

Episode: Promised Land Series No. 03

Narrator: First Israelite Elder

Primary Scriptures: Exodus 4:29-31

Story Summary: Moses and Aaron meet the Israelite elders

Location: Egypt

Time: c. 1526 BC Birth of Moses

c. 1446 BC The plagues and exodus

Suggested Memory Scriptures: Exodus 4:29-31

The Israelites lived in Egypt for four centuries. It is easy to think of them as being faithful to God during that entire time period, but the dialogue at the burning bush refutes that idea.

Abraham's family worshiped other gods before he left Ur.¹ Rachel stole her father's gods, and Jacob/Israel had his family bury their gods.² When the family of Israel moved to Egypt, the notion of having many gods was probably as comfortable as the notion of having only one God.

When the Israelites first moved to Egypt, they had favor with the Egyptian pharaoh who placed them in the land of Goshen, a plain east of the Nile delta. This was an excellent idea, because Goshen was excellent for shepherds but useless for the Egyptian farmers who depended on the floods of the Nile to water their crops.

The Bible doesn't give precise details, but it does say the Israelites had many descendants. You can easily imagine that the Israelites outgrew the land of Goshen and wanted to expand their territory. You can also imagine that, as the Israelites became less isolated, they became more accustomed to the many Egyptian gods.

Four hundred years later, God does not appear to have been overtly active in the lives of the Israelites. They have essentially forgotten God. Easy to do since they don't have a written history, and were constantly exposed to the Egyptian gods, who do seem active and powerful.

As Joseph becomes a distant memory, the Egyptian royalty lose any sense of loyalty to the Israelites. Instead, they become fearful of them and choose to enslave them. This enslavement serves to make the Israelites see God as less powerful than the Egyptian gods. Why should the Israelites acknowledge God when he clearly refuses to provide for them?

When Moses and Aaron arrive, they bring an entirely new worldview with them, backed with signs of wonder. The Israelite elders have a serious, difficult choice to make: the God of Israel or the gods of Egypt? This is far from the last time they will have to make this choice.

¹ Joshua 24:2

² Genesis 31:19, 35:4

Discussion Questions:

1. Exodus 3:1-4:17 is the story of Moses and the burning bush. In the past, did you read the beginning of that passage with the understanding that Moses was already well-acquainted with God or with the understanding that God was mostly introducing himself to Moses? Can you explain why you had that point of view? How would Moses have been well-acquainted with God?
2. Exodus 3:13 is Moses's first expectation of how the Israelites will respond when he tries to free them from slavery. Why do you think Moses had that first response? Was he worried about the Israelites or was he still trying to be convinced himself?
3. In Exodus 3:16, the target audience switches from the Israelites in general to the Israelite elders. How would that have changed the assignment in Moses' eyes? Do you think Moses was aware of who the elders were?
4. In Exodus 4:29, Aaron and Moses gather all the Israelite elders together. How many elders do you think there were? How would they have gotten them all together, and where would they have met? How long do you think it took Aaron and Moses to tell their story and perform their signs? Do you think the elders met together before they believed, or were the words and demonstrations of Moses and Aaron enough?

1. Moses could have learned about God while in Egypt, but it is hard to imagine that would have been easy or that it would have pleased the other Egyptian royals or priests. His father-in-law was a priest of Midian, but was not a Hebrew. If you read the story with no preconceptions, it seems to begin with God introducing himself to Moses, and Moses being very unsure of God's power. 2. He wanted to make sure God was a "big enough" god to make it happen. It was by the name of a god that people would impute power and authority. The Israelites were already convinced that the gods of Egypt had power. The only things they knew about God were stories that had been passed down through hundreds of years. God had not been active in their lives. 3. It was common for clans and tribes to be led by the elders, or older men. It is very possible that the overseers of Egypt sometimes dealt with the elders of Israel to make things happen, although we later find that the Egyptians had appointed Israelite overseers to get work done.

Application Questions:

1. Exodus 4:30-31 says that Aaron and Moses told them what the Lord had said, and showed them the signs of the Lord. And, then the elders believed. Do you tend to be convinced more by words or by actions? Does John 20:29 strike you differently if you realize how you typically make decisions?

Application Questions for Teens:

1. Exodus 4:31 says the elders believed. Since they had just met Aaron and Moses, how deep do you think their belief really was?
2. In Exodus 4:31, the Israelites bowed down and worshiped God. Do you think this looked different from the way they had been worshiping the Egyptian gods?