THE CROSSING OF THE SEA

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The third text from the Old Testament that takes up again and develops the theme of “waters-dry land” is Exod 14 [the other two are Gen 1:6-10 and Gen 6-9]. This time, the focus is no longer on the universe but on the people of Israel and their exodus from Egypt. The account also presents the best example of “liberation” in the Bible.

A. Division of the Text

The text of Exod 14:1-31 contains three units: 14:1-14, 14:15-25 and 14:26-31. The introductions and conclusions of these three parts correspond to each other.

Each part begins with a discourse of God to Moses (14:1-4a, 14:15-18, 14:26). In this narrative, God is like a director who explains the role each character is to play; appearing three times onstage,

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as it were, to give his instructions. He is in sole charge of artistic direction and the actors must obey him alone. In the first scene, God shows the precise direction the story is to take and announces the way in which it will unfold. It seems that he has foreseen everything, and no detail is overlooked. When he intervenes the second time, Israel is in a dire situation; the Egyptians have pursued them to the very edge of the sea, and escape seems impossible. All save Moses are about to surrender, until God’s conversation with the prophet averts Israel’s embarrassment. God’s third intervention solves Israel’s predicament and the dreadful Egyptians disappear forever. God’s utterances are key elements in the narrative, they direct it always towards the future, describing in advance the action which is to follow.

The conclusion of the first part (14:13-14) contains two elements. Moses addresses the despairing Israelites to encourage them by announcing that, first, God is about to save his people, therefore Israel will not see the Egyptians anymore (14:13); and second, that God himself will fight for Israel (14:14). The second element is to be found again at the end of section two (14:25) in the mouths of the Egyptians: “Let us flee from Israel, for the Lord is fighting on their side against the Egyptians.” The Egyptians themselves recognize the truth of what Moses announced (cf. 14:14).

Exod 14:30-31 takes up the first element: “Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore. And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did against the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses” (cf. Exod 14:13). The key words that connect 14:30-31 and 14:13-14 are numerous: “to save,” “today,” “in this day,” “to see,” “do not be afraid” and “they were afraid”.

To emphasize this division, there are some indications of place and time. The first section describes the pursuit of the Israelites by the Egyptians and ends by the sea. The place of the first section is therefore the journey towards the sea, a journey undertaken by Israel and Egypt. We can ascertain that it is evening from the fact that the sons of Israel were setting up camp near the sea (14:9) when the
Egyptians reached them. The second section is set with the sea as its backdrop, Israel entering the sea with the Egyptians in pursuit (14:22-23). The text clearly indicates that the crossing of the sea takes place at night (14:20-21). According to 14:24, God intervenes “in the morning watch,” that is, between two and six in the morning. Finally, the third section supposes that Israel has reached the other shore of the sea (14:29) and is already safe, whilst Moses, following God’s injunction, stretches his hands over the waters that will cover the Egyptians. This happens “when the morning appeared” (14:27).

The last hint favoring this division is that each part ends with an “act of faith.” Moses proclaims his trust in God (14:13-14) whilst everybody else has lost faith. The Egyptians themselves acknowledge the presence of the Lord in their defeat (14:25b), and finally Israel’s newly-regained faith overflows into song—the song of Moses with his people (Exod 15:1-21).

We can therefore give the following titles to the three sections: 1) “Towards the sea, towards evening”; 2) “In the midst of the sea, at night”; and 3) “On the other side of the sea, as the morning appears.”

B. Exodus 14:1-14: Masters and Slaves Face to Face

Our commentary on this first section will include only the most important elements relating to our topic. In particular, the text contains a graphic description of the concept of slaves and of their relationship with their masters.

As in the beginning of each section, God directs the scenario through Moses (14:1-4). We then return to the palace of the King of Egypt and, through the narrator, witness the ensuing meeting between Pharaoh and his counsellors, where the decision is made to recapture the Israelites and return them to captivity (14:5-7). In 14:5, one sentence in particular is worthy of attention: “What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?” The attitude of Egypt is clear: the masters cannot do without their slaves; the
latter are indispensable. The bond between masters and slaves is not a bond of freedom but a bond of necessity.

Pharaoh, thereupon, prepares for the pursuit of Israel. He takes his army, the most splendid and greatly feared army of that time. We must remember that all this takes place without the knowledge of the Israelites; only we, the readers, are privy to these plans.

The scene of the pursuit (14:8-10) is a work of art, a masterpiece of biblical narrative. First, we see the Egyptians with their chariots, then for a brief instant the eye of the narrator, so to speak, focuses on the Israelites who are going out with “raised hands” (a gesture of freedom). The contrast is strong; Israel thinks itself to be free, quite unaware that the Egyptians are in fact pursuing them. The dramatic tension is heightened with the next verse. Again, we see the Egyptians; this time they overtake the sons of Israel. Now, as in 14:8, the narrator shifts his focus to the Israelites who are preparing their camp beside the sea. Previously (14:8), they were walking, now they are still. With the sea in front of them and the Egyptians behind, they are not yet aware that they have fallen into a trap; only the readers see this. Before the unfortunate Israelites discover their desperate situation, the narrator obliges the reader to do a “parade-ground inspection” of Egypt’s impressive army. In fact, 14:9 contains the longest description of this army in the entire chapter. The Egyptians have undoubtedly reached the apex of their power in the account and they appear to be unstoppable. What can the hapless Israelites do?

For a third time, the narrator raises the level of dramatic tension. “Pharaoh approached” (14:10). With his splendid army, he is undoubtedly in complete command of the situation. Only now do the Israelites note his presence; alas, it is too late. “The sons of Israel raised their eyes...” (14:10). We can understand their terror and their desperate cry for help; in fact, the narrative thrust has led us to anticipate this event. One of the purposes of the narration is exactly this: “to read” means to re-construct and to re-live the experiences of the past transmitted by the text. In this particular case, it is clearly the experience of fear which is re-lived, an element which will have great importance later.
Although Israel cries out to the Lord, the sincerity of their prayer is dubious. As in many similar cases, the reaction is immediate: it is necessary to find a scapegoat! And who will this be if not Moses? The short utterance of Israel (14:11-12) is indicative of its mentality and its content merits reflection. The syntax reveals some salient points:

And they said to Moses,
“Is it because there are no graves in Egypt
that you have taken us away to die in the desert?
What have you done to us, in bringing us out of Egypt?
Is not this what we said to you in Egypt,
‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’?
For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians
than to die in the desert.”

Five of the clauses above end with the word “Egypt” and two with the word “desert.” Israel’s preference is clear. They prefer Egypt to the desert, slavery to freedom, Pharaoh to God and Moses, the past to the future, and the secure and known world to the insecure and unknown world. In other words, the slaves want to remain slaves. Why? Because of fear. Like the reader, they have now seen Pharaoh’s formidable army and the enthusiasm which marked their departure from Egypt has melted like snow in the sun. The biblical text is unequivocal, revealing to us the root of Israel’s mentality; it is that of a subject people who do not really want their freedom. Slaves prefer slavery because they fear freedom; likewise they fear death and are afraid of their masters. Whilst this mentality persists, the slaves will remain enslaved, prisoners of their own fear.

In fact, the Israelites use the same language as the Egyptians. “What did you do to us?” (14:11b) echoes the words of Pharaoh’s servants: “What have we done?” The lords cannot do without their slaves any more than the slaves can do without their masters. Now, there appears to be mutual agreement, “Shall we return together to Egypt?” Moses’ opposition in the face of their intransigence will be decisive.

We have already spoken of the intervention of Moses (14:13-
14) in relation to the structure of the chapter. Let us reflect now on three particulars of greater importance.

If the account underlines the fear of the Israelites, allowing the reader to experience it, Moses goes immediately to the root of the problem when he says: “Don’t be afraid.” It is more than a formula, it is the remedy to the evil which enslaves Israel.

If the Israelites see their salvation in the return to Egypt, that is, to their past, Moses sees it in the present; twice he says “today.” “See the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today, for the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again” (14:13). Salvation is not in the past but in the present.

If Israel was mesmerized, almost paralyzed, by the Egyptian army, it was because it had forgotten the presence of the Lord. Moses therefore invites his people to focus not on the fearsome chariots of the Egyptian army, but on the salvation of God. For Moses, the Egyptians no longer exist; they have already disappeared forever.

The contrast between 14:10 and 14:13 is sharp. They describe two views, two attitudes, diametrically opposed. The vision of Moses saves the Israelites because he sees more than they do; his perspicacity allows him to scrutinize the secrets of God and of history. Here, most probably, we have a case where contemplation and action, mysticism and prophetic commitment are reconciled in order to begin a decisive phase in the liberation of Israel. “The Lord will fight for you and you have only to be still” (14:14). The essential point, it seems, is to still their fear in order that God may act, and silence replaces the cry of fear (cf. 14:10b and 14b). But how costly this victory over fear is! The following episode, the entering into the sea, will describe it in a symbolic manner.

C. Exodus 14:15-25: Creation and Liberation

From the second part of the account we can deduce one of the key elements of Israel’s salvation. When God asks Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea, at the same time he causes a strong wind
to blow, a wind that blew over the waters the whole night (14:21). The “strong wind” recalls the end of the flood (Gen 8:1) and even the wind mentioned at the beginning of the first creation account (Gen 1:2). In fact, as in Gen 8:13-14 or in Gen 1:9-10, the “dry land” reappears (Exod 14:22; cf. 14:16). In other words, the narration describes a new act of creation. God commands the waters anew to give way to the “dry land” which he had destined for humanity in Gen 1 so that humanity might fill it. This “dry land” he had purified and rid of violence in order that he might give it to the righteous man, Noah. This time, God acts in favor of the Israelites. The Egyptians, like the corrupt and sinful generation destroyed by the deluge, remain in the waters of primordial chaos.

Going a step further, we can say that the salvation of Israel is an act of God the creator. In order to save Israel, he uses the same power he used to create the world; salvation is a new creation. The creator is both savior and liberator, defeating the forces of oppression and violence and thereby abolishing the fear which paralyzed Israel.

Through its liberation, Israel experiences the presence of God who commands the earth, wind and sea, an experience which remains fundamental to its faith. To be liberated means to experience the creative power of God, a power stronger than the most awesome forces of the universe.

The account describes the beginning of Israel’s transformation in a richly symbolic manner. God changes his position, placing himself behind his people, thus separating them from Egypt and preventing them from returning to the slavery of the past (14:19-20).

D. Exodus 14:26-31:
The March of Faith and of Freedom

In the third part of the account, we find further important elements, some of which merit close attention. Among them are the direction of Israel’s march, the symbolic significance of the walls of
water, the meaning of the moment of salvation, and the relationship between “fear of God” and “faith.”

1. The Significance of the March in the Sea

The text of Exod 14 mentions twice that “the waters were for the Israelites like a wall on the right and on the left.” This specifies clearly the direction taken by Israel and its symbolic meaning. In the ancient world, to orientate oneself meant to look towards the orient, that is, the east. He who looks to the east has the south to his right and the north to his left. Therefore, in the Bible, “right” is also taken to mean “south” (Josh 17:7; 1 Sam 23:19,24; 2 Kgs 23:13; Ps 89:13; Job 23:9), whilst “left” corresponds with “north” (Gen 14:15; Josh 19:27; Ezek 16:46; Job 23:9).

If Israel walks with a wall of water to its right—that is, south; and another to its left—that is, north; it is walking towards the east, leaving Egypt behind to the west. But what is the direction of this march?

These two cardinal points, east and west, have a symbolic meaning in the ancient world as well as in the Bible; the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. The east symbolizes the beginning of light and life; the west is the place where light disappears, representing the place where death begins. The journey of the sun during the day is an image of human life, from birth to death, passing through the zenith of noontime or maturity.

But Israel walks from west to east. Even here, the ancient world provides us with an explanation. If the sun disappears in the west, to rise again the next morning in the east, it means that for the ancient mind, the sun travels under the earth from one point to the other. It “dies” every evening and it “rises” to new life every morning, so to speak. The journey of the sun throughout the night is a journey of “cyclical resurrection.” During the night, the sun passes through a dangerous place in the darkness but, at the same time, it regenerates itself in this primordial ocean which is under the earth, as we have noted above.
Therefore, it is a resurrection journey that Israel takes, but it will take place only once. The sun accompanies it, whilst the cloud of fire represents or rather personifies the “sun of justice” that overcomes darkness and the forces of chaos. The journey of Israel is a journey of resurrection through the sea and the night, beyond death, towards the east and the dawn of a new life.

2. The Symbolism of the Walls of Water

The image of the walls of water is, to say the least, paradoxical. The fluid element becomes solid; the sea that swallows protects; a way appears in a world with no apparent way; two vertical walls appear in a horizontal world; a formless world takes shape; and Israel saves itself by entering the sea, which in the normal course of events would mean destruction. The two walls of water are a complete negation of the world of the sea, which for the biblical world and ancient mythologies is a chaotic world—confused, shapeless and without “order” (“cosmos”).

The passage through the waters acquires new and unexpected significance. In the first paragraph above, we have seen that the symbolism of the waters was rather negative, or at least ambiguous, whilst in Exod 14 it becomes positive. God’s action, through his servant Moses, has transformed the meaning of the sea. The world of death has become the world of birth.

In the technical language of the world of symbols, it is antiphrasis or a double negation. To negate the negative character of the waters means to give them a positive meaning. The cross of Jesus is another example of this phenomenon. The cross is an instrument of torture and of death, therefore it is an image with a strong negative connotation. But Jesus made of it an instrument of salvation, making his death the door that leads to true life.

In other words, we can say that Israel “dies” when entering the waters, but what in fact “dies” is the slave bound to Egypt. When Israel comes out of the waters, it is reborn and free. To enter and to come out of the waters is symbolic of death and resurrection (cf.
Rom 6 for a Christian interpretation of the same movement which corresponds to the rite of baptism).

But the waters do not have the same meaning for all; whilst Israel is saved in these waters, Egypt is destroyed. Why? In a few words, we can say that Israel has found life in the waters because it has risked all, trusting in the word of God, finally choosing to enter the sea rather than return to Egypt. The true freedom promised by God is more important than life itself and in putting themselves at risk in the realm of death, they discover life beyond death. Paradoxically, the sea is not in fact the end of their existence but rather the beginning of a new life.

For the Egyptians, it is the opposite. They do not enter the sea first but they pursue the Israelites in their determination to force them to return to captivity. For Egypt, only one shore matters and at all costs they want Israel to remain on that side. For them there is only one form of existence; it is the life that ends with death symbolized by the sea. There is nothing on the other side, nothing worthwhile and they cannot reach the other shore, which for them does not exist. They identify themselves with a world in which they can exert their will through their most powerful weapon, the fear of death. But they are impotent against those who no longer fear death. The Egyptians occupy a limited universe, a narrow world which begins and ends where their power ceases to hold sway.

3. THE TIME OF SALVATION

Like the direction of the march, the time of salvation also has its importance. Furthermore, both are connected. Like the sea, the night has somewhat negative associations and is often seen as the time when the forces of death are active. It is the time of darkness, whilst the morning is the time in which life, light and justice triumph (cf. Ps 88; Job 3).

On this basis, it is hardly surprising that we see an apparently triumphant Pharaoh in the evening when the sun goes down (14:10). It is also the time of Israel’s “great fear,” the moment in which they
see nothing else but death in the desert. But God is present in the heart of the night (14:21-22), and is the light that “illumines the night” (14:21). Once again, as with the walls of water, we have a paradoxical image; the presence of God is revealed as the opposite of night.

The Egyptians’ triumph, however, is short-lived. “And in the morning watch, the Lord in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down upon the host of the Egyptians” (14:24). In Israel, night was divided into three watches of four hours each: “the first watch” is from six in the evening to ten at night (cf. Lam 2:18); “the middle watch” is from ten in the night to two in the morning (cf. Judg 7:19); “the morning watch” is from two to six in the morning (cf. Exod 14:4, 1 Sam 11:11). At the approach of morning, the forces of light overcome the forces of darkness (cf. Job 38:12-13), and in this moment God defeats the Egyptians (14:24-25).

The victory of God is complete at “the morning watch,” that is, at daybreak. The sun is about to rise and Israel is already on the other side of both the sea and the night, whereas the Egyptians remain in the darkness and in the sea. They will never see the light of this new day that belongs only to those who risk venturing beyond the sea, beyond the night and beyond death. The morning is an important moment of life in the Bible. It is the moment in which the king or his officials will execute justice (2 Sam 15:2; Jer 21:12; Zeph 3:5; Ps 73:14, 101:8; Job 7:18, 38:12-14). God listens to the morning prayer (Is 21:11-12, 26:9, 33:2; Hos 6:3; Ps 5:4, 17:5, 30:6, 46:6, 49:15, 57:9, 108:3, 73:20, 90:14, 130:6-7, 143:8; cf. Ps 63:2; Lam 3:23). Finally, on many occasions Israel obtains victory in the morning (2 Kgs 3:21-24; Is 17:14, 37:36; 2 Kgs 19:35; Hos 10:15; Ps 46:6; 2 Chr 20:16-20). God’s judgment, answered prayer (cf. 14:15) and victory are all elements we find present in Exod 14.

God has judged and his judgment is, as ever, a separation between life and death. The column of fire has, as it were, purified Israel from Egypt. God is at the center of the column progressing inexorably into the sea: Israel is in front, Egypt behind, whilst the walls of water are to their right and left. In the morning, the separa-
tion is complete; Israel belongs to the day, to the light, and to the life that begins beyond both the night and the sea. In complete contrast, Egypt has remained in the sea and in the night, in that world of darkness to which it chose to belong forever. Israel is born because it “died to Egypt.” As St. Paul says, “we are dead to sin” (Rom 6:10-11).

4. “Fear of God” and “Faith”

The final verses of the chapter contain words describing the newness of Israel’s existence. It no longer stands in fear before the army of Pharaoh but instead fears God. Israel has passed from the night to the light of morning, from one seashore to the other, from slavery to freedom, from servitude to service, from “fear” before the Egyptian army to the “fear of God,” from unbelief to faith, from Egypt to the desert, and finally, from the power of Pharaoh to the power of God.

The Bible uses two words to describe this transformation: “fear of God” and “faith” (14:31). In biblical language and in the context of Exod 14, the two expressions have a similar meaning.

The account of the passage through the sea uses the verb “to fear” three times (14:10,14,31). The progression is evident. The first time, Israel “feared much” and “it had a great fear” when it realized the presence of Pharaoh and his army. In 14:14, Moses exhorts the people “Do not fear,” encouraging them to focus on the “salvation of the Lord” compared to the ultimate frailty of the Egyptians who have been annihilated. Thus when the text says: “they fear the Lord” (14:31), it demonstrates the profound change which has taken place in Israel. Now, they no longer fear the power of Pharaoh and have no fear of death, and it is evident that the text is written in order that the reader may fully appreciate that fear is the root of slavery. Freedom begins where fear no longer exists.

But could the “fear of God” be just one more fear? Could God be another Pharaoh? The vocabulary, however, does not allow this interpretation. The verb “to fear” with a direct object (“to fear someone”) is used only when speaking of God. Therefore, it is a different
mindset from that described in 14:10, and this “fear of God” is, in fact, parallel to faith. Ultimately, it is a fear born on the other side of the sea—when Israel crossed the water and overcame the fear of death symbolized by the sea. The fear of God, therefore, is essentially different. It is a life-giving relationship wherein the fear of death finds no place. Unlike Pharaoh, God’s power is not based on the threat of death—because he has demonstrated his power in “saving” Israel (14:13,30-31).

“And they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses” (14:31). These words conclude the account. Actually, in the entire Bible, Israel makes an act of faith only twice: in Exod 4:31 and Exod 14:31 (cf. Ps 106:12). There is only one similar act of faith in Jonah 3:5. In that instance, it is the Ninevites who believe after the preaching of the prophet (the irony of the passage is underlined; whilst the pagans believe immediately, Israel was slow to believe and in fact frequently displayed disbelief throughout its history). And the Old Testament mentions the faith of only one famous individual: Abraham (Gen 15:6). The faith of the people of Exodus therefore corresponds to the faith of the patriarch (“the Father of the faithful”). When the Old Testament speaks of faith on other occasions, it is almost always to say that Israel did not believe, or to call Israel to faith (Num 14:11, 20:12; Deut 1:32, 9:23; 2 Kgs 17:14; 2 Chr 9:6; Ps 78:22,32, 106:24; Lam 3:4,12…). A few exceptions may be found in Ps 116:10 and Ps 119:66.

How are we to define this faith? It is born at daybreak on the other shore of the sea when Israel reaches the desert where it feared to die (14:11-12). Faith is a significant victory over fear. We can say that, as regards Israel, in gaining faith they experienced the creative power of God. The God of Israel, in order to save his people, was able to make the “dry land” appear in the midst of the sea, thus paving the way to a new life in the midst of the waters of death. In such circumstances was the faith of the Israelites born. The power that Israel discovered crossing the sea on dry land is a power stronger than death itself. This experience of faith is the true liberation because he who lives beyond death can no longer be oppressed by those
who use death as an instrument of fear. Faith safeguards Israel from any kind of oppression based on the fear of death, and only by experiencing the sovereign power of the Creator God can Israel be liberated in this definitive manner.

**Conclusion**

Two quotations summarize these considerations on the relationship between creation and liberation. The first is a saying which is famous in the Philippines—first spoken by its national hero, Jose Rizal, a writer sentenced to death by the Spaniards during the revolution which took place on the islands in 1896. Rizal said to his countrymen: “There are tyrants where there are slaves” (“Hay tiranos donde hay esclavos”). In other words, tyranny can exist only where the people have the mentality of a slave and for only as long as the people maintain this mentality. It is useless to be liberated from a tyrant if, at the same time, there is no change in mentality. A slave people will look for another tyrant. The other saying is from the Indian poet, Kabir (1440-1518). He expresses well, it seems to me, the essence of the experience of liberation when he says: “There is a land in which doubt and sorrow are powerless: Where the terror of death is no more.” Who can overcome the terror of death if not s/he who experiences a power capable of taking him or her beyond the reign of death?

**References**

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