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INTRODUCTION, COMMENTARY, & REFLECTIONS
FOR EACH BOOK OF THE BIBLE
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THE APOCRYPHAL / DEUTEROCANONICAL BOOKS
IN
TWELVE VOLUMES

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the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

²⁶Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." ²⁷Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward^a it, and the LORD swept them into the sea. ²⁸The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

²⁹But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. ³⁰That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. ³¹And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.

^a27 Or from

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26Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." ²⁷So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. ²⁹But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

30Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

COMMENTARY

The journey to freedom has begun in 12:37-39. Israel, however, is not yet free. Pharaoh will make one last effort to block the departure. This most dramatic narrative of the departure is arranged in a sequence of quite distinct scenes. While the action turns on the two wonders of the waters divided (vv. 21-25) and the waters returned (vv. 26-28), the actual confrontation is concerned with far more than the miracles of the waters.

14:1-4. The narrative begins, characteristically, with Yahweh's command to Moses. Yahweh knows well before the events themselves that one more crisis with Pharaoh is still to be faced. The reason for this last, desperate effort of the king, so far as the narrative asserts, is not in fact Pharaoh's willfulness, but is yet again Yahweh's act of "hardening."

The reason for Yahweh's action is crucial for our interpretation. The last confrontation will be

staged so that "I will get glory over Pharaoh!" (v. 4). Yahweh arranges the confrontation as an exhibition of enormous power, not for the sake of Israel. The final, decisive intention is not Israelite freedom, but Yahweh's glory, which is decisive. The outcome of the power struggle (which Yahweh will win!) is that Pharaoh in all his recalcitrance shall come at last to know "I am Yahweh."

14:5-9. With this disclosure to Moses and to the listener, we are given the same scene a second time, this time from Pharaoh's perspective. In this scene, the action gives the surface appearance that Pharaoh has freely chosen this new initiative against Israel. We are told simply that Pharaoh changes his mind (יָדַף לִבּוֹ *yēhāpēk lēbab*) and acts with new resolve. The Egyptians now focus not on relief that the "troublemakers" are gone, but on the lost slave labor. What a short memory! Pharaoh cannot remember back to 12:31-32,

when he was desperate for their departure. So, with a radical change of policy and strategy, Pharaoh seeks to block the departure of Israel with a display of enormous power and resolve.

The narrative, however, insists that Egyptian power, resolve, and strategy are not what they seem. Everything has been preempted by Yahweh, who manages all sides of the drama. This is an enormously heavy dose of sovereignty. But then, the entire meeting concerns competing sovereignties. In this scene, the double use of "heart" (change of heart, hardened heart) nicely calls attention to the conflict of sovereignties. Fretheim observes that Yahweh's impact on Pharaoh strengthens Pharaoh's own proclivity.⁶⁹ The hardening by Yahweh does not violate Pharaoh's own intention.

14:10-14. In the third scene, neither Pharaoh nor Yahweh is present. Now the exchange is between Moses and Israel, who appears as a character in the plot for the first time. The speeches are arranged as a petition (vv. 10-12) and a responding salvation oracle (vv. 13-14).

The renewed attack of Pharaoh is an enormous threat to escaping Israel. The erstwhile slave community is completely vulnerable and without resources. Indeed, in this moment the entire departure is once more in profound jeopardy. As a result, the Israelites do the only thing they can do, the thing they always do in fear, and the thing they did in 2:23-24 at the beginning of the emergency: They cry out to Yahweh. Their cry is characteristic of Israel's faith, modeling the way in which the troubled turn to God. The slaves have now found their insistent voice. They cry out to Yahweh in protest, complaint, demand, and hope.

In fact, their speech is not a petition for help; in fact, it is not addressed to Yahweh, as is stated in v. 10. Rather, it is an accusation against Moses (vv. 10-12). The new threat of Egypt is not viewed as a theological emergency, does not even concern Yahweh, who figures more for Moses than for the community. The threat of Pharaoh evokes a crisis of political leadership. The accusation is in three rhetorical questions that are attacks on Moses for his unwise, dangerous, miscalculated, stupid initiative: Was it because . . . ? What have you done . . . ? Is this not . . . ?

69. Fretheim, *Exodus*, 155.

Moses had provided a revolutionary alternative for the slaves, an alternative to the demands of Egypt. In prospect, such emancipation had been attractive. In hand, however, it is only a profound hardship. It is difficult to sustain a revolution, because one loses all the benefits of the old system, well before there are any tangible benefits from what is promised.

In their three angry questions, Moses' opponents utter the name *Egypt* five times. It is the only name they know, the name upon which they rely, the name they love to sound. In the speech of the protesting, distrusting people, the name of Yahweh, however, is completely absent. They do not perceive Yahweh as being in any way a pertinent, active member of the plot. On their own terms, of course, without Yahweh, their reasoning is sound and their complaint is legitimate. Without Yahweh, they have no resources against Egypt and no hope of success. Moses by himself—without Yahweh—is no adequate resource against Egypt.

Moses' response to the challenge, introduced by "fear not," is a characteristic salvation oracle in which the voice of the gospel, rooted in God's own power and fidelity, is offered as a resolution to the voice of protest and trouble (vv. 13-14).

Moses' speech begins with three reassuring imperatives that serve to seize the initiative from the protesters: "Do not fear, stand, see." Moses refuses to accept the despairing picture of reality offered by the protesters. Their picture includes only themselves and the Egyptians, and there is no hope in such a scenario. Moses asserts that such a construal is a severe distortion of reality, for it eliminates Yahweh as an active player. Thus, in his response, Moses twice mentions Yahweh, the very name the protesters were either unable or unwilling to utter. Moreover, Moses' entire self-defense is staked on the claim that Yahweh is indeed a live, active, decisive character in this crisis. Thus the dispute turns on the relevance or irrelevance of Yahweh to the crisis.

Moses' imperatives refuse to respond to the three accusatory sentences just uttered. The first imperative, "fear not," is an enormously preemptive statement, used to override fear by the giving of assurance that lies outside and beyond fear. His