

UNIT 6: THE DELIVERER'S COMPLIANCE WITH THE COMMISSION (4:18-31)

INTRODUCTION ⁴⁴

Text and Textual Notes

4:18 So Moses went back⁴⁵ to Jethro, his father-in-law; and he said to him, “Let me go that I may return⁴⁶ to my brothers who are in Egypt, and see⁴⁷ if they are yet alive.” And Jethro said to Moses, “Go in peace.” **4:19** And Yahweh said to Moses in Midian, “Go back⁴⁸ to Egypt, because all the men who were seeking⁴⁹ your life are dead.”⁵⁰ **4:20** Then Moses took⁵¹ his wife and his sons,⁵² and put

⁴⁴ This last section of the chapter reports Moses compliance with the commission. It has four parts to it: the decision to return (18-20), the instruction (21-23), the confrontation with Yahweh (24-26), and the presentation with Aaron (27-31).

⁴⁵ The two verbs form a verbal hendiadys, the second verb becoming adverbial in the translation: “and he went and he returned” becomes “and he went back.”

⁴⁶ There is a sequence here with the two cohortative forms: *'el^eka-na' w^e'ashubah*--“let me go in order that I may return.”

⁴⁷ This verb form is parallel to the preceding cohortative, and so also expresses purpose: “let me go that I may return . . . and that I may see.”

⁴⁸ The text has two imperatives, “Go, return”; if these are interpreted as a hendiadys (as above), then the second becomes adverbial.

⁴⁹ The form is the *piel* participle, functioning as an attributive adjective with “all the men.” The participle stress the description of these men--they were men seeking Moses.

⁵⁰ The text clearly stated that Pharaoh sought to kill Moses; so this must be a reference to

them on a donkey, and headed back⁵³ to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the rod of God in his hand. **4:21** And Yahweh said to Moses, “When you go back to Egypt,⁵⁴ see that you⁵⁵ do before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put in your hand.⁵⁶ But I will harden his heart⁵⁷ and⁵⁸ he will not let the people go.

Pharaoh’s death. This might provide another bit of the puzzle. Moses was forty years in Midian. Only Pharaoh Thutmose III reigned that long in the 18th dynasty (1504-1450 B.C.). Clearly, from the text, the Pharaoh from whom Moses fled is the Pharaoh that died enabling Moses to return. This would place Moses’ returning to Egypt approximately 1450 B.C. in the beginning of the reign of Amenhotep II, whom most conservatives would identify as the Pharaoh of the Exodus. Rameses II, of course, reigned that long. But if he were the one from whom Moses fled, then he could not be the Pharaoh of the exodus, but his son would be--and that puts the date of the exodus after 1236, a date too late for almost everyone. See Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 62.

⁵¹ Literally, “and Moses took”

⁵² Only Gershom has been mentioned so far. The other son’s name will be explained in chapter 18. The explanation of Gershom’s name was important to Moses’ sojourn in Midian. The explanation of the name Eliezer fits better in the later chapter (18:2-4).

⁵³ The verb would literally be rendered “and returned”; however, the narrative will record other happenings before he arrived in Egypt, so an “ingressive” nuance fits here--he began to return, or started back.

⁵⁴ The construction may involve a verbal hendiadys using the two infinitive forms: “when you go to return” (*b^llekt^lka lashub*). The entire clause is a temporal clause, subordinated to the instruction to do the signs. Therefore, its focus cannot be on going to return, i.e., preparing or beginning to return.

⁵⁵ The two verb forms in this section are the imperative (*r^l’eh*) followed by the perfect with the *waw* (*wa’asitam*). The second could be coordinated and function as a second command: “see . . . and [then] do”; or, it could be subordinated logically: “see . . . that you do.” Some commentators who take the first option suggest that Moses was supposed to contemplate these wonders before doing them before Pharaoh. That does not seem as likely as the second interpretation reflected here.

⁵⁶ Or, “in your power”

⁵⁷ Here is the first mention of the hardening of the heart of Pharaoh. The text has this expression here: *wa’ani ’akhazzeq ’et-libbo*. “I will make strong his will.” God first tells Moses he must do the miracles, but then he announces that He will harden Pharaoh’s heart, as if working against Moses. But it will help Moses to know that God is bringing about the resistance in order to bring a greater victory with greater glory. There is a great deal of

4:22 And you shall say⁵⁹ to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says⁶⁰ Yahweh, Israel is my firstborn son;⁶¹ **4:23** and I say to you, Let my son go that he may serve⁶² me, but if⁶³ you refuse to let him go,⁶⁴ then I will surely slay⁶⁵ your firstborn son’.”

literature on this; but see among the resources Frederick W. Danker, “Hardness of Heart: A Study in Biblical Thematic,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 44 (1973):89-100; and Robert R. Wilson, “The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart,” *CBQ* 41 (1979):18-36.

⁵⁸ Or, “so that”

⁵⁹ The sequence of the instruction from God is stressed by the use of the perfect tense with the *waw*.

⁶⁰ The “instantaneous” use of the perfect tense fits well with the prophetic announcement of what Yahweh said or says. It shows that the words given to the prophet are still binding..

⁶¹ The metaphor uses the word “son” in its connotation of a political dependent. It can mean a literal son, a descendant, a chosen king (and so, the Messiah), a disciple (in Proverbs), and here, a nation subject to God. If the people of Israel were God’s “son,” then they should serve him and not Pharaoh. Malachi reminds people that the Law said “a son honors his father”; and so God asked, “If I am a father, where is my honor?”.

⁶² The text actually uses the imperative, “send out” (*shallakh*) followed by the imperfect or jussive with the *waw* to express purpose.

⁶³ The form is the *piel* preterite with the *waw* consecutive, *watt^ema’en*; this form can be subordinated as an adverbial clause to the final clause of the verse. Such constructions most often have a temporal meaning; here, however, a conditional “if” works better.

⁶⁴ The *piel* infinitive serves as the direct object of the verb, answering the question of what the Pharaoh might refuse to do.

⁶⁵ The construction is very emphatic. The particle *hinneh* gives it an immediacy and a vividness, as if God is already beginning to act. The participle with this particle gives the nuance of an imminent future act, as if God is saying, “I am about to kill” These words are not repeated until the last plague.

4:24 Now it happened on the way at the inn that Yahweh met Moses and sought to kill him.⁶⁶ **4:25** But Zipporah took a flint knife and cut off the foreskin of her son and touched it to his feet,⁶⁷ and said, “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood⁶⁸ to me.” **4:26** So Yahweh⁶⁹ let him alone. Then⁷⁰ she said, “[You are] a bridegroom of blood,” referring to⁷¹ the circumcision.

⁶⁶ The next section (vv. 24-26) records this rather bizarre little story. God had said that if Pharaoh would not comply He would kill his son--but now God was ready to kill His own son. Apparently, we would reconstruct, on the journey Moses fell seriously ill; but his wife, learning the cause of the illness, saves his life by circumcising her son and casting the foreskin at Moses' feet (indicating that it was symbolically Moses' foreskin). The problem was that this son of Abraham had not complied with the sign of that covenant. No one, according to Exodus 12, would take part in the passover-exodus who had not complied. So how could the one who was going to lead God's people through the passover-exodus to find fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant not comply? The bold anthropomorphisms and the clear significance at the border invite comparisons with Genesis 32, the Angel wrestling with Jacob. In both cases there is a brush with death that could not be forgotten. See also, W. Dumbrell, “Exodus 4:24-25: A Textual Re-examination,” *HTR* 65 (1972):285-290; Trent C. Butler, “An Anti-Moses Tradition,” *JSOT* 12 (1979):9-15; and Lawrence Kaplan, “And the LORD Sought to Kill Him,” *HAR* 5 (1981): 65-74.

⁶⁷ The LXX has “and she fell at his feet” and then “the blood of the circumcision of my son stood.” But it is clear that she caused the foreskin to touch Moses' feet, as if the one were a substitution for the other, taking the place of the other (see Cassuto, p. 60).

⁶⁸ Cassuto explains that she was saying “I have delivered you from death, and your return to life makes you my bridegroom a second time, this time my blood bridegroom, a bridegroom acquired through blood” (pp. 60, 61).

⁶⁹ “Yahweh” supplied

⁷⁰ Or, “at that time”

⁷¹ The Hebrew simply has *lammulot*, “to the circumcision(s).” The phrase explains that the saying was in reference to the act of circumcision. Some scholars speculate that there was a ritual prior to marriage from which this event and its meaning derived. But it appears rather that if there was some ancient ritual, it would have had to come from this event. The difficulty is that the son is circumcised, not Moses, making that comparative mythological view untenable. Moses had apparently not circumcised Eliezer, and since he was taking his family with him, which was not wise, God had to make sure the sign of the covenant was kept. It seems likely that here Moses sent them all back to Jethro (18:2) because of the difficulties that lay ahead (compare 2 Sam. 22:3).

4:27 Yahweh said to Aaron, “Go to the wilderness to meet Moses. So he went, and met him in the mount of God,⁷² and kissed him. **4:28** And Moses told Aaron all the words of Yahweh who had⁷³ sent him, and all the signs which he had commanded him. **4:29** Then Moses and Aaron went and gathered all the elders⁷⁴ of the Israelites. **4:30** And Aaron spoke all the words which Yahweh had spoken to Moses, and did the signs in the sight of the people. **4:31** And the people believed! And when they heard⁷⁵ that Yahweh had intervened for⁷⁶ the Israelites, and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed down close to the ground.⁷⁷

⁷² Driver notes that this verse is a continuation of verses 17 and 18, since it is apparent that Aaron met Moses before Moses started back to Egypt (*Exodus*, p. 33). The first verb, then, might have the nuance of a past perfect: Yahweh had said.

⁷³ This verb, and the last one in the verse, should be rendered with the past perfect nuance since their refer to what Yahweh had done prior to Moses’ telling Aaron.

⁷⁴ These are the natural leaders of the tribes who represented all the people. Later, after the exodus, Moses will select the most capable of them and others to be ruler in a judicial sense (18:21).

⁷⁵ The form is the preterite with the *waw* consecutive, “and they heard.” It clearly is a temporal clause to the following verbs that report how they bowed and worshiped. But it is also in sequence to the preceding: they believed, and then they bowed when they heard.

The Greek has “and they rejoiced,” probably reading *wayyism^ekhu*) instead of what is in the MT, *wayyishm^e‘u*. This would have seemed a natural response of the people at the news, and it would have been an easier word order.

⁷⁶ The word was traditionally translated “visited,” which is open to many interpretations. The word means that God intervened in the life of the Israelites to bless them with the fulfillment of the promises. It says more than that He took notice of them, took pity on them, or remembered them. He had not yet fulfilled the promises, but had begun to act by calling Moses and Aaron. The translation “intervened” captures that much.

⁷⁷ The verb *wayyishtakhawu* is usually rendered “worshiped.” More specifically, the verbal root *khawah* (listed under *shakhah* in BDB) in this stem, the *hishtaphel* stem, means “to cause oneself to be low to the ground.” While there is nothing wrong with giving it a general translation of “worship,” it may be better in a passage like this to take it in conjunction with the other verb (“bow”) as a verbal hendiadys, using it as an adverb to that verb (they bowed and bowed low [worshiped] becoming “they bowed low to the ground”). The implication is certainly that they prayed, or praised, and performed some other aspect of worship; but the text may just be describing it from their posture of worship. With this response, all the fears of Moses

Exegetical Analysis

Summary

When Moses obeyed God's command to return and demand that Pharaoh release the Israelites, God met him to kill him because he had not circumcised his son, and only when he complied with the sign of the covenant did he continue to Egypt and see the worshipful response of the elders to the plan of God.

Outline

- I. Moses obeyed the command of God and left Jethro's place to return with his family to the land of Egypt (18-20).
 - A. Jethro gave Moses his permission and his blessing to return to his people in Egypt (18).
 - B. The LORD had commanded him to return because those who sought to kill him were dead (19).
 - C. He took his wife and sons and the rod and returned to Egypt (20).

- II. Moses received the instructions for his confrontation with the Pharaoh along with the qualification that Pharaoh would resist (21-23).
 - A. He was to perform the signs before Pharaoh (21a).
 - B. Pharaoh would resist because God would harden his heart (21b).
 - C. He was to tell Pharaoh to let Israel, God's son, go, or God would kill his son (23).

- III. Moses had to have his wife circumcise their son when God struck him down and almost killed him (24-26).
 - A. God met Moses and was about to kill him because he had not complied with the sign of the covenant (24).
 - B. Zipporah circumcised their son and declared Moses to be a bridegroom of blood (25, 26b).
 - C. God then let Moses recover (26a).

are swept aside--they believed and they were thankful to God.

- IV. Moses reported everything to Aaron, and together they told the elders what the LORD had said and did the signs that the LORD had prepared, with the result that the elders believed and worshiped the LORD (27-31).
- A. He met Aaron and told him all that God had said (27, 28).
- B. He and Aaron told the elders all that God had said, and did the signs God had prepared (29, 30).
- C. The elders, moved by God's care for them, worshiped him (31).

Additional Resources

Trent C. Butler, "An Anti-Moses Tradition," *JSOT* 12 (1979):9-15; W. Dumbrell, "Exodus 4:24-25: A Textual Re-Examination," *HTR* 65 (1972):285-290; Lawrence Kaplan, "And the Lord Sought to Kill Him," *HAR* 5 (1981):65-74; Robert R. Wilson, "The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart," *CBQ* 41 (1979):18-36.

EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

With this section the first part of the book comes to a close. Here the deliverer finally complies with the divine commission to join the covenantal people and deliver God's instructions to them. But the way back to Egypt held an ordeal that was not expected.

There are four basic sections in this portion of the material: the decision to return (18-20), the instructions (21-23), the confrontation by the LORD (24-26), and the presentation with Aaron (27-31). The point of the passage is essentially that all goes as the LORD had instructed and promised. Moses obeys and returns, Aaron meets him as promised, they deliver the message and do the signs, and the people believe and worship. All goes well, except for the incident at the lodging place on the way to Egypt when God met Moses to kill him. Apparently the deliverer of the covenant people had failed to observe the sign of the covenant. No one is indispensable to God's program, certainly not a leader who ignored the covenant stipulations.

I would approach this section in a generally positive way. I have worded the expository idea as follows:

***The powerful and obedient declaration of the divine plan
will inspire the faithful to worship and follow.***

By “powerful” I am drawing up the signs that Moses and Aaron did at the presentation. By “obedient” I am referring to Moses’ willingness to go to Egypt as the LORD had commanded as well as the forced compliance with circumcision. The divine plan refers to the message that he and Aaron brought, i.e., that God would finally redeem the people from bondage in accord with the covenant promises. I have used “inspire” to describe the instantaneous response of the people when they saw and heard. The “worship” means, of course, their devout bowing to the ground in submission to his will—this is what worshipping him means.

The word of the LORD that Moses was to deliver to Pharaoh has a theme that unites some of these parts: “Israel is my son, my firstborn” (may be hendiadys). If Pharaoh will not let God’s firstborn son go, then God will kill Pharaoh’s firstborn son. And, if Moses does not comply with the covenant of the Fathers and circumcise his son, then God will kill Moses who claimed to be part of the “sons” of God by covenant.

I. The servant of God obeys the call of God (18-20).

The first section records Moses’ response to the commission to go back to Egypt. This part is fairly straight forward in its contents. The text records that Moses said to his father-in-law, “Let me go and return” to see if the brethren were yet alive—something about forsaking father and mother and family to follow the Lord. Then the text records that the LORD said to Moses, “Go, return” to Egypt because those seeking to kill him were dead. Either the LORD’s commission was a confirmation of his desire to return, or it is explanatory of his request to return (the LORD having commanded him to do so). Interestingly, the LORD’s reason for the return is that the enemies are dead, but Moses’ motivation is to see if his brethren are yet alive. Thus, the motivations for the return to Egypt vividly depict the life and death conflict that would heighten over the next few months.

The report mentions that Moses took his wife and sons. According to chapter 18, he had two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. Only Gershom was mentioned in chapter 2 because of the harmony in the play on the name with the theme of that passage. The other name explanation will fit well in the post-exodus celebrations.

He also took the “rod of God” as it was now to be called. No longer was it an ordinary rod, for he would no longer be shepherding animals, but the flock of God. If “God” is an attributive genitive it could signify this as the “divine rod,” i.e., the rod characterized by the power of God, or representative of that power. This rod was going to be instrumental in the plagues and the exodus, for God had designated it as the symbol of himself. It may be similar to a scepter in its import.

II. The servant of God takes his instructions from God (21-23).

The second part of the passage lists the instructions that the LORD gave Moses as he went back. He first explains that he must do the wonders and yet God would harden Pharaoh’s heart so that he would refuse. So it is clear from the start--God will seem to work against his messenger. But the messenger can know that the stubbornness of Pharaoh is ordained by God for the greater glory of God. Likewise today when a minister declares the gospel and people do not respond, that minister must remember it is God who will draw them to himself when it is right--all the minister does is proclaim the message. If ministers do this faithfully, they are not failures if people do not respond.

After this announcement the LORD provides the message of warning that must go to Pharaoh. It will be life for life. If Pharaoh does not let the firstborn of the LORD go, then God will strike the firstborn of Pharaoh. This seems to be in retaliation for the killing of the firstborn of the people.

The idea of “son” (simply *ben*) is important in the theology of the the Bible. The term, as a word study would show, can be a literal son, or a grandson or descendant. It also has a wider, figurative usage. It may denote a political dependency (see Gen. 10 where cities are “sons of” places). Finally, it may be used of a king, an adopted son of the God who would serve as the divine heir (cf. Ps. 2). The same is true in the secular world, as the king Ahaz in Isaiah’s day was called the son of Pul, a political subject to the great Tiglathpileser of Assyria. Here in Exodus the political idea is workable. The nation of Israel would be the “son” of the LORD, i.e., his chosen, elected, created people, his theocracy, the seed of Abraham, the covenant people. If they are God’s “son,” then they should serve him and not Pharaoh. This is the point of the expression and the clear teaching of the 23rd verse. Malachi will announce the word of the LORD that “A son honors a father” and so if God is the father of Israel, the nation must serve and honor him.

The point is that Pharaoh (a god) was holding as slaves the subjects of another sovereign, the people of the living God. The only meaningful way to get through to Pharaoh on the political or theocratic allegiance of these people was to destroy the “son” of Pharaoh, the next “god” of Egypt. Thus, it would be a battle of the destiny of two theocracies. This 23rd verse explains the challenge.

*III. The servant of God must comply
with the sign of God’s covenant before leading God’s people (24-26).*

The third part seems rather bizarre. It appears that as Moses was on the way to Egypt the LORD met him to kill him. He had said that if Pharaoh would not comply he would kill Pharaoh’s son, because Israel was his son. But now he was ready to kill one of his own sons. The point is that this son of Abraham had not complied with the covenantal stipulation of circumcision. And that was no minor rule in the covenant—it was the very sign of the covenant. No one, according to Exodus 12, would even be permitted to take part in the passover-exodus who was not in compliance with that. So how could the one who was going to lead the covenantal people into their freedom as God’s new nation ignore the rite? God tolerates no violation of this, no matter how important to the operation he seems. In fact, the more important he is the more dangerous the violation is. It would be like a minister in the Church not bothering with baptism and communion—for they are the two signs of the New Covenant.

What exactly is going on is hard to determine exactly. Moses is the subject and so I would suspect that he is in this section as well. If God was now to kill his son, the text could have said that more clearly. Moreover, if the son was ill, why then did Zipporah have to do the circumcision. Probably Moses was struck down with some illness that would be “unto death,” as he later interpreted (“the LORD met him to kill him”). He knew that he was in violation of the code and therefore had to have the remedy. Zipporah seems not too sympathetic with the whole thing, but complied to save her husband.

The story is an intrusion to an otherwise neat section. There is the commission to return and the instruction of what to say. The end of the story shows how it all worked out so uniquely. But in between, there is a brush with death that would not soon be forgotten. It is a parallel account to the LORD’s meeting Jacob

to fight with him and cripple him for life. That also is rather bizarre, but clear. God's elected servant must be an obedient servant, and to keep Jacob from doing things under his own strength, he crippled him—he had to be stripped of his self-sufficiency and learn to trust the LORD. Moses had to be brought close to death to realize how the leader had to comply with the covenant regulations if he was going to lead the covenant people.

IV. The servant of God

*who complies with God's ordinances and is faithful to God's commission
will see how God will use him to draw people to himself (27-31).*

The final part shows the completion of Moses' compliance with the covenant and the call--and the results that God brings about through his faithful service. Aaron met him, just as the LORD had said; they did the signs and the people believed, just as the LORD had said; and when the people heard that the LORD had visited them (in fulfillment of what he had said through Joseph), and that he saw their affliction, they bowed and worshiped, as the LORD had promised. Moses certainly must have been encouraged to see their initial response to the hope he set before them. Unfortunately, its enthusiasm was short lived and unstable, but would continue.

These people were believers, as far as we can tell (if we speak of the people as the majority of them). They had cried to the LORD, and now the answer came. Their worship was the response to the visitation from God. That is really the primary and most important response anyone can have to sovereign grace in divine intervention. This theme will be repeated in the book as the people respond to the divine deliverance. In fact, the cycle of the next few chapters reflects the events of the great flood in Genesis: God visits his elect to deliver them through great judgments on the wicked so that they might begin a new order in worship and obedience. Here, in Exodus, the fears of Moses are set aside. They believed him.

CONCLUSION

The passage flows smoothly as Moses obeys and returns, and he and Aaron present the plan and the signs, and the elders believe and bow in worship. That would be a tidy conclusion to the call sections. But in the middle God meets Moses

to kill him, and this draws all of our attention. If Moses was to lead the covenant people to the fulfillment of the covenant promises, he had to comply with the sign of the covenant. The passage is therefore about a neglected duty in his own family. Many people enthusiastically begin to serve the Lord in some kind of ministry, but neglect the spiritual duties in their own lives and their families. Paul says if they cannot be spiritual rulers over their own household, how can they be rulers over the household of faith.

We do not know how the details worked out. Something struck Moses down so he was about to die. He perceived, or was told, it was the Lord. He was too ill to do anything, so Zipporah had to perform the ritual. The task itself was not that unpleasant to her. Calling him a bridegroom of blood reveals that she foresaw troublesome times ahead. This was not a normal man; this was not a normal marriage; there was no God like this God who demanded obedience. But the point is that the sign of the covenant was no little detail left undone. It was the sign of the covenant, evidence of faith, commitment to obedience. The spiritual leader must comply of God will not let him see the great things God was going to do. It is a message about personal obedience as a basic requirement for service.