

Pharaoh as pursuer

(Exodus 14:1–12)

At the close of chapter 13 we see the Israelites quickly fleeing from Egypt. They have reached the very edge of the wilderness and are about to enter it for their final escape from the land of death to go to the land of promise. They are carrying Joseph's bones with them as a reminder that the promise of the exodus event in Genesis 50 has now been fulfilled. In addition, God is leading them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The Hebrews have all the evidence they need to believe that God is protecting them and that they will succeed in their escape from Egypt. How soon that assurance is shattered! God is about to place Israel back into the fiery furnace, into the raging crucible!

14:1–2. And Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the children of Israel that they turn back and camp in front of Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. You shall camp in front of Baal Zephon, opposite it, near the sea.'

Israel is on the brink of escape into the wilderness. But God orders the people to 'turn back'. Instead of breaking out of the land of death, God causes the Hebrews to reverse their course. He then commands them to encamp with their backs to the sea, and so it appears that they have no escape route out of Egypt. They are sitting ducks.

Locations of the three sites mentioned are uncertain. Migdol is a term of Semitic origin meaning 'tower/fortress'. It was borrowed by the Egyptians during the New Kingdom period and used as a place name for various sites. A network of Egyptian outposts lined the eastern border of Egypt during the New Kingdom, and any one of them could have gone by the name of Migdol.

Three major proposals have been proffered regarding the location of Baal-zephon. It has been placed at Tell Daphneh, about ten miles west of el-Qantara; in the vicinity of the Bitter Lakes, about twelve miles south-east of Tell el-Maskhuta; and at the head of the Gulf of Suez on the Red Sea. Its location cannot be identified with any certainty.

A clue to the location of Pi-hahiroth is the meaning of its name. It appears to be a Hebraized form of the original Akkadian Pi-hiriti, which literally means 'the mouth or opening of the canal'. The eastern delta has a defensive canal from the Mediterranean Sea to at least the area of the Bitter Lakes and this may have extended further south during the period of the New Kingdom. Pi-hahiroth may therefore have been an opening or break in the canal system that allowed entrance into the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula.

14:3. 'And Pharaoh will say of the children of Israel, "They are wandering in confusion in the land; the wilderness has closed them in."'

The position of the Hebrews is so poor strategically that when Pharaoh is told where they are camping he will think their situation to be utterly hopeless. In fact, he will be vocal about the matter: the verse begins, 'And Pharaoh will say ...' The monarch of Egypt will thus conclude that he has the utmost advantage and he will desire to crush Israel.

The Hebrew verb for 'wandering in confusion', or 'aimlessly', is used elsewhere in the Old Testament of cattle that roam to and fro not knowing where they are headed (see Joel 1:18).

The first words of Pharaoh begin with a lamed preposition, which literally means, 'of the children of Israel'. However, it is probably an emphatic use of lamed that can be translated 'indeed', so that the sentence reads, 'Indeed the children of Israel are wandering aimlessly!' The emphasis demonstrates Pharaoh's excitement over the prospects he now has of crushing Israel.

14:4. 'And I will harden Pharaoh's heart that he will pursue after them. And I will be glorified in Pharaoh and in all his army. And the Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh.' And they did so.

To add fuel to the fire, God says he will then harden Pharaoh's heart so that the King of Egypt will chase after the Hebrews. The verb 'pursue' in Hebrew is normally used in the Old Testament of a man or a group pursuing others for revenge. And, thus, it sometimes bears the connotation of 'persecution'.

Why did God place the chosen people in such treacherous and trying circumstances? Certainly Yahweh could have conducted Israel far beyond the reach of Pharaoh and his army, even before the latter had set

out from Egypt. Why did he not do that? The answer is not cryptic but crystal clear: God desired to display his power in the salvation of his people so that he would be greatly glorified.

Ironically, the word for God's glory in this verse is *kābēd*, which, as we have seen earlier, literally means 'heavy/weighty'. The same word is employed throughout the Exodus account to describe the state of Pharaoh's heart (see 7:14). Pharaoh's heart is 'heavy' so that 'heaviness' would be given to Yahweh! In any event, the plight of Israel appears, in human terms, to be grave. The Egyptians have them trapped with their backs to the sea. Escape seems to be out of the question. Pharaoh's evil object is at the very point of attainment. On a higher level, however, God is controlling this event to his own end and glory. Yes, Israel is placed in the fiery furnace, but man's extremity is God's opportunity. The sovereignty of God is the point of this lesson: it is he who puts Israel in a dire situation, and it is he who hardens Pharaoh's heart. He is directing the scene. We are witnessing a great maestro conducting a grand symphony!

14:5. When it was reported to the King of Egypt that the people had fled, the heart of Pharaoh and his servants turned against the people, and they said, 'What is this we have done, that we have sent forth Israel from our service?'

The setting of the story now changes, reverting to the scene of the Egyptian palace. Pharaoh is told by his counsellors that the Hebrews are trying to flee Egypt, and that they are curiously entrapped by the sea. The first response of the king (and his courtiers) is, literally, that his 'heart changed/turned back' (the verb is a Niphal passive). This is the same verb, in the same form, that was employed in the story of the rod changing to a serpent (7:15). Pharaoh's heart, which had been softened to allow Israel to leave Egypt, now returns to its hardened state.

The Egyptian leaders realize that they have lost a major source of cheap labour. With all the colossal building programmes in Egypt during the New Kingdom period, this loss was no small thing. The Ramesside pharaohs constructed buildings and monuments in the delta by employing much foreign labour, most of which consisted of slaves. The Egyptian document Papyrus Leiden 348 informs us that a group called the 'apiru were engaged in 'hauling stones to the great pylon' of one of Pi-Rameses' temples. The 'apiru are not to be equated with the Hebrews, although the Israelites may have constituted a segment of that social group. In any event, Egypt could not afford to forfeit such a large workforce.

14:6. So he made ready his chariot, and he took his people with him.

A literal translation of the verse is: 'And he harnessed [or "hitched"] his chariot and his people he took with him.' The verb 'āsār ('to harness') is a common Old Testament term meaning to prepare a chariot for action (see Gen. 46:29; 2 Kings 9:21). The word for 'chariot' is often used collectively in the Bible signifying 'chariotry', or 'force of war chariots'. It is likely that Pharaoh was responding to Israel's attempted escape by amassing his chariot force to recapture the Hebrews.

'People' in Hebrew sometimes refers to a group bearing arms, that is, an army (1 Sam. 11:11; 1 Kings 20:10). This term perhaps relates to groups of foot-soldiers gathered to pursue Israel (see 14:9). Thus Pharaoh answers Israel's flight by mustering a significant and substantial military force—made up of cavalry and foot troops—in order to hunt down the people of God.

14:7. And he took six hundred chosen chariots, and all the chariots of Egypt, and officers over all of it. A description of the make-up of the chariot force is now provided. Pharaoh, apparently at the head of one grouping, assembles 'six hundred chosen chariots'. According to the Old Testament, six hundred was a standard military unit (Judg. 18:11, 16, 17; 1 Sam. 13:15; 14:2).

The king also gathered all the remaining chariots of Egypt, and he placed 'officers over all of it'. The word for 'officer' is related to the term for the number three. Based upon that relationship, some scholars have suggested that the 'officer' is 'best explained as third man [in the chariot]'. Thus in each chariot there would be three men, one of whom served as officer in command of the chariot. This is unlikely, however. The 'officer' was probably an adjutant to Pharaoh, one who was 'of the third rank'. Consequently, officers of the third rank supervised the chariots of Egypt, but they were not in each and every chariot.

The reason why these details of the Egyptian chariots are given is to underscore the hopeless situation of the Israelites. Probably the greatest fighting force in the world was preparing to pursue them. Many of

their attackers would come speedily in chariots. The Hebrews were on foot and locked in by the Red Sea. What chance did they have?

14:8. And Yahweh hardened the heart of Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, so that he would pursue after the children of Israel, who were going out boldly.

God further providentially sets the scene by hardening the heart of the Egyptian king so that he would pursue the Hebrews. This action is in fulfilment of the prophecy that Yahweh had spoken in verse 4. For commentary on the use of the word 'hardened', see 4:21.

The end of the verse is normally understood to describe the Israelites' demeanour as they left Egypt as being, literally, 'with a high hand'. This is a Hebrew idiom that many believe means 'in defiance' (see Num. 15:30) or 'in triumph' (see Deut. 32:27). It is a metaphor 'drawn from the depiction of ancient Near-Eastern gods menacingly brandishing a weapon in the upraised right hand'. Thus, many commentators argue that Israel was leaving Egypt in great and complete confidence.

I would suggest, on the other hand, that perhaps the final clause is not speaking of the attitude of the Hebrews at all. Rather, the phrase may be expressing the means by which Israel was departing from Egypt. If the preposition is understood to be a beth of instrumentation, then the clause reads, 'who were going out by a high/mighty hand'. In other words, the verse is speaking of Yahweh's power and not Israel's defiance. In support of this idea is the fact that the idiom 'high hand' is used in the Old Testament of God's power (see Isa. 26:11; Ps. 89:13).

14:9. So the Egyptians pursued after them, and they overtook them camping near the sea—all the horses and chariots of Pharaoh, his cavalry and his army—near Pi Hahiroth in front of Baal Zephon.

The Israelites were encamped by the sea. The Hebrew verb for 'to camp' bears the basic meaning of 'to bend', or 'curve', and when it is applied to settlement areas, it may perhaps reflect the circular configuration of an encampment. Recent studies by Israel Finkelstein have demonstrated that the Hebrews probably camped in an elliptical pattern at the sea and during the wilderness wanderings. Later, the Israelites designed their first settlements in Canaan in an ovate form.

Some scholars have been suspicious of references to horsemanship and chariots in the story, many believing that those arts were late in coming to Egypt. In reality, Egypt is well known for its mastery of equestrian practices as early as the beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty (c. 1550 B.C.). Any doubt regarding the accuracy of the biblical text on this point is unwarranted.

Pharaoh's cavalry, chariots and foot troops 'overtook' the Hebrews by the sea. This verb does not mean there was any direct physical contact, but it signifies that the Egyptians 'reached/caught up with' the Hebrews.

14:10. As Pharaoh drew near, the children of Israel lifted their eyes, and behold the Egyptians were marching after them. And they were very afraid, and the children of Israel cried out to Yahweh.

The Israelites, on foot, encamped by the sea with no means of escape, saw Pharaoh approaching from a distance. The Egyptians were drawing near with evil intent. What was perhaps the most powerful military force of the time was nipping at the heels of God's people. In front of them lay the sea, and behind them the army of darkness was closing in. From a human perspective, the situation appeared bleak and grim—no human power could save them. What chance did they have? What were they to do?

This entire scene is dominated by Pharaoh—only he is mentioned as drawing near to the Hebrews. Pharaoh is commonly depicted as the central figure of battle scenes in Egyptian representations and designs. The Egyptians believed that in war the 'acts of the king alone count; he is invincible, nay, unassailable'; '[No] man can hope to resist the divine ruler and survive,' and 'It is no mere assertion that so many are powerless against the single figure of Pharaoh.'

Israel's response was swift and spontaneous: 'They were very afraid.' And then they reacted properly by '[crying] out to Yahweh'. Earlier they had cried out to Elohim (2:23), and some of them had even cried out to Pharaoh because of oppression (5:15). But now they pleaded for Yahweh, the God of their salvation, to intervene.

14:11. And they said to Moses, 'Were there no graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What is this you have done to us, to bring us out of Egypt?'

Note the irony of this verse. The phrase 'no graves in Egypt' borders on the humorous because Egypt was the land known for its graves, death and preoccupation with the afterlife.

With their sarcastic remarks the Israelites display panic and urgency. Their opening question begins with a double negative: the two negatives are 'en and b'li. Gesenius comments that 'Two negatives in the same sentence do not neutralize each other but make the negation the more emphatic ... This especially applies to the compounds formed by the union of 'en or b'li.'

Murmuring becomes a dominant negative theme in the wilderness wanderings (Exod. 15:23–26; 16:2–3; 17:2–3; etc.). Moses, the author of the Torah, sees it as the antithesis of Yahweh's grace and favour to the people; the alternation of Yahweh's long-suffering patience with Israel's complaints and demands is all too obvious.

14:12. 'Was this not what we told you in Egypt, saying, "Leave us alone so that we might serve the Egyptians"? Because it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than for us to die in the wilderness.'

The Hebrews now recount what they supposedly said to Moses while they were still in Egypt. No record exists in the earlier parts of Exodus that would confirm such a conversation. However, there is little doubt that the people of God were reluctant to leave Egypt: 'So Moses spoke thus to the sons of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses on account of their despondency and cruel bondage' (6:9).

Verse 12 constitutes treasonable words. The Israelites desire to deny Yahweh's deliverance and salvation! And, more to the point, they announce that they would rather serve the Egyptians than Yahweh (see commentary on 8:1).

Application

We may well feel disposed to judge Israel at the sea, and not be able to account for her lack of faith in the trial. However, the more we know of our own lack of resolve and our own cowardice, the more we shall see how like the Israelites we are!

We must be aware of the sovereignty of God in all things. We too frequently lose sight of this great truth, and the consequence is that our hearts give way in time of trial. If we could only look upon each of our trials and persecutions as an occasion for God to be more greatly honoured and glorified, it would certainly enable us to endure any crisis. Thus, when we are put in the fiery furnace it is God who wills us there, and we can persevere because of him: 'Who shall separate from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "For your sake we are being put to death all day long, we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." But in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us' (Rom. 8:35–37).