

# UNIT 5: THE DELIVERER'S SOURCE OF SUFFICIENCY (4:1-17)

## INTRODUCTION <sup>1</sup>

### Text and Textual Notes

**4:1** And Moses answered and said, “And if<sup>2</sup> they do not believe me or respond to me<sup>3</sup>, but say, ‘Yahweh has not appeared to you?’” **4:2** And Yahweh said to him, “What is that in your hand?” And he said, “A rod.”<sup>4</sup> **4:3** And He said, “Cast it to the ground.” And he cast it to the ground, and it became a serpent.<sup>5</sup> And Moses fled from before it. **4:4** But Yahweh said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand and seize it by the tail.” So he stretched out his hand and

---

<sup>1</sup> In the first part of this extensive call, chapter three, Yahweh promises to deliver His people, and this promise is supported by His revelation of Himself. At the hesitancy of Moses, God guarantees His presence will be with him, and that assures the success of the mission.

<sup>2</sup> The use of *hen* is unusual here, introducing a conditional idea in the question without the following clause (see Jer. 2:10; 2 Chron. 7:13). The Greek has “if not” but adds the clause “what shall I say to them?” Also possible, “What if.”

<sup>3</sup> Literally, “listen to my voice”

<sup>4</sup> The rod appears here to be the shepherd’s staff that he was holding. It now will become the instrument with which Moses will do the mighty works, for it is the medium of the display of the divine power (Driver, *Exodus*, p. 27; also, Leon Shalit, “How Moses Turned a Staff into a Snake and Back Again,” *BAR* 9 (1983):72-73.

<sup>5</sup> The details of the verse are designed to show that there was rod that became a snake: the question is used to affirm that there truly was a rod, and then the report of Moses running from it shows it was genuine snake. Using the serpent as a sign would have had an impact on the religious ideas of Egypt, for the sacred cobra was one of their symbols.

caught it. And it became a rod in his hand.<sup>6</sup> **4:5** “That they may believe that Yahweh, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.” **4:6** And Yahweh said to him again, “Put your hand into your bosom.” So he put his hand into his bosom; and when he brought it out--it<sup>7</sup> was leprous as snow!”<sup>8</sup> **4:7** And He said, “Put your hand back into your bosom.” So he put his hand into his bosom; and when he brought it out from his bosom--it was restored<sup>9</sup> as his other skin.<sup>10</sup> **4:8** “And if<sup>11</sup> they do not believe you or respond to<sup>12</sup> the former sign, then they may<sup>13</sup> believe the voice of the latter sign. **4:9** And<sup>14</sup> if they do not believe these two signs, nor respond to you,<sup>15</sup> then take<sup>16</sup> some water from the Nile and pour it out on the dry ground. And the water that you take out of the Nile shall become blood on the dry land.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> The signs would have authenticated Moses' ministry. This sign will show that Moses had control over Egypt and its stability, over life and death. But Moses had to be convinced that He could turn it into a dead stick again.

<sup>7</sup> The particle *hinneh* again points out the startling or amazing sight as if the reader were catching first glimpse of it with Moses.

<sup>8</sup> The disease of leprosy, or skin disease, indicated that God was able to bring such diseases on Egypt in the plagues, and, that only He could remove them. The whitening was the first stage of death for the diseased (Num. 12:10; 2 Kings 5:27).

<sup>9</sup> Literally, “it returned”

<sup>10</sup> Literally, “like his flesh”

<sup>11</sup> Literally, “and it will if”

<sup>12</sup> Literally, “listen to the voice of the sign”

<sup>13</sup> The nuance of this perfect tense with a *waw* consecutive will be equal to the imperfect of possibility--“they may believe.”

<sup>14</sup> Literally, “and it will be if”

<sup>15</sup> Literally, “listen to your voice”

<sup>16</sup> The verb form is the perfect tense with the *waw* consecutive; it functions then as the equivalent of the imperfect tense--here as an imperfect of instruction.

<sup>17</sup> This is a powerful sign, for the Nile was always known as the source of life in Egypt, but now it will become the evidence of death. So the three signs were a unit, consisting of life-death, life-death, and life-death. They would clearly anticipate the struggle with Egypt

**4:10** Then Moses said to Yahweh,<sup>18</sup> “O<sup>19</sup> my Lord,<sup>20</sup> I am not an eloquent man,<sup>21</sup> neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and heavy of tongue.”<sup>22</sup> **4:11** And Yahweh said to him, “Who gave<sup>23</sup> a

through the plagues. The point is clear in the face of the possibility that people might not believe: the servants of God must offer clear proof of the power of God as they deliver the message of God. The rest is up to God.

<sup>18</sup> Now Moses took up another line of argumentation, the debate over his inability to speak fluently (vv. 10-17). The point here is that God’s servants must yield themselves as instruments to God, the Creator. It makes no difference what character traits they have, or what weaknesses they think they have (Moses manages to speak very well) if God is present. If the sovereign God has chosen them, then they have everything that God intended them to have.

<sup>19</sup> The form is a particle of entreaty; it seeks permission to speak, and is always followed by “Lord” or “my Lord.”

<sup>20</sup>The designation in Moses’ address is “my Lord” (*’adonay*)--the term for “lord, master” but pointed as it would be when it represents the *tetragrammaton* (“four letters”--the holy name YHWH) B. Jacob says since this is the first time Moses spoke directly to Yahweh he did so hesitatingly (*Exodus*, p. 87).

<sup>21</sup> When a noun clause is negated with the adverb *lo’* there is a special emphasis since the force of the negative falls on a specific word (GKC, par. 152d).

The expression “eloquent man” is literally (*’ish d’barim*), “a man of words.” The genitive may simply be attributive--a man characterized by words, or, a man who is able to command or control words. Moses apparently is resigned to the fact that he can do the signs; but now he knows the signs have to be explained.

<sup>22</sup> The two expressions are (*k’bad peh*), “heavy of mouth,” and then (*k’bad lashon*), “heavy of tongue.” Both of them use genitives of specification, the mouth and the tongue indicating what is heavy--slow. And, “mouth” and “tongue” are metonymies of cause. He is saying that he has a problem speaking very well. Perhaps Moses had been too long at the other side of the desert, or perhaps he was being a little dishonest. At any rate, he has still not captured the meaning of the point of God’s presence. See among other works, Jeffrey H. Tigay, “‘Heavy of Mouth’ and ‘Heavy of Tongue’ on Moses’ Speech Difficulty,” *BASOR* 231 (1978):57-67.

<sup>23</sup> The verb (*sim*) means “to place, put, set”; the sentence here more precisely says, “Who put a mouth into a man?”

The argumentation by Moses is here met by Yahweh’s rhetorical questions. It is

mouth to man, or who makes him deaf or dumb, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, Yahweh?<sup>24</sup> **4:12** So now, go, and I will be with your mouth,<sup>25</sup> and I will teach you<sup>26</sup> what you must say.”<sup>27</sup>

**4:13** But Moses said,<sup>28</sup> “O my Lord, please send anyone else whom you wish to send.”<sup>29</sup> **4:14** Then the anger of Yahweh broke out<sup>30</sup> against Moses, and He said,

intended to be sharp--it is reproof for Moses. The message is twofold. First, Yahweh is fully able to overcome all of Moses' deficiencies. Second, Moses is exactly the way that God intended him to be. So the rhetorical questions are meant to prod Moses' faith.

<sup>24</sup> The final question obviously demands a positive answer. But the clause is worded in such a way as to return to the theme of “I AM.” Isaiah developed this same idea of God's control over life: “I am Yahweh. There is no other God. I form the light and create the darkness; I kill and I make alive . . .” (45:5-7). So Moses protests that he is not an eloquent speaker. And Yahweh answers, “I Am”--not only “I am the Lord” but “I am a powerful speaker”--“I will be with your mouth.”

<sup>25</sup>What does it mean when the text says “I will be with your mouth.” The promise of divine presence always indicates intervention (for blessing or cursing). Here it means that God would be working through the organs of speech to help Moses speak. See Deut. 18:18; Jer. 1:9.

<sup>26</sup> The verb is *w<sup>e</sup>horetika*, the *hiphil* perfect with a *waw* consecutive. The form carries the instructional meaning because it follows the imperative with a *waw* formation. In fact, there is a sequence at work here: “go . . . and/that I may teach you.” It is from *yarah*, the same root behind *torah*, “Law.” This always referred to teaching either wisdom or revelation. Here Yahweh promises to teach Moses what to say.

<sup>27</sup> The form is the imperfect tense. While it could be taken as a future (“what you shall say”), an obligatory imperfect captures the significance better (“what you must say” or “what you are to say”). Not even the contents of the message will be left up to Moses.

<sup>28</sup> Literally, “and he said”

<sup>29</sup> The text has simply (*sh<sup>e</sup>lakh-na' b<sup>e</sup>yad tishlakh*), “send by the hand of whom you will send.” This is not Moses' resignation to doing God's will--it is his final attempt to avoid the call. It carries the force of his asking God to send someone else. This is an example of an independent relative clause governed by the genitive: “by the hand of--whom you will send” (see GKC, par. 155n).

<sup>30</sup> Literally, “and the anger of Yahweh burned”

Moses had not dared to say “except me” when he asked God to send whomever He

“Is not Aaron the Levite<sup>31</sup> your brother? I know that he can speak very well.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, he is coming<sup>33</sup> to meet you, and when he sees you he will be glad in his heart.<sup>34</sup> **4:15** So you will speak to him, and you will put the words in his mouth. And I will be with your mouth,<sup>35</sup> and with his mouth,<sup>36</sup> and I will teach you that which you must do.<sup>37</sup> **4:16** And he<sup>38</sup> will speak for you to the people. It will be

wanted to send. But God knew that is what he meant. Moses should not have resisted the call, or pleaded such excuses, or hesitated with such weak faith. Now God abandons the gentle answer and in anger brings in a form of retribution. It is like the word to Israel when they would not go up to take the land. Because they refused, they did not get the blessing. Because Moses did not want to do this, he was punished by not having the honor of doing it alone (see U. Cassuto, *Commentary on Exodus*, pp. 49,50).

<sup>31</sup> Driver suggests that the term “Levite” very well may refer to a profession rather than ancestry here, because both Moses and Aaron were from the tribe of Levi and there would be little point in noting that for Aaron. In thinking through the difficult problem of the identity of Levites, he cites McNeile as saying “the Levite” referred to one who had had official training as a priest (cf. Jud. 17:7 where a member of the tribe of Judah was a Levite). And if it was the duty of the priest to give “tora”--to teach--then some training in the power of language would have been in order (*Exodus*, p. 29).

<sup>32</sup> The construction uses the *piel* infinitive absolute and the *piel* imperfect to express the idea that he spoke very well: *dabber y<sup>e</sup>dabber*.

Now Yahweh, in condescending to Moses, selects something that Moses (and God) did not really need for the work. It is as if He is saying: “If Moses feels speaking ability is so necessary (rather than the divine presence), then that is what he shall have.” Of course, this golden-tongued Aaron had some smooth words about how the golden calf was forged!

<sup>33</sup> The particle *hinneh* with the participle is the imminent future; it means “he is about to come” or “here he is coming.”

<sup>34</sup> It is unlikely that this simply means as a brother he will be pleased to see Moses, for the narrative has no time for that kind of comment. It is interested in more significant things. Here he will rejoice because of the revelation of God to Moses and the plan to deliver Israel from bondage (see Jacob, p. 93).

<sup>35</sup> Or, “I will help you speak”

<sup>36</sup> Or, “and will help him speak”

<sup>37</sup> The imperfect tense will carry the obligatory nuance here as well. The relative pronoun with this verb forms a noun clause functioning as the direct object of “I will teach.”

as if<sup>39</sup> he, even he,<sup>40</sup> will be your mouth,<sup>41</sup> but you will be his god.<sup>42</sup> **4:17** And this rod you shall take in your hand, with which you will do the signs.”<sup>43</sup>

## Exegetical Analysis

### Summary

In response to Moses' hesitancy to obey the call, the LORD overcame his contention about the unbelief of the people by the demonstration of signs, about his inability to speak well by the reminder that God gave him his ability to speak, and about his pretentious humility by providing Aaron to assist him.

### Outline

- I. When Moses challenged God's call by suggesting that the Israelites would not believe, God provided signs so that the people would follow him (1-9).
  - A. Moses contested that the people might not believe him (1).
  - B. God provided three signs for Moses to do that would convince the people:

<sup>38</sup> The independent pronoun makes the subject emphatic, as if to say, “he is the one who will speak for you.”

<sup>39</sup> “as if” supplied

<sup>40</sup> The construction says literally, “and it will be [that] he, he will be to you for a mouth,” or simply, “he will be your mouth.”

<sup>41</sup> Literally, “he will be to you for a mouth”

<sup>42</sup> It is as if Moses would be a god, or God, to Aaron, giving him the words to say, inspiring him as God would inspire a prophet. The whole process had now been removed one step. Instead of God speaking to Moses and Moses telling the people, Aaron would be the speaker for a while. But God was still going to work through Moses.

<sup>43</sup> This is an appropriate ending to the section, for it would be God's power (represented by the rod) working through Moses. The applicable point that this whole section is making could be worded this way: the servants of God who sense their inadequacy must demonstrate the power of God as their sufficiency.

1. He turned the staff into a snake to show his power over the fearful forces of the land (2-5).
  2. He caused his hand to turn leprous and then made it whole again to show his power over human life and health (6-8).
  3. He turned the water into blood to show his power over nature (9).
- II. When Moses appealed that he was not a good speaker, God reminded him that he created people with their abilities and inabilities so that they would depend on him (10-12).
- A. Moses protested that he could not speak well (10).
  - B. God pointed out that as creator he had made people with their abilities (11).
  - C. God reiterated the call and promised divine help (12).
- III. When Moses feigned piety by asking God to send whomever he would (wanting someone else to be sent), God angrily accommodated Moses by sending his brother Aaron (13-17).
- A. Making a pretense of piety over the LORD's choice of a servant, Moses wanted God to send someone else (13).
  - B. With great anger the LORD accommodated Moses by sending Aaron to be his spokesman (14-17).

### Additional Resources

F. W. **Danker**, "Hardness of Heart: A Study in Biblical Thematic," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 44 (1973):89-100; J. E. **Hamlin**, "The Liberator's Ordeal: A Study of Ex. 4:1-9," in *Rhetorical Criticism* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1974), pp. 33-42; Leon **Shalit**, "How Moses Turned a Staff into a Snake and Back Again," *BAR* 9 (1983):72, 73; Jeffrey H. **Tigay**, "'Heavy of Mouth' and 'Heavy of Tongue' on Moses' Speech Difficulty," *BASOR* 231 (1978):57-67.

### EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

With chapter four of Exodus the tone of the discussion changes rather

distinctly. True, the discourse continues, but the inquisitive response of Moses over the nature of God changes to the protesting of his inadequacies in view of the nature of the task. In a way, these seventeen verses address the question, “Who is sufficient for these things?” The passage provides a good message on the idea of God’s solutions for our inadequacies.

There are three basic movements in this portion, each building on the preceding section. The first nine verses record how the LORD gave signs to Moses in case Israel did not believe him. The second section, verses 10-12, record how the LORD proposed to overcome Moses' speech problem. And finally, the last five verses record the LORD's provision of a helper who will along with Moses complete what God wanted done.

For the first section that covers the giving of the signs, we could say:

*I. God’s servants must display his miraculous power (1-9).*

In order for people to believe the messenger, they have to be convinced that the power of God is there. This will be demonstrated in a number of ways from time to time; in Exodus it was miraculous signs because it was in a foreign country and God wanted to show he was going to undermine their whole belief system. But Deuteronomy 13 makes it clear that signs and wonders by themselves cannot be taken to authenticate a person as a prophet—the message must be recognizeably God’s.

Moses knows that he is going to tell these people some striking things about himself and about what they are to do. What if they do not believe him? His first feeling of inadequacy is that people won't believe he has any authority, or that what he says should be followed. Thus, God gives him signs to perform. I would not apply this today to say that the credentials of the one sent by God should be miracles. Rather, I would confine it to what the Scripture clearly shows is operative today. The point I would make from the first section is this: God's servants must display his miraculous power. I note that when Paul wished to prove he was authentic (i.e., called of God and doing the work of God), he had no letters of commendation other than the believers he led to the LORD (2 Cor. 3:2). The power of God seen in answers to prayer, spiritual growth, conversions, all are miraculous evidences of God's power. If someone is teaching or preaching the word of God and at the same time demonstrating through his life and ministry the power of God,

there should be no fear that the people of God will believe him.

The signs that God gives to Moses are pointed. Here again, as well as throughout the book, the Egyptian background is helpful. Why these signs--snakes, disease, water to blood? I think two things need to be developed in the exposition. First, try to determine (from research in Egyptian culture and thought) how such signs would have been understood by them or by people living in Egypt. I am sure that this study will reveal that control over the serpent by the hand of Moses signified that the servant of God had the **spiritual power** of Egypt in his control, that the disease signified God's ability to bring all kinds of **hated diseases** in the plagues as well as his power over human life and that the blood signified a destruction of the **life** of Egypt, water. The second thing to determine is what each sign revealed about the nature of God. I would think they show (respectively) power over the forces of Egypt, power over the physical body, and power over nature. In fact, power over several gods of Egypt that these things represented. There was no area of existence that the LORD did not have under his sovereign control.

These signs would then authenticate the ministry of Moses to the people. But in doing so they would also reveal the nature of the LORD. If the people did not believe the evidences of their powerful creator and sovereign LORD, there was nothing Moses could do in his own power to convince them. Jesus himself did several signs (starting with the changing of the water to wine at Cana) but not everyone he went to believed him. In fact, when they clamored for a sign, he gave none but what was in the Scripture. If they do not believe Moses and the Prophets, he said on another occasion, they will not believe if one comes back from the dead. So the only recourse for the servant of God is to demonstrate clear proof of the power of God as he delivers the message of God. The rest is up to God--it is his work anyway.

Now we move to Moses' continued and frustrating refusal. We could word the point positively:

*II. God's servants must present themselves  
as instruments of the creator (10-12)*

This line of protestation being shut down, another is taken by Moses. The second section records the debate over the ability to speak effectively (4:10-12).

The point I would make in this section is that God's servant must present himself as an instrument of the creator. It makes absolutely no difference what character traits and physical abilities the servant has--if God is sovereign. If God is sovereign, then the man or woman he chooses to serve him has everything that he intended them to have. In fact, one gets the impression that God would rather have a frail and seemingly ineffective person through whom he could display his sovereign power.

These ideas are developed through Moses' claims of inadequacy. He claims his problem is speech (he now knows that he can do the signs, but he also knows he has to explain things to the people). The metonymies he uses, "heavy of mouth" and "heavy of tongue," heavy meaning slow and ineffective, provide a repetitious emphasis that he is making. He is not an eloquent man (literally, "man of words"). Perhaps Moses has been too long at the back of the desert, or perhaps he is being slightly dishonest here (subsequent passages show that he rose admirably to the occasion, and indeed, the text of the Pentateuch shows tremendous facility with language). At any rate, he still has not captured the point of the presence of the LORD, the "I AM."

Moses' feeble argumentation is met with rhetorical questioning: "Who made man's mouth?" The implication is twofold. First, the LORD is able to overcome all Moses' deficiencies. Second, Moses is exactly the way the sovereign LORD intended him to be. So the rhetorical question is a call for faith from Moses. God is the one who made the deaf, the dumb.

The final rhetorical question in this series is designed to return to the theme of "I AM." Isaiah developed this fully with his recording of the divine revelation, "I am the LORD. there is no other God; I form light and create darkness, I kill and I make alive . . ." (45:5-7). So Moses protests, "I am not an effective speaker." But the LORD answers, "I AM" (not only "I am the LORD," but "I am a powerful speaker").

This promise, "I will be with your mouth," is a rather interesting thought and needs thorough investigation. Again the promise of presence is seen as the divine enablement, but here it is centered on the organ of speech. The next verb explains what the effect of this will be, "I will instruct you with that which you must say" (*yarah*) is used here for the idea of showing or instructing. I do not think that an allusion is being made here to the Law). God is therefore promising that he will not only enable Moses to speak, but will give him the message as well.

I suppose one could say that true eloquence in speaking, if that is the way to put it, is a combination of divine empowerment and divine inspiration (as the content). David also knew that the Spirit of God spoke by his voice. And Paul, arguing slightly differently, notes that he did not come with eloquent speech such as the Greek orators had, but with the divine message and the power of God. God expects his servants to try to be effective, we would all admit, but not to assume that the success is based on their effectiveness in speech.

*III. God's servants may be given support to share in the work  
if they refuse to do Gods his way (13-17).*

The third section is a bit of a problem. It records how the LORD, frustrated with Moses' attitude (anthropomorphically speaking again), adds Aaron to the work. On the one hand it appears that because Moses would not trust the LORD totally for the success of the mission, he is forced to share the mission with another. On the other hand, it may be observed that Moses still will do what God told him to do: you (and he) will do the signs (v. 17) and you (and he) will speak these words because I will be with your mouth and his mouth (v. 15). It could be said, then, that the servant of God who lacks confidence may be provided support through others; but of course it is not quite the same as it might have been if God had displayed his power through Moses alone. Nevertheless, the inadequacies of Moses do not in any way hinder the work of the LORD from progressing as planned.

The interesting thing in this section is that the LORD became angry with Moses. This, is obviously not the wrath of God being poured out on Moses. Rather, Moses is reporting for his readers the (human) kind of response the LORD had for his silly arguments. Unbelief is the one sin characteristic of Israel--and Moses--with which the LORD was "angry." A word study of this concept shows that the term communicates divine motivation for judgment, or at least for decisive, alternative actions. Here it is followed up with the selection of Aaron, the Levite.

It is worth noting too that the LORD said, "I know that he speaks eloquently. 'Now the LORD selects something that he did not really need for the work as a condescension to Moses. It is as if he is saying, "If Moses feels speaking ability is so necessary (rather than divine presence), then that is what he shall

have." Of course, the golden-tongued Aaron had some smooth words about the golden calf!

But Aaron will be "for a mouth" for Moses, but Moses will be for God for him. Here, what has happened is that the whole work of God has been removed one step. Instead of God himself being with Moses' mouth, now Moses will be for God to Aaron who will be for the mouth. Moses will be the intermediate agent of the message rather than the spokesman.

## CONCLUSION

The passage makes a nice unit on the subject of God's solutions for the inadequate feelings of his servants. He is expounding further what the significance of the divine name is for the one chosen to represent him. I would tentatively word the message of this unit something like this: the servant of God who recognizes his inadequacy must demonstrate the power of God as his sufficiency.

I would be using Moses as a negative example of faith response to what God is saying should be done. The idea of the power of God is derived from the signs as well as the presence with the mouth, both of which are repeated in the last section when Aaron is provided. Aaron's "help" in no way changes what demonstrations of power God planned to convince the people--it simply diluted the privilege of Moses. The themes of this passage are easily traced throughout the Scripture as God seeks instruments through whom he can display his power. All they need supply is faith in him and a willingness to serve as he directs. The New Testament provides many instructions here, but Paul's discussions of sufficiency for ministry should be at the center of the application.

So the polished form of the expository idea for this passage is as follows:

***God's servants, who rightly recognize their insufficiency for ministry, must appropriate the power and provision of God as their sufficiency.***

By faith they must rely on his power, his strength, his enablement, his gifts, so that they can do his work. They must recognize that God made them the way they are and they must dedicate themselves to using what he gave them to do his work. If they will not do it, if they will not have God's best for them they may find God

using others to do what he wanted them to do.