

Thursday Morning Bible Study:

Exodus: God Forms His Holy Nation

3. The Journey To The LORD's Abode (Exodus 14:30-23:33)

The rescue of Israel from Egypt was all to a purpose – the grand, overarching purpose of God for the whole of creation, i.e. the bringing of all things back into blessing. The LORD's call to Pharaoh "Let My people go that they may serve Me," is the call of God to have His people who will be to Him a treasured possession among all the nations of the earth, a royal priesthood, a holy nation (19:5-6.) These chapters of Exodus trace the unfolding of that rescue to its culmination in the sealing of that call in the covenant ceremony at Sinai (24:1-10.)

The rescue itself was extraordinary, and is summarised at the end of chapter 14, vv 30-31. Having seen the great power that the LORD exerted in defeating the Egyptians, "the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in His servant, Moses." Fear of the LORD is thankful awe mixed with a trepidation at offending Him. It is the stance of faith, that trusts the LORD for the future. And this believing fear, this fear-faith, expresses itself in a great song of praise to the LORD. The redeemed people are full of fear and faith that expresses itself in the joy of singing worship. It is a song that seems, from vv.19-21, to have had its origins in Miriam's worship.

Note the flow of the song. One thing to note first up is the *weight* of the song. In our current age where so much focus in our Christian songwriting is on our feeling, willing and doing, only verses 1 and 2 speak of the singers' will. (Elsewhere in verse 9 we have the only other "I will"s of the song – and they speak of the evil intent of the Egyptians in pursuing and plundering Israel.)

The song, rather than dominated by the perspective of the singers, is instead thoroughly focussed on the deeds and purposes of the LORD. And they are words spoken, not just *about*, but *to* the LORD. Vv. 6-12 speaks of the meaning of the Exodus for the LORD Himself, and vv. 13-18 speaks of the meaning of the Exodus for the LORD's people. For the LORD, the Exodus is victory over *His* enemies (see v. 7 – *your* adversaries.) The events of the exodus were first and foremost about the LORD's hallowing of His name, the securing of His Kingship, and the doing of His will in the face of an attempted overthrow. All idolatry is firstly opposition to God and His purposes, and only secondarily opposition to God's people. (We really are too insignificant in ourselves to be any real threat to the powers of evil. We are opposed because the LORD has claimed us as His own.) Only in vv. 13-18 do we get to the "second table" of the song, the purpose of the LORD for His people, a purpose of steadfast love (v. 13.) That purpose is to bring His people to His holy abode (v. 13, 17.) The whole, eternal reign of God (v. 18) is with a view to His people being in His presence, a purpose fulfilled in Jesus Christ – see Ephesians 1:3-4:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

So, the narrative here onwards start to tell the story of the LORD's leading His people to His holy abode before the nations. The song of Moses and Miraim is a prophetic song.

This section in Exodus is like a replay of Genesis 2—involving water and food for life. There, the man and the woman began their life in the garden moving toward the future that God had for them. They were placed in a garden in which water flowed out in a river of life that spread to all the earth, and in which trees of all kinds that were good for food and pleasing to the eye grew to sustain and bring joy to them. These events took place in a garden where there was only the prospect of joy and no history of disappointment. But here Israel is in a wilderness, with the promise of joy and of rescue from a time of bitterness and difficulty.

But, three days into this journey to the LORD's abode, the people find that they are running short of water. They arrive at Marah, but the water supply there is bitter. So resentment grows and the people grumble: "What shall we drink?" (It is not that they have already run out of water; they simply fear for the future.) Intervention by a revelation from the LORD to Moses provides for the sweetening of the waters. (But more is going to have to be done to sweeten the bitterness of the hearts of the people that turn so easily to distrust.) 15:25-26 shows what really needs to be happening for the people – that they listen diligently to the LORD and do what is right in His eyes, listen to His commandments and keep all the statutes. Perhaps this is the heart of those beautiful words in Psalm 84:5-7:

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.
As they go through the Valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools.
They go from strength to strength; each one appears before God in Zion.

Chapter 16 shows the journey from Elim (a place of plenteous water – 12 springs in one place!) to the Wilderness of Sin.¹ It's a month and half now since they left Egypt – and the people are grumbling. In the rose-coloured spectacles of discontent, the past looked better than it was. Instead here they are in the wilderness, all facing death from hunger, because of Moses' and Aaron's foolish plan (16:3.) The LORD's response is to promise to rain bread aplenty from heaven. But this response, like the giving of water at Marah, is a test – "will they walk in my law or not? (16:4)" Moses and Aaron speak to the people of what is about to happen to them, noting that their grumbles are not really about them, but about the LORD, for it is He who brought them out of Egypt. That evening brings droves of quails into the camp – a supply of meat that can be dried and kept for a long time– and the next morning begins the regular provision of manna, a strange bread that continues to be provided day by day (but not the Sabbath) until Israel reach the promised land. With this gift of the manna is the command to not gather on the Sabbath day – the Sabbath will be the test of faith on the part of the people of God.

In chapter 17 the people move on to Rephidim, but again there is no water to drink there. The grumble against Moses now becomes a quarrel (17:2) – which is a test of the LORD rather than faithful, fearing trust. In effect they are questioning whether the LORD is among them. The LORD gives him a sign to perform, by which water flows from out of flinty rock – and the people drink. Another trial then comes – an attack by roving Amalekites. A band of men is called on to retaliate, and Moses takes position on the hill overlooking as the battle takes place. He has the staff of God – and when the staff is raised up, the men of Israel get the upperhand, but when it sinks down, the Amalekites recover and prevail. Moses grows weary, and two others stand beside him

¹ This is not a metaphorical word! – it is the region dominated by Mount Sinai, and "Sin" means "moon," relating to the pagan deity associated with this area.

(Aaron and Hur) and provide support for his arms. And so Joshua and his men triumph by the staff of God.

See how in these chapters, as the LORD leads the people to His abode, He Himself is constantly intervening for them – water, food, water, protection from enemies. Later in 19:4, the LORD will call Israel to remember: “You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles wings and brought you to myself...” It is this testimony that is the grounds for an exhortation to enter into the obedience by which they will truly be His treasured possession, the royal priesthood and holy nation for the sake of the LORD in the world.

Chapter 18 seems to be, at first glance, an interruption to this theme. But it really is not so. Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, a Midianite comes to call, having heard from his daughter, Zipporah, Moses’ wife “how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt (18:1.)” Here, even prior to the commissioning of the people as a royal priesthood, a holy nation in chapter 19, already the nations of the earth are hearing the good news of God’s salvation. Jethro “rejoiced for all the good that the LORD had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians (18:9.)” He recognises that the LORD is greater than all gods (18:11) and offered sacrifices to God (indicating dedication and communion.) Not only is Jethro the recipient of blessing but is now also a giver of it. He has wisdom for Moses about how disputes are to be dealt with: the appointment of able, believing, trustworthy and incorruptible men to judge the less complicated matters will enable Moses to bring the more complex matters to the LORD for judgment, easing the load on his shoulders, and also giving more speedy resolution to the concerns of the people. “Justice delayed is justice denied.” Having passed on his wisdom, Jethro returned home.

At last in chapter 19, it seems that perhaps Israel may have reached the destination of “the LORD’s abode” (Mount Sinai) but in fact, Sinai is yet another staging post on the way – but a very significant one! Verses 1-6 tells of Moses’ first journey up the mountain “to God.” Only later do we find that the LORD descended to the mountain (19:20) – so hearing of Moses going up to God is really speaking of his withdrawal from the community to hear the word of the LORD. This first word is a general promise and invitation to Israel to enter into the purpose of the exodus, i.e. that they become the treasured possession of the LORD, the kingdom of priests and holy nation. The people’s response at these words is unanimous and wholehearted – “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.” (This first event in the covenant making is a little like the giving of consent at the start of a marriage; neither party is being coerced into the relationship.)

Then (19:8-9) Moses goes and reports the words of the people to the LORD. The LORD then tells him that He will come in thick cloud to speak directly with the people. Then (19:9b-15) instructions are given for the needed preparations for this event. Over the next two days, the people are to wash their clothes and be ready for the third day. Limits are to be put up around the mountain that the people not step onto or touch the mountain – the LORD’s coming is a holy event. The life of any one who does transgress is forfeit – they must be executed but not be touched directly. This reflects the very solid view of holiness that Israel had – the holiness of the mountain transfers to the transgressor and then this is risk for any who touch him. God’s holiness can only be approached in the manner that He prescribes. We cannot claim holiness for an action simply because of some “good intention” on our part.

On the third day, climactic and overpowering signs attended the the descent of the LORD to Sinai – thunders, lightnings, thick cloud, and a very loud trumpet blast that increased in volume, louder and louder. The people were led then by Moses to the foot of the mountain. Smoke and fire enveloped the mountain and the mountain shook. As this all took place Moses spoke and the LORD answered in thunder, and then called Moses up the mountain again (the third journey up).

His message is to tell Moses to ensure that the people do not break through to try to look at the LORD – that will be disaster and many will perish. Moses reassures the LORD that His previous word about limits on the mountain has been obeyed, and so the LORD tells him to go down and come up (a fourth time) with Aaron, who must consecrate himself. It is then, while Moses is down with the people that the LORD speaks to the whole community the 10 Words. It is very significant that the 10 Words were not passed on to the people through Moses, but were words that they themselves heard directly from the mouth of the LORD. Deuteronomy 4:9-14 says:

Make them known to your children and your children's children— how on the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, the Lord said to me, ‘Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.’ And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and he wrote them on two tablets of stone. And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and rules, that you might do them in the land that you are going over to possess.

The response of the people to this (19:18-20) is that it is too much to bear – they trembled and were afraid; they stood far off (at a safe distance, not thinking to break out onto the mountain) and asked Moses to act as intermediary for them, to speak God’s word to them, rather than God directly lest they die. Moses speaks comforting words to them – they are not to fear in dread, but rather this is so that they may fear in holy faith and not sin in presumption or arrogance against the LORD.

Moses then (19:21) went up to the LORD again – and 19:22-23:33 is a fuller statement of the 10 Words in particular case law (“statutes”) that covers a wide range of Israel’s life internally and externally. It is worth working through these chapters some time to see how each statute bears relation to the 10 Words.

Terence Fretheim has good things to say about the giving of the Law here.

1. God is the subject in both law and narrative. God is the giver of the law and the chief actor in the narrative... 2. Law is more clearly seen as a gift of God’s graciousness when (seen in the light of the narrative.) Law becomes another part of the larger story of God’s goodness and mercy. From the story it is clear that the law is grounded in a personal and gracious divine will. Narrative reinforces the divine intention in the law: never to leave the people without an indication of what it means to be a community of faith...without instruction regarding the life of faith. Narrative enhances God’s purpose that the law is “for our good always, that God might preserve us alive” (Deut. 6:24)...Narrative helps show that law is fundamentally gift, not burden. 3. Narrative keeps the personal character of the law front and center... The narrative reveals a lively, pulsating relationship between God and people... Obedience to law is thus not seen as a response to the law as law; obedience is fundamentally a response to God and to all God has done. 6...The law is an exegesis of the divine action of the narrative... [T]he way in which God acts in the narrative serves to define the particular details of the law...The specific content of the life of faith is to be shaped by the report of what God has done...7. The motivation given for obedience to law is contained in the narrative... The basic motivation for obeying Torah is drawn from historical experience, not from abstract ethical argument... 9. The integration of law and narrative means that obedience to law becomes another form of witness to God and to what God has done.