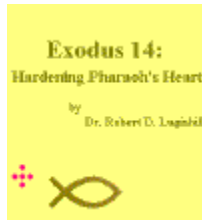


Exodus 14: Hardening Pharaoh's Heart

Verses 11-18

by Dr. Robert D. Luginbill



Verse 22:

Then the Israelites went through the sea while the waters were a wall for them on the right and on the left.

the waters were a wall: The barrier of water forming on both sides of the escape route is a wall of protection for the Israelites, but is a mass of pent up disaster, just waiting to be unleashed, for the Egyptians. Note the poetic description of the collected waters in Exodus 15:8: they are characterized as "piled up", "standing up like a heap" and "curdled" or "thickened" in the "heart of the sea".

Verse 23:

And the Egyptians pursued and went in after them, all Pharaoh's horse, both his chariots and his horsemen, into the midst of the sea.

And the Egyptians pursued: The pillar of cloud and fire, the visible manifestation of the Angel of the Lord (a theophany of Christ; see above on verse nineteen), has apparently followed the Israelites into the dry sea bed, making a pursuit possible at this point. It is just before dawn by the time the Egyptians enter the sea bed. The Israelites have been on the march all night, and having covered the ten to fifteen mile passage, are by now close to coming safely through to the far side.

and went in after them: The Egyptians go in after them without apparent hesitation in spite of the incredible miracle clearly visible before their eyes. The hardening of heart which the Lord has allowed to occur makes it possible for them to disregard the gross temerity of their course of action (see above on verse seventeen), goaded on by their desire for carnage and plunder (see Ex.15:9).

into the midst of the sea: Note that Egyptians go *into* the sea (Hebrew *el-toch*, while in verse 22 the Israelites go *through* it (Hebrew *bethoch*). The language is ominously precise: the Israelites get all the way through, but the Egyptians, while they *into* will never make it completely *through*.

Verse 24:

And it came to pass during the morning watch, that the Lord looked down on the camp of the Egyptians in a pillar of fire and cloud and threw the camp of the Egyptians into confusion.

at the morning watch: In antiquity, the hours of darkness were commonly divided into three "watches". As the time of year is mid to late spring, the time of the last or "morning" watch would be roughly from two to six A.M. Day has thus not yet dawned, but the morning watch, evidently underway for some time now, is likely close to its end.

the Lord looked down on the camp of the Egyptians: During this morning watch, the Lord, from the visible manifestation of His presence (the pillar of cloud and fire which is still following the marching Israelites), observes that the Egyptian "camp" is closing in (see on verse nineteen above for a "camp" being potentially mobile in the Hebrew usage).

and threw the camp of the Egyptians into confusion: An intense, unearthly dread now falls upon the Egyptians of the sort God often employs against the enemies of Israel (compare Exodus 23:27: "I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run."; see also Zech.14:13: "On that day, men will be stricken by the Lord with great panic."). Only after it is too late do the Egyptians now realize the folly of their actions and the perilous nature of their situation.

Verse 25:

And He made the wheels of [Pharaoh's] chariots swerve and so that [the drivers] could only guide them with difficulty. Then the Egyptians said,

"Let us flee from before Israel for the Lord is fighting for them against the Egyptians."

And He made the wheels of [Pharaoh's] chariots swerve: The Lord causes the chariots to behave erratically (He does not "make the wheels fall off" as some translations would have it - then they could not be driven at all!). The Egyptians rightly interpret this latest miracles as evidence that "the Lord" is responsible for their chariots' strange behavior. They even use the Hebrew *Yahweh* to refer to Him, indicating they realize all well Who it is that has come to Israel's assistance, the same One who had wrought such awesome miracles against their country not long before. Just previously they could not keep themselves from charging after Israel in their evil desire, for God had hardened their heart, removing their normal, rational restraint, thus allowing them to pursue what they desperately wanted. Now, they are unable to continue the pursuit of their desires - to slaughter and plunder Israel, for God has placed an overwhelming fear in their hearts. So it always is with the wicked who struggle and strive against God and against His ways. For a moment, they may seem to prosper and triumph, but they are only doing God's will despite themselves. When He wills it, they pursue; when He wills it, they fall back; and when He wills it, they are utterly destroyed.

Verse 26:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch your hand out over the sea so that the waters might come back over the Egyptians, over their chariots and over their horsemen."

Stretch your hand out over the sea: The Israelites have all now safely exited from the dried up sea bed. As Moses had been commanded to stretch out his hand over the waters on the western shore, he now does the same from the eastern shore.

the Egyptians: The cavalry and chariots had apparently nearly caught up with the Israelite rear guard when the Lord threw them into a panic. Now the Egyptians are in the process of attempting to retreat back to their own side of the sea. They had nearly reached the eastern side before being routed by the Lord, but now must retrace their entire route.

Verse 27:

Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and at daybreak the sea returned to its natural state of flow, and the Egyptians fled straight into

it. Thus the Lord shook the Egyptians off [their mounts] into the midst of the sea.

Moses stretched out his hand: While Moses performs the act mentioned here, God actually accomplishes the miracle (see verses sixteen and twenty-one above). Once again, He makes use of the intermediary the agency of wind to perform the miracle (Ex. 15:10).

at daybreak: The Egyptians will get an untrammelled view of the terrifying sight as the waters crash towards them.

the sea returned to its natural state of flow: With the stretching out of Moses' hand, the heaped up waters are released from their supernatural restraints and now begin to behave under normal physical principles once more.

straight into it: The force of this somewhat ironic expression (Hebrew *liqra'tho*: literally, "fleeing to meet it [the sea]") is not so much that the Egyptians are "pointed at" the returning waters, for these are about to engulf them on all sides, but rather that their flight will "meet" the surging waters, though they had hoped to "meet" the safety of the far shore.

shook the Egyptians off [their mounts]: A difficult expression which the ancient versions translate in a variety of ways. The literal meaning of the Hebrew *na' ar* is "to shake off or out". As the Egyptians are on the point of being engulfed by waters from above, they are literally shaken from their chariots and off of their horses down into the raging waters.

Verse 28:

Then the waters returned and covered the chariots and the cavalry. Of the entire force of Pharaoh which had gone into the sea after them, there remained not a single man.

Then the waters returned: Following the initially surge (the "flow" of verse 28) the waters now return to their natural place, burying the Egyptian host beneath.

there remained not a single man: Did Pharaoh himself escape? There has long been much debate about the identity of the Pharaoh of the Exodus. The most widely held traditional view, namely, that Amunhotep II was the Pharaoh of the Exodus, may pose a problem. According to Gispén, Amunhotep II's mummy was found in 1898.⁽¹⁾ Yet this passage, along with Ps. 136:15, seems to indicate unequivocally that he perished in the sea. Two possible solutions suggest themselves. First of all, many dead

Egyptians are said to have washed up on shore after the catastrophe (see verse 31), and Pharaoh's corpse may have been one of them. Unquestionably, he would have been easily identifiable by his regal attire. It is also possible that the regime might have seen fit for religious and propaganda reasons to bury an imposter in Amunhotep II's place. And of course, given the extreme difficulties of Egyptian chronology, we must agree with J. Wilson that the Pharaoh of the Exodus "cannot be satisfactorily identified" in any case.(2)

Verse 29:

But the Israelites had gone through the midst of the sea on the dry ground while the waters were a wall for them on the right and on the left.

But the Israelites had gone through: The Hebrew disjunctive clause is strongly adversative, marking a sharp contrast between the waters as a source of protection for the Israelites, though a source of destruction for the Egyptians. The verb is to be taken as past perfect: "had gone through". For him who truly trusts God, even things that seem to threaten destruction can be a means of deliverance in His unsearchable way.

Verse 30:

Thus on that day the Lord delivered Israel from the power of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the sea shore.

Thus on that day: We have in this sentence something very characteristic of the Hebrew language: a general summation, or as Childs calls it, "epilogue", placed at the end of an important section which the writer wishes to emphasize.(3) The entire process of Israel's miraculous deliverance in chapter fourteen is here summed up at once before the writer returns to the historical sequence of events. After the fact, when our trials and tribulations lie "dead on the shore", it is relatively easy to appreciate God and His goodness in protecting and delivering us. But how much better it is to be able to trust Him and His faithfulness while we are yet in "the midst of the sea" with a furious host nipping at our heels! We may be scared, we may be tempted to doubt, but we should remember the words of Moses, and believe that once God has completed for His work of deliverance from our difficulties, no matter how severe they may seem or be, we shall not see them "ever again forever" (verse thirteen) except to catch a glimpse of them lying dead by the shore of the sea.

Verse 31:

Thus Israel saw the great and powerful deed which the Lord accomplished against the Egyptians. And the people feared the Lord and they believed in the Lord and in Moses, his servant.

the great and powerful deed which the Lord accomplished against the Egyptians: The cream of Egyptian power, the best of their military machine, had been unable to harm the hair on a single Israelite's head, and now lay smashed and submerged under the sea by the true power and might of God. We who are presently in this world are apt to fear and faint in our faith when confronted by a good deal less than one of the most awesome military juggernauts in history bearing down upon us with no earthly thing to stop them.

the people feared the Lord and they believed in the Lord: Now, at last, the Israelites believe. The Egyptians realized the truth too late, but Israel, by the grace of God, has been delivered and now takes advantage of the opportunity to appreciate the incredible goodness and mercy of the Lord in delivering them in spite of their failings. How much better it would have been if they had believed and had faith all along. How much better it is to trust God *before, and during*, as well as after the crisis has past. To grow up in the Lord, we need to learn to have faith in Him at all times; to trust Him wherever He may lead us, no matter if the situation seems grim from the human point of view - our deliverance comes not from human beings but from the Lord God Almighty. We need to learn to trust Him when our backs are to the impenetrable sea. We need to learn to trust Him when we are struggling through the dry sea bed, the way of escape He has promised us (1Cor.10:13), even though imminent destruction threatens us from the left and from the right. Then, and only then, can we truly appreciate to the fullest His final deliverance, when He sets us safe upon the further shore to view our worst fears slain, and washed up upon the beach.

Notes:

1. W. Gispén, *The Bible Student's Commentary - Exodus* (Grand Rapids 1982) 145.
2. J. Wilson in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville 1962) v.3, 774.
3. B. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster 1974) 227.