

“Learning about God and Ourselves”

Exodus 14:19–31

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The story we have read from Exodus about the parting of the sea is familiar to most people, even those who don't spend a lot of time in church or reading the Bible. There are many allusions to this event, not to mention Hollywood films about it. We know the basic story, that God parts the sea, allowing the Israelites to escape on dry land, and then God turns the sea back on the Egyptians, killing them all. It is a story about a Mighty God who protects God's people. We get the message loud and clear, as do the Israelites and the Egyptians in the story.

But there are a couple questions the story raises, not just for sceptics and scholars, but for anyone paying attention and thinking about what is happening. First, does God protect God's people in a direct way? If God does, how do we explain the Holocaust? Where is God while the people of Ukraine are suffering the brutalities of war? Did God offer protection in the past, but not now? Why would that be? There isn't much assurance here if God's help is only a thing of the past.

A second question is raised by Jewish commentary on the text. A Midrash says that when the waters poured over the Egyptians, the angels offered to sing a song of praise to God, but God replied, “My handiwork (the Egyptians) are drowning in the sea, and you are reciting a song before me (b. Sanhedrin 39b)?” Deliverance comes at a cost, the Egyptians have oppressed the Israelites, but they are God's people too. Should their deaths be cause for rejoicing?

God's resistance to celebrate in this commentary seems appropriate. If we think about human conduct in a war room, we can appreciate the fact that sometimes leaders must take action and eliminate certain threats, but a little restraint and respect for human life is ideal. If the best human beings can view such action as necessary but regrettable, we can trust that God can and does. It may seem like a straightforward story of assurance. It is anything but that.

So, what do we make of this story? What does it tell us about God and human experience? This is one of those texts in which God seems to be vindictive. A couple of our study groups are currently reading Paul Copan's book *Is GOD a Vindictive Bully?* The premise seems obvious and it has a basis in reality. Many present-day Christians caricature Islam as a violent religion with violent texts, and a small minority of Muslims have done violent things, but historically speaking, Christians have committed as much violence or more in the name of God, and careful studies find more violence in the Bible than the Qur'an.

As Old Testament professor Anna Marsh notes, military imagery is used throughout the Exodus narrative. The rival parties are in *makhanot*, camps. Time is marked by *ashmoret ha boqer*, the morning watch. The strategy of the *malakh ha-elohim*, the messenger of God, had been to lead but is now to lag behind and stand in between the Israelites and the Egyptians because God is doing the fighting.

This is war! An angel is involved, and Moses is God's messenger, but God is the primary actor and what is involved is not simply liberation and the shielding of some people but mass death of others. Israel's God is a great warrior, the God to be feared above all other gods!

This is the text's claim, the Israelites' claim, but these people often function out of an inferiority complex. That is, while being the centerpiece of salvation history in Judeo-Christian tradition, Israel is never a significant political, economic, or military player on the stage of ancient history. Other empires in the East and West rule – Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Rome. And while many of the stories take place a thousand or more years before the time of Jesus, the collection of texts takes place much later, around the time of the exile.

So, when a nation licking its wounds in defeat tells its story, there is an element of hyperbole. The deliverance from Egypt, the conquest of the land, the power revealed, the violence committed, all by God, should not be taken literally.

When God is portrayed in this way, it is a bit like young children saying, "My Daddy is bigger than your Daddy, and my Mom is smarter too!" Now, my father was bigger and tougher, he was former SAS, and my mother was smarter, but that is beside the point. The point is in this

view, when vulnerable people say, “Our God is greater, don’t mess with us,” it is a hyperbole designed to bolster the nation’s self-esteem, a bluff to frighten potential enemies. Does this let God or this view of God completely off the hook? Perhaps not, but it does soften the imagery, and it suggests we read the text more carefully.

We should also note that other parts of scripture present a different image of God. Jesus forgives those who harm him, the Apostle Paul talks about overcoming evil with good, and Jesus teaches us to love our enemies. But it’s not just a Christian Testament pattern. The Hebrew canon contains images of a gentle, nurturing God, as in Hosea 11 where God loves Israel like a mother lifting a young child to her cheek.

No one text can define the nature of God, nor can any single image reveal all there is to God. Furthermore, any claim that God takes out all evil while protecting God’s beloved children from harm is simply not in touch with reality. We can embrace without hesitation the claim that God helps us in our times of need without buying into the image of God as an absolute protector who violently eliminates our enemies.

But all of this noted, what do we learn about ourselves in this text? Assuming that the representation of God is at least in part an image of how the Israelites want to view God; in a sense, a projection of their own feelings; we see a reflection of ourselves. They want to see their enemy wiped out, or at least a part of them does. They have been oppressed. They have come to hate these people. If they could express their anger directly, they would do it!

Whether we acknowledge it openly or not, we feel this way at times about those we think of as our enemies. Anger is a natural human emotion. It is healthy to own this and express it while paying attention to what we do with our anger. Denying our feelings doesn’t make them go away. In fact, it often empowers them. We are much better off facing our darker side and coming to terms with it.

Psalm 137, an imprecatory psalm, provides liturgical space to affirm our anger and yearning for revenge. Set in the context of exile, it opens with hauntingly beautiful words. “By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On

the willows there, we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How could we sing the Lord’s in a foreign land?”

All of this feels like lament, not the invocation of harm. But the mood shifts at the end of the psalm. “O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against of the rock!”

It is a startling request for the slaughter of innocents. It is not a psalm we use very often as a call to worship. I wouldn’t want to have offer a prayer right after it. But I have used the psalm in worship, Wednesday evening, September 12, 2001. We didn’t end that service in my previous setting with that psalm, with anger and vengeance, but after what happened the day before, we needed space to express our anger.

We always do, the Israelites certainly do as they leave Egypt, and as they live as captives in Babylon centuries later. It is healthy to express our emotions, even anger. But we are not called to stop there, we are called to go beyond anger. As we have noted, Jesus teaches us to love our enemies and pray for those who harm us. Paul tells us not to return evil with evil but to overcome evil with good. The cross is the ultimate expression of this principle, as Jesus overcomes violence not with more violence but by laying down his life, forgiving those who put him to death, while they put him to death.

There are many, even in the church, who view this as weakness. They view Jesus as weak. They want a tough guy Jesus, a holy Arnold Schwarzenegger character. They want strength in their leaders, Jesus, and God! But true strength is revealed in weakness, according to the Apostle Paul, in restraint, in a willingness to forgive rather than avenge. The truth is revenge never accomplishes much. It doesn’t recover what is lost and it creates a cycle of hostility which never ends. This is true of personal conflict, political conflict, and war.

In his book *The Sunflower*, Simon Wiesenthal describes a time when he was pulled aside from his labor in a Nazi concentration camp and asked to forgive a dying SS soldier for crimes in which he participated. Given that some may not have read the book, I will not tell

you how Wiesenthal responded. All claims to the contrary, I am capable of not spoiling an ending! But the second half of the book contains responses to Wiesenthal's experience by a wide range of religious leaders from different faith traditions. Many are insightful, especially the one by Desmond Tutu.

Tutu describes the process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa where some people who lost loved ones in bombings and shootings were able to forgive those who committed such atrocities while others were not, providing evidence that forgiveness is not facile or cheap. We should note that this process began after the atrocities ceased, and truth went along with reconciliation, those who committed atrocities fully owned their wrongdoing.

Yet many wondered how anyone who lost a loved one to violence was able to offer forgiveness. Tutu says they did so, following the rabbi who, when he was crucified, said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Then, Tutu concludes his response with these words. "It is clear that if we look only to retributive justice, then we could just as well close up shop. Forgiveness is not some nebulous thing. It is practical politics. Without forgiveness, there is no future." Indeed!

In today's reading from Matthew, Jesus offers a theological motivation to add to this practical one. Given the grace we have received from God, how can we not extend grace to one another?

The message here is not to suggest that Christian grace renders Jewish experience irrelevant nor is it some kind of demand that oppressed people quickly make nice with their oppressors. It is simply a word of encouragement to think more deeply about who God is and who God calls us to be. God does care for God's people in need, even if God cannot shield us from all harm. God works to liberate oppressed people, even if this has costs for the oppressors. But God loves all God's children and extends mercy to all, and God calls us to follow in this path, even if it takes more seas parting to enable us to do so.