

Exodus 4:10–17, 27–31 (CEB)

¹⁰ But Moses said to the LORD, “My Lord, I’ve never been able to speak well, not yesterday, not the day before, and certainly not now since you’ve been talking to your servant. I have a slow mouth and a thick tongue.”

¹¹ Then the LORD said to him, “Who gives people the ability to speak? Who’s responsible for making them unable to speak or hard of hearing, sighted or blind? Isn’t it I, the LORD? ¹² Now go! I’ll help you speak, and I’ll teach you what you should say.”

¹³ But Moses said, “Please, my Lord, just send someone else.”

¹⁴ Then the LORD got angry at Moses and said, “What about your brother **Aaron** the Levite? I know he can speak very well. He’s on his way out to meet you now, and he’s looking forward to seeing you. ¹⁵ Speak to him and tell him what he’s supposed to say. I’ll help both of you speak, and I’ll teach both of you what to do. ¹⁶ **Aaron** will speak for you to the people. He’ll be a spokesperson for you, and you will be like God for him. ¹⁷ Take this shepherd’s rod with you too so that you can do the signs.”

²⁷ The LORD said to **Aaron**, “Go into the desert to meet Moses.” So he went, and **Aaron** met him at God’s mountain and greeted him with a kiss. ²⁸ Moses told **Aaron** what the LORD had said about his mission and all the signs that the LORD had told him to do. ²⁹ Then Moses and **Aaron** called together all the Israelite elders. ³⁰ **Aaron** told them everything that the LORD had told to Moses, and he performed the signs in front of the people. ³¹ The people believed. When they heard that the LORD had paid attention to the Israelites and had seen their oppression, they bowed down and worshipped.

Exodus 7:1–7 (CEB)

The LORD said to Moses, “See, I’ve made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother **Aaron** will be your prophet. ² You will say everything that I command you, and your brother **Aaron** will tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites out of his land. ³ But I’ll make Pharaoh stubborn, and I’ll perform many of my signs and amazing acts in the land of Egypt. ⁴ When Pharaoh refuses to listen to you, then I’ll act against Egypt and I’ll bring my people the Israelites out of the land of Egypt in military formation by momentous events of justice. ⁵ The Egyptians will come to know that I am the LORD, when I act against Egypt and bring the Israelites out from among them.”

⁶ Moses and **Aaron** did just as the LORD commanded them. ⁷ Moses was 80 years old and **Aaron** was 83 when they spoke to Pharaoh.

Exodus 32:1–6 (CEB)

The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around **Aaron** and said to him, “Come on! Make us gods who can lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don’t have a clue what has happened to him.”

² **Aaron** said to them, “All right, take out the gold rings from the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” ³ So all the people took out the gold rings from their ears and brought them to **Aaron**. ⁴ He collected them and tied them up in a cloth. Then he made a metal image of a bull calf, and the people declared, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

⁵ When **Aaron** saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf. Then **Aaron** announced, “Tomorrow will be a festival to the LORD!” ⁶ They got up early the next day and offered up entirely burned offerings and brought well-being sacrifices. The people sat down to eat and drink and then got up to celebrate.

Surrendering to God is one thing; staying on God’s path is another.

Poor Aaron. Forever overshadowed by his younger brother Moses. Tell the story of the Exodus and, inevitably, it is Moses who gets all the attention. The older brother, Aaron is so easily overlooked. I know that even when preparing this study, I was surprised by the prominence of Aaron in the story. Whose rod is thrown to the ground and turns into a snake in front of Pharaoh? Aaron’s, not Moses’s. (I’m pretty sure it is Charlton Heston who throws his staff to the ground in The Ten Commandments, but you can

check me on that.) I bolded Aaron's name in the passages above to help you see his presence in the story.

But today, our focus *is* on Aaron. Like King David, Aaron's story takes dramatic turns – the highs and lows, surrender and rebellion, obedience and disobedience. Aaron's story begins with an encounter at a burning bush. Moses's, not his own.

Surrendering to a new life

When the book of Exodus opens, the Israelites are enslaved. Seeking refuge from famine, they had come to Egypt a few centuries before and had never gone home. God might have promised Abraham a great nation and some land but the only promise that seems to have been fulfilled is the one about lots of descendants. There are now so many Israelites that Pharaoh fears them. We are told of an Israelite baby, Moses, who is saved from Pharaoh's massacre. We are told how he grows up in Pharaoh's household only to flee into the wilderness after murdering an Egyptian slave master.

Years later, when God calls Moses over to the burning bush, God wastes no time telling Moses that he is changing careers. Moses may have been a shepherd in the wilds of Midian, but God is going to rescue his people and Moses is just the man to lead the effort.

Moses reacts as most of us probably would. He wants to know exactly who it is that is sending him on this mission. So God reveals his name, YHWH. Moses asks, what if the people don't believe me? God gives Moses the power to do miraculous signs. But I don't speak well, Moses reminds God. God assures Moses that God will be his mouth. Finally, Moses admits he just doesn't want to do this, "O my Lord, please send someone else." Understandably frustrated with Moses, God gives him Aaron, his brother, to speak for him. This is to be Moses's, and now Aaron's, vocation.

So God and the two brothers head to Egypt where they will confront Pharaoh, who imagines himself a god, and demand that Pharaoh set the Israelites free. You know how the story goes. Pharaoh refused and God sent one plague after another, all meant to force Pharaoh to see that YHWH is the one true God. But only after the arrival of the last and most terrible of plagues, the death of the firstborn, does Pharaoh let Aaron, Moses, and the Hebrews flee to freedom.

At God's mountain

Once the Israelites reached the wilderness on the far side of the Red Sea, God led them directly to Mt. Sinai, where Moses had first met God. There Moses and the people will be given God's Law, the teachings on what it means to love God and neighbor. Yet while Moses was on the mountaintop receiving the very word of God, a terrible thing happened. Pretty much the worst thing ever; so chilling in its execution that the consequences could only be disastrous.

When Moses had been gone longer than the people expected,¹ they panicked and turned to Aaron, Moses's brother, and pleaded for gods that could lead them as they thought they ought to be led. That's bad enough. But it got worse, much worse. Aaron led the people in constructing a golden calf out of their melted down jewelry. And they worshipped this pagan idol, this abomination. They worshipped it and thanked the statue for bringing them out of Egypt. Was this any way to love God? The people had promised to do just that . . . but, gee, that was weeks before!

Wait! . . . Aaron?!! He made the golden calf? . . . Yes, he did (Exodus 32:35). But hadn't he been with Moses through it all: the confrontations, the plagues, the flight from Egypt?? Yes, he had and, nevertheless, he committed the grievous sin of fashioning a golden calf for the newly freed Israelites to worship. Did he really know better? Yes, for God had already spoken to them of his Law and the prohibition on graven images and

¹ This story begins at 32:1 and continues the narrative 24:14. The truth is that it is very difficult to be confident of the chronological ordering of the events at the mountain.

idols of any sort. It is hard for grasp how terribly grievous was the sin of the golden calf. For the Rabbis it was the most terrible moment in all the Hebrew Bible. Terence Fretheim on this:

At the heart of the matter, the most important of the commandments has been violated. Israel has been disloyal to its God. The problem is thus fundamentally not one of disobedience to a law code; it is a matter of unfaithfulness to the God who had bound himself to a people. Israel has violated the established relationship (see at 20:3–4).

A recurring phrase in this section is “who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” Moses is the subject in the mouth of both people (32:1, 23) and God (32:7; 33:1); God is the subject in Moses’ speech (32:11–12); and the manufactured god is according to the people (32:4, 8). This usage will provide important clues to the flow of the narrative: Who will be responsible for Israel when Israel is being irresponsible?

The issue presented initially in chapter 32 is that of a leadership vacuum. Without proper leadership the people can flounder. Here they complain that their leader Moses has been absent for too long; they are impatient to move on. Consequently, they confront Aaron, who was given the responsibility of leadership in Moses’ absence (see 24:14). The people demand that he make an image of “a god” to “go before” them to lead them to the promised land (their first words after 24:7!). Without hesitation Aaron accedes to their request. He takes the people’s Egyptian gold (the status symbol of their deliverance), shapes it, and makes an image. . . .²

Will God go on with these people?

Back to the story -- in response to the wild goings-on at the base of Mt. Sinai celebrating the golden calf (we’re told specifically that Aaron let them), God hurried Moses down the mountain to see for himself the depth of Israel’s sin. And then God tells Moses that he is done with these people. God is ready to let his fury devour them and start over with Moses alone (no mention of Aaron in this). But Moses pleads with God on behalf of the people and God relents . . . the people will live.

That isn’t the end of it. The people will live, but God tells Moses to go ahead without him. The people are so rebellious they will never complete the trip. At some point, they will be consumed by God’s holy anger, much as you and I would be consumed were we to fly too close to the sun.

And so Moses again comes before God, ready to plead for the Israelites, to persuade God that he must go on with the Israelites to the Promised Land. What courage it must have taken for Moses to again appeal to God, not deferentially, but firmly and directly. Perhaps Moses’ courage in confronting God was born in his understanding of God’s nature.

And Aaron? He goes on toward Canaan, but he will not see it. At one point, Aaron and Miriam (the sister) grow jealous of Moses and speak against him. God hears them and comes to confront them – never good (Numbers 12). Later, Aaron would die in the wilderness, for another act of disobedience (Numbers 20) – the same would be true of Moses, though he dies at a later date.

In the end, we wonder how . . . how could Aaron make the golden calf, leading the people in idolatry and unfaithfulness? How could David arrange the murder of Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband? Surrender and obedience to God is never a straight path with one obedient day leading neatly to another. Instead, too often, we insist that we know better, that our way is the most sensible, the most realistic. David chose his own path at times. Aaron chose his own path at times. We too chose our own path at times. And, yet, God does not abandon us, but patiently pulls us back so we can go on together. And, indeed, at Mt. Sinai God agrees to go on with the Israelites and Moses and Aaron, leading them to the Promised Land.

² Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 280–281.

Daily Bible Readings

More on Aaron

Monday, Exodus 32 The golden calf

Tuesday, Numbers 12 Aaron and Miriam are jealous of Moses

Wednesday, Numbers 16 Aaron and Moses have to deal with rebellion

Thursday, Numbers 17 The budding of Aaron's staff

Friday, Numbers 20:1-22 The disobedience of Moses and Aaron

Saturday, Numbers 20:22-29 The death of Aaron

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

A study of the book of Revelation

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Paul's letter to the Romans

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle."

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *Stories from the Apocrypha*

Video of each week's class is posted here: vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy