

Signs and Wonders
Exodus 3:16-4:9
November 16, 2025

I told you all I wouldn't overlay the "Memphis to Memphis" connection in Exodus.¹ But I bring it up today for a couple reasons. First, the city we're in was named Memphis, in part, because of the massive river that runs north and south beside the city. For those that named this city—Jackson, Overton, and Winchester—the Mississippi was Memphis's Nile.

A number of years *after* the city was named, Memphis leaned *into* that identity by building a pyramid along that river. And if you recall, pre-Bass Pro, in front of that pyramid was a 30-foot statue of well-known pharaoh Ramesses the Great.² If you want to see that statue *today*, it's over at the University of Memphis. But I bring it up today, primarily, to talk about what's on Ramesses' head. On the crown of that Egyptian king, there's a cobra—hood raised, staring back at you.

That's because the cobra was the foremost symbol of pharaoh, reflecting his claim to divine royalty, sovereignty, and power.³ The Egyptians considered their pharaoh to be omnipotent, ruling the land as a god.⁴ He wore a crown to make *that* clear. And by it to threaten all of Egypt's enemies.⁵

In Egypt, the snake signified more than a snake. And in that world, so did the river. The vast majority of Egyptians lived on the Nile's banks.⁶ Every year those waters cleansed, renewed, and increased Egypt's soil. It was why their land was famous for its fertility. It was the reason why they had such wealth and power. And in the polytheistic world they inhabited, the Nile itself was worshipped by the Egyptians. It was the father of life, the mother of all, the manifestation of a god.⁷

The snake signified *more* than a snake. So did the river. And into that world, God *also* intends for a river and a snake to signify *more* than a river and a snake, so that He might make Himself known.

1. God Makes Himself Known to Israel's Elders (3:16–18a)

In last week's text, Moses asks this question: "Who am I?" God answered him—indirectly, but sufficiently—by saying: I AM with you (3:12). As a follow-up, Moses asked, "Ok, but who *are* You? What is Your Name?" I AM answered: "Yahweh" (3:15). That's *last* week.

In *this* week's text, on the heels of the re-revelation of His name, the Lord gives instructions to Moses. Verse 16: **Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, "The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, 'I am indeed concerned about you and what has been done to you in Egypt.'"**

Maybe you say, "we've heard this already." Yes, we have, *more* than once. And with that repetition in mind, listen to verse 17: **So I said, I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, to a land flowing with milk and honey.** Have we heard *that* before? Absolutely. Verse 17 repeats—almost verbatim—what we heard back in verse 8.

So, if that's the case, why are we hearing all this again? Because *this* time the news/revelation isn't for Moses *only*, it's for the elders of Israel that Moses was to gather. Because once he journeyed

¹ For the record, I said that on September 28, 2025, a *full* month and a half ago.

² Interestingly, installed the same year this church was started—1987.

³ Phil Ryken, *Exodus*, 110.

⁴ John Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*, 93.

⁵ Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 63.

⁶ See Douglas Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC, 132–133.

⁷ Their god Hapi. See Motyer, 64.

back to Egypt and gathered them, what he'd *heard*—on the mount, via the fire in a bush—he was to *repeat* exactly/precisely.⁸

Which is, first, that the God sending Moses to Israel was not some *new* god, but the God of Israel's fathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Secondly, *that* God was, verse 16: **indeed concerned about you and what has been done to you in Egypt**. He was to tell Israel's elders that the God of their father had *never* been aloof. And He wasn't acting, at this point, because He'd been *recently* made aware of their plight. No. He'd *never* abandoned them. He'd always carefully watched over them.⁹

And, with that in mind, with His perfect timing having arrived, He was now going to act. He would bring them up **out of the affliction of Egypt** (v. 17). He'd deliver them. But note that this salvation is not only *from* something, but *to* something.¹⁰ We just read it in verse 17: **I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, to a land flowing with milk and honey**.

The New Testament picks up on this in significant ways. We're saved *from*, but also *to*. As we think about *our* inheritance, we ought to rejoice in forgiveness, but also in transformation. We rejoice in redemption, but also in reward. We're no longer slaves; we're sons. Salvation is both *from* and *for*. It is *out of*, and *to*.

In *this* context, that meant *out of* Egypt and *into* Canaan. Moses was to go to the elders of Israel and tell them this news, news he'd heard up on the mount. Because God aims to make Himself known, not only to Moses, but to the leaders of the Hebrews. And what He aims at, He does not miss. After Moses tells them what he tells them, verse 18 forecasts the future: **They will pay heed to what you say**.

The God that hears, sees, and knows in Exodus 2 *already* knows what's going to happen in Exodus 5. Moses will travel back to Egypt. He'll gather the elders together. He'll tell them what the LORD told him. And God says they *will* listen. Exodus 4:29–31 confirms it: **Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the sons of Israel; and Aaron spoke all the words which the LORD had spoken to Moses. He then performed the signs in the sight of the people. So the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord was concerned about the sons of Israel and that He had seen their affliction, then they bowed low and worshiped**.

What happened? God made Himself known to Moses. And He would soon, *through* Moses, make Himself known to the leaders of His people. So that He might make Himself known further.

2. God Makes Himself Known to Egypt (3:18b–22)

After the elders heard from Moses, they would pay heed to what he said. And then verse 18 continues to forecast to Moses what will soon happen: **and you with the elders of Israel will come to the king of Egypt and you will say to him, “The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us**.

It's worth pausing there and considering all that verse says. Moses and the leaders of the enslaved people will approach the king that oppressed them—the one with a cobra on his crown—and during that “meeting,” tell *him* of *Another* they'd met with. I point that out because, *before* they were to ask *anything* of pharaoh, they were to make clear that they came in the *name* of their God.¹¹

⁸ Ryken, 102.

⁹ Stuart, 123.

¹⁰ Ryken, 103.

¹¹ Stuart, 124.

Pharaoh might wear a crown, he might sit on a throne, and *many* might bow to him, but ultimately, he was not the one Moses and these leaders served.

As you might guess, saying that to his face would provoke. And though the conflict ahead had *many* layers, at the foundational level was worship. They would approach pharaoh and make clear that the God they worshipped met with them. That they belonged to *Him*. And, further, they desired to serve Him all the more. That's what verse 18 goes on to say: **"The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. So now, please, let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God."**

So, even though we know how this will turn out, through Moses and these leaders God is making Himself known to pharaoh. He's a God that both deserves and demands honor.¹²

This is what Moses and the elders were supposed to say. And it *is* what they say. See Exodus 5. However, the LORD knows how pharaoh will respond. Verse 19: **But I know that the king of Egypt will not permit you to go, except under compulsion.** The "I" in "I know" is emphatic.¹³ What happens as Exodus unfolds does not surprise the Lord. And he warns Moses, telling him that the "king" he confronted would be hardened.¹⁴

With that in mind, knowing what's to come, what will Yahweh do? The clause at the end of verse 19 leads us into verse 20's answer. He will *not* permit them to go, verse 19: **except under compulsion. So I will stretch out My hand and strike Egypt with all My miracles which I shall do in the midst of it.**

To stretch out His hand is something of a summation of the plague account ahead.¹⁵ In fact, verses 19 and 20 outline much of the next eleven chapters of Exodus. Pharaoh will not let them go. He will refuse repeatedly. But the Lord will stretch out *His* hand and strike Egypt. The NASB describes this as **with all My miracles**. The ESV says **with all the wonders**. That's language we'll hear echoed later, in John, in the book of Acts, and elsewhere.

As we continue in Exodus, we see what is previewed here. A variety of these supernatural acts, these miracles and wonders, unfold. Each was impressive.¹⁶ What He will do **in the midst** of Egypt evokes awe.¹⁷ So we might define miracle, or wonder, in the way Alec Motyer does, as "something that halts people in their tracks, making them stop and stare."¹⁸

Through those wonders, God will accomplish His purposes. First, they will have their intended effect on pharaoh. Verse 20 ends: **and after that he will let you go.** God makes Himself—and His power—known.

And not *just* to pharaoh. Verse 21 continues to preview what's ahead: **I will grant this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians.** Here, the emphasis isn't on the Hebrews *earning* this favor, or even having to fight for it. The emphasis is, instead, on Yahweh giving it *to* them, granting it *for* them.¹⁹ In the midst of all the conflict ahead, *He* will change the hearts of the Egyptians toward the Israelites.²⁰

And the evidence of that change is in the balance of verse 21: **I will grant this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and it shall be that when you go, you will not go empty—**

¹² Back in verse 12, He'd already told Moses this is what they were going to do: **when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain.**

¹³ Motyer, 59.

¹⁴ Stuart, 126.

¹⁵ Stuart, 125.

¹⁶ Stuart, 126.

¹⁷ Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, AOTC, 94.

¹⁸ Motyer, 62.

¹⁹ Alexander, 95.

²⁰ Stuart, 126.

handed. But every woman shall ask of her neighbor and the woman who lives in her house, articles of silver and articles of gold, and clothing; and you will put them on your sons and daughters. Thus you will plunder the Egyptians. In news that had to stagger both Moses and these elders, God says the enemies of the Israelites will fund their journey out of Egypt.

So, consider the years *after* the Exodus, years where these Hebrews traversed the barren wilderness. Obviously, the Lord sustained them during those years (manna, their clothes didn't wear out, etc.), but He *also* sustained them via their plundering of the Egyptians. And when we get to Exodus 25, we might wonder, "Where are they getting all these materials—these fabrics and this gold—for the tabernacle?" They have it because the riches of Egypt were handed over.²¹ And that was because God gave His people favor.

Now, listen to what He'd said hundreds and hundreds of years prior in Genesis 15:13: **Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions.**

God makes Himself known to Israel's elders. *And* He makes Himself known in Egypt. But how? We've touched on it, but in verses 1–9 He's more specific.

3. God Makes Himself Known Through Signs and Wonders (4:1–9)

Now, maybe you'd assume—after all the questions and all the assurances—at this point, Moses would be out of questions. He was not. Verse 1: **Then Moses said, "What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say? For they may say, 'The LORD has not appeared to you.'"**

Now, *last* week I was a bit more sympathetic to Moses, stating more than once that his questions were somewhat reasonable. "Who am I?" to bring the Hebrews out of Egypt is an understandable question from a shepherd out in the middle of nowhere. However, *next* week we'll see the Lord's anger against Moses's ongoing questions (4:14). So, at some point in this conversation—and I can't state *exactly* when that is—but at some point, Moses's questions are no longer reasonable.

In verse 1 his "what if" concerns a lack of belief, maybe within himself or within those he goes to share with. Moses asks, in essence, "What do I do if they do not think the Lord appeared to me?" Verse 2: **The LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" And he said, "A staff."**

As we walk through Exodus, we'll see little by little how Moses's staff begins to symbolize the power of God.²² Via *this* staff in *his* hand, plagues fall, a sea parts, and a rock pours out water.²³ Here, the staff shows the power of God in a different way. In verse 3, the LORD says, **"Throw it on the ground." So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent.**

Maybe like you, I have a few too many snake stories. But the snake tale I remember most was in Sparta, TN—when I was a child at my grandfather's house, sitting in lawn chairs out in the front yard on some holiday. There were aunts and uncles all around, many of them sitting under a holly tree. I can remember hearing birds up in that tree making quite the racket, enough to cause a number of us to look up into its branches. And then, while we sat under it, in a circle of lawn chairs, something fell out of that tree and landed right in the middle of our circle. It looked like what you'd expect to fall out of a tree—a stick. But in the midst of the Sligers, that stick began to slither. What did a bunch of farmers and their sons do? We did what's described in verse 3: **and Moses fled from it.**

²¹ Motyer, 60.

²² Stuart, 129.

²³ Ryken, 109.

We discussed this in the intro. But, in Egypt, a snake was on the crown of pharaoh's head, picturing his claim to divine royalty, sovereignty, and power.²⁴ A snake wasn't merely a snake. It was a symbol.

Further, we know this because of what the LORD calls this "staff to snake" in verse 8—a sign. What the Lord does in these verses isn't merely some parlor trick. As a sign, it's intended to point beyond itself to something else.²⁵ And that's why the sign isn't complete when the staff turns into a serpent. Verse 4 continues: **But the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand and grasp it by its tail"—so he stretched out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand.**

This sign is intended to point beyond itself to something else. What does this sign point to? Verse 5 tells us this sign's purpose. Verse 5: **that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.**

Moses grabbed the symbol of pharaoh's rule by the tail. And when he did, he subdued it. This sign was intended to point Israel to the One Moses told them about, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And it told them that what He said He *would* do, He *could*. He'd come to conquer pharaoh and Egypt Himself.²⁶

By the way, that statue of Ramesses outside the Pyramid downtown was a replica of a statue found outside Memphis, Egypt in 1820. The original was ancient, constructed not too long after the Exodus. And this ancient statue of pharaoh was massive—made of solid granite, weighing in at over 80 tons. Like many other things in that part of the world, it's a testament to the power and wealth of Ancient Egypt. But when this statue was discovered in 1820, it was found outside a pagan temple, lying on its back in the sandy mud, because both of its legs had been broken off.

That's a picture, one that reminded me of Dagon in 1 Samuel. And not unlike this one in Exodus 3. And as we move forward in Exodus, that sign will be even clearer.

But that's not the only sign in this passage. Some have called verse 6 a "backup miracle."²⁷ Verse 7: **The LORD furthermore said to him, "Now put your hand into your bosom." So he put his hand into his bosom, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow.** Just to picture this rightly, because Moses also "took (his hand) out," bosom is probably referring to some sort of cloak.²⁸ He puts it in. And then he brings it back out. But, with this sign, whenever Moses took his hand out, it would be **leprous like snow**.

This may or may not be *exactly* the same as leprosy of today, but it certainly seems to be a skin disease characterized by the presence of scales that rubbed off like flakes of snow.²⁹ By the way, in that world—and in much of ancient thinking—there was a strong association with disease and the power of the gods.³⁰ Many assumed only a deity could afflict or heal. Verse 7 continues: **Then He said, "Put your hand into your bosom again." So he put his hand into his bosom again, and when he took it out of his bosom, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh.** As Alec Motyer says, He made, "the place of contagion the place of renewal and restoration."³¹

Like the serpent, this was intended to point to something else. That's what verse 8 makes clear: **"If they will not believe you or heed the witness of the first sign, they may believe the**

²⁴ Ryken, 110.

²⁵ Motyer, 62.

²⁶ Motyer, 63.

²⁷ Stuart, 130.

²⁸ Alexander, 97.

²⁹ Stuart, 130; Alexander, 96.

³⁰ Stuart, 131.

³¹ Motyer, 65.

witness of the last sign.” The implication is that either sign—the staff into a snake or the hand in and out of the garment—could be replicated multiple times.³²

Maybe the first sign would convince someone. Maybe the second one would. But if neither did, the LORD has one more. Verse 9: **But if they will not believe even these two signs or heed what you say, then you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water which you take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.**

We said it earlier. The Nile was more than the Nile. It cleansed and renewed. It was why their land was so fertile, why Egypt had such wealth and power. For that reason, the Nile was worshipped, the manifestation of one of their gods—the father of life, and mother of all.

And by turning that water to blood—now *and* later—Moses would show Yahweh’s power over it. The wonders intend to capture attention. The sign intends to do what a sign does, that is, point us to something else. These signs witnessed. For a doubting Moses, and for a doubting people He was sent to, these three signs demonstrated that the God of Israel was superior to the gods of Egypt.³³

Conclusion

Into a world where a serpent was more than a snake and the Nile was more than a river; water is turned into blood, and a serpentine figure is subdued.

Through these signs, God intends to make Himself known. That they might see His power over their enemy, Egypt. That they might see His power over disease. And that they might see His power over what they *thought* gave them life.

In Acts 2, Peter is preaching on the day of Pentecost. And in that famous sermon, he describes his Subject with these words, **Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst** (Acts 2:22).³⁴

In the midst of a people, He too was sent, in order that God might be made known. And His life, too, was marked by what the Scriptures call signs and wonders. Wonders intended to halt us in our tracks, to make us stop and stare. So that we might see signs, signs intended to point us to something else—His power over *our* enemy, His power to give life, and His rule over all.

A serpent not just subdued, but crushed.

³² Stuart, 129.

³³ Ryken, 111.

³⁴ Like we did last week, we might also go to John’s Gospel. In that Gospel, the word for sign occurs seventeen times. For example, when Christ changed the water into wine (2:1–11), when He healed the nobleman’s son (4:46–54), when He healed the lame man (5:1–15), when He fed the multitude (6:1–15), when He healed the blind man (9:1–41), and when He raised Lazarus (11:1–57). See Andreas Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, 324.