

Chapter 14

The Egyptian Pursuit and the Red Sea Catastrophe

“AND IT came to pass at the end of the four hundred and thirty years, even the self-same day it came to pass, that all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt. It is a night to be much observed unto the Lord” ([Ex. 12:41–2](#)). The reason why the night that witnessed the exodus was to be a memorable night in the national history was not because Israel attained their liberation from the Egyptian bondage: this was but a collateral element in the case. Moses touched the kernel of the event when he said, “Remember this day in which ye came out of Egypt: for *by strength of hand* THE LORD BROUGHT YOU OUT from this place.” The passover was established as an annual feast, not to commemorate the achievement of national independence, but to keep in the national view the part performed by divine power in the matter, as Moses explained: “When the Lord shall bring thee unto the land of the Canaanites ... thou shalt keep this service ... and thou shalt show thy son in that day, saying, This is done *because of that which Yahweh did unto me*, when I came forth out of Egypt. And it shall be for a sign ... that the Lord’s law shall be in thy mouth: for *with a strong hand* HATH THE LORD BROUGHT THEE OUT OF EGYPT” ([Ex. 13:5–9](#)). The passover has been observed ever since by Israel in their generations: and this is the meaning of it—that God exists and has a purpose in the earth; for there could have been no Egyptian exodus apart from these facts; and the Egyptian exodus occurred precisely that these facts might be made manifest, as we have seen throughout the Mosaic history of the plagues. The observance of the passover at this day is a witness of these things having transpired. Let any man who doubts this try to explain the observance of the passover by Israel during all their history, apart from the explanation of its institution given by Moses. He will find it not possible to give an explanation that will be rational, or that can be reconciled with the facts that have to be admitted by friend and foe. The only explanation that fits the facts all round—and especially that accounts at all for the escape of a slave rabble from the clutch of a powerful military nation, is the explanation given by Moses—that Jehovah miraculously interposed to accomplish the event in order that His name might be known.

The exodus being a miraculous performance, how out of place and beside the mark is that style of criticism which raises objections on the score of impossibility. Is anything impossible with God? The critics themselves would not affirm so insane a proposition. What they vainly persist in doing is trying to find an interpretation of the exodus which shall explain its events, without the element of miraculous performance in it. It is as if some old fogey were to try to account for the performance of the journey from London to Edinburgh in ten hours on the stage coach principle—without any reference to the participation of steam. It is a bootless attempt altogether. Without the steam, or some propelling agent of equal power, the journey could not be made in the time. Without the miraculous, the deliverance of Israel from Egypt could not have happened at all; and if the miraculous were in it, there is no difficulty as to anything connected with it; for the miraculous would be sure not to do the great things well and leave the little things unprovided for. The case stands perfectly plain. The exodus of Israel from Egypt was the great historic exhibition of the visible hand of God in the earth that God might be known and

recognised, and that the foundation might be laid among men for the great purpose He has contemplated for the earth from the beginning: the purpose to make the earth at last the habitation of His praise, and gladness for all mankind.

But God's mighty judgments on the Egyptians were not yet ended. He proposed a finishing stroke which would give a tertion—that dramatic completeness to the work, and write the intended lesson in the heart of Israel in characters that would not be effaced by the friction of a hundred generations. This, with consummate wisdom, was accomplished by leading Israel into a trap. The marching host was taken—not through the direct and easy route that lay by the Mediterranean seaboard, but by a road turning southwards, which brought them by the western side of the northern tongue of the Red Sea, into a position from which there was no exit—the Red Sea in front, a mountain barrier to the north and south, and the road to Egypt in the rear. They received instructions to “encamp before Pihahiroth between Migdol, and the sea, over against Baal-zephon.” This was the “order of the day,” promulgated to the host direct from God, through Moses. The order was carried out, and they “encamped by the sea,” in a position from which escape was impossible in case of attack in the rear. Israel were not aware of the reasons for this apparent bungle of generalship; but it was not long before it became apparent to them—at all events, in its first, and not at all comforting, aspect. They discerned in the distance the Egyptian army approaching with speed. Pharaoh, hearing of the route taken by the Israelites, and of the position they had taken up, saw at a glance the fatal mistake they had made, according to all military tactics: “They are entangled in the land, and the wilderness hath shut them in.” It was a situation to tempt pursuit and re-capture. This was the divine bait. God had said to Moses, “I will harden Pharaoh's heart, that he shall follow after them: and I will be honoured upon Pharaoh and all his host: that the Egyptians may know that I am Yahweh.” And God did so. It required very little divine influence to quicken Pharaoh's pre-disposition in this state of matters. He found himself vexatiously regretting the consent he had given to Israel's departure. “Why,” said he, “have we done this, that we have let Israel go from serving us?” His fermenting feelings soon took shape. He decided to catch Israel in the trap they had walked into. “He made ready his chariot and took his people with him, and he took six hundred chosen chariots, and all the chariots of Egypt, and captains over every one of them. And he pursued after the children of Israel ... and overtook them encamping by the sea beside Pihahiroth before Baal-zephon.”

Never was a company of human beings in more perilous position than Israel at this moment. Here was a vast defenceless crowd of men, women, and children, encumbered with flocks of sheep, and herds of cattle huddled into a valley that opened only to the sea; and here, behind them, in compact military order, was rapidly approaching a thoroughly equipped corps of the flower of the army of the most powerful monarchy of the earth. Israel quickly saw their danger, and something like panic seized the assembly. “When Pharaoh drew nigh, the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold the Egyptians marched after them, and they were sore afraid and the children of Israel cried out unto the Lord.” This crying out was not in the sense of devotion and trust, as the sequel shows. It was the crying out of alarm. There was no faith in it at all, for they taunted Moses with the unreasonable bitterness that most people show in the hour of misfortune. “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 with us to carry us forth out of Egypt? *Is not this the word we did tell thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone that we may serve the Egyptians? For it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness*” ([Ex. 14:11–12](#)). Could leader be more sorely tried than Moses in these words? Moses knew what the Lord had said to him as to the upshot of this alarming phase of things, and

on this he leant. He tried to quiet the people with the faith which he possessed himself. He said: “Fear ye not; stand still and see the salvation of the Lord which he will show you today: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen today, ye shall see them again no more for ever. The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace.” There is no evidence that Moses knew in what way the Egyptian army would be destroyed. It would rather appear that he did not. He cried to the Lord in the great strait in which they were placed, believing that the promised deliverance would come, but waiting to see how. “And Yahweh said unto Moses: *Wherefore criest thou unto Me?* Speak unto the children of Israel that they GO FORWARD. Lift thou up thy rod, and stretch thine hand out over the sea, and divide it, and the children of Israel shall go on dry ground through the midst of the sea.” Here was something new in military history about to be done—but what matters “military history”? Military history is only the history of human fightings, and human fightings are a recent affair upon earth. What are six thousand years in the roll of beginningless eternity? But because we happen to be in the run of the human chapter, just at present, the human chapter seems great and important with nearly all men. It is an insignificant affair, for all that: and God was showing this to Israel, and all men, by the wonderful programme of divine doings that gave Israel an existence among the nations—very small and easy things for God to do, but very marvellous to man, as a spectator—poor, weak, perishing man.

Moses did what he was told (the sum of all virtue in man towards God). But, before he did so, there was a change in the “dispositions,” as military man say, to suit the move about to be made: “The Angel of God which went before the camp of Israel removed, and went behind them: and the pillar of cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them. And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel, and it was a cloud of darkness to them (the Egyptians), but it gave light by night to these (Israel), so that the one came not near the other all night.” This brings into view an element of the wonderful journey from Egypt not yet noticed—the fact that the immense procession of the Israelitish host was divinely led in a tangible and visible manner: “Yahweh went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead them the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light: to go by day and night: he took not away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people” ([Ex. 13:21](#)). In a certain sense, there is nothing to marvel at in such a prodigy. If God was bringing this nation out of Egypt by power miraculously shown (for the manifestation of His name), it was according to the fitness of things that He should do it well and completely: and what better mode could be conceived of guiding a host on the march through an unknown country, than by suspending in their sight in front an object visible to all—as a cloud in the day and fire at night. It was an admirable arrangement of wisdom. It was a miracle—this pillar cloud changed to fire at night; and so was its sailing progress through the air, as the assembly marched; but what difficulty about that? The whole affair of the exodus was a miraculous transaction, or it did not happen at all: and as to which of these alternatives is admissible, we have already seen it is not an open question. The exodus did happen, and it was God’s doing throughout, and therefore all difficulty is absent. Any cloud is a wonder, and any fire is a piece of inscrutability if we will but consider it. Intrinsically, there was nothing more wonderful in the pillar of day and night than in the formless masses of cloud in the sky; only this cloud was shaped and guided by a direct application of intelligent power, and the others are allowed to shape and adjust themselves on mechanical principles fixed in them when they were originally established for the purpose which they serve. Men talk about this cloudy pillar as “the symbol of the divine presence!” This is a vague and cloudy way of talking altogether. It was not hung out in front of the assembly as a symbol at all, but as a practically useful thing. By it, God went before them to guide. Doubtless it

was a token that God was with them, but there were many things beside this that betokened that wonderful guidance. The cloud was not a token in particular, but a means of leadership which the circumstances made necessary.

It is well to notice that while the first account of the cloudy pillar tells us that “YAHWEH went before them in it,” the second says it was “*the angel of God* that went before the camp of Israel.” No plainer intimation could we receive—that what we read of as the doings and sayings of Yahweh are often in actual form the doings and sayings of the angels whom He employs, “who excel in strength, that do his commandments, hearkening to the voice of his word” ([Psa. 103:20](#)).

The Yahweh-angel having interposed himself between the approaching Egyptians and the alarmed assembly of the Israelites, the safety of the latter was secured while the wonderful movement was executed that was to sink Pharaoh and his army to the bottom of the sea. Night came on during the operation; and while Israel’s movements were facilitated by the flood of light thrown among their ranks from the electric brightness of the fiery pillar, a contrary effect was produced among the Egyptians, to whom the rear side of the pillar was made a cause of increased darkness. This was necessary, otherwise the Egyptians would have gained too rapidly on Israel for the divine purpose. Even as it was, they came on too quickly, and the angel had to moderate their speed by taking off a few of their wheels, in consequence of which “they drave heavily.”

Moses, having done as he was commanded, an extraordinary thing happened. The sea, cut asunder by the east wind, divided in the middle; a path of dry land was thus formed all the way across, the divided waters were congealed, and kept in their place like two sloping banks; and Israel received orders to march. They probably obeyed this order with all the alacrity with which people usually escape from danger when a way is suddenly opened. The opened channel was soon filled from end to end with rapidly-marching people. The Egyptians were held at bay while Israel got clear. Israel, by and by, began to deploy out of the channel at the other side. The Egyptians “went in after them into the midst of the sea.” It was the most natural thing in the world for the Egyptians to do: for seeing the Israelites had ventured into the bed of the sea and were getting along in safety, what could the Egyptians think but that what the Israelites were safely doing, they could do also? Military orders brook no parley, and military ardour, with a flying foe just ahead, does not deliberate much. Ordered to advance, the Egyptians march along the new highway in the waters. Israel had cleared the channel and were standing on the shore on the other side. The Egyptian army was now bodily in the bed of the sea, and making good progress through the channel towards the other side. Ah, Pharaoh! you thought you had Israel in a trap: what a trap you are in! Get out as fast as you can. Alas! your utmost speed is in vain. Moses stands on the shore on the other side. He is the faithful servant of the God who had made all water and all men, and to whom all things belong, and to whom none in heaven or earth can say, “What doest thou?” This God has told His servant Moses to bring those waters on each side of you together again. It is the work of a moment. He lifts his rod: the restrained waters are set free: with a quiet, sudden leap from each side, they run together with the plunging sullen roar of the waves that beat the strand, and lo, where is now the army on which you placed your confidence? Struggling in the water—a confused mass of men and horses, shouting in battle with an enemy they did not expect to encounter—fighting with the waters: it is a short conflict. In ten minutes or a quarter-of-an-hour, the sounds of struggle cease; the sea has returned to its strength: the power and pride of Pharaoh and his captains are no more. “The depths have covered them; they sank into the bottom as a stone. Thy right hand, O Lord, is become glorious in power: thy right hand, O Lord, hath dashed in pieces the enemy.... The enemy said, I will pursue, I will overtake: I will divide the spoil: my lust shall be satisfied upon them. I will draw my sword: my

hand shall destroy them. Thou didst blow with thy wind: the sea covered them: they sank as lead in the mighty waters.”

And thus did Jehovah finally put an end to Egyptian hostility, and separate His people Israel for the work to be done. It was a consummate stroke of wisdom. Whichever way it is looked at, it commands our unbounded admiration. It not only destroyed the pursuers of Israel, but it brought destruction in a form that could leave no doubt in the minds of men as to the divine nature of the calamity; for who but God could open a path in the sea for the escape of his people, and hold it open just so long as was needful to allow Israel to get out of it and the Egyptians into it. It was far more eloquent on this point than if the Egyptian soldiers had been destroyed as they stood in their ranks, after the manner of the Assyrian army nearly a thousand years afterwards. Such a destruction might have been put down to an accidental plague: but the catastrophe of the Red Sea was susceptible of no such explaining away. It was as unanswerable as it was complete; and see, also, how effectually, by bringing Israel to the eastern side of the sea, it protected them from all further molestation from Egyptian reinforcements, and left them at liberty for those spiritual exercises to which they were to be subjected in the wilderness of Sinai. It was a perfect triumph of divine wisdom. No wonder Israel broke forth in song; “I will sing unto the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and song: and He is become my salvation: He is my God, and I will prepare Him an habitation: my father’s God, and I will exalt Him. Yahweh is a man of war: Yahweh is His name. Pharaoh’s chariots and his host hath He cast into the sea: his chosen captains also are drowned in the Red Sea ... Thou in thy mercy hast led forth the people which Thou hast redeemed: Thou hast guided them in Thy strength unto Thy holy habitation. The people shall hear and be afraid: sorrow shall take hold of the inhabitants of Palestine.... Fear and dread shall fall upon them: at the greatness of Thine arm they shall be as still as a stone, till Thy people pass over, O Lord, till the people pass over which Thou hast purchased. Yahweh shall reign for ever and ever” ([Ex. 15](#)).

This drowning of a whole army in the Red Sea, which had just been safely crossed by the Israelitish multitude, is the most extraordinary event that ever happened in the history of nations, if we except the interview between God and Israel at Sinai. No wonder that it stands out so boldly in all the Scriptures that come after Moses. It is the beacon seen towering from afar—it is a brilliant light streaming from the days of Moses down all the darkness of the centuries since. David refers to it continually in the Psalms. *One example*: “Oh, give thanks to the Lord of Lords ... to Him which divided the Red Sea into parts ... and made Israel to pass through the midst of it ... but overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea, for His mercy endureth for ever” ([Psa. 136:1–15](#)). How often is it the subject of allusion in the Prophets? How undoubted is its recognition in the apostolic writings ([Acts 7:36](#); [Heb. 1:29](#)). Why is it so faintheartedly and uncertainly received nowadays by those who are ostensibly the religious leaders of the people—by those who profess a nominal allegiance to the Scriptures? Why do they hesitate to receive the testimony of a man like Moses, whom they glorify as a wonderful legislator, confirmed as that testimony is by such an unspeakable wonder as “the prophet like unto Moses”—the prophet of Nazareth, Jesus Christ, the Son of God? Why are they so prone to sacrifice unmistakable historic truth at the shrine of human speculation and sentiment? The answer is doubtless to be found in what may be called the Egyptians’ side of the question. There is a feeling to the effect that, while the exodus was a grand affair from the Hebrew point of view, it has a different aspect when looked at in the light of “broad humanitarian principles.” These “broad humanitarian principles”—presuppose a philosophy which writes down every human being an entity of incomparable preciousness. Here is the worm at the root. God’s great and

mighty works upon earth are obscured and wrested, because of a false theory of the importance of man. The Greeks held man to be immortal. Christians caught up the pleasing notion; the result has been, to eat away the life and destroy the meaning of the Holy Oracles, and reduce the sublimities of Scripture history to a collection of ancient tales of little further use than to entertain Sunday scholars. Let man be seen in the light in which the Scriptures always place him—as a creature of vanity ([Psa. 39:4–5](#); [144:3–4](#)): of the dust ([Gen. 3:19](#); [18:27](#); [Psa. 103:14–16](#)): as grass of the earth ([Isa. 40:6–8](#), [15–17](#)): of no consequence in his intrinsic nature ([Dan. 4:35](#); [Ecc. 3:18](#); [Psa. 49:12–20](#))—let frail man be seen thus in his true light of smallness, and worthlessness, and ephemerality, and God in His true position of sole and sovereign power, greatness, and immortality, and the Mosaic narrative springs into its place of stupendous truth and significance. Let man be recognised as the clay, and the operations of the Potter will be easily discerned. The Egyptians were “but men” ([Psa. 9:20](#)), the property of God ([Ezek. 18:4](#)), in whose hand their breath was, and whose were all their ways ([Dan. 5:23](#)). Like Belshazzar, they had not glorified Him: they knew Him not: they were sunk in ways and practices that were abominable to Him ([Deut. 18:12](#)). Therefore, as God says concerning the Sodomites, “I took them away as I saw good” ([Ezek. 16:50](#)). He did with them as with the entire race of man, except Noah’s family, before the flood: He drowned them. They were only fit for drowning, and He had the right to drown; and their drowning was made a means of furthering the great purpose of wisdom and goodness He had conceived concerning the earth. Where is the difficulty? There is none except such as is created by supposing a lie to be the truth. If we suppose man to be immortal, and the drowning of them in judgment to be a sending of them to Dante’s hell, then there is great difficulty. The difficulty has been felt by those who believe this to be the truth; and the effect is seen in the general tendency manifested in all educated circles to make out Moses to be a fabulist and the wonderful works of God in Egypt the legends of ancient superstition. Get rid of the lie, and the truth asserts its great and glorious place, and we are enabled to respond to David’s invitation to praise the Lord for the judgments He executed on Pharaoh and his host in the day He brought Israel out of Egypt. It also places us in the position of being able to look forward, with intelligent solicitude for the further exhibition of the visible hand of God, of which God Himself has spoken by the prophet Micah: “According to the days of thy coming out of the land of Egypt will I show unto him marvellous things. The nations shall see and be confounded at all their (Israel’s) might; they (the nations) shall lay their hand upon their mouth: their ears shall be deaf. They shall lick the dust like a serpent: they shall move out of their holes like worms of the earth. They shall be afraid of the Lord our God and shall fear because of thee” ([Micah 7:15–17](#)).