

The Parting of the Waters

Drawing on the Hebrew Scriptures and the storytelling traditions of Judaism (midrash), here is a reflection to enjoy at Easter time: Exodus 14. It takes up the story of the parting of the Red Sea which is an essential reading at the Easter Vigil. Note the creative brilliance of the Jewish sages as they manoeuvre their way through the sacred text. Their approach is reverently 'playful' (certainly not historical/scientific), revealing rich spiritual insights within a single verse of Torah.

"But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground" (Exodus 14:16, NRSV).

At first glance, the parting of the Sea reads like an 'out of the blue' miracle. However, the speculations of the midrash fill the 'gaps' in the biblical story and reveal a more complex process before the waters actually part.

One midrashic source¹ tells how Moses queries God's command. Quoting from scripture, he suggests to God that perhaps the waters were not destined to be divided. How does God reply? By quoting Torah! *"You have not read the Torah from the beginning, where it is written, 'And God said: Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together' (Gen. 1:9). It was I who made the condition at the very beginning that I would one day divide it."*

Convinced, Moses goes to divide the sea, but a new obstacle appears, for *"the sea refused to comply, exclaiming, 'What, before you shall I divide? Am I not greater than you? For I was created in the third day and you on the sixth.' When Moses heard this, he went and reported to God, 'The sea refuses to be divided.' What did God do? He placed His right hand upon the right hand of Moses..."* Here the midrash makes a link with Isaiah 63:12 where God *"caused his glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them."*

The midrash continues: *"When the sea beheld God, it fled, as it says, 'The sea saw it, and fled'*

(Ps. 114:3). What did it see? It saw God's right hand placed on Moses, and it could no longer delay, but fled at once."

The sea's reaction seems to surprise Moses, for he asks of it, *"Why do you flee?"* Quoting Ps. 114:7, the sea replies, *"'At the presence of the God of Jacob,' because of the fear of the Holy One, blessed be He."*

At this point, Moses raises his hand over sea, and the sea divides. But not only that... *"all the waters that were in all the fountains and wells and other places became divided."* Here the midrash pays close attention to Exodus 14:21 which *"does not say that 'the water was divided', but 'And the waters were divided.'"*

The midrash ends on a note of triumph, celebrating the greatness of the God-Moses partnership: *'that caused His glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses' (Isa. 63:12).*

All kinds of personal reflections can be stimulated by this delightful and insightful midrashic text. For instance, it can remind us that just as the parting of the Red Sea is not an automatic event but a process with questions to be answered and obstacles to be overcome, so too is the path of faith (such as adult Christian baptism) a journey with questions, challenges, doubts. Yet, when the time comes for God (and us) to act, God acts decisively, grace flows in abundance!

Each year at the celebration of the Easter Vigil, we can listen for and cherish the prayer that follows the Red Sea reading:

"Father, even today we see the wonders of the miracles you worked long ago. You once saved a single nation from slavery, and now you offer that salvation to all through baptism. May the peoples of the world become true sons [and daughters] of Abraham and prove worthy of the heritage of Israel." •

1. Exodus Rabbah 21, 6. See Freedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus* (New York: Soncino Press, 1983).

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