

Pharaoh's Chariots

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In Exod 11:29-33, after plagues ending in the death of his eldest son, Pharaoh bids the Israelites go. But in Exod 14, followed by the celebratory Exod 15, he pursues them to bring them back. Exod 14-15 might be merely one more thrill-packed episode, or it might be a later addition. Some points suggesting a later addition are:

- In Exod 13:17, the sea route to Canaan is ruled out:

“And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not by the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near, for God said, Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt, [18] But God led the people about, by the way of the wilderness by the Red Sea.”

But Exod 14:1 orders a change of direction, to the previously forbidden sea route:

“turn back and encamp before Pihahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-zephon, over against it shall ye encamp by the sea.”

Of these place names, Migdol was near the border fortress at the northern end of the Nile delta,¹ and thus near the Mediterranean, and Baal-zephon was also near the sea.² So we are near the Mediterranean Sea, and not the Red Sea of the previous narrative. A story may *disappoint* previous expectations, but does not normally *reverse* them.

- Palestine is tectonically unstable. The Jordan follows a typical rift valley, caused by a tectonic shift. Another tectonic shift produced a situation on the Mediterranean coast where a stretch of land is temporarily exposed, but then is covered again by seawater. This phenomenon may well have inspired Exod 14. But that particular tectonic shift occurred later. The first report of tectonic instability at that site is from Strabo (c020).³ If the inspiration for the story is late, then the story itself must also be late.
- The Exod 14 story is graphic. How would one draw a picture of a swarm of gnats? But the drowning of those horses and chariots was a favorite subject for later artists. It is typical of later Biblical material to be visually arresting in this way.⁴

But is that story itself consistent? Or does it contain contradictions? That question brings up the Documentary Hypothesis (DH), followed by most commentators, which sees Exod 14 as a composite of several parallel accounts, one late and complete (“P”), and one early and fragmentary (the no longer distinguishable “J” and “E,” here “X”).

¹A 3c Itinerarium (Davies 162) mentions a Migdol twelve Roman miles from Pelusium, a city at the eastern mouth of the Nile and thus at the north end of the border toward Palestine.

²Identified by Cazelles (Davies 162) with the Deus Casios of Herodotus 2:5, 158; 3:5), a seaside S\shrine to Zeus..

³Davies 164f. Strabo was gathering data for his Geography in Egypt during 025-c019.

⁴So also, in its way, the very dramatic Joseph story; see Brooks **Hexateuch**.

We may pause to consider that proposition, following the version of Noth.

Noth 102-104 distinguishes early (X, italicized) and late (P) strata in Exodus 14.

I here indent his italicized passages, and substitute the ASV translation:

Exod 14:1. And Yahweh spake unto Moses, saying, [2] “Speak unto the children of Israel, that they turn back and encamp before Pihahiroth, between Migdol and the sea; before Baal-zephon, over against it shall ye encamp by the sea. [3] And Pharaoh will say of the children of Israel, They are entangled in the land; the wilderness hath shut them in. [4] And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he shall follow after them, and I will get me honor upon Pharaoh, and upon all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am Yahweh.” And they did so.

[5] *And it was told the king of Egypt that the people were fled, and the heart of Pharaoh and of his servants was changed towards the people, and they said, “What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?”* [6] *And he made ready his chariot, and took his people with him; [7] And he took six hundred chosen chariots, and all the chariots of Egypt, and captains over all of them.*

[8] And Yahweh hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued after the children of Israel, for the children of Israel went out with a high hand.

[9] And the Egyptians pursued after them, all the horses and chariots of Pharaoh, and his horsemen, and his army, and overtook them camping by the sea, beside Pihahiroth, before Baal-zephon. [10a] And when Pharaoh drew nigh,

[10b] *the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they were sore afraid.*

[10c] and the children of Israel cried out unto Yahweh,

[11] *and they said unto Moses, “Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? Wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us, to bring us forth out of Egypt? [12] Is this not the word that we spake unto thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it were better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness.”* [13] *And Moses said unto the people, “Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of Yahweh, which he will work for you today, for the Egyptians whom ye have seen today, ye shall see them again no more for ever. [14] Yahweh will fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace.”*

[15] And Yahweh said unto Moses, “Wherefore criest thou unto me? Speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward. [16] And lift thou up thy rod, and stretch out thy hand over the sea, and divide it, and the children of Israel shall go into the midst of the sea on dry ground. [17] And I, behold, I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians, and they shall go in after them, and I will get me honor upon Pharaoh, and upon all his host, upon his chariots, and upon his horsemen.

[18] And the Egyptians shall know that I am Yahweh, when I have gotten me honor upon Pharaoh, upon his chariots, and upon his horsemen.”

[19] *And the Angel of God, who went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud removed from before them, and stood behind them, [20] and it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel, and there was the cloud and the darkness, yet gave it light by night, and the one came not near the other all the night.*

[21] And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and Yahweh caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all the night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. [22] And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground, and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left. [23] And the Egyptians pursued, and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen.

[24] *and it came to pass, in the morning watch, that Yahweh looked forth upon the host of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and of cloud, and discomfited the host of the Egyptians.* [25] *And he [clogged]⁵ their chariot wheels, and they drove them heavily, so that the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the face of Israel, for Yahweh fighteth for them against the Egyptians."*

[26] And Yahweh said unto Moses, "Stretch out thy hand over the sea, that the waters may come together again upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen." [27a] And Moses stretched forth his hand over the sea,

[27b] *and the sea returned to its strength when the morning appeared, and the Egyptians fled against it, and Yahweh overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea.*

[28] And the waters returned, and covered the chariots, and the horsemen, even all the host of Pharaoh that went in after them into the sea; there remained not so much as one of them. [29] But the children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea, and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left.

[30] *Thus Yahweh saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea-shore.* [31] *And Israel saw the great work which Yahweh did upon the Egyptians, and the people feared Yahweh, and they believed in Yahweh, and in his servant Moses.*

There is the Documentary proposal. How are we to judge it? Many agree that it is supported if there are doublets which recount the same episode twice. In Exod 14, Childs 219 identifies 14:8a / 9a (the pursuit) and 9a / 10a (the overtaking) as among the doublets. But in the Noth separation, all these partial verses *fall within P*.

In Noth's separation, we find 27b (X), "and the sea *returned* to its strength when the morning appeared" and 28 (P) "and the waters *returned*, and covered the chariots." But the first need only describe the sea when it is no longer blown back by the wind, leaving the second to describe the resulting inrush of water that drowns the Egyptians.

So far, we have three failures. Further inspection of Noth reveals seeming doublets that are *within the same proposed stratum*:

(24, X) "and it came to pass, in the *morning* watch, that Yahweh . . . "

(27b, X) "and the sea returned to its strength when the *morning* appeared."

(22, P) "and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left."

(29, P) :and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left."

That makes five failures, and we must conclude that the DH has not established itself by the doublet evidence. Perhaps it is time to consider other possibilities.

⁵so RSV; ASV "took off" makes no sense. The wheels tended to mire in the soft ground.

May it not be that the teller of the Exod 14 tale simply likes to linger over his details, seeing things now from the Egyptian side, and now from the Israelite side? Now in prospect, and now in fulfilment? Turning things over in his hands, relishing their sound, savoring their implications? This, after all, as Yahweh himself says, is to be Yahweh's greatest triumph, his personal mastery of the Egyptians, whom he himself meets in battle, and utterly vanquishes? Such a scenario could explain the recurrences with which Exod 14 indeed abounds, but which the DH-based distinctions seem notably unable to account for.

Recapitulation

We began by asking, is Exod 14 (with its following celebration in Exod 15, which may or may not be a still later addition) original? Or is it intrusive? We may return to that question by asking what happens when that episode is over. When the singing and dancing die down at last, what ensues? Does the story continue from the northern geographical location which was reached with so much effort in Exod 14:2?

The answer lies before us . . .

Exod 15:22. and Moses led Israel onward from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur, and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water. [23] And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter; therefore the name of it was called Marah.

[24] And the people murmured against Moses . . .

. . . and it is No. When all is over, the story goes on as though Exod 14-15 had never happened. It is utterly gone. This alone proves the secondary nature of that segment.

Once upon a time, a Chinese teacher told a class, struggling to make sense of some difficult classical text, "If you don't understand *one* sentence, just go ahead and read the *next* sentence, and it will become clear."

It may be that this advice has its usefulness, beyond that particular classroom.

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