

Bible Study # 25 Exodus 15.1–18 03–08–2021

The main part of this chapter is given to the Song of Moses, or the Song of the Sea as it is often called. It is a lengthy poem dedicated in praise of the Lord for Israel's deliverance from the Red Sea. It has no other parallels in Exodus, though embedded songs do occur in other books (e.g., Lamech's song, Gen. 4:23-24; the song of Moses, Deut. 32:1-43; Deborah's song, Judg. 5:1-31; Hannah's song, 1 Sam. 2:1-10).

Several general observations need to be made about this poem at the outset. This song is set within the prose narrative of the exodus experience of Israel. Without the song, the narrative from Exodus 14:31 could almost be followed immediately by Exodus 15:19-21 (see later comment on these verses).

The song is in typical Hebrew poetic form exhibiting many of the usual features such as use of metaphors, assonance, and parallelism. It is unusual in that it puts into poetical format the information already given in prose in chapter 14, enabling a comparison to be made of the two styles of communication of ideas.

It reinforces the teaching by expressing theologically and poetically the truths about God's great redemptive work. I encourage you to take time to make a list of how each impress or touch you as you read. Make a list of what you find in Chapter 14 and then in Chapter 15, vs. 1–21. Then compare them with each other. Which touched you the most and why? This might teach you something about your learning style!

In the Near East there was a tradition of victory songs, some of which were in both prose and poetical versions. Hence this song fits in well to the cultural context of the time. The expressions in it have many parallels with later parts of the Old Testament, especially the psalms.

It has three time frames – the immediate situation of the exodus from Egypt, the coming invasion of Canaan, and finally the establishment of a place of worship on Mount Zion. This poem shows how fitting song is in forming a response to God's saving mercy.

This includes poetic passages in the prophetic books, many of the psalms, the songs of Mary and Zechariah (Luke 1:46-55; 68-79), and songs of the redeemed in the book of Revelation (Rev. 5:9-10, 12-13). Words and music combine to give memorable praise to the redeemer.

Moses and his fellow Israelites (v. 1) joined together in a song addressed to their redeemer God. The song commences with a declaration of praise to the exalted Lord; for He has overthrown the Egyptian chariots, hurling them into the sea. It is phrased as first person singular, 'I', which means that it was intended for the individual member of the community to use.

Rightly, the song focuses immediately on the character of Israel's God. In this way it resembles the commencement of some psalms, such as Psalm 89:1: 'I will sing of the love of the Lord forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations'; or, Psalm 138:1: 'I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart; before the "gods" I will sing your praise'.

The personal testimony continues with statements concerning 'my strength', 'my song', and 'my salvation', and all these relate to Yah, an abbreviated form of the divine name yhwh. This form occurs many times in the Old Testament but mainly in names such as Elijah, Isaiah, and Uzziah, where the English 'iah' represents the Hebrew yah, only appearing alone in Hebrew poetry as here.

The thought in the first colon, 'The Lord is my strength and my song', is sharpened by the climactic statement in the second colon, 'he has become my salvation'. That explains why the Lord is his strength and his song. The conjunction of 'strength' and 'salvation' appears elsewhere (cf. Ps. 28:7; 62:7–8; 118:14).

It has been suggested that the word 'song' should be translated as 'refuge' or 'protection', but the evidence is not strong enough to compel such a change. The experience of the exodus was a demonstration of God's strength, and, as a consequence, it became an object of praise, being incorporated into verbal acknowledgement of it in a song.

Though the Lord had been the God of the patriarchs ('my father's God'), he also had become Moses' God as well. Past knowledge of the Lord was confirmed by personal acquaintance so that he confesses him as 'my God', the one who is worthy of all praise. 'Exalt' is simply a way of saying that God will be treated with reverence and adoration.

In reflection on the Lord's actions in redeeming His people by overthrowing the Egyptian army, Moses referred to Him as a warrior, a description that some modern readers may find disturbing. However, it was a recognition that the Lord had fought on his people's behalf.

It is simply putting in another way the truth that God had promised deliverance to his people by omnipotent power, and that he had also said he would fight for them (14:14). Because of the great victory that had been achieved over the Egyptians, Moses likened God to a victorious soldier.

This imagery of God's might is pervasive in the Scripture, and many later passages take up this theme. They point to the ultimate battle when God will be victorious over the forces of evil (Rev. 19:11-21). Earlier (3:14), God had declared that His name was indeed the LORD (yhwh), and now that is reaffirmed in the declaration, 'the LORD (yhwh) is his name'.

The theme of the victory over Egypt is developed, first with mention of the overthrow of the army (vs. 4-5), and then in more general terms in verses 6-8 of the defeat of the Egyptians being an expression of God's anger.

The destruction of the Egyptian chariots is described in graphic language. The Lord hurled them into the sea, called again in Hebrew [yam sôf], the Re(e)d Sea (remember how that name was used in the Bible to describe numerous bodies of water). It was not just the ordinary soldiers who died there, but also the best of Pharaoh's military officials. Like stones, they dropped to the bottom of the sea and were drowned.

Up to this point in Exodus mention has been made of God's hand ('my hand', 3:20; 7:4), but now this song speaks of his 'right hand' as the agent of destruction, stressing it by the repetition of the phrase within the verse. The power of the Lord was majestic in shattering the enemy. As much as the earlier signs were displays of his power, the overthrow of the Egyptian army was an even greater one.

In later Old Testament poetry God's right hand and holy arm are mentioned as working salvation (Ps. 98:1). Victory over the Egyptians is described as an overthrow of opponents, and as anger that burns up even as fire consumes stubble. God had sent His anger on a mission to consume the enemy. Here is poetic language that draws together ideas both of God's majesty and his definitive action against those who try to hinder his plan.

The reference in the prose account to the piling up of the water as walls is depicted as being accomplished by God's breath (rûach, 14:21). From His nostrils came the wind that drove the surging waters into a firm wall, so allowing the Israelites to pass through unscathed.

The Egyptians' boasting (v. 9) is expressed here in the first person: 'I will pursue; I will overtake ...; I will divide...; I will gorge...; I will draw my sword.' Proud Egypt thought that human might could intervene and frustrate divine purposes.

That comes out strongly in the final words of verse 9. Egypt's puny hand was set against the mighty hand of the Lord. The contrast is emphasised at the beginning of verse 10: 'I will (x 5) ... but you blew ...' To God's breath

is attributed the return of the waters (cf. 14:21, which attributes it to a strong east wind). Just as the drowning Egyptians were compared to sinking stones in verse 5, so now they are compared to lead.

A change comes in the song in v. 11. Two rhetorical questions highlight the characterization of God. The first one implies his incomparability with all the other gods, including those of Egypt. They had been vanquished by the judgment inflicted on the night of the first Passover (see 12:12). The second question asked who could be like the Lord – ‘majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?’

In himself he was separated from his creatures by his holiness, while in the outworking of his purposes his glory was awe-inspiring. His deeds were indeed ‘wonders’ such as no one else could imitate. They were peculiarly his, since they were divine actions manifesting his eternal power.

What happened to the Egyptians is said to have been caused by the Lord stretching out his right hand (cf. v. 6). The destruction of the Egyptians is likened to the earth opening up and swallowing them.

Now in v. 13 we find a parallel expression. The point is made that in God’s unfailing love he will lead his people to the place of his appointment. They were his redeemed people, who needed guidance on their way from Egypt to the ‘sworn’ land, where ultimately they would come to his holy dwelling.

The same verb for ‘redeem’ has already appeared in God’s response to Moses’ puzzlement over the Lord’s seeming lack of action to rescue his people (6:6). Later in this song (v. 17) this holy dwelling is called God’s sanctuary.

This reference is to the fact that the ark of the covenant would first be brought to Jerusalem, and then afterwards Solomon would build the temple there where the Lord would dwell among the Israelites and not abandon His people Israel (1 Kings 6:13). The way in which God would lead His people would be like that of a shepherd as he tenderly brought his people to Canaan.

Not only did God show his power in bringing the people out of Egypt, but in bringing them into the land of Canaan as well. This combination of being ‘brought out’ and ‘brought in’ was a promise he made repeatedly (cf. 3:8, 17; 6:6-8). News of the exodus would reach surrounding nations, especially those whose territory lay in the path of the Israelite journey to Canaan, and they would fear.

The Philistines were a problem for Israel for several centuries until David finally subdued them. Edom and Moab were going to be a thorn for Israel, and Deuteronomy 2:1-23 details the contact with them en route to Canaan. Then too Canaan will submit to the military prowess of Israel (‘the power of your arm’) until the people redeemed from slavery in Egypt pass by.

In this song addressed to God, Israel is called ‘your people’, ‘the people you bought’. Redemption was but a prelude to occupation of their own land. The verb used here is has a general meaning of ‘acquire’, can also be used as a synonym for ‘redeem’ (cf. the parallel between the two in vv. 13 and 16, and in Psalm 74:2).

The final verses of the song look ahead, not just to the occupation of the land of Canaan, but also specifically to worship of the Lord there. The thought is that Israel will be ‘brought in’ and ‘planted’ in Canaan. Later, a psalmist, employing this same imagery, pictured Israel as a little plant taken from Egypt and transplanted into the land (Ps. 80:8-11).

The place where worship would take place is declared to be ‘the mountain of your inheritance – the place, O Lord, you made for your dwelling.’ David’s capture of Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5:6-12) was followed by the moving of the ark of the covenant there (2 Sam. 6:1-23). From then onwards there was never any question as to where the Lord’s dwelling place should be.

Psalm 132:13-14 expressed it succinctly: ‘For the Lord has chosen Zion, he has desired it for his dwelling; “This is my resting place for ever and ever; here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it.”’ On that mountain a sanctuary would be built, a dwelling place for the Lord.

The song ends (v. 18) with a declaration of the Lord’s kingship. A little later it will be clear that Israel was chosen as a kingdom of priests (19:6), but at this stage there is simply the assertion of God’s kingly rule. The God who redeemed His people from slavery was indeed the everlasting king.

The exact sentence here, ‘The Lord will reign for ever and ever,’ does not occur elsewhere. The nearest equivalent is Psalm 10:16: ‘The Lord is king for ever and ever,’ whereas the idea of God’s eternal kingship is reasserted often.

Next we will study Exodus 15:19–27.