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# Deliverance at the Sea: Diversity and Unity in a Biblical Theme

Arlis J. Ehlen

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The faith of ancient Israel centered around a particular salvation-history. It recalled a set of events reaching from the Exodus to the taking of the Promised Land. One of the most memorable of these events was the deliverance at the Reed Sea, which frequently served as a symbol for the entire complex. Israel's liturgy and preaching referred to this event often and with great variety of detail and application. This diversity shows up in a long series of Old Testament passages, ranging from the very earliest to the latest.

The present study will first examine the diversity to be observed in references to the Reed Sea event outside the Book of Exodus. The second section will then trace the fourfold witness underlying the most extensive account of the event, that found in Ex. 13-15. As in the case of the fourfold Gospel account in the New Testament, diverse testimonies are seen to reflect the same event, applying it to different needs and situations in the life of God's people. We must learn to avoid leveling the characteristic contours of these individual testimonies into a flat and uninteresting plain of simplified statements. Instead we must look for an enrichment of faith and understanding, channeled through the varying gifts of inspiration bestowed on various holy men of God. Yet in all we recognize the one Lord and the one faith.

## I. BIBLICAL TESTIMONY OUTSIDE THE BOOK OF EXODUS

Two aspects of the diversity to be

found in Biblical references to the deliverance at the Sea will receive consideration here: the variety of its theological functions and the variety of narrative details.

### Diversity in Theological Functions

The deliverance at the Sea is expressly mentioned in about 20 Old Testament passages, all of which will be referred to in the following discussion.<sup>1</sup> These, of course, are only a small segment of the total number of references to the Exodus as a whole. It will be useful to make a few observations first on the theological functions of the Exodus in general before moving to the smaller number of passages that reflect the Reed Sea event in particular.

#### *The Exodus in General*

The exhortations in the Book of Deuteronomy, for example, mention Yahweh's activities in the Exodus at several significant junctures. Most notable is His self-revelation introducing the Ten Commandments: "I am Yahweh, your God—He who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Deut. 5:6; see also 4:20, 32-40; 6:20-25; 26:5-9). A study of each of these contexts shows that the Exodus references are connected with three important tenets of the Israelite faith: Israel's close relationship with the one God who

<sup>1</sup> The one exception, so far as I am aware, is Num. 33:8, which is merely an itinerary with no further theological import behind its reference to the Sea event. In addition there are a number of questionable allusions, some of which will also be referred to.

brought her out of Egypt, recognition of the land of Palestine as Yahweh's gift to Israel through the events beginning with the Exodus, and the requirement of obedience to the laws imposed on Israel by the God who accomplished these great things for her. These theological consequences of the Exodus event are reflected also elsewhere in the Old Testament and may be assumed as normal fare for the covenant worship and preaching of ancient Israel. The Psalms attest the depth and breadth of this theology in numerous examples where Yahweh's activities in the Exodus are cited as a major reason for praising Him (for example, Ps. 135:8-9) or as a basis for trusting that He will help in current troubles. (For example, Ps. 80:8-11)

In the classical prophets of the eighth century B. C. we may observe several further applications of the Exodus theme. These prophets proclaimed that the relationship set up long before by the Exodus would now serve as the norm according to which the Israel of their own time would be judged (Amos 2:10; 3:1-2; 9:7; Micah 6:3-5). Since Yahweh's people had failed to fulfill the demands arising out of the Exodus, that very event would be reversed and Israel would go back into bondage and exile under the Assyrians, losing the gift of the land (Hos. 8:13; 9:3, 6; 11:5). Yet in spite of all, Yahweh would remain faithful to His reputation as the God of the Exodus. He planned the exile to be only a temporary chastisement, after which He would inaugurate a second Exodus and return Israel to the Promised Land (Hos. 2:14-15; 3:4-5; 11:10-11). Later the sixth-century prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and II Isaiah similarly applied Exodus-related themes to the interpretation of another great catastrophe, the captivity of Judah to the Babylonians.

The Exodus event receives no basically new reinterpretation until the

New Testament era. Now a single individual, Jesus Christ, is identified as the new Israel. As such, He recapitulates in Himself individually the redemption once accomplished for ancient Israel, and that in a far more profound and spiritual sense. Christ bursts the bonds of want, sickness, and demon possession, and finally those of the grave itself. His death and victorious resurrection was an Exodus (the very word is used in Luke 9:31!) of much greater consequence than the first. All who are "in Christ" are assured of participating in that same victory, already now and even more fully in the future.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Reed Sea Event*

The miraculous deliverance at the Reed Sea<sup>3</sup> was a particularly memorable and climactic scene in the

<sup>2</sup> A number of New Testament passages show a clustering of ideas familiar to those acquainted with the Old Testament's Exodus references. See Luke 21:25-28; Rom. 8:23; Col. 1:13-14; Tit. 2:13-14. All these examples use the term "redeem" or its cognates, which in the Old Testament regularly refers in a theological sense to the salvation wrought for Israel in the Exodus; see Ex. 6:6; 15:13; Ps. 77:15; Is. 43:14.

<sup>3</sup> As is commonly recognized, the term "Red Sea" is inaccurate as a translation of *yam suph*, the explicit name for the locale of the miracle. *Yam* can mean a lake or other body of fresh water as well as a sea. The use of *suph* (an Egyptian loan-word) in Ex. 2:3, 5 and elsewhere shows that it refers to reeds (bulrushes) which grow in shallow, marshy waters as along the Nile and in parts of the present Suez canal area. Thus the term should properly be translated "reed marsh" or the like. "Red Sea" was, however, already the rendering of the ancient Greek version (*he erythra thalassa*), and it is true that several Biblical occurrences have in mind either the northwestern arm (Gulf of Suez, as in Num. 33:10-11) or the northeastern arm (Gulf of Aqaba, as in Num. 21:4; 1 Kings 9:26, and others) of what our current maps call the Red Sea. But it is very unlikely that any portion of that body was the site of Israel's deliverance. Rather, the miracle occurred at an inland "sea" (lake or marsh) not far east of the land of Goshen in the eastern Delta. See John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), pp. 120-21, with further references there. In this

complex happening known as the Exodus. But mention of the Reed Sea event tends to be clustered in a few books, including Exodus, Joshua, the Psalms, and Isaiah, with occasional references scattered elsewhere. As might be expected, the deliverance at the Sea served much the same function in the theology of these writings as did the references to the Exodus as a whole in a larger number of Biblical books.

Thus Deut. 11:4, part of a short series of references to selected mighty deeds of Yahweh, functions in its context in all the ways found to be characteristic of Deuteronomy's references to the Exodus in general. Here the destruction of the Egyptian chariotry in the Reed Sea is connected with Israel's possession of the land as Yahweh's gift (vv. 8-17), and even more directly with the demand to remain loyal to Him and keep His laws (vv. 1-2). Fear and obedience toward Yahweh, who saved them at the Sea, is enjoined upon Israel also in Joshua 4:23-24 and 24:6-7. The latter passage shows the Reed Sea event built into the historical prolog of the covenant, the fundamental pattern regulating the relationship between Yahweh and His people Israel.

As one of the basic acts of Yahweh's might by which He made Israel His own, the deliverance at the Reed Sea often serves to elicit fear or praise. Rahab, the converted harlot at Jericho, confesses both of these responses in Joshua 2:9-11, and Joshua 4:23-24 in fact expects "all the peoples of the earth" to be led by this wondrous deed to acknowledge Yahweh's power. If even non-Israelites are impressed by this mighty act, Yahweh's own people must surely praise Him for it. Several

article we often follow the lead of the Scriptures themselves in designating the locale of the event simply as "the Sea," thereby retaining the fuller breadth of reference established by Hebrew usage, particularly also the more numinous aspects to be mentioned later.

of the psalms attest this practice in Israel (Ps. 66:5-7; 106:11-12; 114; 136:13-16).<sup>4</sup> These may be thought of as confessions of Yahweh's greatness and goodness to Israel. On other occasions, however, Israel is called upon to make confession of her own guilt. In such contexts a reference to the Reed Sea event serves to highlight the obligations of loyalty and obedience which Israel owes to Yahweh, and thus to deepen her confession of failure to meet these obligations. Ps. 78 refers to the dividing of the Sea as the first in a short list of Yahweh's marvels (vv. 12-16, also v. 53), which stand in strong contrast to Israel's forgetfulness and rebellion (vv. 10-11, 17-20, and *passim*). The event at the Sea serves a similar function in Ps. 106:6-14, 19-23, as also in several prayers of confession outside the Psalter, Is. 63:10-14<sup>5</sup> and Neh. 9:9-17.

The remembrance of Yahweh's deed at the Sea has yet another function in Israel's faith and prayers. In Ps. 77:7-20 this historic act serves as a basis for trust that Yahweh is still able to work decisively for His people in their current distress. The prophetic books contain a number of examples of how this basis for trust is applied to certain specific historical situations. Isaiah, for instance, quotes Yahweh as telling His people not to be afraid of the Assyrians, who are currently threatening Israel's freedom in much the same manner as the Egyptians had long before. Yahweh will soon turn His anger away from His

<sup>4</sup> The most extensive example appears not in the Psalter but in Ex. 15, the so-called Song of the Sea, which will be treated further below. Ps. 68 probably contains a praise reference to Yahweh's miracle at the Sea in vv. 19-23, though this interpretation depends on the acceptance of some such translation of the difficult Hebrew as that given by Mitchell Dahood, *Anchor Bible: Psalms II* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1968), pp. 131, 133, 143-47.

<sup>5</sup> The entire prayer extends from 63:7 through ch. 64.

own people and against the enemy, just as He did to the Egyptians: "His rod will be over the Sea, and He will lift it as He did in Egypt" (Is. 10:24-27). Yahweh's ancient deliverance at the Reed Sea underlies this confidence, even though the new crisis involves Assyria and there is evidently no sea in the picture.

This theme is particularly strong in the second half of the Isaiah collection, where the Babylonians have replaced the Assyrians as the current enemy. See Is. 43:1-2, 14-21; 51:9-11; 63:7-16, all of which use the Reed Sea incident as a basis for continuing trust that Yahweh will deliver His people from their Babylonian captors.<sup>6</sup>

In a number of these prophetic passages the Reed Sea allusion serves not only to undergird trust but also to depict the very shape of the predicted future deliverance. We have already pointed out that Is. 10:26 looks to the time when Yahweh will lift His rod over the Sea "as He did in Egypt." It is hard to imagine the usefulness of this particular gesture in an exodus from Assyria, and we do not expect to find a literal fulfillment of this prediction reported in later pages of the Scriptures. But it is clearly a tribute to the abiding significance of the Reed Sea event as a symbol of Yahweh's redemptive power that the prophets picture the return from exile not only as a new exodus but as involving very specifically a new display of Yahweh's power over the waters. Further examples are found in Is. 11:15-16; 42:15-16; and Zech. 10:10-11. A still more complex blend of old and new is offered in Is. 43:16-21, where the God who displayed His power over water at the Reed Sea promises to eclipse this performance when He acts against the Baby-

lonians. The new miracle is depicted as a reverse image of the old. Long ago He pushed the waters aside to uncover dry land and thus make a way in the Sea; now He will channel water into what was previously dry land, making a way in the desert.

This survey of all Old Testament references to the deliverance at the Sea (apart from the Book of Exodus itself) has pointed up the significant role played in ancient Israel's faith by that mighty deed of Yahweh. Aside from other events in the exodus-conquest complex, the Biblical authors referred more frequently to the miracle at the Sea than to any other occurrences prior to their own lifetime.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, God's people did a good deal of meditating, preaching, teaching, and praying on the basis of this one narrative. Not always was it the same lesson that was drawn from this event, nor was it always applied to the same kind of situation. The diversity of its theological functions attests to the richness of meaning that God's Spirit led His people to find in the event at the Sea.

#### Diversity in Narrative Details

A rereading of the passages already cited will bring another aspect of the Reed Sea references to our attention: a diversity not only in the theological applications of the material but also in the details of the event itself. This will occasion no surprise to one who is aware of the same situation in connection with details in the Christ-

<sup>7</sup> It is significant that no event referred to in the Book of Genesis—for example, the fall of man in the garden, the great flood, or even the lives of the patriarchs—comes close to sharing the theological limelight with the Exodus events, judging from their frequency of mention in the remainder of the Old Testament. The only rivals might be the doctrine of creation (though not the specific descriptions of creation as found in Genesis) and the promises to the patriarchs. In later history only the divine election of David is referred to with any comparable frequency. These facts must receive due recognition in any Biblically based theology.

<sup>6</sup> Compare also Nah. 1 and Hab. 3, which apply what is apparently a highly poetic version of the Reed Sea story to the Assyrian and the Babylonian empires, respectively.

event. Clearly, the numerous eyewitnesses and witnesses of faith whose testimonies have been recorded in the New Testament describe the same event with differing accents and diverse details. The same is to be expected with the equally inspired testimonies of faith deposited in the Old Testament Scriptures.

Being ourselves men whose faith draws sustenance from those very Scriptures, we are naturally interested not only in their common denominators but also in these differences of narrative detail. Nor will we be content simply with observing and recording the data that establish such diversity; we will wish to come to an appropriate evaluation on the basis of these data. Certainly the chief purpose for which we read the Scriptures is a theological one: We seek to know what God means to be saying to us in each passage of His Word. Therefore the most appropriate question to ask in regard to the differing details about the Reed Sea event is: What message is each such detail intended to convey to us? This is merely an extension of the same question we were considering in the previous section, where we sought to hear out the diverse theological applications openly stated in the various references to the Reed Sea event. Here we are attempting a somewhat more subtle procedure. We are now seeking to read the message-values implied in mere narrative variants and not directly expressed.

A useful approach is to discover where the variants came from in the thought-processes of the authors, since this is likely to give a clue as to their intended meaning. We may begin by assuming that an event actually did occur at a location referred to as the Reed Sea, and that an authentic tradition about that event was passed on to others in Israel by those who actually participated in it. The event itself, exactly as it happened, was obviously meaningful to

them. It was in fact so pregnant with meaning that both the event and its meaning had to be communicated to others, particularly to each new generation of Israelites. Granted that this repeated communication of the tradition did preserve the essentials of the event itself, how was its vital meaning to be apprehended and expressed? What further sources in their human and religious experience could the Israelite tradents draw upon to emphasize or elaborate on the meaning of that event at the Reed Sea? Where could they find motifs which they could use to highlight the event and magnify its glory?

The Biblical passages already listed in the preceding section allow us to recognize three directions, other than the authentic memory of the event itself, from which Israelite preachers and authors may have taken their cues when elaborating on the Reed Sea event: other events in their national history, events in nature, and particularly their creation imagery. Each of these areas of their experience would open further horizons of insight into the great event that occurred at the Reed Sea early in their national history. Each might at the same time suggest additional motifs which could be woven into the retelling of the event itself in order to make its meaning more evident to the hearers for whom it was intended. A study of these three motif sources will help us both to explain and to evaluate the diversity of narrative details concerning the Reed Sea event.

### *Events in History*

As the infant nation of Israel continued its existence and developed its traditions, it underwent further experiences, some of which were analogous to the event at the Sea. An obvious instance is the crossing of the Jordan River under Joshua one generation later. The Biblical account makes

the analogy explicit. Later generations are to be told:

Yahweh your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as Yahweh your God had done to the Reed Sea, which He dried up for us until we passed over. (Joshua 4:23)

Numerous indications suggest that a sermon such as this, drawing a connection between two impressive events involving water, was preached at least annually in the early years of Israel's life in the land. The entire account in chs. 3 to 5 of the Book of Joshua points unmistakably to a repeated celebration of these events at the site near the Jordan every spring. Extensive reference is made to the pile (or circle?) of 12 stones (Joshua 3:12; 4:1-8, 20) known by the readers to exist at Gilgal, the first encampment inside the Promised Land and an important place of worship down to the end of the Northern Kingdom.<sup>8</sup> Another group of 12 stones is pointed to as still standing in Jordan's mid-stream "to this day" (Joshua 4:9). Curiosity about these stones when later generations come to this place is to be the starting point for retelling the account of the Jordan crossing (Joshua 4:6f.) as well as the similar event at the Reed Sea. (Vv. 21-24)

Such recounting of God's past mighty deeds for Israel was surely intended to be done within the con-

text of ritual worship. This is strongly suggested by various details in the story which would remind those participating in the festival at Gilgal that their liturgical rites are designed to celebrate these historic events. Thus we note a direct tie-in with the festival calendar when Joshua 4:19 dates the ceremonial procession up from the river to Gilgal on the 10th day of the first month. This is the very day on which Passover preparations are to begin each year (Ex. 12:2f.). Following a reference to the rite of circumcision, which is to explain the name of this sanctuary (Joshua 5:2-9), we are told that the Israelites did indeed celebrate the Passover there at the appointed time (14th day of the month, at evening, v. 10).<sup>9</sup> The Feast of Unleavened Bread, which regularly begins the next day (Ex. 12:15-20; 13:3-10; Lev. 23:6-8; Deut. 16:3-8), is historically explained in this connection. On that very day, the beginning of the grain harvest, the manna ceased and the people for the first time ate the produce of the Promised Land, unmixed with leaven (Joshua 5:11f.; cf. Lev. 23:9-15; Deut. 16:9). References to the ark of Yahweh, the Levitical priests, and representatives from each of the 12 tribes add to the impression that these chapters reflect ongoing liturgical usage. Finally, a proof for the sacredness of this place of worship is given by a closing reference to the appearance of Yahweh's heavenly general, implying that its holiness is equal to that of Sinai itself. (Joshua 5:13-15; cf. Ex. 3:5)

Since it is well known that the celebration of Passover involves the worshipers in a dramatic reenactment of the event itself, we may suppose that other aspects of the Gilgal story were likewise reenacted annually at that location. The procession of the

<sup>8</sup> Besides frequent mention in Joshua as the base camp from which the official distribution of the land among the tribes was made, it is the preferred sanctuary where Yahweh deals with Saul's kingship through Samuel (1 Sam. 10:8; 11:14f.; 13:4, 7-15; 15:12, 21, 33). Several centuries later, however, the worship then being carried on at the place is denounced by the first generation of "writing" prophets (Amos 4:4; 5:5; Hos. 4:15; 9:15; 12:11; Micah 6:5). Its convenient location near a ford over the Jordan is recognized in 1 Sam. 13:7 and 2 Sam. 19:15, 39f. For a full discussion of early Israelite worship at the place, and of the cultic background of Joshua 3-4, see Hans-Joachim Kraus, "Gilgal: Ein Beitrag zur Kultusgeschichte Israels," *Vetus Testamentum*, 1 (1951), 181-99.

<sup>9</sup> The exact calendar references in 4:19 and 5:10 appear to be late additions to these verses. But they only serve to highlight a liturgical connection that is already strong in the context.<sup>6</sup>

ark, symbol of Yahweh's glory, across the river and to the sanctuary is likely to have been part of the regular ritual. The ark is borne by the priests and accompanied by 12 men, representing all the tribes of Israel (Joshua 3:12; 4:2, 4, 5, 8). In its annual repetition we may picture the procession as ending at the 12 stones in the sanctuary, where a sermon is delivered following the outline of Joshua 4:21-24. Both the crossing of the Jordan and the crossing of the Reed Sea are rehearsed in detail and, after the conclusion that this demonstrates Yahweh's might and requires the response of fear (v. 24), the triumphant "Song of the Sea" in Ex. 15 may well be sung. That song bears the marks of coming from the earliest period after Israel entered the land,<sup>10</sup> and is particularly appropriate for this festival because its first half (vv. 1b-12) celebrates the miracle at the Sea, while the second half (vv. 13-18) clearly refers to the conquest of Canaan. The Reed Sea event, as a part of the Exodus, is still referred to in the Passover ritual used by Jews in our own time. If our reconstruction of the Gilgal festival is not too wide of the mark, we may assume that already in very ancient times the Passover-Unleavened Bread celebration was the occasion for an illuminating combination of the entire Exodus experience with its sequel, the entry into the Promised Land.

These considerations yield several valuable points for our understanding of the Reed Sea narratives. It now seems probable that these narratives had their early home in a liturgical setting, a regularly held festival commemorating the great acts of God in the Exodus and the generation following. They are to be read in this light, rather than as excerpts from a history textbook or minstrel tales from the dim past. Further, the regular occasion in which we see the Reed

<sup>10</sup> See the further treatment of this text below.

Sea account as being at home is one that specifically invites comparison with another event in that same history-complex. The location of the celebration (at least in some significant early period) is near the Jordan River, and the nature of Israelite worship suggests that they regularly "walked through the paces" of the event there.

This supplies a rich source of motifs to add to the celebration of Yahweh's might as displayed at the Reed Sea. Not only the interpretation of the event's meaning for Israel's faith, but also the portrayal of the event itself may easily have drawn from this source. Thus it would be a simple matter to transfer from one event to the other the recognition of Yahweh's might by non-Israelites (Joshua 4:24a; cf. Ex. 14:4, 17f.), or the response of fear on the part of His own people (Joshua 4:24b; cf. Ex. 14:31). More speculatively, it is possible to see a connection between the waters standing up as a "heap" in both cases, using a word which appears nowhere else in Hebrew (*ned*, Ex. 15:8; Joshua 3:13, 16; also Ps. 78:13). Even the idea of crossing the body of water in order to get to the other side could have been applied to the Reed Sea incident from that at the Jordan, where it is more clearly required by the situation of the people. This would serve to strengthen the lesson that also the earlier event was an instance of Yahweh's guiding His people to the Promised Land.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Another possible case of a later event in Israel's history which added to the Reed Sea tradition is the defeat of Sisera at the Wadi Kishon. According to Judg. 4:7, 13-15 Sisera had chariots while the Israelites were on foot, but Yahweh threw the enemy into a panic and routed them (using the same verb in v. 15 as in Ex. 14:24). The victory song in the next chapter describes the wadi-torrent as washing them away (Judg. 5:19-21), reminiscent of the Reed Sea description. Here again the direction of the influence, if any, is not entirely clear. For a discussion of the parallels see Lewis H. Hay, "What Really Happened at the Sea of Reeds?" *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 83 (1964), 402f.



*Events in Nature*

Another source of motifs for the enrichment of the Reed Sea tradition is the sphere of nature. When Yahweh appears in all His might for the miraculous salvation of His people, it is entirely appropriate and expected, in Biblical thought, that His theophany should be accompanied by various striking phenomena in nature. A particularly common one is fire, either in the ordinary sense or in the form of lightning. The Song of the Sea uses this picture once with reference to Yahweh's act at the Reed Sea:

In Thy great majesty  
 Thou didst smash Thy foes.  
 Thou didst send forth Thy fury  
 (that is, Thy hot anger);  
 it consumed them like stubble.  
 (Ex. 15:7)

Judging from the great bulk of other references to the event at the Sea, there is no likelihood that such a statement is meant to describe the historical event in a literal way. Rather, it is a clear case of transferring a nature motif so as to elaborate on the event and its significance.

Later in the same poem the demise of the Egyptians is described in still another pictorial fashion:

Thou didst stretch out Thy right hand;  
 the earth (=underworld?) swallowed them. (Ex. 15:12)

Apart from the stretching out of God's own hand (usually it is Moses who performs the gesture), the swallowing whole of the enemy is a theme found elsewhere (for example, Num. 16:30-34), but hardly intended to be taken literally here—otherwise the Israelites could not have seen the Egyptian corpses strewn over the seashore when it grew light the next morning. (Ex. 14:27, 30)

One of the psalms of praise which mention the event tells us quite imaginatively that "when Israel went forth from Egypt" to become Yah-

weh's dominion a number of natural phenomena occurred.

The Sea looked and fled,  
 Jordan turned back,  
 the mountains skipped like rams,  
 the hills like lambs of the flock.  
 (Ps. 114:3-4)

The Sea is personified and is joined by other topographical features reacting to Yahweh's display of might. Then they are addressed as persons in order to uncover the reason for this unusual activity in nature:

What ailed you, O Sea, that you fled?  
 O Jordan, that you turned back?  
 O mountains, that you skipped like rams?  
 O hills, like lambs of the flock?  
 (Ps. 114:5-6)

The psalmist answers his rhetorical question by indicating that such convulsions in nature are the appropriate reaction to the God who controls both nature and history:

At the presence of the Lord,  
 writhe, O earth,  
 at the presence of the God of Jacob,  
 who turned the rock into a pool of water,  
 the flint into a spring of water.  
 (Ps. 114:7-8)<sup>12</sup>

*Creation Imagery*

From motifs in nature it is an easy transition to our third source of motifs for describing and interpreting the Reed Sea experience: creation imagery. A renewed look at the familiar creation account in Gen. 1 will bring to mind some surprising points of contact between the acts of creation and those at the Reed Sea. The work of separating or dividing the waters from the waters (vv. 6-7) has

<sup>12</sup> Ps. 18:7-15 and 77:15-20 contain probable allusions to the Reed Sea event in connection with Yahweh's help in a current crisis, and in both cases the reference is expanded greatly by the use of storm terminology.

an unexpected parallel in some accounts of the deliverance at the Sea, as does the idea of forcing the Sea back so that dry land appears (vv. 9-10). Without implying at this point that there is any real connection between the creation and the Sea accounts, we may note that the theme of taming or controlling the waters of the Sea is found frequently elsewhere in the Old Testament as a symbol for creation. Psalm 104, another of the major creation passages of the Old Testament, describes the earth as initially covered entirely with water (parallel to the first two verses of Gen. 1):

Thou didst set the earth on its foundations,  
so that it should never be shaken.  
Thou didst cover it with the deep as  
with a garment;  
the waters stood above the mountains.  
(Ps. 104:5-6)

But then came God's thunderous word of rebuke, sending the waters scurrying to their appointed place and allowing the dry land to appear.

At Thy rebuke they fled;  
at the sound of Thy thunder they  
took to flight.  
The mountains rose, the valleys sank  
down  
to the place which Thou didst appoint  
for them.  
Thou didst set a bound which they  
should not pass,  
so that they might not again cover the  
earth. (Ps. 104:7-9)

The verses immediately following indicate that God does permit controlled amounts of water from the great deep to gush forth in springs and water the land. Thus it is clear throughout this section of the long psalm that a fundamental part of creation is the suppression of the chaotic waters.

The rebuking of the waters by Yahweh, already seen in this psalm,

is a standard theme found in other poetic contexts too.

Behold, by My rebuke I dry up the Sea;  
I make the rivers a desert. (Is. 50:2b)

The fountainheads of the Sea were made  
visible,  
and the foundations of the world  
were laid bare,  
at Thy rebuke, Yahweh,  
at the breath of wind from Thy  
nostrils. (2 Sam. 22:16=Ps. 18:15)

While it is not entirely certain that these two contexts refer specifically to creation, there is no such question about Job 26, which includes the following lines:

The pillars of the sky tremble,  
and are astounded at His rebuke.  
By His power He stilled the Sea;  
by His understanding He smote  
Rahab.  
By His wind the skies were made clear;  
His hand pierced the ancient Serpent.  
(Job 26:11-13)

Here we observe a full-blown personification of the Sea as a monster, a hostile power which Yahweh must conquer. Various examples of poetic parallelism in the Old Testament ascribe to this personage a number of different names: Sea,<sup>13</sup> Deep,<sup>14</sup> the Serpent or Dragon,<sup>15</sup> Rahab,<sup>16</sup> and Leviathan.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Clearly personified in the Ugaritic texts, where "Prince Sea" is frequently used in parallelism with "Judge River." "Sea" and "River" (the same words as in Ugaritic, but without the titles of majesty) appear often as a standard pair in Hebrew poetry too, for example, Ps. 24:2; 66:6; 80:11; 89:25; Job 14:11; Is. 11:15; 19:5; Nah. 1:4, and others.

<sup>14</sup> *T<sup>e</sup>hom* is grammatically a proper noun in Hebrew, since it is regarded as definite when used without the article. It is regularly construed as feminine in gender. Exactly equivalent according to known etymological patterns is the Akkadian name for the female sea monster, *Tiamtu* (common parent form: *Tiham*, either with or without feminine ending; this reconstruction is supported also by Ugaritic *thm* and Arabic *tihamat*).

Various Old Testament passages are surprisingly free in using such language to describe Yahweh's activity at creation. Its mythical background has become abundantly clear since the discovery of the Ugaritic tablets, providing us with a Canaanite version of the Baal myths in a dialect closely related to early Hebrew. The Hebrew writers of course threw off the crass polytheism of the Canaanite myths, but otherwise found the picture of a conflict between God and the watery powers of chaos quite useful to express certain dimensions of their faith in Yahweh as creator. Two examples from the Psalms will make this clear.

Who in the skies can be compared with Yahweh?

Who among the sons of El is like Yahweh? . . .

<sup>15</sup> Two words are used, *nahas* and *tannin*. Both are used to denote a monster in the Sea as well as the more ordinary terrestrial snake. Ugaritic used the latter word (clearly the more numinous of the two in Hebrew usage) alongside *btm* = serpent, which appears in the Old Testament place name Bashan (the form expected according to normal etymological changes) as well as the noun *peten*, usually translated "asp" or "adder" (this form suggests an early borrowing via the Aramaic). The concept, including even the proper epithet "ancient" (the preferred translation of *bari<sup>m</sup>h* in Job 26:13; Is. 27:1), is faithfully reproduced twice in the Book of Revelation many years later: "the Dragon, that ancient Serpent, who is the Devil and Satan." (Rev. 12:9; 20:2)

<sup>16</sup> Rahab is also used without the article, that is, as a proper noun. Its use has not been traced outside the Old Testament. The corresponding verbal root suggests that the epithet has reference to the Sea's stormy insolence, by which it seeks to overpower its victims. (Rahab as the name of the harlot at Jericho is unrelated, being spelled differently in Hebrew.)

<sup>17</sup> The only extra-Israelite parallel to this name is in the Ugaritic myth of Baal, where it occurs in the contracted form *ltm*. There can be no doubt about the identification, however, since it appears there with exactly the same epithets and parallelism as in Is. 27:1. The probable etymology points to the meaning "twisting" or "twisted, coiled," an appropriate description of a serpent. See further below, footnotes 19 and 22.

Thou dost rule the raging of the Sea;  
when its waves rise, Thou stillest them.

Thou didst crush Rahab like a carcass;  
Thou didst scatter Thy enemies with  
Thy mighty arm.

The heavens are Thine, the earth also  
is Thine;

the world and all that is in it, Thou  
hast founded them.

The north and the south, Thou hast  
created them;

Tabor and Hermon joyously praise  
Thy name. (Ps. 89:6, 9-12)

If it was not sufficiently clear earlier in the poem, at least the final two verses quoted show that the subject is creation. The following excerpt likewise moves from highly mythical imagery to more matter-of-fact ways of describing the setting of bounds at creation.

God my King is from of old,  
working salvation in the midst of the  
earth.

Thou didst divide (?) the Sea by Thy  
might;

Thou didst break the heads of the  
dragons on the waters.

Thou didst crush the heads of Leviathan;  
Thou didst give him as food for the  
creatures of the wilderness.

Thou didst cleave open springs and  
brooks;

Thou didst dry up ever-flowing  
streams.

Thine is the day, Thine also the night;

Thou hast established moon and sun.

Thou hast fixed all the bounds of the  
earth;

Thou hast made summer and winter.  
(Ps. 74:12-17)

Thus far we have seen no certain allusions to the Reed Sea miracle in this creation language. It has been necessary to survey this usage rather extensively, however, because of its unfamiliarity to the average reader of the Old Testament.

We are prepared now to appreciate the fact that such creation imagery, with all its overtones emphasizing Yahweh's power against the forces of cosmic evil, would prove to be a useful symbol for Yahweh's might in general. His rebuking of the Sea is a symbolic act that He can repeat at any time, whether literally or figuratively, as He vanquishes His enemies. Thus the prophet Nahum evidently quotes an ancient liturgical poem<sup>18</sup> about Yahweh's creator might for the purpose of applying it to the Assyrian menace of his own day.

His way is in whirlwind and storm,  
and the clouds are the dust of His feet.  
He rebukes the Sea and makes it dry;  
He dries up all the rivers.  
Bashan and Carmel wither;  
the bloom of Lebanon fades.  
The mountains quake before Him;  
the hills melt.  
The earth is laid waste before Him;  
the world and all that dwell therein.  
(Nah. 1:3b-5)

The poem itself then makes the generalized application of this picture to the human situation, which Nahum will carry out more specifically.

Yahweh is good,  
a stronghold in the day of trouble;  
He knows those who take refuge  
in Him.  
But with an overflowing flood  
He will make a full end of His  
adversaries,  
and will pursue His enemies into  
darkness. (Nah. 1:7-8)

The Book of Isaiah makes particularly striking use of this creation imagery in application to the current scene. In a passage from the so-called Isaiah

<sup>18</sup> As the interpreters have noted, Nah. 1:2-8 preserves approximately the first half of an alphabetic acrostic poem. Rather than to think of this poem as a later insertion into the context, it seems preferable to assume that the prophet quotes that portion of an existing hymn which is useful to his purposes, and then builds on it the message that he was sent to deliver (from about verse 9 on).

Apocalypse (ch. 24–27) the expected eschatological deliverance is described in unrelentingly mythic terms:

In that day Yahweh will punish  
with His hard and great and strong  
sword  
Leviathan the ancient Serpent,  
Leviathan the twisting Serpent  
and He will slay the Dragon that is in  
the Sea. (Is. 27:1)<sup>19</sup>

The Second Isaiah represents Yahweh as challenging His people's unfaith concerning His ability to save them from Babylonia by asking and then answering His own question:

Is My hand shortened, that it cannot  
redeem?  
Or have I no power to deliver?  
Behold, by My rebuke I dry up the Sea;  
I make the rivers a desert.  
Their fish stink for lack of water,  
and die of thirst.  
I clothe the heavens with blackness,  
and make sackcloth their covering.  
(Is. 50:2b-3)

This prophet uses both the creation story and the Reed Sea event to visualize the new deliverance from Babylonian exile, as we have indicated in separate parts of this article. Is there any evidence that he himself noted the striking similarities between these two favorite images? One passage does bring the two unmistakably together, and shows how both point forward to the deliverance from exile, viewed as a new creation and also a new exodus.

Awake, awake, put on strength,  
O arm of Yahweh!  
Awake as in days of old,  
the generations of long ago!  
Was it not Thou that didst cut Rahab  
in pieces,  
that didst pierce the Dragon?  
Was it not Thou that didst dry up the  
Sea,

<sup>19</sup> Compare the closely similar language in the Canaanite Baal myth, quoted below in footnote 22.

the waters of the Great Deep;<sup>20</sup>  
that didst make the depths of the Sea  
a way

for the redeemed to pass over?

And (=Even so) the ransomed of Yahweh shall return,

and come with singing to Zion.

Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;

they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee  
away. (Is. 51:9-11)<sup>21</sup>

There is thus a rich interrelationship between the motifs of creation, exodus (including Reed Sea), and return from exile (understood as new creation and new exodus). The imagery of the first two is available to describe the third; and it seems equally likely that the first two have enriched each other. Undoubtedly this reflects a long tradition dating back many centuries before Second Isaiah.

Certain other passages now emerge more clearly as examples of the application of creation symbolism to the Reed Sea event. The smiting of the Sea or River into seven streamlets which Yahweh will trample with His shoes (Is. 11:15) is easily seen as drawing from this source. We may compare the smashing of the Dragon's heads in Ps. 74:13-14. According to both the Ugaritic material<sup>22</sup> and the

Book of Revelation (chs. 13 and 17) the monster of the Sea had seven heads. Some strangely similar motifs appear in the difficult Psalm of Habakkuk. The prophet, longing to hear an encouraging word from Yahweh about the bleak situation in his own time, harks back (as in Nah. 1, also Ps. 74 and 77) to the old stories about Yahweh's power. He first recalls the great creation-battle, asking whether it must be regarded as a purely cosmic event only. He answers that question by stating that God's wrath was in reality directed against Egypt, an earthly nation, and that He did it for His people Israel.

#### (Question)

Was against River Your wrath, Yahweh,  
yea, was against River Your anger,  
yea, was against Sea Your rage,  
when You drove Your horses,

Your victorious chariots,  
You readied Your naked bow,  
the seven staves of promise,<sup>23</sup>

You split the earth to make streams,  
the mountains saw You and writhed,  
a cloudburst of waters came across,  
the Deep shouted out its voice,  
the sun forgot to raise its rays,  
the moon stood still in its habitation,  
at the light of Your arrows as they sped,  
at the gleam of Your flashing spear?

#### (Answer)

In Your fury You strode on earth,

James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969], p. 138), which is closely related to Is. 27:1 (see above, footnotes 17 and 19), reports that Baal "slays Leviathan the ancient Serpent, / puts an end to the twisting Serpent, / the mighty one of the seven heads." Seven-headed monsters are also depicted in ancient Near Eastern art.

<sup>23</sup> The Hebrew of v. 9 has a term translatable either as "seven" or "oath." Almost all modern translators emend. But is it not plausible that the seven-ness of the weapons reflects the seven heads to be slain? The promise recalls the spells attached to Baal's clubs with which he killed Sea (Ugaritic text 68, in Gordon, p. 180; Pritchard, p. 131).

<sup>20</sup> Note the ambivalence of this couplet. It may be taken either as continuing the creation picture which preceded or introducing the Reed Sea picture which follows.

<sup>21</sup> Helmer Ringgren has suggested that the creation story as introduced here served as the proper liturgical text for a time of crisis. Reference to the original act of creation serves as the basis for hope in a new creation that will resolve the present crisis. Several additional examples are given in his short article, "Die Funktion des Schöpfungsmythus in Jes. 51," pp. 38-40 in *Schalom* (Alfred Jepsen Festschrift; Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1971). But Ringgren makes no more than a passing allusion to the fact that the Reed Sea reference functions in the same way.

<sup>22</sup> Ugaritic text 67:I:1-3 (Cyrus Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* [Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965], p. 178; English translation in

in Your anger You trampled on nations.

You went out to save Your people,  
to save Your anointed one.

You smashed the heads of the wicked one,

laying him bare from tail to neck;  
You pierced with his own staves the head of his warriors,

who had stormed so as to drive me (Israel) apart,

whose rejoicing had been like that  
(of a beast of prey) over devouring the poor in his lair;

You trod on Sea with Your horses,  
the foaming of the mighty waters.  
(Hab. 3:8-15)

Though the translation is uncertain at many points, the prophet seems to have consciously "historicized" the mythical battle by revising it in terms of Yahweh's victory over Egypt at the Reed Sea. This in turn serves to strengthen his faith in Yahweh's current power and willingness to save, as the prophet makes clear in the conclusion of his psalm. (Vv. 16-19)

Such examples as these show how the comparison with the creation-battle could be used to emphasize the cosmic or numinous dimensions of the Reed Sea event. As the people of Israel meditated further on their miraculous deliverance at the Sea, this analogy evidently became a rich source of further insight into the meaning of what had happened. Details of the creation-battle could even be used to embellish the historical account, for such additions would help the hearers to make the interpretive connections. In this category we must list the motif of Yahweh's rebuking the mighty waters (Ps. 106:9).<sup>24</sup> Other possible examples are splitting the waters, opening the earth's mouth to swallow

the enemy, treading on the Sea or making it into a pathway, and the like.

The striking diversity to be observed among the numerous Biblical references to Yahweh's deliverance at the Sea can now be understood in the light both of diverse theological functions and of diverse sources of imagery. Clearly, all testimony points to an ultimate unity: An amazing event must have occurred at the Reed Sea, by which the pursuing Egyptians were drowned and the fleeing Israelite slaves received their independence as a people; and this event could only be attributed to the power and saving will of Yahweh, their God. This event was so basic to Israel's faith that it was applied in many different ways to their relationship with Yahweh. The story of the event was told and retold with many different emphases and elaborations, drawing also from various other areas of the people's historical and religious experience. By tracing the history of this one tradition as reflected on numerous pages of the Scriptures, we may become more sensitive to the marvelously varied workings of the Holy Spirit as He guided His people into all truth, from the Old Testament era on into the New. We may also be able to see more clearly the analogous ways in which the same Spirit of God is still active among His people today.

## II. THE TESTIMONY OF EX. 13-15

A certain diversity might well have been expected when we are dealing with references to the event which obviously came from different authors, writing in different situations. When we turn our attention to the single Book of Exodus, however, we may understandably expect the diversity to be at an end. This, by far the most extensive account of the event, ought to give a single, coherent view of what happened and what it means.

<sup>24</sup> Certain other occurrences of the rebuking idea are probably also to be taken as referring to the Reed Sea event as well as to creation; so Ps. 18:15; Is. 50:2; Nah. 1:4.

Yet such is by no means the case, as we discover upon more careful examination of details. Ex. 15:12, already referred to in another connection, says of Yahweh, "Thou didst stretch out Thy right hand; the earth swallowed them," that is, the Egyptians. Both clauses of this verse deviate rather strikingly from statements made in the immediately preceding chapter. It is hard to picture how in the same context the vanquished enemies could have been swallowed up by the earth and yet be seen dead on the seashore the next morning (14:30). And in 14:21 and 26 it is not Yahweh Himself but Moses who stretches out his hand to accomplish this miracle. One of the verses just mentioned has its own internal difficulties. First we are told (14:21) that "Moses stretched out his hand over the sea," and we fully expect that the dividing of the sea will immediately ensue, brought on by this gesture; that is what Moses had been told in v. 16. Instead, we are informed that Yahweh first "drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and made the sea dry land." But then, after the dry land has already appeared where the sea had been, we are told: "and the waters were divided." A similarly inexplicable repetitiousness occurs in vv. 27 and 28, where "the sea returned to its wonted flow" and the Egyptians ended up in the midst of it, but then "the waters returned" (again?) and covered all the host of Pharaoh. A somewhat more subtle example is found earlier in the account, where the harried Israelites are first told to "stand still" (v. 13, KJV) and "be still" (v. 14), but then before anything further has happened they are given the command to "go forward." (V. 15)

In view of all that has been said earlier in this study, such diversity could be fully understandable and even edifying for faith if we were dealing with more than one author's testimony.

Then we would only need to determine what theological assertions each author meant to make by his own testimony in his own situation, and we might further wish to inquire as to the sources of the special motifs he uses. We could without difficulty accept each human author's statements as a part of God's Word to man.

I feel that this is exactly what we must do in the present case. There are in fact numerous indications throughout the Pentateuch that those five books are no more the work of a single author unaided by preexisting sources than are the books of Samuel or Kings. Replacing the hypothesis of unitary authorship (a theory which arose in the centuries just before the Christian era and remained traditional until recent times), the more plausible hypothesis of documentary sources has now been very widely accepted. The preponderance of evidence points to the existence of at least two, and probably three, narrative sources underlying the books from Genesis through Numbers, commonly known as J, E, and P.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Most of Deuteronomy represents a separate, nonnarrative source known as D, placed chronologically after J and E but before P. Various scholars feel that the two or three narrative sources also extend into Joshua and perhaps further, but on this there is no such consensus as in the case of the first four books of the Pentateuch.

The use of faceless symbols such as J, E, D, and P instead of personal names reflects the fact that frequently the authors of the most basic writings of a community remain anonymous or are soon forgotten. In this case, however, that is not as serious a loss as it might seem, since the work of these "authors" must be understood to consist not so much in original composition as in compiling and structuring the remains of a living oral tradition.

The earliest of these documents is J, that is, the Yahwist, so called because it uses the divine proper name "Yahweh" already in telling the story of pre-Mosaic times. This source was compiled in Jerusalem circles during the time of Solomon or soon after (ca. 950 B. C.). E (like P) withholds use of the name Yahweh until its

The idea of several sources, recognizable on the basis of many criteria from all parts of the Pentateuch, can aid in understanding diversities in Ex. 13–15. This proves to be a relatively difficult text to analyze in terms of source criticism, and scholars differ more widely on details here than in most parts of the Pentateuch.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless a good many observations are common to almost all work on the source analysis of this passage. We will conveniently bypass some of the more disputed details by relegating them to a category labeled “uncertain,” though most critics would ascribe much of that material to E. We are left with two long series of statements, each of which, if taken separately, appears to give a complete account of the happening at the Sea. Although some scholars would attach different symbols, we

revelation to Moses is reported (Ex. 3), preferring “God” (Elohim). It is roughly contemporary or slightly later than J, but seems to reflect a setting in the Northern Kingdom. It is the least fully preserved of the three, and may never have had a written form apart from its use to supplement the J narrative. P reflects priestly interests, and was written down during the latter part of the Babylonian exile (ca. 550 B. C.?), supplying the basic structure of the completed Pentateuch. Further details about the documentary or source hypothesis can be obtained from any work on Old Testament introduction.

<sup>26</sup> The most commonly accepted division of the sources here is that given, for example, by Martin Noth, *Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), pp. 104–106; James Plataras, *The God of Exodus: The Theology of the Exodus Narratives* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1966), pp. 167–70; and J. Philip Hyatt, *Exodus* (Century Bible; London: Oliphants, 1971), p. 148. Though they differ in some details, they agree in major points and generally follow the tradition laid down already in S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: Meridian, 1956; reprint of 1897 revision), pp. 28–30. More widely varying analyses are given by Otto Eissfeldt, *Hexateuch-Synopse* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1922), pp. 133–37; and Georg Fohrer, *Ueberlieferung und Geschichte des Exodus* (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1964), pp. 97–110, both of whom posit a third early source alongside J and E.

shall follow the majority and ascribe these two strands to J and P.

We give below a translation of the Hebrew text from 13:17 through ch. 14. Special care has been taken to make the rendering as accurate a reflection of the Hebrew as is possible in English. In addition, several devices have been employed to facilitate distinguishing the several putative sources. Each clause is purposely isolated from the others as much as the Hebrew syntax allows. Standard narrative style in Hebrew relates each consecutive occurrence in a primary clause of its own, coupled to the preceding clauses by the conjunction “and.” Normal English translations quite properly break up these long chains of consecutive clauses by subordinating many of them or transforming them into adverbial phrases more suited to English literary taste. The following translation, however, leaves each clause independent unless the subtleties of Hebrew syntax point unmistakably to some kind of dependence. Each such clause is then placed on a separate line without terminal punctuation, so that its relationship (or lack of it) to the immediate context can be easily evaluated without prejudice.<sup>27</sup> The probable ascription of each such line of text to either J or P (or its relegation to the “uncertain” category, possibly E) is then indicated by its varying indentation from the left-hand margin. This allows the reader to see clearly the suggested distribution of the sources, while still being able to read the full, combined text consecutively and make his own evaluation.

<sup>27</sup> This of course is the same format normally used for the printing of poetry—in order likewise to make the mutual relationships between the lines of text as clear as possible. The use of the same typographical device here, however, is not to be construed as implying that this text is poetic.



EXODUS 13:17 – 14:31

Uncer-  
tain P  
(E?)

J

- 13:17 and it came to pass when Pharaoh set the people free that Elohim did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines although (for, even when) that was closer for Elohim said  
"lest the people change their mind when they see war and turn back to Egypt"
- 18 and Elohim made the people go around by way of the desert / Reed Sea and equipped for battle the sons of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt
- 19 and Moses took the bones of Joseph with him for he had solemnly sworn the sons of Israel saying "Elohim will definitely visit you and you shall bring up my bones from here with you"
- 20 and they set out from Succoth and they encamped at Etham / at the edge of the desert
- 21 and Yahweh—he was traveling in front of them by day in a *pillar of cloud* to lead them on the way and by night in a *pillar of fire* to give light for them so as to travel by day and by night
- 22 it never left its place  
—the *pillar of cloud* by day and the *pillar of fire* by night—  
in front of the people
- 14:1 and Yahweh spoke to Moses saying (Command I)  
2 "speak to the sons of Israel and they shall (so that they) turn back and they shall encamp in front of Pi-ha-Hirot / between Migdol (Fortress) and the Sea / in front of Baal-Zephon (Lord of the North) / opposite it you (plural) shall encamp / by the Sea  
3 and Pharaoh will say of the sons of Israel 'they have gotten lost in the land the desert has closed in on them'  
4 and I will make the heart of Pharaoh obstinate (hard) and (so that) he will chase after them and I intend to be glorified in Pharaoh and in all his forces and the Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh" (Execution I)  
5 and they (the sons of Israel) did thus  
5 and it was told to the king of Egypt that the people had fled and the heart of Pharaoh and of his servants was changed toward the people and they said "what is this we have done that we have set Israel free from serving us?"  
6 and he hitched up his chariot(s) and his people he took with him  
7 and he took 600 selected chariots and all the (other) chariots of Egypt with warriors (third men, officers?) on them all  
8 and Yahweh made the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt obstinate (hard) and (so that) he chased after the sons of Israel as the sons of Israel were going out with high hand (in triumph, defiantly)

- 14:9 and the Egyptians chased after them  
and they caught up with them as they were encamped by the Sea  
all the horses / the chariots of Pharaoh and his drivers / and his forces  
by Pi-ha-Hirot / in front of Baal-Zephon
- 10 and as Pharaoh was coming (when Pharaoh had come) close  
(and) the sons of Israel *lifted up their eyes*  
*and behold* the Egyptians were setting (had set) out after them  
and they *feared greatly*  
and the sons of Israel cried out to Yahweh
- 11 and they said to Moses  
"was it for lack of any graves in Egypt  
that you took us to die in the desert?  
what is this you have done to us by bringing us out from Egypt?"
- 12 isn't this the very thing we spoke to you in Egypt saying  
'leave us alone and we will just be slaves to the Egyptians'?  
for it would be better for us to be slaves to the Egyptians  
than to die in the desert"
- 13 and Moses said to the people  
*"don't be afraid*  
*stand still* (stand your ground)  
and *you will see* the *salvation (victory) of Yahweh*  
which *he will work* for you today  
for the ones whom *you see* today / the Egyptians—  
you will *never again see* them for ever
- 14 *Yahweh—he will fight* for you  
and *you—you shall keep quiet"*
- 15 and Yahweh said to Moses (Command II)  
"why are you (singular) crying out to me?  
speak to the sons of Israel  
and they shall (so that they) set out
- 16 and you—  
raise your staff and  
stretch out your hand over the Sea  
and split it open  
and the sons of Israel will (so that they may) go in  
through the midst of the Sea on dry ground
- 17 and I—behold I will make the heart of the Egyptians  
obstinate (hard)  
and (so that) they will go in after them  
and I intend to be glorified in Pharaoh and in all his forces  
in his chariots and in his drivers
- 18 and the Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh  
by my being glorified in Pharaoh  
in his chariots and in his drivers"
- 19 and the angel of Elohim traveling in front of the camp of Israel set out  
and he (it) traveled (to a position) off behind them  
and the *pillar of cloud* from in front of them set out  
and it stood (at a position) off behind them
- 20 and it (he) went in between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel  
and the *cloud* was (became) . . . and the darkness  
and it lit up the night (the night passed)  
and the one did not come close to the other *all night long*
- 21 and Moses stretched out his hand over the Sea (Execution II)  
and Yahweh made the Sea travel by means of a strong east wind *all night long*  
and he turned the Sea into dry land  
and (so that) the waters were split open  
and (so that) the sons of Israel went in
- 22

- 14:23 through the midst of the Sea on dry ground  
with the waters serving to them as a wall  
on their right and on their left  
and the Egyptians gave chase  
and they went in after them  
—all the horses of Pharaoh / his chariots and his drivers—  
right into the midst of the Sea
- 24 and it happened that *in the night-watch just before dawn*  
Yahweh gazed down at the camp of the Egyptians  
*in the pillar of fire and of cloud*  
and he panicked the camp of the Egyptians
- 25 and he made the wheels of their chariots come off (bind)  
and (so that) they were hardly able to drive them  
and the Egyptians said "let us flee from in front of Israel"  
for *Yahweh was (is) fighting* for them against the Egyptians
- 26 and Yahweh said to Moses (Command III)  
"stretch out your hand over the Sea  
and (so that) the waters will return upon the Egyptians  
upon their chariots and upon their drivers"
- 27 and Moses stretched out his hand over the Sea (Execution III)  
and the Sea returned *at the dawn of the morning* to its normal fullness  
just as the Egyptians were fleeing directly toward it  
and Yahweh shook the Egyptians off (flung them out)  
right into the midst of the Sea
- 28 and (so that) the waters returned  
and they covered up the chariots and the drivers  
of all the forces of Pharaoh  
that had gone after them into the Sea  
nor a single one of them remained
- 29 and the sons of Israel—they traveled  
on dry ground through the midst of the Sea  
with the waters serving to them as a wall  
on their right and on their left
- 30 and *Yahweh* on that day *saved Israel* from the hand of the Egyptians  
and *Israel saw* the Egyptians dead on the shore of the Sea
- 31 and Israel saw the great hand (mighty deed)  
(with) which Yahweh worked against the Egyptians  
and the people feared Yahweh  
and *they believed* in Yahweh and in Moses his servant

Certain expressions in the translation have been emphasized by the use of italics or bold type. This draws attention to recurring words and ideas, which tag the clauses containing them as evidently belonging to the same source. Other clauses can then be seen as having various logical connections with these. In this way at least two extended series of clauses can be traced through the entire pericope. Some observations about the structure of these separate narratives then also take shape. One of these is indicated by the words **Command** and **Execu-**

tion repeated several times in the margin. These and other data will now be discussed as we look separately first at the J materials, then at those ascribed to P. In each case we will also attempt to determine the theological import conveyed by the narrator.

#### *The Yahwistic Account (J)*

The first references to a pillar of cloud and fire appear in 13:21 and 22. Thus the background is laid for several important segments of action in 14:19-20 and 24. The cloud laced with fire (lightning?) represents the

mighty presence of Yahweh and normally goes in front of Israel as a guide. But on this fateful night it shifts to the rear and keeps the pursuing Egyptians from making hostile contact with the Israelite camp. Then in the darkness just before dawn it is from the fire-cloud that Yahweh gazes down and sets the Egyptians into a panic as they try to get away.

Another significant set of observations begins with 14:10, 13-14. The Israelites, we are told, looked up, saw the pursuing Egyptians, and feared greatly. Their behavior is depicted as entirely passive. They only observe and react. This role is sharply emphasized in Moses' speech before the battle, which allows the hearer an insight into the meaning of the event before it occurs. As in holy war, the Israelites are exhorted not to fear but simply to stand back and watch. The Egyptians whom they now see as objects of terror will never be seen again after today. What they will see instead is a great victory worked by Yahweh. Every expression referring to an overt activity has Yahweh as its subject. The point is made explicit by the two contrasting clauses of verse 14: "*Yahweh*—He will fight for you; and *you*—you shall keep quiet." From that point on, according to the J stratum, neither Moses nor Israel does anything more than to stay where they are and remain silent. Not until the final two verses is any further participation on Israel's part reported, and here again the contrasting subjects emphasize that Yahweh has done the work while Israel only observes and reacts: "And *Yahweh* on that day saved Israel from the hand of the Egyptians; and *Israel* saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the Sea, and they believed in Yahweh and in Moses His servant." Whereas initially they had seen and feared, now they see and believe. But their salvation has been won entirely by Yahweh, and they can only respond with faith—surely a beautifully Lutheran con-

clusion!

Another look at the chapter discloses a series of references to time, dovetailing with the pillar references. A close study of these will show how J depicted the miraculous deliverance itself. The first is at the end of v. 20, informing us that the pillar of cloud prevented the two camps from coming into contact all night long. The next verse reports that concurrently a strong east wind blew, causing the waters to be displaced from their normal position. Presumably this means that the waters shifted westward, leaving at least the eastern (windward) side of the sea-bed dry by the end of a blustery night. According to v. 24 it was just at this time, during the last of the three night watches (1 Sam. 11:11; Judg. 7:19) that Yahweh in the pillar threw the Egyptians into a panic. They decided to retreat (v. 25) and fled onto the dry sea-bed (v. 27). But at the end of the night the wind also ended, and as the sun began to dawn the waters flowed back to their normal position, drowning the Egyptians and washing them up on the shore. There the Israelites found them dead the next morning.

This series of statements yields a portrait of the event at the Sea that is complete in itself. All parts hang together coherently and there appear to be no gaps, yet only about one third of the present, combined text has been used. We seem to have uncovered a preexisting narrative which has a satisfying internal structure and a well-developed theological point of its own. It tells of a miraculous deliverance by Yahweh's power alone without referring to a crossing of the Sea by the Israelites,<sup>28</sup> and it emphatically reminds Israel that the proper response to Yahweh's saving might is

<sup>28</sup> A trait which this narrative shares with several other Old Testament references to the Reed Sea event, particularly Joshua 24:6-7, which seems to be quite closely related to the J (or E) account.

faith. No room is left for boasting over human achievements. Such a message is highly appropriate for the hearers of J's time, when the virile young nation was basking under the achievements of David and Solomon. This form of telling the story preached very clearly the Gospel of Yahweh's grace to that generation—and it can easily be applied also to our own.

### *The Priestly Account (P)*

One of the most striking features in the structure of Ex. 14 is a series of three speeches of Yahweh to Moses. The fact that they belong together is evident from a number of repeated features linking the three, yet showing a progression from one to the next. V. 1 begins, "And Yahweh spoke to Moses saying," whereas vv. 15 and 26 both have, "And Yahweh said to Moses." For ease of reference we may designate these as Commands I, II, and III. In Commands I and II Moses is told, "Speak to the sons of Israel, and they shall . . ." In the first case they are to turn back and encamp at a stated location; in the second they are to break this camp and move in across the Sea. Commands II and III, however, also contain instructions for Moses himself: "Stretch out your hand over the Sea." In Command II the result will be that the Sea is split open, while in Command III the waters will return again. In each case also the effect of these actions on the Egyptians is anticipated. Command I will result in their concluding that the Israelites are hopelessly lost and the decision to chase after them; Command II in their following the Israelites into the Sea; and Command III in their being covered by the returning waters. Thus the entire course of the event is traced in advance through the three speeches of Yahweh.

These speeches also serve another important function. The first two make Yahweh's theological purposes explicit. In Command I he says, "And

I will make the heart of Pharaoh obstinate<sup>29</sup> . . . and I intend to be glorified in Pharaoh and in all his forces, and the Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh." Command II uses almost the identical language. Command III, however, omits this element entirely. This final speech is much shorter than the first two, an arrangement which very effectively emphasizes its climactic character. Yahweh's intent has already been made perfectly clear, and the final outcome needs only to be reported very succinctly.

Much of the wording of the three commands is exactly reflected in certain of the narrative clauses in this chapter. These lines clearly belong to P because of various links with other Priestly segments of the Pentateuch. In the structure of the P account these reported events are portrayed as the exact execution of Yahweh's commands. Execution I begins with the last line of v. 4, which reports simply, "And they did thus,"<sup>30</sup> that is, the Israelites obeyed Yahweh's command

<sup>29</sup> The term here rendered "make obstinate" (from the root *h2q*, describing one as being "firm, strong, courageous, stubborn, obstinate") is one of two which KJV and RSV translate as "harden." (The other is from *kbd*, "heavy, dull, hardened, obdurate." Luther properly distinguished the two, translating them with *verstocken* and *verhaerten*, respectively. So also the Jerusalem Bible and NEB.) Though the distinction in meaning is not great, the confusion of the two is unfortunate from the viewpoint of source criticism. Our term *h2q* is found not only here but also in those portions of the plagues narrative which for various reasons are assigned to P (7:13, 22; 8:19; 9:12; 11:10), whereas *kbd* appears in J sections. (7:14; 8:15, 32; 9:7, 34; 10:1)

<sup>30</sup> This simple expression is a favorite one in P, exemplifying as it does the appropriate response to a command of God. The plagues narrative uses it as part of the same command/execution pattern in 7:10, 20, and 8:17, where in each case the same expression is then also used of the Egyptian sorcerers, setting up an intriguing counter-theme. See also 16:17; Num. 5:4; 8:3; and the similar but even more frequent statement, "He/they did just as Yahweh commanded."

precisely. But not only do the people do their expected part; Yahweh also brings about exactly what He has promised Moses. Hence Execution I continues in vv. 8-9, reporting that the very things foretold in vv. 1-4 did indeed occur. (See particularly the expressions indicated by bold type in the translation.) By the end of this first phase in the three-part cycle the scene has been deftly established, down to the details of geography.<sup>31</sup> It is a scene of great conflict and tension, with the Egyptians catching up behind and the water in front of Israel, all other escape routes apparently being blocked off by the places named.

Into this dismal situation Yahweh speaks Command II. Echoing it, Execution II (vv. 21a and 21d-23) reports that when Moses gestured with his hand as directed the waters split open and the Israelites were able to obey the command to set out by moving forward on a path through the Sea. Also as foretold, however, the Egyptians gave chase and went in after them. Thus the second phase results in a still further heightening of the tension, and another command from Yahweh is required.

Command III, as already noted, is very brief, and the same is true of Execution III (vv. 27a and 28-29). Moses repeats his gesture, the waters return, and the result is that Pharaoh's forces are drowned to the last man. But rather than end on this hostile note, the narrator repeats v. 22, describing the miraculous passage of the Israelites across the dry sea-bed be-

<sup>31</sup> A great deal of discussion has raged over the place-names here (and in 13:20). At present it seems that none of the locations can be established with certainty by archaeological evidence. It is safe to say, however, that nothing militates against placing them either due east or somewhat more northeast of the Wadi Tumilat, an eastward extension of the Nile delta region probably to be identified as the land of Goshen. Thus the miracle took place either in the present mid-Suez Canal area or—less likely—nearer to the Mediterranean coast.

tween walls of water. There is no need to belabor the obvious fact, prepared for in Commands I and II, that hereby Yahweh has indeed been glorified, so that even the Egyptians had to recognize Yahweh's power and reputation.

As in the case of the J narrative, we have been able to reconstruct another complete and remarkably coherent account using fewer than half the lines in the chapter. The portrait of the event at the Sea provided by P presents a very different structure from that of J. It is highly stylized and segmented by the use of repeated formulas, which divide the action into three distinct episodes.<sup>32</sup> Certain narrative details in P also differ rather widely from J, for instance, the active involvement of the human mediator Moses,<sup>33</sup> or the fact that here not only the Egyptians but also the Israelites venture out onto the dried-up sea-bed.

The theological point that P emphasizes in the story is also significantly different from J. The stress is on the supremacy and glory of Yahweh, even in the face of a formidable enemy.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> This is a well-known trait of the Priestly writer. See the intricate structuring of the first creation account, Gen. 1:1—2:4a; the larger pattern imposed by the *toledot* (progeny, "generations") formula on the entire Book of Genesis; and the still larger pattern of the four covenant eras (those of Adam, Noah, and Abraham, culminating in that of Moses).

<sup>33</sup> This feature stands out by contrast to J also in the narrative of the plagues. In J it is Yahweh who brings the plague of frogs, then removes them again (8:2, 13), whereas in P Yahweh tells Moses to have Aaron stretch out the rod to bring the frogs (8:5-6). The same contrast reappears in connection with the insect plagues [cp. 8:21, 24 (J) with 8:16-17 (P)] and the skin disease plagues. [Cp. 9:3, 6 (J) with 9:8-10 (P)]

<sup>34</sup> The more powerful the enemy, the greater yet is Yahweh's glory. This is expressed in P's plagues narrative by depicting the ability of the Egyptians to do at least some of the same miracles as Moses and Aaron. In the account of the Sea the same effect is achieved by the repeated listing of Pharaoh's horses, his chariots and his drivers, and all his forces (in varying sequence; cp. vv. 4, 9, 17, 18, 23, 26, 28).

Contrary to their earlier inclination, the Egyptians themselves would have to concede Yahweh's superiority after this great display of His power. This would have been a useful emphasis when retelling the story for the benefit of the Jews in Babylonian exile, who were groaning to Yahweh in their renewed bondage. The stress on the role of Moses was likewise useful for impressing on these latter-day Israelites the authority of the priestly tradition as the foundation for the rebuilding of their shattered community. Some aspects, at least, of P's message can also be made fruitful for the Christian people of God in various situations which they may confront today.

#### *Other Hands at Work in Ex. 13—15*

Approximately one quarter of the lines which make up Ex. 13:17 to 14:31 have not been taken into account in the discussion of either J or P. As already noted, their ascription is uncertain, and it is quite possible that a few of these lines belong with one or the other of the full-length accounts already treated. There are definite indications, however, that most of these lines are remnants of a third once-complete narrative ascribable to E, the Elohist. The use of *Elohim* for God in 13:17-19 and 14:19 points in that direction, though also the E source feels free to use the name Yahweh after its introduction in ch. 3. The reference to the bones of Joseph in 13:19 clearly reflects an E passage at the end of Genesis (50:25).

The E traditions are thought to have been partially incorporated into the already-written J document, perhaps shortly after the end of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B. C. Since this supplementary material was drawn from a tradition quite similar to J, it does not seem to have greatly changed either the story line or the theological thrust of the latter in regard to the

Yet another important testimony to the deliverance at the Sea is to be found in this context, however. The sequel to our narrative, telling of Israel's leaving the Reed Sea and traveling on into the desert, does not begin until 15:22. Prior to that we are told in verses 20-21 of an appropriate response by Israel to Yahweh's great act of salvation at the Sea:

And Miriam the prophetess the  
sister of Aaron  
took a tambourine in her hand  
and all the women went out after her  
with tambourines and with dances  
and Miriam sang (responded) to  
them (masculine)  
"sing to Yahweh  
for he is highly exalted  
horses and chariots  
he has cast into the Sea."

This conclusion to the Reed Sea account may well have been added from the E source as another supplement to the J narrative. The hymn verse which Miriam sings obviously reflects the occasion very suitably. Short as it is, it reviews the essential fact of the event: Yahweh caused the enemy's chariotry to be overwhelmed by the Sea. And it makes clear that this feat establishes Yahweh's supremacy, so that His people must sing His praises. We may safely assume that the song here quoted was actually used by generations of Israelites as their proper response at each new retelling of the deliverance at the Sea. It serves very appropriately as the hymnic conclusion to the story of the exodus, which has occupied the whole of Ex. 1:1—15:21.

But there is now also a much fuller version of the hymn, immediately preceding the brief reference to Miriam's song. It comprises vv. 1b-18, with a brief introductory formula ("Then Moses sang, and the sons of Israel, this song to Yahweh; and they said, saying:") plus another verse of explanation at the end. This last (v. 19) uses terminology very similar to that

of the P account (cp. 14:28-29), which may indicate that the entire 19 verses was brought in here via the P source.<sup>35</sup> The opening lines of the hymn in this form are virtually identical with the four lines cited as Miriam's song. The remainder expands the theme into a victory song of great power and elemental beauty. Following various recent interpreters,<sup>36</sup> we accept the entire poem as an archaic composition, datable well back into the period of the judges. The latter half (vv. 13-18) of the two-part hymn commemorates Yahweh's successes in the conquest of Canaan, while the former half (vv. 1b-12) deals with the event with which we are concerned here. If the dating is correct, this is by far the earliest source for our knowledge of what happened at the Reed Sea.

What portrait of the event emerges from the Song of the Sea, as this composition may be called? It is understandable—though perhaps also regrettable—that this poetic source is far more interested in conveying a sense of wonder and awe at Yahweh's power than in describing exactly what happened. It divided the event into a series of overlapping impressions rather than a chronological sequence

<sup>35</sup> Others see 15:1-18 as J, still others regard all of it (or vv. 2-18) as an independent supplement to the combined JE narrative. In either of these cases v. 19 must be considered a later insertion by P or the Priestly redactor. The entire question of ascription is of minor importance, since in any case the hymn itself (where our main interest lies) is a separate composition, ultimately independent of all the prose sources. Its independence in the tradition-history has been well argued by F. M. Cross in the 1968 article cited in the next note.

<sup>36</sup> Particularly Frank M. Cross Jr. and David Noel Freedman, "The Song of Miriam," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, XIII (1955), 237-50, and Cross, "The Song of the Sea and Canaanite Myth," *Journal for Theology and the Church*, V (1968), 1-25. They date the entire work in its original form to the 12th or early 11th century. Earlier critics generally regarded only the opening verse as truly archaic, taking the rest as a much later expansion.

of occurrences. But by picking out details wherever we find them we learn that the Egyptians are pursuing Israel, hoping to overtake them, destroy them with the sword, and divide the spoil (v. 9). In the course of their pursuit they somehow get into a position where the following can happen to them.<sup>37</sup> Yahweh blows up a strong wind over the Sea, churning the waters into waves as high as hills (vv. 8, 10). As a result the Egyptians are thrown into the Sea (vv. 1, 4). Alternatively it is said that the wind-blown Sea covers them (vv. 5, 10), or that they sink into the water (vv. 4, 5, 10) like a stone or a lead weight (vv. 5, 10). Still more pictorially it is said that Yahweh's right hand does it (vv. 6, 12), or that his burning fury consumes them like straw (v. 7), or that they are swallowed up whole into the underworld (v. 12). We note that there is no mention of any activity on Israel's part, such as walking through the Sea on dry ground, nor is there any reference to the Egyptians fleeing or going on dry ground. The absence of such details is difficult to evaluate. Whether or not this throws any light on the historicity of various items in the prose accounts,<sup>38</sup> it is more important to note that the purposes of the poet did not require these details even in a celebration of the event 12 verses

<sup>37</sup> Cross, "Song of the Sea," p. 17, suggests it is because they are crossing the water in barks or barges. It seems at least equally possible that they were simply crossing a narrow, low spit of land next to the water.

<sup>38</sup> Plastaras, *God of Exodus*, p. 200, offers the interesting conjecture that P's portrayal of the Israelites as passing through the midst of the hostile waters involves a "telescoping" of the two events celebrated in the Song of the Sea. First Israel was delivered from her Egyptian enemies at the Reed Sea, then her Canaanite enemies were struck with terror as she *passed over/through* into Yahweh's land (v. 16). The faith-value of both events is summed up in the picture of being brought unharmed through waters. This is then equivalent to the use of the same picture in the psalms, for example, Ps. 69:1-2, 14-15.



long. To Yahweh belongs the praise as the Warrior who vanquishes His enemies through a variety of means. Each new detail, whether pictorial or historical, adds its voice in the rich chorus of testimony to Him who is "awesome in renown, worker of wonders." (V. 11)

One more voice is yet to be heard—in some ways the most important of all. It is that of the so-called redactor, who brought the several sources together into the canonical form of Ex. 13—15.<sup>39</sup> Regardless of the extent to which we may have been willing to attribute inspiration to any or all of the earlier sources, we are bound by our doctrinal commitment to recognize the grace of inspiration as having guided this final major phase of the work. It is the intricately combined form of the text that is canonical and therefore authoritative for us. This leads to some immensely liberating and edifying observations. It was of course obvious to the anonymous but inspired man of God who did the work of redacting that the texts which he

<sup>39</sup> Actually room must be left for several stages of redaction, as is already clear from the foregoing. The earliest would be the redactor who supplemented the J document by the addition of excerpts from the E tradition, perhaps around 700 B. C. The inclusion of the archaic Song of the Sea, in both its full form and a one-verse citation of it, may involve one or two further stages, at undetermined times. The most creative phase of the redaction, however, was that which wove the JE narrative together with that of P. This occurred either in connection with the initial writing down of the Priestly materials, most likely during the Babylonian Captivity around 550 B. C., or somewhat later after P had already become a separate written document. It is primarily this Priestly redaction (symbolized R<sup>p</sup>) to which we refer in the text.

was bringing together and editing represented diverse testimonies to the same important event. If they were not diverse, he would feel no compulsion to preserve as much as possible of each lest anything of importance to the faith be lost. And if they did not refer to basically the same event, he would not have woven them together but left them entirely separate, as he did with many other episodes in the several documents. Thus both aspects are part of God's purpose in inspiring this combined text. The event is to be regarded as one—a deeply significant one, as we have observed at length. It can be alluded to and its essence captured in a single brief phrase or it can be expanded into a long impressionistic poem or a detailed narrative. The diversities in detail and in theological application are not to cast doubt on the occurrence of the event but to convey the fullness of God's judgment and grace as these touch many kinds of people in many different situations. We may indeed be unable to reconstruct in our minds exactly what happened on that memorable occasion, and we may differ widely on the factuality of various details. But we have been brought face to face with the acts and words of the Ancient of Days, the same God who has in these latter days both spoken and acted in His Son. The diversity of testimonies makes His words and deeds richly applicable to ourselves in all situations of life. But the Gospel message of His grace in saving us freely from our enemies remains changeless, as it reaches its peak in Jesus Christ.

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