

BaptistWay: Questions and faith

March 11, 2015

• *The BaptistWay lesson for March 29 focuses on Exodus 14:1-4, 10-31; 15:1-2, 20-21.*

The parting of the Red Sea is a can of worms:

- Where exactly did the Israelites cross? Did they cross the Gulf of Suez? Did they cross somewhere further north in what is called the Sea of Reeds?
- How can we explain the parting of the water empirically? How much wind does it take to push water apart? Has anything like this ever been observed anywhere else?
- How many Israelites crossed? Could an entire nation of people realistically cross a body of water like that? Could an entire nation of people—including children and the elderly and infirm—cross before the Egyptians caught up to them?
- Have the remains of an entire ancient Egyptian army been discovered anywhere in either the Sea of Reeds or the Red Sea?

Confronting the questions

In an increasingly secular and skeptical society, these questions and many others have been and are being asked about the parting of the Red Sea. These questions should not be dismissed or belittled. They should be handled with honesty and humility. And we should keep in mind they are not the most important question. Rather than getting bogged down in and flustered by a can of worms, as we honor and address them, we should seek ways to move people to the more important question.

The more important question is: How did a nation of people go from questioning Moses to taking the first step into the parted waters?

It's one thing to have faith after crossing the water. It's another thing to take the first step. How did that happen? How was their suspicion overcome?

The people had real concern as they watched the powerful Egyptian army cut off their escape route back into the desert (14:10). The people had real concern—nay, terror—in realizing they were pinned between slaughter by army and death by drowning. What in the world changed their minds?

The narrative

As we look at the narrative, the movement is as follows:

1. The people accuse Moses (and therefore God) of bringing them into the wilderness to die (14:11-12).
2. Moses tells the people not to fear, that God would take care of them (v. 13-14).
3. God tells Moses to speak to the Israelites and to hold his staff out over the water to part it (v. 15-16).
4. God tells Moses, "I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them," and God says through Pharaoh and his army the Egyptians would know God is the Lord (v.17-18).
5. God's messenger and the column of cloud move from in front of Israel to between Israel and the Egyptians and stay between them all night.
6. Moses stretches his hand over the water, and the water parts (v. 21).

7. Israel goes through the water on dry land (v.22).

What strikes me in this narrative is we've seen this sort of movement before. Moses had spoken to the Israelites before. The Israelites had heard him claim to speak for God more than once. The Israelites followed Moses' directions in relation to the Passover, and they followed Moses out into the desert. As a result, we might think precedent had been set.

However, never before had the Israelites been pursued by a powerful army. Never before had they been hemmed in by the water, which the ancients believed bore chaos and horrors of its own. Never before had they been faced with such panic. Yet rather than giving in to mob mentality, the narrative conveys quite calmly that the Israelites went from terrified suspicion to simply going through the water on dry ground (v. 22).

How in the world did that happen? I think the answer is found in Israel's song.

What's in a song?

Israel's fears were not realized. God did not slaughter Israel in the wilderness. God did not drown Israel in the water. Rather, God saved Israel just as Moses, Miriam, and the people sang on the other side.

The people sang, "By the breath of your nostrils the waters piled up. ... You blew with your breath, the sea covered them" (15:8, 10, *The Schocken Bible*). The Hebrew word translated "breath" is *ru'ah*. This same word also is translated "spirit" when referring to the life in human beings and as "Spirit" when referring to God's Spirit, as in its first occurrence in Genesis 1:2, "And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters."

How did a nation of suspicious and panicked people calmly step into the parted waters? I believe the still, small voice, the whispered breath that brought no attention to itself but that received its glory through the army of

Egypt, I believe the Spirit of God made all the difference.

Yes, in this increasingly secular and skeptical time, we need to move people to the more important question about how we go from panicked suspicion to singing a new song on the other side.