

Interpretive problems in Exodus 4:20-26

Verse 20 Then Moses took his wife and his sons and set them on a donkey, and he returned to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the rod of God in his hand.

NOTE: We are told of the birth of only one of his sons, Gershom, in Exodus 2:22. Yet, this verse mentions “Sons,” without the name of the second (Eliezer—not mentioned by name until chapter 18).

Verse 21 And the LORD said to Moses, “When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh which I have put in your hand. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.

Verse 22 Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD: “Israel is My son, My firstborn.

Verse 23 So I say to you, let My son go that he may serve Me. But if you refuse to let him go, indeed I will kill your son, your firstborn.”

NOTE: This instruction by God to Moses mentions Israel as God’s “firstborn.” It is to be assumed that God utilizes the fact that Israel (formerly Jacob) bought the birthright of his elder brother, Esau, the firstborn of Isaac, in order to claim Israel’s descendants as His collective “firstborn,” or heir. (Is this assumption acceptable without dispute?) We are not told if Moses delivered this message at the beginning of his confrontations with Pharaoh, but the promise to kill the firstborn of Egypt was fulfilled later.

Verse 24 And it came to pass on the way, at the encampment, that the LORD met him and sought to kill him.

Verse 25 Then Zipporah took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at Moses’ feet, and said, “Surely you are a husband of blood to me!”

Verse 26 So He let him go. Then she said, “You are a husband of blood!”-- because of the circumcision.

NOTE: (Problem 1) We are not told why God sought to kill Moses. From what follows, it is assumed that Moses had failed to circumcise his son, according to the covenant bound on the descendants of Abraham. Commentators “assume” also that the effect of God’s intention was to incapacitate Moses, so that his wife had to perform the circumcision. (Problem 2) Verse 25 says that Zipporah circumcised her son (singular), but Verse 20 mentions plural sons. We are not told which son was circumcised. We also have no information about the circumcision of the other son. If only one was circumcised at this time, and the other not, would not God still be angry? Yet, Verse 26 tells us “He (God--?--) let him go.” Commentators are uninhibited about filling in the gaps of information. They

presume that Gershom, the firstborn, had already been circumcised, though there is no information on it. This presumption is followed by the bold statement that it was Eliezer who was circumcised in Verse 25.

Filling in gaps of information in the Bible is problematical. Assumptions and presumptions create disputes, because one man's assumptions have no more validity than another's. The assumption that there are examples of infant baptism in the wholesale baptisms of households in the New Testament comforts the one who believes in infant depravity. However, the one who accepts believer baptism cannot be persuaded by such thin examples. The problems of our passage in Exodus 4 are not earth shaking, but they provide fodder for those critics of the Bible who are fond of pointing out supposed discrepancies. The only interpretive principle that can help us to defend the integrity of the Bible text is that of "necessary inference." By this rule, we can conclude that both of the sons of Moses were circumcised, at one time or another, because God took away his threat against Moses. We do not need to supply names to the personal pronouns in the passage, when this conclusion is drawn. The warnings against addition to the text (such as Deuteronomy 12:32) should steer us away from building a presumptive scenario that is too broad, and capable of creating disputations.

Help me with another interpretive problem.

Consider these two verses.

Exodus 9:6 So the LORD did this thing on the next day, and all the livestock of Egypt died; but of the livestock of the children of Israel, not one died.

Exodus 9:19 "Therefore send now and gather your livestock and all that you have in the field, for the hail shall come down on every man and every animal which is found in the field and is not brought home; and they shall die.""

Question: If all the livestock of Egypt died, how did they have livestock to save, later?