

Book of Exodus, Session 5
The Crossing of the Sea
Exodus 14–15

The story of the exodus reaches its narrative climax in the episode of the crossing of the sea. According to Exodus 13:17-18 (usually ascribed to E), when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was shorter, but by a roundabout way in the desert, toward a body of water that is known in Hebrew as *yam sup*. The conventional translation, "Red Sea," derives from the Greek translation of the Bible, the Septuagint, which was then adopted by the Latin Vulgate. In modern terms, the Red Sea is the body of water between Africa and the Arabian peninsula, ranging in width from 100 to 175 miles, which splits at its northern end into two gulfs, the Gulf of Suez (20-30 miles wide) between Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula, and the Gulf of Aqaba (east of the Sinai peninsula, 10-20 miles wide). The Hebrew expression *yam sup* is used several times in the Bible to refer to the Gulf of Aqaba (for example, in 1 Kgs 9:26 it is said to be in the land of Edom) and may refer to the Gulf of Suez on a few occasions (for example, in Exod 10:19, where God drives the locusts from Egypt into the *yam sup*). The Hebrew word *sup*, however, does not literally mean "red" but "reed," and some scholars have suggested that in the story of the exodus the *yam sup* was not a great sea but a reedy marsh or lake. The main route from Egypt to Canaan is called "the way of the land of the Philistines" anachronistically in Exodus 13, since the Philistines moved into the area only around the same time as the emergence of Israel. It is easy enough to see why fugitives would avoid this route, because of the presence of Egyptian patrols and border guards. It is difficult, however, to see why they would go toward the Gulf of Suez, still less the Gulf of Aqaba. For this reason, many people have

found the suggestion of "the Sea of Reeds" attractive. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the sea of the exodus seems to be distinguished from the *yam sup* in Num 33:8-10 (in which the Israelites reach the *yam sup* after Exodus 15, rather than before).

The hymn in Exodus 15

The prose account of the crossing of the sea in Exodus 14 does not identify the sea in question. In 15:4, however, we are told that Pharaoh's officers were sunk in the *yam sup*. Exodus 15:1-18 is a hymn, which is generally believed to contain some of the oldest poetry in the Bible, and to be older than the J and E sources. (The argument is based on the use of archaic expressions, and similarity to Ugaritic poetry.) A summary form of the hymn is attributed to Moses' sister Miriam in 15:21. The hymn was evidently known in more than one form.

The hymn does not actually speak of people crossing through the sea, and makes no mention of dry land. In fact, Israel is not mentioned at all in the verses that deal with the conflict between Yahweh and Pharaoh. The central theme is how Yahweh, the Lord, cast Pharaoh and his army into the depths of the sea. It is important to remember, however, that this is a hymn, not a ballad, and that its purpose is to praise God, not to describe an historical event. The poem's ill fit with its narrative context is most evident in its second half, where it describes how God led the Israelites to his holy dwelling, planted them in his mountain sanctuary. Clearly at this point Moses could not be describing what had just occurred.

The imagery of sinking in water is used elsewhere in Hebrew poetry as a metaphor for a situation of distress. In Psalm 69 the psalmist prays:

Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.

I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold

I have come into deep waters and the flood sweeps over me.

As the psalm goes on, however, it becomes clear that drowning is not the problem at all.

Rather:

More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause;

many are those who would destroy me, my enemies who accuse me falsely.

Similarly, a psalm found in Jonah 2 says: "The waters closed in over me; weeds [Hebrew *sup!*] were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains." (Jonah is supposedly in the belly of the whale, but the psalm, like that in Exodus 15, was not composed for that context.) In these cases, sinking in the depths is not a description of a physical condition, but simply a metaphor for distress. By analogy, we might suppose that the hymn in Exodus 15 is simply celebrating the defeat of Pharaoh. To say that he and his army sank in the depths like a stone is a metaphorical way of saying that they were completely defeated and destroyed. We do not actually know what defeat of Pharaoh was originally in question, or whether the hymn was composed to celebrate the exodus. It may have been a celebration of the withdrawal of Egypt from Canaan, or it may have had a specific battle in mind. It is poetic language, and it does not lend itself to the reconstruction of historical events.

The Yahwist account

The biblical prose writers, however, wanted to describe the overthrow of Pharaoh in more concrete, specific terms. The most familiar part of Exodus 14, where Moses

stretches his hand over the sea, is from the Priestly source, but a complete J account can also be reconstructed. The J account reads as follows:

14:5. When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed toward the people, and they said, "What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?" 6. So he had his chariot made ready, and took his army with him; 7. he took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them. 10. As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them, and they were in great fear. 11. They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." 13. But Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. 14. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still."

19. The angel of the Lord who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. 20. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night. 21. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land. 24 At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. 25. He clogged

their chariot wheels, so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt." 27. And at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. 30. Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. 31. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

Here again we are not told that the Israelites crossed the sea. We are left with the impression of a tidal wave, which returned and engulfed the Egyptians. One can imagine how this account might have been inferred from the poetry of Exodus 15. The Yahwist adds a few distinctive touches, such as the role of the pillar of fire and cloud.

The Priestly account

The Priestly account adds further embellishment to the story. Moses is told to stretch out his hand over the sea so that the waters are divided (cf. Gen 1:6-10, where God separates the waters, and gathers the waters under the sky in one place, so that dry land appears). The Israelites pass through, but then Moses again stretches out his hand and causes the waters to return on the pursuing Egyptians. This vivid account is the culmination of a long process. It should not be viewed as an historical memory but as one of a series of imaginative attempts to give concrete expression to the belief that Yahweh had rescued his people and overthrown the Egyptians.

The sea imagery continues to exercise a powerful effect on the religious imagination of ancient Israel. As we saw in chapter one, other ancient Near Eastern peoples had stories of combat between a god and the sea, or a sea monster. The Ugaritic myth of Baal and Yam is the one closest to the context of Israel. The battle between Marduk and Tiamat in the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* is also relevant. In the biblical psalms, too, we often find that Yahweh is said to do battle with the sea. In Psalm 114 we are told that the sea looked and fled before the Lord. Psalm 77 also says that the waters were afraid, in view of the thunder and lightning of the Lord, as he led his people. One of the most vivid passages is found in Isa 51:9-11, where the prophet asks: "Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?" Rahab and the dragon were sea monsters, supposedly defeated and slain by Yahweh in the process of creation (although this story is never narrated in the Bible). The exodus, in the view of the prophet, was an event of the same type. It would not be too much to say that the exodus was the creation myth of Israel, and that the sea imagery provided a powerful way to give expression to its mythic character. Just as the ancient Near Eastern myths provided paradigms, through which various events could be viewed and endowed with meaning, so the exodus became the paradigm for understanding later events in the history of Israel. We shall find that the prophets imagined a new exodus, as a way in which Israel might start over, and renew its relationship with its God. This motif becomes especially important after the Babylonian exile, either in the form of return from exile or of a final, eschatological deliverance.

A warrior God

One other theme in the accounts of the episode at the sea requires comment. The hymn in Exodus 15 declares: "Yahweh is a warrior, Yahweh is his name!" The idea that gods are warriors was a common one in the ancient Near East. A major reason why the early Israelites worshiped Yahweh was that they believed that he was a powerful warrior, who could help them defeat their enemies (or simply defeat them on their behalf). Implicit in this image of God is an agonistic view of life, as an arena of constant conflict between competing forces. The book of Exodus makes no pretense that we should love our enemies. This view of God and of life was qualified in the later tradition to a considerable extent, but it has never been fully disavowed. It persists in the last book of the Christian Bible, the book of Revelation, where Jesus comes as a warrior from heaven to kill the wicked with the sword of his mouth (Revelation 19). Some people in the modern world may find the violence of such imagery repellent, but its power cannot be denied. In the context of the exodus, it is the power of God as warrior that gives hope to people in slavery, and has continued to give hope to people suffering oppression down through the centuries. Warrior-gods were also thought to act on behalf of the powerful, and in that case the imagery can support an oppressive view of the world. In Exodus, however, the warrior God is on the side of the weak, and this imagery has continued to inspire and support liberation movements down to modern times.

Conclusion

In the end, very little can be said about the exodus as history. It is likely that some historical memory underlies the story, but the narrative as we have it is full of legendary details and lacks supporting evidence from archeology or from nonbiblical sources. The story of the crossing of the sea seems to have arisen from attempts to fill out the allusions in the hymn preserved in Exodus 15. That hymn celebrates some defeat of a Pharaoh, but the references to drowning are poetic, and cannot be pressed for historical information.

Regardless of its historical origin, however, the exodus story became the founding myth of Israel (especially in the northern kingdom) and of later Judaism. It is more important than any other biblical story for establishing Israelite and Jewish identity. It is repeatedly invoked as a point of reference in the Prophets, later in the Writings, and in the New Testament. It has served as a paradigm of liberation for numerous movements throughout Western history, from the Puritans to Latin America. It can fairly be regarded as one of the most influential, and greatest, stories in world literature.

Questions for reflection:

1. What exactly is described in the poetry of Exodus 15?
2. What different accounts of the crossing of the sea are combined in Exodus 14?
3. What can be said about the literary genre of these chapters?
4. What is the symbolic significance of the sea in biblical tradition?
5. How do we now appropriate the idea that God is a warrior?

Basic Reading

Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus," 790-809.

Childs, *Exodus*, 215-53.

Further reading

J. S. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch* (New Haven: Yale, 2012) 193-213.

B. Batto, *Slaying the Dragon* (Louisville: Westminster, 1992) 102-52.

F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973) 112-44.

T. B. Dozeman, *God at War: Power in the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996).