

CHAPTER 10

THE CROSSING OF THE RED SEA

(*Exod. 14*)

On the third evening after they had hurriedly left their homes in Egypt the people of Israel found their way barred by the waters of the Sea of Reeds, a name normally, but questionably, rendered as the Red Sea. With a shock they realized that they had yet to cross the Egyptian frontier. To the tired people came the command to pitch their tents for the night. Scarcely had they done so, when a cloud of dust was seen on the horizon. It drew nearer, and soon the sound of horses, of chariots and of soldiers' shouts was heard, while at times the dust cloud was broken by the glint of the setting sun on armour and weapons. A shout of dismay and terror rose from the Israelites, for they realised that Pharaoh's chariotry was on their heels. Servitude in Egypt would have been better than death in the wilderness.

Suddenly the sight of their pursuers was blotted out. The strange pillar of cloud that had led them from Rameses through Succoth and Etham had now moved between them and their pursuers, bewildering them and preventing them from moving forward. As darkness fell, its fiery heart glowed red, assuring them of God's watchful eye and protection.

With the onset of night a hot, strong, east wind began to blow. The people sheltered as they could from the driving sand. Then the light of the moon, only a few days past full, was blotted out by thick clouds, and a violent thunder-

storm broke over Israelites and Egyptians alike (Psa. 77:18). Then the ground heaved and shook in earthquake shock (Pss. 77:18; 114:4, 6). There has been a surprising ignoring by many of the poetic accounts of Israel's experiences at the Sea of Reeds.

The clouds cleared and under the bright light of the moon Israel saw a clear pathway of dry land before them, though to right and left the waters of the Sea of Reeds could be seen. The story attributes this to the force of the wind (14:21), but it may well be that in addition the earthquake had temporarily lifted a strip of the sea-bed as well.

The command went round the people to be ready to march. Whether under other circumstances Israel would have dared to tread this strange path, it is hard to say. Fear of death, however, drives men to risk what they would otherwise never think of doing, and so they moved steadily forward where man had never stood before. As the Egyptian troops realized what was happening they followed. It would seem clear from archaeological evidence that while the Pharaoh sent his chariots after the Israelites, he preferred to remain on dry land himself.

Even when the Egyptians sensed that the Israelites were moving, the pillar of cloud prevented them from seeing what was happening. To right and left they could see the waters of the Sea of Reeds glittering in the moonlight. They were in real fact a protective wall, preventing any attempt to outflank the fleeing people. It was only as the pillar of cloud glowing with fire started passing along the strip of dry land to act as Israel's rearguard that the position became clear. Because of this delay the Egyptian chariots had advanced no more than half way by the time the last Israelite stood safely on the other side.

Suddenly a strange unease and panic seized the pursuers. The narrative explains it simply by saying "the Lord in the pillar of cloud and of fire looked down on the host of the Egyptians, and discomfited the host of the Egyptians". At the same time the chariot wheels began to be embedded in

the sand. If the suggestion made earlier is correct, the sea bed was returning to its normal level, as so often happens after an earthquake, and so the first signs of returning water became apparent.

As Moses stood under the first signs of dawn on the eastern shore of the Sea of Reeds, God commanded him to stretch out his hand, presumably holding his rod, cf. verse 16, over the sea, so that its waters might return. Probably only one who has barely been saved at the last moment from drowning can even begin to imagine the horror of what followed. As the panic-stricken Egyptians turned to flee, throwing aside armour and weapons, they suddenly realized that they were in rapidly rising water. This lasted only a moment and then a veritable tidal wave swept over them. For a few there will have been a despairing effort to swim to safety; most, however, will have been entangled among the madly plunging, screaming horses still attached to the chariots. It may be that something of the horror of it lies behind the Talmudic passage, where R. Johanan expressed the view that God does not rejoice in the downfall of the wicked. "The ministering angels wanted to sing a hymn at the destruction of the Egyptians, but God said: "My children lie drowned in the sea, and will you sing?"

We need not be surprised that we find Israel, led by Moses, singing a song of glad triumph in praise to God, while Miriam led the women in the refrain: "I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea." The rider was not a cavalry man, for he did not exist at the time in the Fertile Crescent, but the rider in the chariot. The leading thought of this song of praise is "triumphed gloriously", which means much more than that God had destroyed the Egyptian chariot force and set his people free.

There is a perplexing element in the story of the plagues that God brought on Egypt, which is often overlooked. It is often assumed that they were the means used by God to make the Pharaoh bow to his will and let his people go.

True enough, when God first sent Moses back to Egypt, he told him, "I know well that the king of Egypt will not give you leave unless he is compelled" (Exod. 3:19, NEB). But before Moses returned, God said to him, "I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go" (4:21), and in the following story there is far more stress on God's act of hardening than on the Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart.

There is only one adequate answer to this problem. We are told, "Pharaoh will not listen to you, so I will assert my power in Egypt, and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt . . . then Egypt will know that I am the Lord" (7:4, 5 NEB). This knowledge comes through God's mighty acts, which teach his nature and his power. They may be experienced in blessing as does Israel in 6:7, or in judgment. In other words the plagues were not simply a way of breaking down the Egyptians' obstinacy; they were a means of revelation to Israel and Egypt alike. More than that; they were specially chosen, for "on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments" (12:12).

It is now generally agreed that the first nine plagues were intensifications of natural phenomena which plague Egypt to this day. The gods of Egypt were all nature gods in one form or another, so Jehovah's power over nature was in itself a demonstration of the powerlessness of the corresponding Egyptian deities. In certain cases definite gods were involved, and if we knew more of Egyptian religion, we might discover that this was so in all cases. The first affected the Nile (7:14-21), which was one of the greatest of the Egyptian deities. The frog (8:1-7) was linked with the gods Hapi and Heqt. Various kinds of cattle (9:1-7) were sacred to a variety of deities, and the darkening of the sun (10:21-23), presumably by a terrible sand-storm, was a blow delivered at the worship of the sun, Egypt's chief god. The tenth plague, its indubitably miraculous nature, being shown by death smiting all the first born, and them only,

showed Jehovah's lordship over life and death, which were Egyptian religion's greatest preoccupation. In this way simultaneously Israel learnt the absolute supremacy of Jehovah over any and every force in nature, and Egypt was shown the folly of its religion.

Egypt was supremely the land where the regularities of nature were evident. As a result it was the first civilization to discover the true solar calendar. Indeed, for most of its citizens the round of human life was foreseeable and would be upset only by disease or accident. Man was little more than an expression of nature, and so in the Egyptian pantheon the distinction between gods, men and animals largely vanished. The Pharaoh could be regarded as a god, the result of a god's visit to his mother's bed, and animals could be regarded as divinities, many of the gods being represented in semi-animal shape. Moses stressed that God's love and care were far more important than all uniformities that nature might offer. In Deut. 11:10-12 he praised the promised land, not because, like Egypt, it was completely under man's control, but because it was dependent on God for its rain. "The eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year".

Man's apparent control of nature ultimately makes him a slave of nature; it is only in his dependence upon God that man reaches his true stature. We see the same today, where the more the man uses the resources of his scientific knowledge, the more he becomes enslaved by it. It is only, when he allows his studies and knowledge to show him how infinitely greater God, the Creator, is that he learns true freedom.

There is probably a dark side to every developed nature religion known to us. Disaster strikes man at the least expected moments. Sometimes it can be explained by rivalry between different deities, sometimes one finds the solution in some offence, deliberate or accidental, offered to a deity - a well-known example of this will be found in the opening of Homer's Iliad. There is, however, always the

haunting fear that it may be due to a break-down of the power of the gods, that there are dark forces that threaten the very existence of order.

For the Israelites, brought up in the thought-world of the Ancient Near-East, these dark forces were symbolized by the waters of the sea. In the mythologies that surrounded them the ordered world of nature had sprung from the victory of the gods of order over the powers of chaos, but it was believed that they were still capable of breaking out again in a new life and death struggle. Man's religion was, at least from one point of view, regarded as his throwing his whole weight on the side of the gods of order.

Especially in the myths of Canaan, chaos was personified by the sea, the ruler of which was the seven-headed Lothan or Leviathan. It is easy enough to grasp the reason for this. The Mediterranean, being an enclosed sea, shows very little of the ordered ebb and flow of the tides, which speak of a higher power in control of it. Men saw in it rather the chaotic powers of evil, cf. Isa. 57:20, uncontrolled and uncontrollable.

These concepts were taken over at least by Israel's poetry and transformed. Asaph saw God crushing the many heads of Leviathan (Psa. 74:14, where the reference is both to creation and to the crossing of the Red Sea), while Psa. 104:26 looks on Leviathan as no more than God's prize aquarium exhibit. In the same psalm (verses 6-9) the taming of the sea and the fixing of its bounds are stressed as a major factor in creation.

We find a variation in the thought in Psa. 29. The poem itself obviously springs out of a tremendous and devastating storm that swept through the country from North to South, breaking and uprooting cedars and oaks. For some the roar of the tempest may have presaged the breaking-in of chaos but the psalmist heard only the voice of God, re-echoed in the heavenly temple by the angelic cry of *Glory*. It is most probable that the storm-wind brought torrential rain and flooding with it and so revived memories

of the most dreadful incident in man's past, Noah's flood. It may very well be that ancient Near-Eastern fears of a possible resurgence of chaos were mainly based on the horrors of Noah's flood. The Gilgamesh Epic describes the terror of the gods during the flood as follows, "Even the gods were afraid at the deluge, took to flight and went up to heaven of Anu, cowered they like dogs and crouched down at the outer defences", but the Psalmist calmly states:

Jehovah sat as king at the Flood;
Yea, Jehovah sitteth as king for ever (29:10, RV),

thus reaffirming God's promise in Gen. 8:22. All that happens in nature and in human government is under the control of God's rule. The renderings of RSV, NEB, TEV ignore the fact that the word used, *mabul*, is found only in contexts involving Noah's flood.

All this helps to explain why God led Israel through the sea and overwhelmed the Egyptian forces in it. It is relatively easy, far easier than many imagine, to put one's trust in God and not in man, when one finds oneself amid the regularities of human life, where the future seems reasonably foreseeable, and the welfare state and insurance policies seem to cushion oneself, wife and family, against the ruder winds and misfortunes of life. When, however, all standards and landmarks seem to vanish and accepted norms of behaviour are no more, to go forward in faith can be very difficult – apart from the fact that it is often the only way open – especially when one has no defence against the violence and anarchy one is likely to meet. This is particularly the case when, as in the case of Job, it is recognized, accepted, traditional, spiritual landmarks that have been swept away.

The Egyptians had to perish, not as a punishment, for one can hardly maintain that the country's chariot corps was in any special way responsible for the treatment of Israel, but to underline that the forces which God had unleashed were a

real peril. Israel, however, now knew, or should have known, that even in the desert (another recognized picture of chaos) the God who led them was in complete control of the hostile environment.

It is worth reminding ourselves that this note is struck elsewhere in the Old Testament. For a variety of reasons Jonah was not prepared to face the might of Nineveh with the message God had entrusted to him, until he experienced God's protecting and chastening hand in the great waters and the fish's belly – though it was not Leviathan, it must have seemed so to the runaway prophet. Jeremiah, before he could bring God's message of judgment in all its fulness to Jerusalem, had to see the earth reduced to its primeval chaos, as God spoke in wrath (4:23–26). Isaiah could appreciate the miracle of transformation involved in the resurrection of the dead (25:6–9; 26:19) only as he first saw returning chaos used by God as his instrument of judgment (ch. 24). This is, of course, one of the main messages of *Revelation* and is implicit in the biblical teaching of the Day of the Lord and the Return of Christ.