

LS — Week 5 Response

Exodus 1–20 is a very dramatic set of chapters, with a lot to comment on, to the point that even our two readings had little in common — and to give a sense of the density and scale of the passages, each took minute details and expanded them to significant theological points: one from Mariam’s potentially singing the Song of the Sea to women as prototypical prophets, the other from “a priestly kingdom” to the purifying purity of the saved.

There is much that can surprise even someone familiar with the story. To list some of the unexpected elements in the crossing of the Red Sea alone:

- That Pharaoh still thinks he can hold onto the Israelites after the ten plagues.
- That the Israelites even veer south to cross the Red Sea in the first place. (And in general that by this circuitous route the Israelites managed to take forty years to cross the desert.)
- That Moses seems to know the fate of the Egyptians before God reveals his plan (14:13).
- That YHWH chides Moses for “crying out to him” (14:15) when Moses has just reassured the Israelites that “YHWH will fight by your side”, giving the impression that he is telling Moses, “It’s your job, not mine!” One thinks of the burning bush and Moses’ persistent hesitation to take on a leadership role when he invokes YHWH here.
- That there is an “angel of God” accompanying them, not previously mentioned.
- That the Israelites’ song names various nations to be defeated with whom they haven’t interacted for 430 years: Philistia, Edom, Moab, Canaan (15:14-15). And it alludes to Zion and the “sanctuary” to be established there long in the future (15:17).
- That, as Janzen observes, Miriam is called a “prophet” for the first time.

The actual miracle is laden with echoes. One can be heard in God’s telling Moses to “stretch out your hand and divide the sea,” followed straightaway by “Moses stretched out his hand and YHWH divided the sea” — a hint of the paradox of God’s partnership with his prophets and a precursor to many instances in the OT of God being said to do things that are apparently enacted by human agents. We might also note that “stretch out your hand” is God’s typical instruction to Moses, from the signs at the burning bush to the transformation of the staff to the plagues. Stretching out the hand is often used of God’s agency from a distance; in Ex. 15:12 the song says God, not Moses, stretched out his hand just now.

The parting of the water, too, is familiar in that it recalls Genesis 1 using the same word for “dry ground”. The sea with its connotations of primeval chaos is pulled back to reveal land, which always brings to my mind David’s “spacious place” (Ps. 18:19). God creates out of chaos a place for his people to dwell: dry ground from worldwide water, Eden from the desert, and a path out of the “wilderness” that Pharaoh believes will enclose the Israelites (Ex. 14:3) but which will enclose him instead, drowning him as he “rushes to meet it” (14:27). The sea is not God’s enemy but is under God’s command and a trap for his enemies. On the other side, God draws the Israelites out of the water safe and sound, as Moses was drawn from the river, giving him his name (2:10)¹ — he was drawn and now he draws.

¹ *Mosheh* is the participial form of *mashah* “to draw”. One imagines the Israelites calling their leader “the drawing” by analogy with “foundling”.

One of the harder problems for me has always been the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, which I know is much discussed by commentators: Does God override human will? Does he confirm it? Or is this just an expression? Pharaoh certainly seems to act against reason, marching out immediately after Egypt loses every firstborn, with the intent to round up 600,000 people in the desert, while a presumably supernatural pillar of cloud stands in front of them, following the refugees into a clearly supernatural parting of the sea. The Egyptians themselves realize, too late, that YHWH is fighting for Israel (14:25), and perhaps did so earlier — they have suffered greatly — but didn't dare defy Pharaoh until it became a matter of life and death.² The explanation is given in 14:4 when God outlines his plan to Moses.

One avenue of interest, I think, lies in the close association of two words in that verse, which have some semantic overlap but not total: *khazaq*, to be hard, and *kavad*, to be heavy. YHWH will *khazaq* Pharaoh's heart in order to *kavad* himself. Both words signal strength and gravity; both are used to mean "severe" (*kavad* appeared last week to describe Sodom's sin, for instance). But *khazaq*, which also means "to grip", leans towards tightness, seizing, while *kavad* leans towards glory, importance.³ They are different types of power. Pharaoh's power, as he imagines it, is in seizing; we might say not that God "hardens" his heart, but that he makes it "grippier", makes him ever more bent on holding onto that which God wants him to let go.⁴ God meanwhile shows himself to be infinitely "heavy": he cannot be held by any grip. Pharaoh tightens his grip, but the Israelites are rolling stones that can no longer be held back, and thereby reveal God's *kavad*, weight, glory.

If this reading (only one of many possible ones) works, our exegesis for teaching could be: What kind of power or authority do we seek in the classroom? That of *khazaq*, developing an "iron grip" that lets us be in control of everything, with students who know how to obey, to whom we can give twice as much to do when they get complacent (5:8-9)? Or that of *kavad*, where there is something "weighty" about us that invites respect in and of itself? After all, one has to actively maintain one's grip, but weight is inherent and constant.

As a new teacher I had no *kavad* and struggled to *khazaq*. When you don't command respect, you have to come up with strategies to hold things together. We all know even experienced teachers who still have to use forceful *khazaq* means to maintain order: volume, detention, sending to the office, belittling, and so on. But others seem to carry respect wherever they go. Only over time have I begun to build up a sense of my teacherliness, and with it the bearing and confidence that inspires students to listen to you. This doesn't mean instilling a constant sense of dread, even though we might expect that from the command to "fear the Lord", the reaction we're supposed to have to God's *kavad*. Rather, it consists of a recognition on the students' part that there is something solid in you, something that has substance, which you've found and are drawing your strength from as you teach. You aren't just vapour, the

² In the Qur'an's telling, the Egyptian magicians try to counsel Pharaoh to listen to Moses and God, to no avail.

³ The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is also described as *kavad*, but four of five times he is the agent. He puffs himself up; or, to switch metaphors, he tries to "weigh down" his side, but God is too weighty and wins the tug-of-war.

⁴ The same root is used in 9:2 when YHWH says to Pharaoh, "If you refuse to let them go, and still *khazaq* them..." Interestingly, the Egyptians in 12:33 paradoxically *khazaq* the Israelites to leave, translated "urge" or "press upon".

Biblical opposite of that which is solid and endures. That solidity can inspire many different emotions on the students' part.

There's a teacher at my school who is possibly the best-loved of all of us. When I subbed for her once, I also discovered that she was the best-obeyed. Every other class I'd subbed for required some classroom management on my part. In her class, I didn't even need her lesson plan. She had told them what to do and the instant I finished attendance, they began doing it and worked diligently the entire class. I knew that I had nothing to do with it. She was so present, so solid, that even when absent it was as if she were there.

Once while discussing power and the fear of the Lord in another class, I asked my students what makes this teacher so good and described how her students had been when I subbed for her. I asked them a leading question: "Does that authority come because you're afraid of her?" and knew I would get a negative (this teacher is slight, soft-spoken, courteous, quick to laugh!). Sure enough, a student instantly replied, "No! You're not afraid of her. You're afraid of what she would *think* of you."

This quality is best described as respect, *kavad*: her opinion carries weight, it counts for something, because of the person of substance she reveals herself to be. Not only is this a good goal for us as teachers, but I suspect it's how God would wish us to obey him: not because we fear what he might do to us, but because we fear what *we* might do to our relationship with someone so worth being in relationship with.