of Moses' speech impediment in a story that pictures him burning his tongue in his infancy in the Egyptian palace. More cautiously, we are best advised to seek the meaning of a biblical idiom by, first of all, observing where else it occurs in Scripture. "Heavy of tongue" occurs in one other place, Ezek 3:5-7. There YHWH tells Ezekiel that he is not being sent to peoples who are "deep of lip and heavy of tongue," whose words Ezekiel cannot understand. YHWH says, ironically, that such peoples would listen, but the house of Israel will not listen! In that context, "heavy of tongue" refers to nations who speak foreign languages. It has therefore been suggested that Moses' protest here in Exodus is that he does not speak Egyptian. This is difficult to defend, though, given

the explicit report in Exodus 2 that Moses has been raised in the Egyptian court. Still, the meaning of "heavy of tongue" as referring to speaking a foreign language fits our context in Exodus 4, I believe, because YHWH has told Moses to gather and speak to the elders of Israel. Moses' protest may perhaps be best understood, then, as being on the grounds that he does not yet speak Hebrew! God's response in fact confirms that the problem for Moses is speaking "to the people," not to the Egyptians (4:16). And the final confirmation is that in the first meeting with the people's elders "Aaron spoke all the words that YHWH had spoken to Moses" (4:30); but in the first meeting with Pharaoh, both Moses and Aaron speak (5:1,3).

nor since you spoke to your servant. Another understanding of "I'm not a man of words" and "heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" is that Moses is saying that he is not eloquent. And this is a wonderful irony, because his humble wording here is in fact an eloquent formulation ("Neither yesterday nor the day before— nor since you spoke to your servant!"). Moses, as it were, undermines his own denial. Whether "heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" means a speech defect, a foreign language, or a lack of eloquence, a question remains: why choose a man who has a speaking problem for a task that requires speaking?! The lesson may be (as with Jacob) that God can work through anyone. Or it may be that it takes divine insight to comprehend what would make someone the best person for a task. Perhaps it is precisely Moses' heaviness of mouth that makes his acts most impressive in Egypt, rather than their being performed by a person who heralds each of the miraculous plagues with a grand speech. And perhaps such a greater speaker would shift the focus too much from God to the human himself. Also, one can learn from the divine choice that one should not judge a person's ability to do a task too hastily or by the most obvious characteristics. Even an individual who has a disadvantage may be the best suited to be successful.

Alter

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.

11. וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלָיו מִי שָׂם פֶּה לְאָדָם אֹו מִי־יִשֹּׂם אֵלִים אֹו חִלָּשׁ אֹו פִּקֵּחַ אֹו עִוֵּר הֲלֹא אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
And the LORD said to him, "Who gives man speech? Who makes	YHWH said to him: Who placed a mouth in human beings or who [is it that] makes one mute or	And YHWH said to him, "Who set a mouth for humans? Or who	And the LORD said to him, "Who gave man a mouth, or who makes him mute or deaf or

him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?	deaf or open-eyed or blind? Is it not I, YHWH?	will set a mute or deaf or seeing or blind? Is it not I, YHWH?	sighted or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?
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12. וְעַתָּה לֵךְ וְאָנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִם־פִּיךָ וְהוֹרִיתִיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבֹר:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
Now go, and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct you what to say.”	So now, go! I myself will be with your mouth and will instruct you as to what you are to speak.	And now go, and I'll be with your mouth, and I'll instruct you what you shall speak.”	And now, go, and I Myself will be with your mouth and will instruct you what to say.”

Friedman

I'll be. Hebrew 'HYH. (*ehyeh*) Note the significance of the first recurrence of the word here. It also came in 3:12, before the revelation of the divine name. It will come again in 4:15. So the answer to Moses' first, second, third, and fourth is, in essence, the same: 'HYH. I Am. I'll Be With You.

Alter

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. וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי אֲדֹנָי שְׁלַח־נָא בְיַד־תְּשַׁלַּח:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
But he said, "Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent. (Lit. "send through whomever You will send.")	But he said: Please, my Lord, pray send by whose hand you will send!	And he said, "Please, my Lord, send by the hand you'll send.”	And he said, "Please, my LORD, send, pray, by the hand of him You would send.”

Fox

pray send by whose hand you will send! That is, find someone else!

Friedman

send by the hand you'll send. There are two separate meanings that this strange clause may have. It may mean: send whoever -- which is to say, anyone but me. Or it may mean that Moses now acquiesces to the divine will, in the sense of "Very well, then, send the one you want." The fact that God is angry at Moses in the next verse fits more naturally with the former meaning. In either case, the one common element of the two meanings is: they both denote that Moses is out of excuses. God has nullified each of his four attempts to avoid this task. He can only acquiesce or beg off. He cannot raise problems or objections. This is also further evidence that fear of the task is what has motivated Moses all along. He is forced now to the essential point. It is not "Who am I" or "What shall I tell them?" or "They won't believe me." It is Moses' reluctance about the hand whom God has chosen to send.

Through all five responses, Moses' reluctance stands out and perhaps comes as a surprise to many who find it difficult to imagine someone's receiving a prophetic commission directly from God and trying to avoid it. Yet this image of the reluctant prophet recurs in several other places in the Bible (Elijah, Jonah, Jeremiah). It does not appear to me to be simply a recurring literary motif in the way that some understand, for example, the "wise courtier" theme. It seems rather to reflect a shared conviction, by a number of the biblical authors, that it is not necessarily an honor or a joy to be a prophet. It is a burden, almost beyond human endurance. Here, in the book that introduces the role of the prophet as the individual who brings a revelation to a community, we learn from the beginning that this is not attractive. To hear the voice of God is frightening. To experience the divine power is terrifying. To deliver a divine message to the community is thankless, frustrating, and occasionally even dangerous.

Alter

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. וַיִּחַר-אַף יְהוָה בְּמִשְׁחָה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלֹא אֶהְרֶן אֶחֱיָךְ הֲלֹא יִדְעָתִי כִּי-דִבֶּר יְדַבֵּר הוּא וְגַם הִנֵּה-הוּא יֵצֵא לְקַרְאֲתְךָ וְרֹאֵךְ וְשִׁמַּח בְּלִבּוֹ:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
The LORD became angry with Moses, and He said, "There is your brother Aaron the Levite. He, I know, speaks readily. Even now he is setting out to meet you, and he will be happy to see you.	YHWH'S anger flared up against Moshe; he said: Is there not Aharon your brother, the Levite— I know that <i>he</i> can speak, yes, speak, and here, he is even going out to meet you; when he sees you, he will rejoice in his heart.	And YHWH's anger flared at Moses, and He said, "Isn't Aaron your Levite brother? I knew that <i>he</i> will <i>speak!</i> And also here he is, coming out toward you! And he'll see you and be happy in his heart.	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 when he sees you, his heart will rejoice.

Fox

flared up: Literally, burned, the normal biblical metaphor for anger.

Aharon: Trad. English "Aaron." This is the first mention of the brother whom we later find out was the firstborn.

Friedman

your Levite brother. This means a fellow Levite. The text does not yet identify Aaron as Moses' actual brother. That is not stated explicitly until Exod 6:20. After that, Aaron is referred to as "your brother" (7:1,2) and never again as "your Levite brother."

I knew that he will speak! This has usually been taken to mean only that God is aware that Aaron is a capable speaker. But the tenses and context possibly indicate that it is much stronger: that God is informing Moses that He knew all along that Aaron would have to do the talking for Moses. This would only be a case of divine foreknowledge (knowing something in advance), not of God preordaining or manipulating human affairs. This in turn opens the question of why God would be angry at Moses' protest. The ambiguity here is tied to the complexity of Hebrew verb tenses (which are not simply past, present, and future, as they are often taught), and so the meaning of this verse remains uncertain.

Alter

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.

15. וְדַבַּרְתָּ אֵלָיו וְשָׂמַתָּ אֶת-הַדְּבָרִים בְּפִיו וְאֲנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִם-פִּיךָ וְעִם-פִּיהוּ וְהוֹרִיתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶת אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשׂוּן:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth—I will be with you and with him as you speak, and tell both of you what to do—	You shall speak to him, you shall put the words in his mouth! I myself will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will instruct you [both] as to what you shall do.	And you'll speak to him and set the words in his mouth, and I, I shall be with your mouth and with his mouth, and I shall instruct you what you shall do.	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. וְדַבַּר-הוּא לְךָ אֶל-הָעָם וְהָיָה הוּא יְהִי-לְךָ לִפֶּה וְאַתָּה תְהִי-לּוֹ לְאֱלֹהִים:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
And he shall speak for you to the people. Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him.	He shall speak for you to the people; he, he shall be a mouth for you, and you, you shall be a god for him.	And <i>he</i> will speak for you to the people. And it will be: he will become a mouth for you, and you will become a god for him.	and he will speak for you to the people, and so he, he will be a mouth for you, and you, you will be for him like a god.

Fox

You shall be a god: Moshe is to Aharon as God is to a prophet; the latter is to serve principally as a mouthpiece.

Friedman

you will become a god for him. No matter how figuratively we take this image, it is extraordinary. To speak of a human, Moses, in terms of the divine is awesome, and it will recur later when God tells Moses, "I've made you a god to Pharaoh! (7:1). The idea that Moses will in any way be godlike in other humans' perception sets up a theme that will continue after the exodus: Moses must repeatedly insist to the people that their complaints are against God and not against him. This in turn recalls Joseph's insistence to the wine steward, the baker, and Pharaoh that "Not I. God will answer ... " (Gen 41:16).

Alter

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.

17. וְאֶת־הַמִּטֵּה הַזֶּה תִּקַּח בְּיָדְךָ אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה־בּוֹ אֶת־הָאֵתוֹת:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
And take with you this rod, with which you shall perform the signs.”	And this staff, take in your hand, with which you shall do the signs.	And you shall take this staff in your hand, by which you’ll do the signs.	And this staff you shall take in your hand, with which you will do the signs.”

18. וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיָּשָׁב | אֶל־יִתְרוֹ קְהֵתָנוּ וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אֵלְכָה נָא וְאָשׁוּבָה אֶל־אִתִּי אֲשֶׁר־בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאָרְאָה הַעֲוֹנֹתַי
 תַּיִם וַיֹּאמֶר יְתָרוֹ לְמֹשֶׁה לֵךְ לְשָׁלוֹם:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
Moses went back to his father-in-law Jether and said to him, “Let me go back to my	Moshe went and returned to Yitro his father-in-law and said to him: Now pray let me go and	And Moses went. And he went back to Jether, his father-in-law, and said to him, "Let me go so I	And Moses went and returned to Jether his father-in-law, and he said to him, “Let me go, pray,

kinsmen in Egypt and see how they are faring.” And Jethro said to Moses, “Go in peace.”	return to my brothers who are in Egypt, that I may see whether they are still alive. Yitro said to Moshe: Go in peace!	may go back to my brothers who are in Egypt and see if they're still living.” And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace."	and return to my brothers who are in Egypt that I may see whether they still live.” And Jethro said, “Go in peace.”
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Fox

My brothers: This concern has not been heard from Moshe during his years in Midyan, nor has he mentioned his past at all.

Friedman

Jethro. His name is Jethro. The change to yeter here may be part of a wordplay to come later (10:5; see the comment there).

Alter

Jethro. 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.

19. וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְיָן לֵךְ וּשֵׁב מִצְרָיִם כִּי־מֵתוּ כָּל־הָאֲנָשִׁים הַמְּבַקְשִׁים אֶת־נַפְשְׁךָ:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
The LORD said to Moses in Midian, “Go back to Egypt, for all the men who sought to kill you are dead.”	Now YHWH said to Moshe in Midyan: Go, return to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life have died.	And YHWH said to Moses in Midian, "Go. Go back to Egypt, because all the people who sought your life have died."	And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, “Go, return to Egypt, for all the men who sought your life are dead.”

Fox

all the men: Moshe need no longer fear for his life at Pharaoh’s hands, but he will shortly be threatened by God himself (see vv. 24–26).

20. וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת-אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת-בָּנָיו וַיֵּרֶכְבּוּם עַל-הַחֲמֹר וַיָּשׁוּב אֶרְצָה מִצְרָיִם וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת-מִטֵּה הָאֱלֹהִים בְּיָדוֹ:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
So Moses took his wife and sons, mounted them on an ass, and went back to the land of Egypt; and Moses took the rod of God with him.	So Moshe took his wife and his sons and mounted them upon a donkey, to return to the land of Egypt, and Moshe took the staff of God in his hand.	And Moses took his wife and his sons and rode them on an ass, and he went back to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the staff of God in his hand.	And Moses took his wife and 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.

Fox

mounted them upon a donkey: A stereotyped biblical way of describing setting out on a journey.

staff of God: In standard hero stories, one would expect to hear a good deal more about this object, which would normally possess magical powers. Here, as usual, such a motif has been suppressed. It surfaces later in Jewish legend, in full mythical garb. The staff is mentioned in this verse, possibly, to provide a dramatic conclusion to the entire revelation account: Moshe sets out for Egypt armed, as it were, with a token from God. This was the missing piece in his activity in Egypt.

Alter

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. וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּלִכְתּוֹךָ לָשׁוּב מִצְרָיִם רְאֵה כָּל-הַמִּכְפָּתִים אֲשֶׁר-שָׂמְתִי בְיָדְךָ וַעֲשִׂיתָם לְפָנַי פְּרָעָה וְאֲנִי אֲחַזֵּק אֶת-לְבָבוֹ וְלֹא יִשְׁלַח אֶת-הָעָם:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
And the LORD said to Moses, "When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the marvels that I have put within your power. I, however, will stiffen his heart so that he will not let the people go.	YHWH said to Moshe: When you go to return to Egypt, see: all the portents that I have put in your hand, you are to do before Pharaoh, but I will make his heart strong-willed, so that he will not send the people free.	And YHWH said to Moses, "When you're going to go back to Egypt, see all the wonders that I've set in your hand, and you shall do them in front of Pharaoh. And I: I'll strengthen his heart, and he won't let the people go.	And the LORD said to 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.

Alter

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 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. וְאָמַרְתָּ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה בְּנִי בְכֹרִי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD: Israel is My first-born son.	Then you are to say to Pharaoh: Thus says YHWH: My son, my firstborn, is Israel!	And you shall say to Pharaoh, 'YHWH said this: My child, my first-born, is Israel.	And you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus said the LORD: My son, my firstborn, is Israel.

Fox

Thus says YHWH: A formula often used by the prophets to open their pronouncements. The context is similar as well: the prophets stand frequently against the kings of Israel and Judah, arguing for an end to oppression.

my firstborn: The use of this image is a statement of emotional force, not actual primacy of birth or antiquity, as Israel was a comparative latecomer in the ancient Near East.

Friedman

My child, my firstborn, is Israel. God tells Moses to say this to Pharaoh, but Moses is never reported as saying it. He also is never reported as saying the rest of this message: "Should you refuse to let it go, here: I'm killing your child, your firstborn! Why does he not say this to Pharaoh? It is apparently because his first words to Pharaoh do not work. Moses begins by speaking strongly to Pharaoh: "YHWH said, 'Let my people go. ' But Pharaoh, unmoved, replies, "I don't know YHWH, and I won't let Israel go." Moses then changes his approach dramatically. He starts over and this time does not use the commanding wording (the imperative), but rather the polite particle of request (Hebrew na') and the gentler form: "please that we might go" (the cohortative). Moses has backed off somewhat and taken a more conciliatory approach rather than taking the even tougher approach of threatening Pharaoh with the death of his own son. This conciliatory wording is given to Moses at the burning bush as well (3:18), so it appears that God is giving Moses both the tough and the gentle options. In any negotiation — in law, business, or any human relationship, including marriage — one must use wisdom to know when to exercise each approach.

Alter

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. וְאָמַר אֵלָיךָ שְׁלַח אֶת-בְּנִי וְיַעֲבֹדְנִי וְתִמְאַן לְשַׁלְּחוֹ הַיְהוָה אֶנְכִּי הֵרֵג אֶת-בְּנִי בְּכֹרֶךָ:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
I have said to you, "Let My son go, that he may worship Me," yet you refuse to let him go. Now I will slay your first-born son."	I said to you: Send free my son, that he may serve me, but you have refused to send him free, [so] here, I will kill your son, your firstborn!	And I've said to you: Let my child go, and serve me. And should you refuse to let it go, here: I'm killing your child, your first-born!	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."

Alter

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. וַיְהִי בַדְרֹךְ בַּמַּלְאָךְ וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה וַיִּבְקֶשׂ הַמִּיתוֹ:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
At a night encampment on the way, the LORD encountered him and sought to kill him.	Now it was on the journey, at the night-camp, that YHWH encountered him and sought to make him die.	And he was on the way, at a lodging place, and YHWH met him, and he asked to kill him.	And it happened on the way at the night camp that the LORD encountered him and sought to put him to death.

Fox

to make him die: To kill him; the means is not specified, but one could surmise that illness is meant.

Friedman

he asked to kill him. No one knows what the episode at the lodging place means. The explanation that accounts for more of the connections than any other is that of my colleague William Propp: The reason that God seeks to put Moses to death is because Moses still bears the bloodguilt for having killed an Egyptian. The blood of the circumcision serves to expiate the guilt, making it possible for Moses to live and return to Egypt. The word for "blood" in this story is the plural *damim*, which is usually associated with bloodguilt. The word for "bridegroom" also means "circumcision" in Arabic (and in some cultures circumcision is performed just before marriage). Trop suggests that the original bridegroom/circumcision connection had been lost in the time this story was composed, and so it was created to explain an old expression *hatan damim*, "bridegroom of blood." Also, this use of blood to avert death is a foreshadowing of the tenth plague in Egypt.

Still, like all explanations I have seen, this leaves the question of why God would choose Moses, make a miraculous appearance to him, insist on his going to Egypt despite his five attempts to avoid it, and then seek to kill him. I therefore understand the confused use of the pronoun "he" in this story in a different way. All commentators recognize that it is unclear when it refers to God, to Moses, or to Moses' son. But they all take the first "he" to refer to God: He (God) sought to kill Moses. I am raising the possibility (reflected in my translation: "he asked to kill him") that it means that Moses is asking God to take his life (rather than send him to Egypt). This is consistent with another time in Moses' life when he will ask God to kill him (Num 11:15, where he says emphatically: "Kill me!"). And it fits with a model of prophets who ask God to take their lives — Elijah (1 Kings 19:4) and Jonah (4:4) — or say that they prefer death to being prophets — Jeremiah (20:14-18). (Note that these are

the same three prophets who, like Moses, are famous for being reluctant; see the comment on 4:13.) If Moses is seeking his own death here, then Zipporah's action might be understood as her passionate response to her husband's wish to die: You have a wife! You have a son, who should live to marry and be a part of the covenant!

Alter

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 epidemic of death visiting the firstborn sons. With this troubling mythic encounter, we are ready for the descent into Egypt.

25. וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צֹר וַתְּכַרֵּת אֶת-עֶרְלַת בְּנֹהּ וַתִּמָּנַע לְרַגְלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי חֲתַן-דָּמִים אַתָּה לִּי:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his legs with it, saying, "You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!"	Tzippora took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin; she touched it to his legs and said: Indeed, a bridegroom of blood are you to me!	And Zipporah took a flint and cut her son's foreskin and touched his feet, and she said, "Because you're a bridegroom of blood to me."	And Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched it to his feet, and she said, "Yes, a bridegroom of blood you are to me."

Fox

His legs: Whose? Presumably those of Moshe, who is then "released" by God.

26. וַיִּרַף מִמֶּנּוּ אֲזַי אָמְרָה חֲתַן דָּמִים לְמוֹלֵת:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
And when He let him alone, she added, "A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision."	And he released him. Then she said, "a bridegroom of blood" upon the circumcision-cuttings.	And he held back from Him. Then she said, "A bridegroom of blood for circumcisions."	And He let him go. Then did she say, "A bridegroom of blood by the circumcising."

Fox

upon the circumcision-cuttings. Others, "on account of the circumcision," "because of the circumcision," "referring to the circumcision."

Friedman

And he held back from Him. Meaning that Moses stopped asking God to kill him.

27. וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַהֲרֹן לֵךְ לִקְרַאת מֹשֶׁה הַמִּדְבָּרָה וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ בְּהַר הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּשְׁק-לוֹ:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
The LORD said to Aaron, "Go to meet Moses in the wilderness." He went and met him at the mountain of God, and he kissed him.	YHWH said to Aharon: Go to meet Moshe in the wilderness! He went, he encountered him at the mountain of God and he kissed him.	And YHWH said to Aaron, "Go toward Moses, to the wilderness." And he went, and he met him in the Mountain of God, and he kissed him.	And the LORD said to Aaron, "Go to the wilderness to meet Moses." And he went and encountered him on the mountain of God and he kissed him.

Alter

And the LORD said to Aaron. We return to the welcome sphere of a God Who speaks, and directs men to act through speech. After the reunion of the brothers, they will promptly implement God's instructions as Moses imparts the words to Aaron and Aaron then speaks the words to the people.

28. וַיַּגֵּד מֹשֶׁה לְאַהֲרֹן אֵת כָּל-דִּבְרֵי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר שָׁלְחֵהוּ וְאֵת כָּל-הָאֲתֹת אֲשֶׁר צִוְּהוּ:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
Moses told Aaron about all the things that the LORD had committed to him and all the signs about which He had instructed him.	And Moshe told Aharon all YHWH'S words with which he had sent him and all the signs with which he had charged him.	And Moses told Aaron all YHWH's words that He had sent him and all the signs that He had commanded him.	And Moses told Aaron all the LORD's words with which He sent him and all the signs with which He charged him.

29. וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן וַיֵּאֲסֹפוּ אֶת-כָּל-זִקְנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the Israelites.	Moshe and Aharon went; they gathered all the elders of the Children of Israel,	And Moses went, and Aaron, and they gathered all the elders of the children of Israel,	And Moses, and Aaron with him, went, and they gathered the elders of the Israelites.

30. וַיְדַבֵּר אַהֲרֹן אֶת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וַיַּעַשׂ הָאֱתָת לְעֵינֵי הָעָם:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
Aaron repeated all the words that the LORD had spoken to Moses, and he performed the signs in the sight of the people,	and Aharon spoke all the words which YHWH had spoken to Moshe, and did the signs before the people's eyes.	and Aaron spoke all the words that YHWH had spoken to Moses. And he did the signs before the people's eyes.	And Aaron spoke all the words that the LORD had spoken to Moses, and he did the signs before the people's eyes.

31. וַיֵּאֱמֶן הָעָם וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ כִּי-פָקַד יְהוָה אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכִי רָאָה אֶת-עֲנָנָם וַיִּקְדּוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ:

JPS	Fox	Friedman	Alter
and the people were convinced. When they heard that the LORD had taken note of the Israelites and that He had seen their plight, they bowed low in homage.	The people trusted; they hearkened that YHWH had taken account of the Children of Israel, that he had seen their affliction. And they did homage and bowed low.	And the people believed, and they heard that YHWH had taken account of the children of Israel and that He had seen their degradation. And they knelt and bowed.	And the people believed and heeded, that the LORD had singled out the Israelites and that He had seen their abuse. And they did obeisance and bowed down.

Fox

The people trusted: For the first time in the Torah, Israel responds to God's promises in a positive manner, something which will rarely happen again. The vocabulary and attitude form an *inclusio* (a bracket) with the end of the Liberation Narrative, 14:30–31 (cf. the verbs “trust” and “see”).

Alter

And the people believed and heeded. In the event, the two signs of the staff and the hand are sufficient to win their trust (“believe” does not have any doctrinal sense here), and the third sign, of water turned to blood, can be reserved for the first plague.