

Separation of the sea (Exodus 14:13–31)

This next paragraph relates the actual event of the dividing of the Red Sea. It tells of the destruction of the Egyptian army, one that was so significant that Egypt was not again a force to be reckoned with by Israel until after the death of Solomon (the reign of Pharaoh Shishak in Egypt). It also gleefully describes the salvation of the people of God, and how they finally became free of the Egyptian oppression.

The Red Sea crossing is the salient incident in the history of Israel. It left a striking and lasting impression upon the later writers of the Old Testament (see, for example, Ps. 78:13; 106:9–10; Isa. 50:2; 51:10; 63:12). Deliverance at the sea was so important that it came to be viewed as a paradigm for later salvation events in the life of Israel, such as the return from Babylonian captivity (see Zech. 10:10–11). 14:13. And Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid! Take a stand! And watch the salvation of Yahweh which he does for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you will not see them again—not ever.’

Moses’ reply to the people’s complaints is somewhat harsh. He begins with a volitional statement: ‘Do not fear!’ The negative followed by an imperfect verb ‘constitutes the negative imperative’ in Hebrew. True imperatives cannot be preceded by a negative particle. Therefore, what we have here is the strongest possible form of expressing negation in the Hebrew language. It is followed by two imperatives: ‘Stand!’ and ‘See!’ Moses is ignoring, and refusing to sanction, the murmurings of Israel.

The prophet is calling the Israelites to ‘take a stand’. The verb ‘to stand’ is in the Hithpael pattern, indicating its reflexive nature. It is best understood as signifying, ‘taking one’s stand/holding one’s ground/stationing oneself’. Moses is probably telling the people to choose with whom they stand—Yahweh or Pharaoh? How long will they limp between two opinions?

It is enlightening that the Hebrews are called merely to ‘see’ the salvation of Yahweh. They have nothing to contribute. They are spectators. Salvation is by God’s power, by his grace alone.

14:14. ‘Yahweh will wage war for you, and you shall be quiet.’

This short and simple statement goes to the very heart of the Red Sea event. First, it says, ‘Yahweh will wage war for you.’ God is the one who is going forth to battle, and to face Pharaoh of Egypt, with his claims to divine status. As Pharaoh dominates the military might of Egypt (14:8), so Yahweh is the sole character representing Israel’s military prowess. When Moses praises God for his work at the Red Sea in the next chapter, he declares, ‘Yahweh is a man of war!’

In contrast, Moses commands the Israelites, literally, ‘... but you, you shall be quiet.’ This declaration is accentuated by the inclusion of the second person masculine plural independent personal pronoun, ‘you’. Again, the inability of the people to help in their deliverance is underscored. Yahweh will act; Israel will watch and remain silent.

14:15. And Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Why do you cry out to me? Speak to the children of Israel that they should go forward.’

The Syriac Old Testament adds, by way of introduction to the verse, the clause, ‘And Moses cried out to Yahweh.’ Its translators were trying to solve the problem of God’s confronting Moses about crying out, although he apparently had nothing to do with it (see 14:10). The proper solution is to understand that Moses is being addressed by God as the mediator of the covenant, the representative of the people. This interrogative normally means ‘What?’ But in a few instances, such as the present, it means ‘Why?’ (see, for example, 2 Kings 7:3).

The time for pleading and prayer is over. The time for action has arrived. Moses is to command (‘Speak’ is a Piel imperative) the Hebrews to ‘set out’.

14:16. ‘Lift up your staff and stretch your hand over the sea and divide it. And the children of Israel shall go in the midst of the sea on dry ground.’

In spite of Israel's unbelief, God orders Moses to stretch out his hand (apparently with the rod of God in it) over the Red Sea in order to divide it. It is essentially the same command God had given in the opening plague (see comment on 7:19). On that earlier occasion, the miracle had worked primarily as a curse upon Egypt. Here, as we shall see throughout the passage, it serves as both blessing and curse. The term for 'dry ground' refers to something which is 'dry, withered, without moisture, drained'. In Scripture, it is the exact opposite of, or contrast to, to the sea. In the creation account, for instance, the separation of the 'dry ground' on the third day (Gen. 1:9) is in antithesis to the waters that are gathered into one place.

Yahweh's power as the source of this miracle is confirmed by the later prophets, such as Isaiah, who says:

Was it not you who dried up the sea
the waters of the great deep;
who made the depths of the sea a pathway
for the redeemed to cross over?

(Isa. 51:10; cf. 63:12).

14:17. 'And, behold, I am hardening the heart of the Egyptians that they might go in after them. And I will be glorified in Pharaoh and in all his army, in his chariots and in his cavalry.'

God's role as the source and engineer of the scene at the Red Sea is emphasized at the outset of this verse. It begins with an independent personal pronoun followed by a demonstrative particle with a first person singular suffix: 'And I, behold I'. God is the subject and main character of the Red Sea episode! The verb 'I am hardening' is actually a Piel participle being used predicatively. In that form it reflects a continuous exercise of action. The construction signifies an action in process: 'And I, behold I, am hardening the hearts of the Egyptians.' The verb is the same word used in verses 4 and 8 (and elsewhere) of God hardening Pharaoh's heart. Now Yahweh stiffens the resolve of the entire Egyptian army to chase the Hebrews into the sea.

The second half of the verse is dominated by four instances of the preposition *beth* being used to convey instrumentality. It literally reads, 'I will be glorified [kābēd] by Pharaoh, by his army, by his chariots and by his cavalry.' This is a statement of the ultimate purpose and significance of the Red Sea incident.

14:18. 'And the Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh when I am glorified in Pharaoh, in his chariots, and in his cavalry.'

What ended verse 17 is now repeated in verse 18. The principal aim of the event at the Red Sea is the glorification of Yahweh and the recognition of his sovereignty over all. This has been the theme of the book of Exodus (see 7:5, 17; 8:19, 22; 10:2; 14:4, 18, 25).

14:19–20. Then the angel of God who had been going before the camp of Israel travelled and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud travelling in front of them stood behind them. And it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel. And there was the cloud with the darkness and it gave light to the night. And one did not come near the other all night.

Yahweh now acts to protect his people. First, the angel of God, who had been leading the Israelites in their escape, moves between God's people and the Egyptians. It may be that the angel of God poses in a military stance, as he does in Numbers 22:22–23, 31–32. This is the same figure who appeared in the burning bush in Exodus 3:2. There he spoke and acted as if he was God. (The suggestion has already been made that perhaps this person is a pre-incarnate appearance of the Messiah—see commentary on 3:2). The second event is that the pillar of cloud also moves to stand between Israel and Egypt. This is the theophany of Yahweh that leads Israel out of Egypt into the wilderness (13:21–22). It is the Shekinah glory by which God often makes his presence known to his people (19:9; 33:9–10).

Verse 20 expresses the work of the cloud that night to bring both blessing and curse. One side of the cloud brought light; the other side gave darkness. The Egyptians were clothed in darkness, as they had been during the ninth plague; Pharaoh, the incarnation of the sun-god Ra, could not bring light to his

people. But the Hebrews were bathed in the light of the pillar. Symbolically, one represents the children of darkness, and the other the children of light.

14:21. Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and Yahweh caused the sea to go back all night with a strong east wind. And he turned the sea into dry land. And the waters were divided.

Moses obeyed God's command of verse 16 and stretched his hand out over the sea. Then, Yahweh, literally, 'caused the sea to retire/go back' (Hiphil causative). And the Lord accomplished this feat by using 'a strong east wind' (note the beth used here to convey instrumentality, i.e. 'by'). The miracle is not instantaneous, however; it takes 'all night'.

The consequence of God's activity is that 'He turned the sea into dry land.' The verb here is *šîm*, which normally means to 'set/put/place'. But when it is followed by a lamed preposition, as in this verse, it conveys the concept of making or fashioning (see 4:11).

For an excellent study of the changing of the waters into dry land, see the work of M. Barlian.

The direction of the mighty wind that divides the sea is from the east (cf. 10:13). That means that the wind was coming from the opposite side of the sea from where the Hebrews were standing. Obviously the waters would first open on the eastern shore of the Red Sea. The Hebrews would thus have to wait until the entire sea was divided before they could put one foot into it. In other words, the people of God had to be patient all night, watching the sea separate from the far side.

Many scholars attempt to explain the event in wholly naturalistic and rationalistic terms. Nothing in the text supports that position.

The dividing of the Red Sea may be an ironic, belligerent critique of Egyptian magic and its spells. The Egyptians themselves had an account of a priest separating a large body of water. The Westcar Papyrus tells the story of the bored King Snofru who summons his chief priest Djadjaemonkh to give him advice on how to find some pleasure. The priest suggests that the pharaoh travel on a lake in a boat rowed by many beautiful naked women. His heart is happy until one of the rowers drops her fish-shaped charm into the water. She will accept no substitute, so Snofru calls for Djadjaemonkh to solve the problem with his secret arts. Through his magic sayings Djadjaemonkh places one side of the lake upon the other and finds the fish-shaped charm lying on a potsherd. Having returned it to its owner, Djadjaemonkh utters some more magic sayings that bring the water of the lake back to its original position.

The Egyptian tale is reminiscent of the biblical account of the crossing of the Red Sea. One wonders whether the Hebrew writer may have regarded this event as a polemical parallel. The chief lector priest of Egypt may have divided a lake in search of a valuable charm, but the God of the Hebrews parts the entire Red Sea and causes a nation to pass through on dry ground. Who has the greater power?

14:22. And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, and the waters were a wall for them on their right and on their left.

The Hebrews, literally, 'entered into the midst of the sea' and they walked through on 'dry ground' (see discussion of verse 16). The latter term is used in the Bible to describe land that is exceedingly dry, with no moisture. It appears in Genesis 1:9 as the 'dry ground' which becomes visible at creation (in antithesis to the waters). The earth's surface is called 'dry ground' after the flood of the day of Noah (Gen. 8:7, 14). In all three events, God causes water to be removed so that dry land might appear. This truth underscores the sovereignty and omnipotence of Yahweh!

The divided waters are described as 'walls'. 'Wall' is an architectural term in Hebrew often employed for the fortifications surrounding a city—walls which are high and strong for protection and security.

14:23. And the Egyptians pursued and they went in after them—all the horses of Pharaoh and his chariots, and his cavalry into the midst of the sea.

Some time after Israel entered the Red Sea, the angel of God and the pillar of cloud must have stood aside. The Egyptian army was thus allowed free viewing of what was happening and access to the sea. Pharaoh's troops see Israel traversing the sea, and in their hardness and obstinacy they believe they also can go through protected. So they take up the evil pursuit. Note, however, that it is only the mobile forces,

the chariots and cavalry, who take up the chase. Certainly they would have thought that they would overtake Israel very quickly.

14:24. And it came to pass in the morning watch that Yahweh looked down upon the Egyptian camp in the fire and in the cloud, and he threw the camp of Egypt into confusion.

The verse opens with the clause, 'And it came to pass in the morning watch' (see 1 Sam. 11:11 for the identical expression). The term 'watch' signifies a division of time. In the Old Testament, the night is comprised of three watches: 6:00–10:00 p.m., 10:00–2:00 a.m. and 2:00–6:00 a.m. (Ps. 63:6; 119:148; Lam. 2:19; and cf. Judg. 7:19 that speaks of a middle watch). The morning watch is the latest of the three divisions of time, that is, 2:00–6:00 am.

During these early morning hours, Yahweh 'leant over and looked down' upon the Egyptian forces. He then acted by, literally, 'throwing the army of Egypt into confusion by noise'. This latter verb is used in 1 Samuel 7:10 when God thunders with a great thunder against the Philistines, and they become confused. Back in Exodus 14:3, Israel was the one in apparent confusion, but now we see it is Egypt who is truly in a panic.

14:25. He removed the wheels of their chariots so that they drove with difficulty. And the Egyptians said, 'Let us flee from Israel because Yahweh fights for them against Egypt.'

As the Egyptian chariot force moved through the Red Sea, God 'removed' (a Hiphil form) the wheels from their chariots. The Septuagint, Syriac, Samaritan Hebrew Pentateuch and some modern commentators prefer to understand the root of this verb to be 'to tie/bind'. So, in some manner, God locked up the wheels of the chariots in order that they could not easily move. In reality, however, there is no compelling reason to accept this proposal in place of the direct, straight reading of the Masoretic Text.

The second verb of the passage literally says, 'He caused them to drive in heaviness.' The subject of the clause is Yahweh, and he is causing the situation to occur, or effecting it (the verb is a Piel form reflecting 'the bringing about of a state').

'Heaviness' is a derivative of the noun *kābēd*, which, as we have seen, is often used in Exodus of what God does to Pharaoh's heart. Here we see that not only is Pharaoh subject to the hardening activity of Yahweh, but so too are the chariots of Egypt!

14:26. And Yahweh said to Moses, 'Stretch forth your hand over the sea and return the waters over the Egyptians, over their chariots and over their cavalry.'

As the Egyptian forces are bogged down inside the sea, God orders (with an imperative form) Moses to put forth his hand and cause the waters to close over the army. Here, then, is 'the final retribution, measure for measure, for the casting of the infant sons of the Israelites into the waters of the Nile (1:22).'

14:27. And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and he returned the sea at daybreak to its place. And the Egyptians were fleeing to meet it. And Yahweh shook off the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. We are told that the destruction of Egypt's army occurred 'at daybreak'. As the sun-god Ra rose in the east, the Egyptian forces were destroyed. The sun-god could do nothing for his worshippers; he was impotent to stop the decimation of his people. Who is sovereign? Who is God? Is it Ra, Pharaoh, or Yahweh?

On this day, the triumph of the God of Israel is trumpeted forth throughout creation. The fears of the Hebrews and the boastings of the Egyptians are dashed by the overwhelming power of Yahweh!

The same waters that formed a wall of protection for God's people served as a tumbling wall of death for the Egyptians. The water thus signifies both blessing and curse. That curse finds its import in the verb that means 'to shake off' (in Piel pattern; cf. Ps. 136:15). God shakes off wicked men from the face of the earth (Neh. 5:13; Job 38:12–13).

After the destruction the water returns 'to its place'. A more literal translation would be, 'to its steady flow'—that is, to its permanent and previous position.

14:28. And the water returned and it covered the chariots and the cavalry of all the army of Pharaoh which was going after them into the sea. Not one remained from them.

Attached to the phrase ‘the entire army of Pharaoh’ is a lamed preposition. Many understand it to be in apposition, and to mean ‘that is’. Thus an equation is made between ‘the chariots and horsemen’ and ‘the entire army of Egypt’. This is probably not correct. Rather, the particle may be used to indicate possession, so that the phrase means, ‘the chariots and horsemen which belonged to the entire army of Pharaoh’. It is not the whole army of Pharaoh that was destroyed in the Red Sea, but only the chariots and cavalry of Egypt (this fits with commentary on 14:23).

14:29. But the children of Israel went on dry ground in the midst of the sea. And the water was a wall for them on their right and on their left.

This verse is a repeat of verse 22 in order to contrast the fate of the Egyptians and that of the Hebrews. It is worth noting that the Genesis creation account serves as a paradigm for Israel’s deliverance at the sea. That is to say, ‘The redemptive creation of Israel at the sea is cast in the same narrative style of original creation as the pillar of divine presence brings light into darkness (Exodus 13:21, cf. the first creative day), the waters are divided (Exodus 14:21; cf. the second creative day), and the dry land emerges (Exodus 14:29, cf. the third creative day).’ In other words, the account of the deliverance of Israel out of the oppression of Egypt through the crossing of the Red Sea reflects the narrative of the original creation. The sea crossing is so structured ‘as to be a redemptive re-enactment of creation.’ (For a fully developed presentation of this theme, see my book on ancient Egypt.)

14:30–31. On that day Yahweh saved Israel from the hand of the Egyptians. And Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea. And Israel saw the great hand that Yahweh used against Egypt. And the people feared Yahweh, and they believed in Yahweh and in Moses his servant.

These two verses set out an important contrast. In verse 30, the writer says that Yahweh saved Israel ‘from the hand [sing.] of the Egyptians’. Verse 31 literally says that ‘Israel saw the great hand that Yahweh used’ against the Egyptians. Here is the antithesis! Whose hand is more powerful? Yahweh’s hand is omnipotent, and his alone. The reference to the ‘hand’ of Yahweh is also a fulfilment of his promise back in 6:1, in which he said, ‘Because by a mighty hand he will send them out, and by a mighty hand he will drive them from his land.’

In verse 13 of this chapter Moses had proclaimed that the Hebrews would not see the Egyptians ever again. The Israelites did see them in verse 30, but not as they had the day before. Now they were dead, and simply powerless adversaries.

Application

Donald Bridge tells the story of ‘an American congregation which included some negroes accustomed to answering the preacher as he went along. On one occasion they were addressed by someone with “liberal” leanings, tending to dismiss the miracles of the Bible. He referred in his sermon to the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. “Praise de Lord,” shouted a negro. “Takin’ all dem children through de deep waters. What a mighty miracle!” The preacher frowned. “It was not a miracle,” he explained condescendingly. “They were doubtless in marsh-land, the tide was ebbing, and the children of Israel picked their way across in six inches of water.” “Praise de Lord!”, shouted the negro unabashed. “Drownin’ all dem Egyptians in six inches of water. What a mighty miracle!” ’

How like Israel we are! Unbelief is the same in all ages. David, in an evil hour, said, ‘I shall one day perish by the hand of Saul’ (1 Sam. 27:1). Unbelief led Elijah to flee from the evil rantings of Jezebel, that evil queen who was the power behind the throne of Israel. It caused Peter to disown his Lord and flee from the place of trial. How many of us facing suffering or tragedy or persecution have not cowered, having moments of unbelief and doubt?

Yet, truly, there is no difficulty too great for the Lord. In fact, the greater the trouble, the greater the opportunity for God to display his power and grace. Man’s weakness is God’s opportunity. It is Yahweh who does battle for us—if he is for us, who can be against us? Dare we think that the God who divided the Red Sea is powerless to intervene in our lives, that he is unable to care for us? Do we think that he is somehow shackled?

Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:1–6 tells us that the exodus event speaks to the church today. He basically argues that the Hebrews were specially chosen people and they received the great blessing of being delivered by God's work at the Red Sea. Yet, though they had been set apart by God, they 'were strewn in the wilderness' because of their disobedience. And Paul warns the Corinthian church and the church today that we ought to beware of, and take warning from, this incident. John Calvin comments: 'If God did not spare them, he will not spare us, for our situation is the same as theirs.'