

Deliverance at the Sea

The climactic event within the first half of the book of Exodus, and a key moment in the narrated history of the Hebrew Bible, is the LORD’s deliverance of the Israelites at the Red Sea (or literally in Hebrew, “the Sea of Reeds”). This story has inspired people across diverse cultures throughout the centuries and across millennia. While most interpretations of the event focus on the splitting of the sea into towering walls of water, the real drama within the biblical text is centered on the LORD’s mythical overthrowing of the Pharaoh and Egypt. Like the plague narratives, the natural wonders that the LORD performs point to the Divine Warrior’s overthrowing of the Egyptian empire.

Parting the Waters

The rich descriptions within Exod 14 provide many complex and, at times, convoluted details. Within the story, the divine manifests itself through the angel of God and a pillar of cloud. Moreover, the LORD uses both natural (east wind) and human (Moses) elements in parting the waters. Hence, all of heaven and earth is arrayed against the Egyptians, setting the battle on a cosmic stage. Moses stretches his hands out over the sea (v. 21a), and the LORD drives back the sea by means of a strong east wind. The waters are divided (v. 21b), and the Israelites walk across on dry ground (v. 22). The language of a wind from God combined with the dividing of the waters and the appearance of dry land harken back to the beginnings of the world in Genesis (1:2, 9) and the re-creation of the earth in the Flood Narrative (Gen 8:1). Thus, the language of Exod 14 suggests that another kind of creation is taking

Lectionary Loop

**Easter Vigil, Year A, B, C,
Exodus 14:10-31, 15:20-21;
Exodus 15:1b-13, 17-18
Seventeenth Sunday after
Pentecost, Year A, Exodus 14:19-
31, Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21**

Study Bible

See the excursus, “Salvation and the Sea” in *NISB*, 106-107.

Sources

To learn about the exodus from different cultural perspectives, see, “The Exodus: One Narrative, Many Readings,” in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, New ed, edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 213-85.

place with the Israelites' passing through the waters. The deliverance at the sea represents the creation of a new people. Moreover, the language within this chapter has strong mythical elements. In other ancient Near Eastern creation stories, the deity slays the watery chaos beast, establishing an ordered creation and the deity's rightful claim to sovereignty over the other gods. Hence, the LORD's parting of the mighty waters points to both God's rightful sovereignty over the Egyptians and the creation out of chaos of a new people, the liberated Israelites.

Tension between Divine and Human Action

A tension exists within Exod 14 between the LORD's deliverance of Israel and the role of Moses. It is clear that the deliverance at the sea is described as an act of the divine will. Hence, in this last conflict between Pharaoh and the God of Israel, the battle belongs to the LORD. God, like a mighty warrior, fights on behalf of Israel, breaking loose the bonds of Egypt's oppression over Israel in a decisive display of divine and natural power. This climactic scene in the conflict between Pharaoh and the LORD comes to a close with a unanimous acknowledgement from all characters in the story that the LORD has fought for Israel and defeated the empire of Egypt (14:25, 30-31)

Though the theme of the LORD's deliverance is clear within Exod 14, there remains a strong tension between divine and human action in this story. Moses plays a strong mediatorial role within this chapter as elsewhere in the book of Exodus. Throughout this episode, the LORD speaks to the people through Moses, conveying the divine will to the people by means of a human agent (v. 1 and v. 15). At only one point within the story does Israel address God directly (v. 10). Even in this instance, however, the people's cries that follow are eventually redirected to Moses (v. 11). Hence, the pattern of speech within Exod 14, which contains the important movement from human lament to divine response, is mediated through the character of Moses.

Moreover, within the actual act of deliverance, Moses is given a central role. Amidst the powerful images of divine presence and natural force—"angel

Reflections

1. What images do you have in mind when you see the Israelites crossing through the sea?
2. Water is simultaneously the place of salvation and chaos in the exodus story. What meanings does water have for us in our communities of faith?

Teaching Tips

Have members of the class draw the crossing at the sea from their imaginations. Ask them to share their images and interpret them. Ask for feedback from the class on the different illustrations, and compare them with the images within the biblical text.

of God,” “pillar of cloud,” “strong east wind,” and “waters”—Moses plays a crucial part in the orchestrating of the LORD’s decisive act of deliverance for the people of Israel. Following the command of the LORD, Moses stretches his hands over the sea to part the waters so that the Israelites can walk through on dry ground (v. 21). At the conclusion of the event, Moses repeats the action so that the waters come back upon the Egyptians (v. 27). The human participation within this passage is not lost on the narrator, who summarizes the awe-inspiring event of deliverance with the conclusion: “So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and *in his servant Moses*” (v. 31, emphasis mine). Thus, this formative event within Israelite history is an act that involves both the mighty deliverance of the LORD and the faithful actions of God’s servant, Moses. God’s deliverance is made possible through divine natural wonders and human agency. Within this act of salvation at the sea, human and divine will work together to defeat the oppressive force of Pharaoh’s Egyptian empire.

Reflections

1. To what extent do God’s deliverance and salvation involve the participation of human beings?
2. How can we be agents of God’s purposes for liberation?
3. Moses plays the role of mediator in this text; in fact, he is the mediator *par excellence*. What role can/do mediators have in contemporary communities of faith? Do we find the hierarchical aspects of this idea problematic?

The Response of the People

As a result of the LORD’s mighty deliverance, the people of God respond with reverent awe and worship. When the Israelites saw Pharaoh’s army approaching (14:10), they were afraid, fearing the strength of the Egyptians and the potential for their own death (v. 12). At the end of the chapter, as the Israelites see the once mighty army of Pharaoh dead on the seashore, the people are once again afraid (vv. 30-31). Now, however, their fear has turned into awe, as they marvel at the “great work” that the LORD has done against the Egyptians. This shift in the object of the people’s fear points to a transformation in their identity as the people of God. While in slavery under the Egyptian empire, the people were trained to fear the oppressive might of Pharaoh and his officials. Their identity as slaves was cast by the fires of cruel servitude. However, as the people of God, their identity is founded upon the LORD’s mighty acts of liberation. Their fear has turned to wonder. They are now free to worship the LORD who has secured their release.

Fittingly, in Exod 15, Miriam and Moses lead the people in song, a victory hymn to the LORD. The Song of the Sea, which scholars have identified as one of the oldest texts within the Hebrew Bible, recounts the LORD's deliverance in rich, mythical images. Within the song, creational motifs, depicting the LORD's victory over Pharaoh in the watery chaos, are combined with the exaltation of the Divine Warrior as highest among the gods (v. 11). Themes emphasizing God's kingship are prevalent within the hymn, including the LORD's choice of a holy abode (v. 17). Therefore, the people's first act following the LORD's mighty deliverance at the Sea is worship. Through the waters of deliverance, this once oppressed group of slaves has been re-created as God's people. Israel is transformed as fear changes into awe and lament gives way to praise. In a triumphant hymn to the Divine Warrior, God's people respond by proclaiming the LORD's victory over the oppressive empire of Pharaoh.