

Exodus 14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Exodus chapter 14 And they did so.

When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the mind of Pharaoh and his servants was changed toward the people. And they said, What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?

So he made ready his chariot and took his army with him, and took six hundred chosen chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them. And the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the people of Israel, while the people of Israel were going out defiantly.

The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and his horsemen and his army, and overtook them, encamped at the sea, by Pi-ha-hiroth, in front of Baal-zaphon.

When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?

[1 : 30] What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt? Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians. For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.

And Moses said to the people, Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again.

The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent. The Lord said to Moses, Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward, lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground.

And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians, so that they shall go in after them. And I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots and his horsemen. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen.

Then the angel of God, who was going before the host of Israel, moved and went behind them. And the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel.

[2 : 42] And there was the cloud and the darkness, and it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night. Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided.

And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots and his horsemen.

And in the morning watch, the Lord in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down on the Egyptian forces and threw the Egyptian forces into a panic, clogging their chariot wheels, so that they drove heavily.

And the Egyptians said, Let us flee from before Israel, for the Lord fights for them against the Egyptians. Then the Lord said to Moses, Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and upon their horsemen.

So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal course when the morning appeared. And as the Egyptians fled into it, the Lord threw the Egyptians into the midst of the sea.

[3 : 55] The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen. Of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained. But the people of Israel walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.

Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians. And Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great power that the Lord used against the Egyptians.

So the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses. The story of Exodus chapter 14, the crossing of the Red Sea, is a pivotal event in the Exodus narrative.

It's the hinge that leads from the Exodus narrative and the plagues to the story of the wilderness. It's a narrative once again sandwiched in liturgical material.

On the one hand, it has the material concerned with the Passover celebration and the law of the firstborn. And on the other side, it has the song of the sea. God is going to gain glory over Pharaoh.

[5 : 01] He strengthens Pharaoh's heart again. Pharaoh has changed his mind in verse 5 and God intensifies Pharaoh's resolve. This is for his glory and also for the revelation of his glory to the Egyptians.

In verse 25 of the chapter, the Egyptians declare that the Lord fights for the Israelites. God will gain honour over the Egyptians in this and gain honour from them as they declare his glory.

God said in chapter 9 verse 16, There are 600 chosen chariots that pursue the Israelites.

600,000 Israelites have left the land of Egypt. So there's one chariot for each one of the thousands of Israel. And beyond that, there are many other chariots besides.

Back in Genesis chapter 50, there was an honour guard of chariots that accompanied the body of Jacob as it was being brought to the land of Canaan to be buried there.

[6 : 04] God once again is having chariots accompany his people out of the land, this time as pursuers, no longer as an honour guard. But there is a sense of the honour that he will gain in both instances, either with the Egyptians as an honour guard or with them as pursuers to be defeated.

The numbers are interesting. 600,000 of Israel divided in 50s as they're going out in 50s in their ranks is 12,000.

It's the tribes times 1,000, then times 50. It probably is a significant number for that reason. We can think maybe back to the story of the flood as well. There are 120 years leading up to the flood.

The width of the ark is 50 cubits. Israel goes out in 50s and they're 40 times the length of the ark is in cubits in numbers of their ranks.

Maybe there's something to this. Maybe we're supposed to see a new ark going through the waters. The Egyptians overtake the Israelites and Israel is trapped between the sea and the Egyptians.

[7 : 09] And at this point, the people cry out against Moses. Moses tells them not to be afraid. God will fight for his people. All they have to do is be silent and watch God's deliverance.

Once again, God strengthens the hearts of the Egyptians. The point is not to harden them, but to give them the courage and the resolve to go through with their purpose. They become foolhardy enough to follow the Israelites into the sea.

Moses in this story plays a central role. He is the one who goes before Israel. He is the one who is the backbone of the nation, giving them confidence in a time of terror and fear.

And he declares that as they stand and watch, that God will accomplish his salvation. This whole event is in some way encapsulating the greater deliverance.

It's returning to the original crime of the Egyptians. The Egyptians cast the Hebrew boys into the waters of the Nile. Now they are being cast into the Red Sea.

[8 : 10] Their boys are being cast into the Red Sea. And there is a sort of poetic justice occurring here. We might also see symmetry with the story of Moses himself. The sea is the Red Sea, but it also could be translated as the Reed Sea.

The word that we have for the place where Moses was placed among the reeds is the same word used for the description of the sea here. Moses received his name as he was drawn out from the water.

Israel is drawn out from the water here. Moses was greeted by his sister Miriam as he was delivered. She was the one who came and spoke with the daughter of Pharaoh and ensured that he was given to his mother to nurse him.

Now we have a similar situation. Miriam will greet the people with song at the other side. So Moses does not merely lead them through the Red Sea, give them confidence as they take the route that God has opened to them.

He is also the one who is the exemplar of the salvation that God is about to work for them. He has already experienced this. They are entering into something that he has already undergone.

[9 : 18] The angel of God goes before them and the connection between the angel of the Lord and the pillar of cloud is interesting here. They are associated together and yet they seem to be slightly different.

Maybe we can think about this in terms of the relationship between the angel of the Lord and the glory cloud of the Spirit. At various points in the book of Genesis, we have an appearance of the angel of the Lord and the angel of the Lord, I believe, is associated with the second person of the Trinity.

And at many of those points, the angel of the Lord does not appear with glorious manifestations surrounding him. Whereas here, there is that association. And maybe we should see a movement into a greater degree of glory occurring at this point.

There are many creation themes that we might recognize in the story of the Red Sea Crossing. There's the presence of the Spirit, the glory cloud of the Spirit that might remind us of the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the deep at the very beginning of the story of creation in Genesis chapter one.

There's the light in the darkness, the light of the pillar of cloud. There's the division of the waters. There's the raising of the land from the waters and dry land emerging from the waters.

[10 : 31] It's a new creation event. And there are continued themes of God's hypernatural work against the nation of Egypt. Evening and morning were the first day and now there is a new evening and morning.

The evening of the crossing passes and a new day emerges where everything has changed. Israel has been created as a new nation. The Egyptians lie dead at the bottom of the sea and they have emerged into a new freedom.

The Egyptians descend into the tomb of the deep and they recognize that the Lord fights for Israel and none of the Egyptians remain at the end. The response of the Israelites is to fear God and to believe in his servant Moses.

This once again recalls the early story of Moses, that Moses is set apart from the people as a leader but also as an example, as one who has undergone this experience before them.

He goes before them in his personal life through the waters. He's drawn out of the waters. They are drawn out too. In 1 Corinthians chapter 10, Paul speaks about this as them being baptized into Moses.

[11 : 41] What happened to Moses happens to them later on. And it's a similar pattern with us and Christ. Christ is drawn out of the waters of death and we follow through him as he has opened up the abyss of death so that we might walk through on dry land.

The crossing of the sea is a definitive transition and in the story of Israel, we have a series of these transitions, water crossings, at which the identity of the people is defined.

They served foreign gods on the far side of the great river, the Euphrates. They received the name of Israel at the ford of the Jabbok. They are delivered from Egypt through the Red Sea.

They enter in through the Jordan. Each one of these transitions is an event in which Israel received something of their identity. And as they would look back to these events and also see these physical boundaries of their nation, they would be reminded not only of past deliverances, but of their present identity.

Water crossings bookend the entire wilderness experience. The whole wilderness period could be spoken of as if it were in this period of the crossing. It's as if they're in the middle of these two bodies of water and they have to pass through this liminal realm, this space on the threshold between Egypt and the promised land.

[13 : 04] This can be spoken of as a conflation of the two events as we can see in places like Psalm 66, verse 6, the drying up of the sea and the passing through of the river.

Those two events belong together. And that bookending also leads to a symmetry of the going out and the coming in. Those two events are similar and they also express something of the connection between what Moses does and what Joshua does.

The event of the Red Sea crossing has an incredibly important part to play in the later praise of Israel. They would look back to this event, look upon God's deliverance, and recounted in praise and in song.

It was also something that was connected with deeper themes, God's power over evil and the forces of chaos, for instance. You divided the sea by your might. You broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters.

You crushed the heads of Leviathan. You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. That's the way it's described in Psalm 74, verse 13 to 14.

[14 : 07] In chapter 63 of the book of Isaiah, we see a similar thing. But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. Therefore he turned to be their enemy and himself fought against them.

They did not stumble. Like livestock that go down into the valley, the Spirit of the Lord gave them rest. So you led your people to make for yourself a glorious name. Israel is led through the sea, but this is described as if it were a new creation experience, as if God was setting the heavens in place, as if God were working with the deep to divide the waters, bring out dry land.

And the cosmic themes that come to the surface here are not accidental. Nor is it accidental that within the New Testament we'll have further uses of this material concerning the Red Sea crossing to describe the experience of the church, the actions of Christ, and the events of his ministry.

I've already mentioned Isaiah chapter 63 verses 10 following. And if you listen carefully to those verses, you will have heard the words that the book of Hebrews brings out in verse 20 of chapter 13.

He's drawing upon the Old Testament story of the Red Sea crossing as it is recounted in the story of Isaiah. And he's presenting this as a paradigm for thinking about the resurrection.

[16:37] Like Moses brought the people out and formed the people under his leadership, so Christ forms a new people as he leads people up not from the womb of Egypt, but from the womb of the tomb itself so that they might walk through on dry ground through the abyss of death itself.

A question to consider. Throughout the history of the church, the story of the Red Sea crossing has provided an important paradigm and pattern for thinking about Christian baptism.

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