

Bible Study # 23 Exodus 14.1–14 03–05–2021

Moses was given strategic instructions regarding the movements of the Israelites. Four geographical areas are mentioned in the text, though none of them can now be identified with any certainty. The first, Pi Hahiroth, seems to be an Egyptian word, while Migdol and Baal Zephon are certainly Hebrew words. ‘Migdol’ is the Hebrew word for ‘a [watch] tower’, and there may have been several places with that name.

‘Baal Zephon’ means ‘Baal of the north’. This points to the presence of Baal worship in Egypt, suggesting that the followers of this religious devotion were active in propagating their faith. By his word to Moses, the Lord instructed the people to turn back from where they were at Etham and encamp by the sea. This was to make Pharaoh and his forces think that the Israelites were muddled in their thinking and could be contained.

Another hardening of Pharaoh’s heart was predicted, as he and his men pursued the fleeing Israelites. But the chase by the Egyptians would bring glory to God, as they would come to realize that the God of the Israelites was indeed the Lord (yhwh).

The events that were going to unfold would be a further display of God’s power, and in themselves they would be a way of bringing more glory to Him. Whatever doubts any of the people had (see the later section, vv. 10–14), at this stage they obeyed and acted in accordance with the message.

On hearing of the departure of Moses and the people, Pharaoh and his officials quickly realized what this meant, as his country had now been deprived of much of its workforce. The prospect of economic loss was the great motivator for their decision-making. Pharaoh’s response was to assemble his troops, especially his chariots, and pursue the fleeing Israelites.

The reference in verse 6 to his getting his chariot ready may be to his whole force of chariots, not just his individual one. The assembled army was a large one, six hundred special chariots, together with other unnumbered ones. The Lord’s word to Moses was fulfilled, and Pharaoh’s heart was hardened.

The Israelites marched out ‘boldly’. This expression occurs in the parallel passage (Num. 33:3) and may well have had a military overtone to it. If that were so, the word ‘triumphantly’ would suit well as the translation here.

The Israelites were chased and overtaken as they camped by the sea near Pi Hahiroth, and opposite Baal Zephon. The strength of the Egyptian force is emphasized by saying that ‘all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots, horsemen and troops’ pursued the Israelites. Pharaoh was clearly determined to prevent his slaves from escaping.

As the Israelites looked up, there was Pharaoh and his troops coming against them in military order. Fear gripped them and they cried out to the Lord. The same verb used here for ‘cry out’ was used earlier of the Israelites crying out to God as they sought relief from their situation. Whether in Egypt, or during their wilderness journey, Israel had to look to the one true God who could deliver them.

Moses’ own people, though, raised the question that it would have been better for them to die in Egypt rather than in the wilderness. They went further by reflecting on their own arguments for staying in Egypt and not taking part in any attempt to escape. In their minds the option of staying in slavery to the Egyptians was preferable to going out to die in the desert.

These verses help to explain later actions by the people, as clearly they had been arguing against Moses in Egypt, not wanting to take part in the escape from slavery. Service of the Egyptians was regarded as better than the service of the Lord (v. 12).

Moses responded by assuring the people that salvation was going to be provided by the Lord that very day. He and Joshua were merely leaders of the people, not their saviors. The people's fear had to be banished. The command, 'Do not be afraid', was the same word of encouragement given earlier to Abraham (Gen. 15:1) and Isaac (Gen. 26:24), and also the one to be given later to Joshua (Jos. 8:1).

Instead, they had to set themselves to wait passively to see God's intervention on their behalf. The fear of the Egyptians pursuing them would only be temporary, since they were to lose their lives in the Red Sea. God was the warrior who would fight for His people (v.14). This concept comes to even clearer expression in the Song of Moses, the victory song following the triumph over the Egyptians (15:3-8).

All that was required of the Israelites was to wait patiently and be quiet. The translation can be strengthened by noting that the final clause is adversative, 'The Lord will fight for you, but you are to stay silent'

Our continuing study will take us next to Exodus 14.15–31.