

20. Pharaoh's Chariots

Exod 14-15

This miracle was added for extra reader excitement, and to give first Moses, and then Yahweh, something dramatic to do.

In Exod 11:29-33, Pharaoh bids the Israelites go. In Exod 14-15, he pursues them to bring them back. He seems to be remarkably undecided about it all. Two points suggest that the Exod 14-15 story is a later addition:

(1) The coastal road was the main highway of the period. In Exod 13:17, that route to Canaan is ruled out, and for valid reasons: the fleeing Hebrews are not prepared to deal with the warlike Philistines in their coastal cities:

Exod 13:17. "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 suddenly, a *change of direction* to that dangerous sea route is ordered:

Exod 14:1. And Yahweh spake unto Moses, saying, [2] Speak unto the children of Israel, that they turn back and encamp . . . between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-zephon.

Migdol was near the border fortress at the north end of the Nile delta.¹

(2) There is a curious phenomenon that sometimes occurs at that location.² For whatever reason of sea or wind, a patch of land is temporarily revealed, and then the sea again covers it. This may have inspired someone to invent the story which we now find in Exod 14-15, which takes place at that location.

And what happens when that episode is over? It *began* (at Exod 14:2) by shifting the direction of the story from the south (wilderness) to the north (sea). Here is the point where we again encounter the older story:

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 . . .

The story resumes its wilderness location, *as though nothing had happened*. This is the standard sign of an interpolation.

But is that story itself consistent? Noth³ sees it as made up of a two-strand narrative, suggesting earlier and later versions.

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

²The location was identified by Cazelles (Davies 162) with the Zeus Casios of Herodotus 2:5, 158; 3:5, a seaside shrine to Zeus.

³Noth **Exodus** 102-104.

Here they are, with the Moses part at left, and the Yahweh remake at right:

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 ye shall 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.*

The Egyptians are in the trap. The climax is now approaching.

[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]⁴ 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, and Yahweh overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea.*

[28] And the waters returned, and covered the chariots, and the horsemen, 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.*

If we let the last paragraph serve for both, *each version is complete*. The earlier features Moses. In the later one, Yahweh takes over, showing his power against Pharaoh. In the Plague stories, Aaron does nothing that Pharaoh's magicians cannot do. Moses takes over, but the last plagues are wrought by *Yahweh*. So also in the second strand here: Yahweh "hardens Pharaoh's heart," and then triumphs in the confrontation. We are at that stage in the growth of the tradition when Yahweh replaces Moses as leader in the Wilderness wanderings, and as the sole Lawgiver of Israel, no longer with Moses as his intermediary.

The chronological sequence for Pharaoh's Chariots is then:

- Israel leaves Egypt and sojourns somewhere in the Sinai wilderness
- An exciting story of an encounter near the sea (Exod 14) is inserted
- That insert is then rewritten with Yahweh as the chief figure. The rewrite is intertwined with the older story, to conceal its separate identity.⁵
- A concluding song of triumph (Exod 15) is supplied.⁶

Late additions such as this one tend to be both long and thrilling. Some are also visually arresting. Few later artists have put the Plague of Gnats on canvas, but the Drowning of Pharaoh's Chariots has been a favorite subject.

⁴RSV (ASV "took off" makes no sense). The wheels were mired in the soft ground.

⁵Compare the intertwined stories in §10 (Noah) and §46 (Goliath).

⁶For the late Moses song, see Deborah (§42). A further addition, an echoing song and dance led by Miriam, narratively redeems her earlier, more negative role (see §20). All this argues for the Chariot story as a late addition.