

Exodus 15:1-20

In this lesson we are examining only the first twenty verses of the chapter because the story of Israel in Egypt ends with verse 20 and the story of the wilderness wanderings begins in verse 21. We will examine the first 18 verses of the Egypt story by applying the five “accomplishments of the song” as laid out by Kass (Founding God’s Nation: Reading Exodus pg. 212-213). These five accomplishments allow us to understand the song and its purposes more fully. As a note this song is divided into four sections or strophes (vs 1b-6, 7-11, 12-18, 20-21). Verses 1a and 19 are brackets around the song of Moses.

Accomplishment 1 is to tell what happened. We see this history throughout when the story speaks of the defeat of the Egyptians in the sea. We hear of the chariots being cast into the sea, waters piling up and the enemy being drowned in the depths.

Accomplishment 2 is to give meaning to the events detailed in the song. The meaning is that this event was a mighty act of God and not a mighty act of Moses or the people. Notice carefully that while Moses writes and leads the song, he is not in it. All the praise and glory go to God and God alone. It is God’s mighty hand that has defeated the Egyptians and freed the Hebrews.

Accomplishment 3 is the uniting of the people in a common celebration of YHWH’s greatness. Again, as we have noted before, the Hebrews have been a rag-tag group of slaves without a common identity. This song brings them together as a people and as a people who have recognized that YHWH is the source of their deliverance. Additionally, this song will continue to unite God’s people and will show up later retellings of the this liberating event.

Accomplishment 4 is that they are given confidence for the battles that lie ahead. Taking the Land of Promise will not be easy and so the people need to believe that with God at their side they can do anything. We see this trust in vs. 11, “Who is like you YHWH among the gods?” In other words, there is no god and no people who can defeat YHWH and YHWH’s people. This is carried through in the third strophe when the people learn that the occupants of the Land of Promise are living in fear of the Hebrews and their God.

Accomplishment 5 is that the people are turned toward the future. This is not simply a song of the past but of the future. This idea can be seen in verse 17 where it speaks of the people being planted upon the mountains that belong to God.

The fourth strophe is referred to as the song of Miriam. This song is thought to be one of the oldest sections of scripture and is a fitting ending to the story of Moses in Egypt. It is a fitting ending because the story of Moses in Egypt begins with women. As a reminder the story opens with Shiphrah and Puah, the two midwives who refuse Pharaoh’s orders to kill the Hebrew baby boys, which would have included Moses. Next Moses is saved by his mother who placed him in a basket and by Pharaoh’s daughter who rescues him. In verses 20-21 Miriam and the women celebrate by dancing and singing in tribute to YHWH. Women have the first and last words in this portion of Exodus.

Reflection: Over the centuries both rabbis and pastors, Jews and Christians have found this song to be disturbing. It is disturbing because it glories in the death of human beings. If God is a God of life, the question goes, how is it that we can celebrate the deaths of any person. While death may be necessary to protect life, should we sing about any death? I offer two pieces of Jewish teaching. *“The Egyptians were drowning in the sea. At the same time, the angels wanted to sing before God, and the Lord, God, said to them: ‘My creations are drowning and you are singing before me?’”* (Midrash Megilla 10) *“Do not gloat at the fall of your enemy.”* (Proverbs 24:17).

Questions:

1. Which of the five accomplishments holds most meaning for you?
2. Why do you think that women are given the first and last words in this portion of Exodus?
3. What are your thoughts on the “gloating” in the song over the deaths of the Egyptians?