

Exodus 15: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 12 April 2020

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Exodus chapter 15 Exodus chapter 15 contains two great hymns of praise, the Song of Moses and then the answering Song of Miriam.

In some respects, the Song of the Sea could be compared to a sort of national anthem for Israel. It declares the great event of salvation achieved at the Red Sea, the event in which the nation comes to its birth. Both of these songs, the Song of Moses and the Song of Miriam that answers, are preceded by a reference to God's great act of deliverance that has just occurred.

But in chapter 14 verses 28 to 29 and then in chapter 15 verse 19, Moses and the people and then Miriam the prophetess singing to the women. It's an antiphonal song, a song and then an answering song. We can see this as part of the liturgy of a victory. In 1 Samuel chapter 18 verses 6 to 7, we see the importance of songs in celebrating victory. It's part of the liturgical element associated with deliverance in this context. You can see a similar thing in the Song of Deborah in the book of Judges. It connects the Red Sea crossing with future events. The passing over of the Jordan, the planting in the land in verses 16 and 17. The song deals with these founding events of Israel as a nation and it's similar to the songs of deliverance that we might find in the Psalms.

[5 : 01] It's a sort of realised eschatology, an anticipation of what God is going to do for his people. God is creating a new heavens and a new earth and this drawing a part of the waters and the bringing up of his people from the waters is a new creation event. It's a testimony to God grounded in historical acts in which his character and his purpose are revealed. And the importance of the song more generally is seen in the fact that it's not just an ascent to truth. It's a stirring of emotions and a declaration of God's glory from the very depths of the heart. It exists for the benefit of memory and memorialisation, for adoration and witness. The event of the Red Sea is often recounted in the Psalms and elsewhere in the Prophets a number of times in the book of Isaiah for instance.

It's God's declaration of his power, the decisive act by which in that final fell judgment Israel is delivered from Egypt and established as a people. It establishes God's supremacy over the false gods as we see in verses 11 to 12. It proves God's faithfulness to his covenant. It's an event producing responses, the praise of Israel, the overcoming and the humbling of his adversaries, the trembling of the oppressors and the wider world sees what God has done and it marvels.

And there is a sort of deparicularisation. This song is not just about this specific deliverance in history. It will be more generally sung of God's great works of his victory over his enemies, not just over Egypt. Beyond their historical particularity, the Egyptians also stand for the chaotic forces of the world and all that might be arrayed against God. God's victory is of cosmic significance and in the book of Revelation we see once again the song of Moses being sung at the edge of a sea as God has delivered his people from a greater adversary. God is the warrior, God is the king, God fights with his very creation, with the winds, with the deep, with the sea, with the flood, with the earth. God wields nature itself against all of his adversaries. And after this great song of praise, Israel finds itself in a place where there's no water to drink. The water of Mara is bitter and even after God's great deliverance that he has accomplished. At this place they wonder whether he will be able to provide. The Lord instructs Moses to cast a log into the water and when he does the water is made sweet. We've read a story similar to this. It's a story of water being transferred from one form to another. It's the story of the first plague where the water became blood. The life-giving water at the heart of Egypt became undrinkable and polluting and now we see that working the other way around. This event is an event where God demonstrates his power to heal. Just as God has shown his power in destruction in the plagues in Egypt, now he shows that he can heal and restore his creation and give life to his people. It's a time of testing and obedience but God heals

and delivers his people. And he shows that just as in the plagues he demonstrated his power to bring death, his power is a power that will ultimately be seen most clearly in his ability to bring life. This chapter ends with Israel encamped at Elim, a place with 12 springs and 70 palms. Numbers that would seem to be significant. 12 associated with Israel. It's the number of Israel, the number of its tribes, 70 associated with the elders of Israel but also with the nations of the world. The story of the Red Sea crossing has often in the history of the church been looked to as a paradigm for thinking about the resurrection of Christ. The impassable obstacle has been opened up for us so that we should pass through death itself to a life beyond it on the other side.

Our pursuers, Satan and his demons and all the forces of hell have been drowned in the depths. Christ has gone on ahead of us and led us through on dry land. It's an event of rebirth.

[9 : 09] The story of the exodus is a story of birth culminating in this deliverance through the sea. As a narrow passage is made for Israel to leave the womb of Egypt where they have been experiencing these birth pangs. The story of birth and struggle in birth and Israel crying out in pain and God hearing. The story of people struggling to have children and those children being destroyed by Pharaoh. The story of dedicating the firstborn of the womb. Of Israel being God's firstborn son.

This is the birth event and Israel has been born through the sea. Christ is the firstborn from the dead. He is the one who opens up the womb of the tomb so that life might emerge from it. It's a new creation. It's a time when land is brought out from the sea. A people drawn out of the waters. It's when our great champion goes on ahead of us and we are brought into his life. Moses was first drawn out of the water in his birth. He lived out the history of Israel in advance and Israel entered into his story.

Aphrahat the Syrian writing in the third century declared Moses divided the sea for them and had them cross it. Our Lord opened hell and broke its gates when he went down into its depths and opened them and marked out the path for those who come to believe in him. Christ in his death and his resurrection tore open the abyss of hell so that we might walk through on dry land. And when this deliverance has been accomplished, to borrow the words of C.S. Lewis, death itself would start working backwards. The bitter waters of death are made sweet through the wood of the cross of the carpenter's son. Out of Christ's scented garden tomb flow the living waters of the spirit which are for the healing of the nations. The Lord is our healer. The Lord is our healer because of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The story of Exodus 15 ends with Israel encamped at Elim with 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees. A spring for each of the tribes of Israel and a shade-giving palm tree for each of the nations. His imagery from the temple. It's a temple in the wilderness, a dwelling place of God with his people where his people find shade and rest, refreshment. In all the troubles and the difficulties around them, they've found some oasis of calm. And through the resurrection of our Lord, a new Elim is being established in the church. An Elim where Jew and Gentile are brought together, where those 12 springs and those 70 palms, that new temple imagery is established as a place of God's dwelling among us. A new garden of Eden. In Revelation chapter 7 verses 4 to 17, we meet another Elim.

The imagery is all there. Israel and the nations brought together. Water and salvation, all in the shade of palm trees. And I heard the number of the sealed. 144,000 sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.

12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed. 12,000 from the tribe of Reuben. 12,000 from the tribe of Gad. 12,000 from the tribe of Asher. 12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali. 12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh.

[12 : 30] 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon. 12,000 from the tribe of Levi. 12,000 from the tribe of Issachar. 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun. 12,000 from the tribe of Joseph. 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed. After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number. From every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying, Amen. Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever. Amen.

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, Who are these clothed in white robes, and from where have they come? I said to him, Sir, you know. And he said to me, These are the ones coming

out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Therefore they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple. And he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more. The sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. The risen Christ, the great shepherd, come up from the deep of the grave, has delivered us from the ruler of this world and all his powers that pursue us, trampling down death by death, healing our diseases and bringing us to his verdant oasis, where thirst is quenched and souls revived.