6. Salvation at the sea Exodus 13:17–15:21
God as guide
(Exodus 13:17–22)

Here we witness the Israelites fleeing from Egypt. They are not leaving in great fear, however. The style of this paragraph is poetic and elevated. It demonstrates the joy and passion with which the Hebrews left Egypt, the land of death and darkness—and why not? God was guiding them in his appearances as a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud; it was the Lord who was leading this expedition and there was no room for fear.

13:17. And it came to pass when Pharaoh sent forth the people, that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near, because God said, 'Lest the people change their minds when they see war, and they return to Egypt.'

The writer returns to a description of the travel itinerary of the Hebrews in their escape from Egypt. He explains, firstly, that God did not lead them to the promised land by the shortest route possible. That most direct route would have been the Via Maris (the Way of the Sea) that extends from the Nile river across the northern Sinai into the coastal plain of Palestine. This was an extensively travelled road in ancient times, and was probably the most commonly used route from Egypt to Asia.

An attempted escape through northern Sinai would have placed the Hebrews in harm's way because the primary roads in that region were guarded by a series of Egyptian forts. God was well aware of the character of the Israelites, that they would flee at the first sign of danger and war. They would simply prefer to return to Egypt and its oppression rather than face the hazards of battle (consider Num. 14:1–4 where God's assessment is shown to be correct).

A play on words is evident in two of the major verbs of the verse. The verb for God's 'leading' them is nāhām. The verb used for the Hebrews' changing their minds is yĭnnāhēm. Although the two verbs derive from different roots, here they look and sound alike. The reason for it is perhaps to underscore the contrast between God's leading and Israel's desire to go elsewhere—i.e., back to Egypt.

13:18. So God led the people by the way of the wilderness to the Red Sea, and by divisions the children of Israel went up from the land of Egypt.

God guides the people in a more south-easterly direction by a desert road towards the Red Sea (Hebrew, yăm sûph). The identification of the latter body of water has been much disputed. Since I have dealt with the issue elsewhere at length, I will quote from that study:

Throughout the parallel accounts of the crossing, the water is often referred to as the yăm sûph (Exod. 15:4; Deut. 11:4; Josh. 2:10; 4:23; 24:6; Ps. 106:7, 9, 22; 136:13, 15). Many modern scholars translate yăm sûph as 'Sea of Reeds/Papyrus' because the term sûph is used in the Old Testament to refer to the reeds growing along the side of the Nile River (see Exod. 2:3). Furthermore, we are told that sûph may in fact be related to the Egyptian word twf(y), 'marsh plant'. Since papyrus does not grow along the Red Sea/Gulf of Suez, scholars conclude that the yăm sûph is one of the marshy lakes in the eastern delta region north of the Red Sea.

Recent studies by Bernard Batto have demonstrated, however, that this common view cannot be sustained by the evidence, but in fact yăm sûph does refer to the Red Sea/Gulf of Suez. In the first place, every certain reference to yăm sûph in the Bible refers to the Red Sea or its northern extensions in the Gulfs of Aqaba and Suez (e.g., 1 Kings 9:26; Jer. 49:21). Second, the parallel drawn between Egyptian p3-twfy and yăm sûph is not without its problems. Whereas yăm sûph refers to a body of water, that is not true of p3-twfy. Egyptian p3 is a demonstrative pronoun meaning 'the'. The term twfy, is properly translated 'papyrus, papyrus thicket', and sometimes designated a region or district where papyrus grows. Nowhere in Egyptian texts does p3-twfy refer to a body of water; it means 'the land/area of papyrus'.

Batto has also demonstrated that the word sûph in Hebrew is not related to the Egyptian twfy, but derives instead from the Semitic root sôph, which means 'end'. Therefore the Hebrew place-name yăm sûph, literally meaning 'the sea of the end', refers to the waters to the far south, the waters at the end of the land. And that, of course, would be the Red Sea.

Numerous ancient and modern translations (such as the Targums and the Vulgate) say that the Hebrews left Egypt 'armed' or 'equipped for battle'. The meaning of the Hebrew term is uncertain, however. The Septuagint translators render it 'the fifth generation'. It seems to be a derivative of the number five, and it may possibly refer to an army in five parts/divisions. Thus the word may indicate that the Hebrews were leaving Egypt not necessarily in a military posture, but rather in an orderly, military-like fashion. They were well organized in their departure from Egypt.

13:19. And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because he made the children of Israel truly swear, saying, 'God will certainly visit you, and you will bring up my bones from this [place] with you.'

Moses performs a curious act. He retrieves and takes the embalmed body of Joseph to go up with the Hebrews to the promised land. This incident is in fulfilment of a promise the Hebrews of earlier generations had made to the patriarch Joseph—in fact, the author of Exodus quotes Genesis 50:25 word for word. It is related later that the body of Joseph was eventually buried in Shechem in Palestine (see Josh. 24:32).

13:20. And they journeyed from Succoth, and they camped at Etham on the edge of the wilderness.

An Egyptian text, called Papyrus Anastasi V, from the thirteenth century B.C., may be helpful in determining the route out of Egypt taken by the Hebrews. The text is in the form of a letter written by a soldier from a place called Tjeku. He tells of his pursuit of two slaves fleeing from Egypt to the wilderness. The soldier mentions three place-names: 'I reached the enclosure wall of Tjeku on the third month of the third season ... to the south ... When I reached htm, they told me that the scout had come from the desert [saying that] they had passed the walled place north of Migdol.' Tjeku has already been identified as Succoth (see 12:37). The slaves headed south from Succoth to htm, which perhaps corresponds to the biblical Etham (it is phonetically possible). They then fled to Migdol, which appears to be on the fringe of the desert. Migdol is mentioned in Exodus 14:2 as a location near which Israel camped. The order of this escape—Succoth-Etham-Migdol—is similar to the account of the Israelites' departure recorded in Numbers 33:6–7: 'And they journeyed from Succoth, and camped in Etham, which is on the edge of the wilderness. And they journeyed from Etham, and turned back to Pi-hahiroth, which faces Baalzephon; and they camped before Migdol.' The Egyptian papyrus raises the possibility that the Israelites fled from Egypt on a common escape route into the wilderness.

In any event, the Hebrews are now at the gate of freedom, arriving at the final town or outpost before escape into the wilderness. Nothing appears to be standing in the way of their deliverance.

13:21. And Yahweh was going before them by day as a pillar of cloud to lead them on the way, and by night as a pillar of fire to give light to them, in order to travel by day and by night.

Moses now presents Yahweh in theophany. In the Old Testament, the appearance of Yahweh arrives in many forms: at times he appears as a man (e.g., Gen. 18:1–33) or in a bush (Exod. 3:1–6). Often he would appear as a glory cloud, called the Shekinah glory by some writers. The glory cloud was a visible symbol of God's presence among his people.

In the present story we see Yahweh in a double theophany. It is, as Kline remarks, a 'double-columned cloud-and-fire revelation of the Glory-Spirit at the exodus'. The reason for the two theophanies is clear: it is so that Yahweh would be with his people and lead them 'by day' and 'by night'. The use of the two opposites underscores the all-inclusive nature of God's presence with Israel.

Both occurrences of the word 'pillar' are introduced by a form of the preposition beth. Here it is probably used as a beth essentiae, meaning 'as' rather than 'in'. This grammatical point accentuates the fact that both the cloud and the fire are no more nor less than theophanies.

For the Hebrews these manifestations of God were no small thing. Although they were traversing unknown territory they had no reason to fear. Yahweh 'was going before them', guiding, directing and leading them.

13:22. He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night from before the people. Opening the verse are the words, 'He did not remove/take away …' The subject is clearly Yahweh from verse 21. The verb is in the third person masculine singular, a Hiphil causative stem. The point is that Yahweh is the one who appeared as the cloud and fire, and he is the one who controlled and decided the length of time that these manifestations were to appear. Obviously they were constantly before the people because God had not removed them.

Application

How often God does not lead his people by what they perceive to be the easiest and shortest way! He knows our hearts, that they would falter in times of danger. Oh, how like the Israelites we are! Thus God will frequently take us by the long road in many things. In that way, he protects us from danger and destruction. His leading also has a didactic purpose, to teach us to rely upon him and his timing. We think we know best: 'There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death' (Prov. 14:12).

But, even today, God is always with his people. In the barren wilderness, God travelled with the Hebrews by day and by night as a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud. He is also with us even in times of distress, turmoil and suffering. Many are the saints who had a clear perception of the presence of the Almighty during such periods of danger.