

thought, "Lest the people regret when they see battle and go back to Egypt."  
 18 And God turned the people round by way of the wilderness of the Sea  
 19 of Reeds, and the Israelites went up armed from the land of Egypt. And  
 Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had solemnly made the  
 sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely single you out, and you shall  
 20 take up my bones with you from here." And they journeyed from Succoth  
 21 and encamped at Etham at the edge of the wilderness. And the LORD was  
 going before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them on the way and  
 22 by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light to go by day and by night. The  
 pillar of cloud would not budge by day nor the pillar of fire by night from  
 before the people.

1,2 **CHAPTER 14** And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak  
 to the Israelites, that they turn back and encamp before Pi-Hahiroth  
 between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-Zephon, opposite it you shall  
 3 camp, by the sea. And Pharaoh had said of the Israelites,

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18. *the Sea of Reeds*. This is not the Red Sea, as older translations have it, but most likely a marshland in the northeastern part of Egypt. (Marshes might provide some realistic kernel for the tale of a waterway that is at one moment passable and in the next flooded.) But it must be conceded that elsewhere *yam suf* refers to the Red Sea, and some scholars have recently argued that the story means to heighten the miraculous character of the event through the parting of a real sea. Even if the setting is a marsh, the event is reported in strongly supernatural terms.

19. *he had solemnly made the sons of Israel swear*. Here the reference of *beney yisra'el* would have to be Joseph's brothers, the actual sons of Israel/Jacob. But the double sense of the term works nicely by stressing the continuity of obligation between the original sons of Israel who swore to bring Joseph's bones up out of Egypt and these "sons of Israel" who are the Israelites, the Hebrew nation.

21. *And the LORD was going before them*. The participial form of the verb in the Hebrew suggests constant action. This effect is complemented by the verb at the very beginning of (in the Hebrew) the next verse, *lo' yamish*, which has an iterative force, "would not budge." The twin images of a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire going before the people extend the representation of the Israelites as "the LORD's battalions" because in biblical idiom the commander of an army is said to "go out and come in" before it, that is, lead it in battle.

*a pillar of cloud . . . a pillar of fire*. This spectacular panoramic picture of the Israelite throngs following these miraculous guides through the wilderness nicely counterpoints the plagues that preceded. Several of the plagues involved destruction descending from the sky. Here a great mass of cloud descends from the sky to lead Israel. The penultimate plague plunged Egypt into terrifying darkness, and now a column of divine fire serves as a huge beacon to show Israel the way through the dark of the wilderness.

‘They are confounded in the land,  
The wilderness has closed round them.’

And I shall toughen Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, that I may gain glory through Pharaoh and through all his force, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD.” And thus they did do.

And it was told to the king of Egypt that the people had fled, and Pharaoh and his servants had a change of heart about the people, and they said, “What is this we have done, that we sent off Israel from our service?” And he harnessed his chariot, and his troops he took with him. And he took six hundred picked chariots, and all the chariots of Egypt, and captains

CHAPTER 14      3. *They are confounded in the land, / The wilderness has closed round them.* Since God has just given the most precise instructions as to where the Israelites should establish their camp, this quotation of what Pharaoh says when he hears of the Israelites’ movements is a strong indication that God has set up what amounts in military terms to an ambush. Pharaoh, seeing that the Hebrews have not followed the short and obvious coastal route to get out of Egypt northward, concludes that they have lost their way (“they are confounded in the land”) and have inadvertently allowed themselves to be pinned down on the shore of the Sea of Reeds (“The wilderness has closed round them”), where the pursuing troops will easily surround them and recapture the whole mass of run-away slaves. Note that Pharaoh, in his regal confidence, speaks in verse—two semantically complementary clauses with three nicely scanning beats in each, *nevukhím hém ba’árets / sagár ’aleihém hamidbár*. What the Egyptian leader can scarcely foresee is that the Hebrews will be able to flee into the sea, which then will turn into a death trap for the pursuing Egyptian troops. The place-names stipulated in God’s instructions to Moses have not been identified, though it might be noted that they are all Hebrew names, with the exception of Pi-Hahiroth, which appears to have an Egyptian prefix.

4. *that I may gain glory.* The Hebrew verb *’ikavdah*, as anyone reading the story in the original would notice, plays on the same word *kaved*, “heavy,” that has been repeatedly used for the severity of the plagues, the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart, and the density of the Israelites’ livestock.

5. *about the people.* It is noteworthy that through this section the Israelites are several times referred to simply as “the people,” the perspective of the narrative, the audience, and of God having become thoroughly an Israelite national perspective.

*from our service.* Literally, “from serving us.” The multivalent “send” is now given its explicit legal sense of manumission.

6. *his troops.* The literal meaning of *’amo* is “his people,” but *’am* in military contexts regularly refers to troops, and Pharaoh clearly has not taken the entire people with him, only his army.

7. *and all the chariots of Egypt.* That is, Pharaoh took not only the elite chariotry, but in fact the entire Egyptian chariot corps.

*captains.* The Hebrew *shalishim* has never been definitively explained. It appears to be

8 over it all. And the LORD toughened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the Israelites, the Israelites going out with a high hand.  
 9 And the Egyptians pursued them and overtook them encamped by the sea—all the horses of Pharaoh's chariots and his riders and his force—at  
 10 Pi-Hahiroth before Baal-Zephon. And Pharaoh drew near, and the Israelites raised their eyes and, look, Egypt was advancing toward them, and they  
 11 were very afraid, and the Israelites cried out to the LORD. And they said to Moses, "Was it for lack of graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the  
 12 wilderness? What is this you have done to us to bring us out of Egypt? Isn't this the thing we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, 'Leave us alone, that we may serve Egypt, for it is better for us to serve Egypt than for us to die in the  
 13 wilderness?'" And Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. Take your station and see the LORD's deliverance that He will do for you today, for as  
 14 you see the Egyptians today, you shall not see them again for all time. The LORD shall do battle for you, and you, you shall keep still."

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derived from *sheloshah*, "three," and may refer to the division of the army into command units of three and thirty (compare 2 Samuel 23:9–23). Some have conjectured that the *shlish* would be the third man or commander in a war chariot, but Egyptian chariots appear to have had crews of only two men. A few scholars have suggested a Ugaritic cognate meaning "bronze," as in bronze armor, the term by metonymy referring to a warrior or officer.

8. *with a high hand*. Nahum Sarna proposes that the idiom is drawn from depictions of ancient Near Eastern gods brandishing a weapon in the upraised right hand. The English "high-handed" has some kinship with the notion of defiance conveyed by the Hebrew expression. "Hand" has figured centrally in the entire Exodus narrative both in God's powerful hand against Egypt and Moses's outstretched hand (or arm, the Hebrew *yad* often covering both) unleashing the plagues, as here it will split the sea.

11. *Was it for lack of graves in Egypt*. After the initial complaints of the Israelites against Moses, we have been given no information about their collective mental state. Now we see them as fearful and as recalcitrant as they were at the beginning. This moment becomes the first of a whole series of "murmurings" that will punctuate the Wilderness narrative.

*What is this you have done to us . . . ?* These words are a pointed echo of the words of Pharaoh's courtiers, "What is this we have done?" (verse 5).

12. *Isn't this the thing we spoke to you in Egypt*. These words amount to delayed narrative exposition since, before this revelation in the people's dialogue, there was no report of their having said they would perish in the wilderness and so should stay in slavery. Alternately, they may be inventing words that they never said, but now imagine what they may never actually have said.

13. *Do not be afraid*. Moses has already proven himself an irascible figure, and he will be quick to anger in subsequent episodes. Here, however, he recognizes that the complaint of the newly freed slaves stems from fear, and so he reassures them.

*for as you see the Egyptians today, you shall not see them again for all time*. The defeat will be so crushing that Egypt will never again attain this zenith of imperial power. This ringing statement is not the least of the exercises in gratifying historical fantasy in the story.

And the LORD said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to me? Speak to the Israelites, that they journey onward. As for you, raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and split it apart, that the Israelites may come into the midst of the sea on dry land. As for me, look, I am about to toughen the heart of the Egyptians, that they come after them, and I shall gain glory through Pharaoh and through all his force, through his chariots and through his riders. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, through his chariots and through his riders. And the messenger of God that was going before the camp of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them. And it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel, and there was the cloud and the dark, and it lit up the night, and they did not draw near each other all night. And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the LORD led the sea with a mighty east wind all night, and He made the sea dry ground, and the waters were split apart. And the Israelites came into the sea on dry land, the waters a wall to them

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Egypt in fact continued to be an intermittent military threat to Israel throughout the First Commonwealth period.

15. *Why do you cry out to me?* This is a little puzzling because there has been no report of Moses’s crying out to the LORD. The least strained solution is that of Abraham ibn Ezra, who argues that since Moses is the spokesman of the people, if the people cry out, God can readily attribute the crying out to Moses.

19. *the messenger of God that was going before the camp.* In the initial report of the pillars of cloud and of fire, God Himself was going before the Israelite camp. The introduction of an agent of the deity here is either an explanation in the original narrative of what God’s presence before the people actually meant or an interpolation of later tradition in order to mitigate the anthropomorphism.

20. *and it lit up the night.* This clause is ambiguous, especially because the antecedent would have to be the pillar of cloud, which does not give off light. Perhaps one might view these words as a telescoping of a temporal shift: the Egyptians approach the Israelites, who are clearly in full view, in daylight, perhaps, one may infer, in the late afternoon. The pillar of cloud swings around from Israelite front to rear in order to form a barrier between the Hebrews and the Egyptians. As night falls, the pillar of cloud (“and there was the cloud”) in response to the gathering darkness (“and the dark”) turns into fire (“and it lit up the night”).

21. *wind . . . sea dry ground.* The key terms here hark back to the first creation (God’s breath-spirit-wind, *ruah*; the dividing between sea and dry land). His power over the physical elements of the world He created is again manifested, this time in a defining event in the theater of history.

*split apart.* Not merely “divided,” for the Hebrew verb *baqa’* is a violent one, the word that would be used for splitting wood with an axe.

22. *the waters a wall to them on their right and on their left.* Ilana Pardes persuasively identifies birth imagery in this whole story. The passage through waters—led by a man who

23 on their right and on their left. And the Egyptians pursued and came after  
 24 them, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his riders, into the sea. And it  
 happened in the morning watch that the LORD looked out over the camp of  
 Egypt in a pillar of fire and cloud and He panicked the camp of Egypt. And  
 25 He took off the wheels of their chariots and drove them heavily, and Egypt  
 said, "Let me flee before Israel, for the LORD does battle for them against  
 26 Egypt." And the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea,  
 that the waters go back over the Egyptians, over their chariots and over their  
 27 riders." And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea went  
 back toward morning to its full flow, with the Egyptians fleeing toward it,

has been saved from water, after a genocidal decree in which water was to be the means of killing the babies—is the beginning of the birth of the nation, and Pardes aptly sees the large narrative from Exodus to Numbers as the "biography of a nation."

24. *in the morning watch.* By Israelite reckoning, the last third of the night, from 2:00 A.M. to 6:00 A.M. The Hebrews, then, would have marched through the Sea of Reeds during the night, literally plunging into the dark, for the pillar of fire would have been behind them rather than leading them on their way.

*the LORD looked out.* The Hebrew verb *hishqif* is generally reserved for looking down or out from a high vantage point.

*in a pillar of fire and cloud.* The double identification is presumably because of the moment of transition toward daybreak when the fire becomes cloud. The narrative sequence at this point is not entirely clear, but it might be sorted out as follows: during the night, the Israelites make their way across the sea, with the protective pillar of fire following after them. The Egyptians, seeing their movement, which would be joined with the receding pillar of fire, begin pursuit. As day breaks, God looks down on them from the pillar of fire just as it turns back into a pillar of cloud. As the water begins to seep back, the Egyptians turn round and flee.

25. *He took off the wheels of their chariots.* There is some dispute about the sense of the verb, which usually means to "take away," "take off," "remove." The simplest explanation is that as the water begins to seep back and before it becomes a flood that engulfs the Egyptians, it turns the dry ground into muck. The chariot wheels rapidly become stuck in the mud ("He . . . drove them heavily") and break off from the axles. In all this tale of the utter destruction of the Egyptian chariots, there is a kind of allaying of a recurrent Israelite fear. From a number of references in the Book of Judges, we can infer that the highland-based Hebrews were poorly equipped with chariots and vulnerable, at least when they fought on level terrain, to the chariots of the Canaanites, which would have been a rough ancient equivalent of armored corps in a modern army. The heavy chariots must have often appeared terrifying to the lightly armed Israelites. In the story of the victory at the Sea of Reeds, the mighty Egyptian chariot corps is rendered helpless, and this particular aspect of the Egyptian defeat is made a focal point of the narrative.

27. *the Egyptians fleeing toward it.* The Hebrew preposition used here clearly means "toward." What is suggested is the following sequence: the Egyptian troops are struck with panic, perhaps at the sight of the pillar of cloud and fire, surely by the fact that their chariots have lost traction on what had briefly been dry land in the sea; they flee, presum-

and the LORD shook out the Egyptians into the sea. And the waters came back and covered the chariots and the riders of all Pharaoh's force who were coming after them in the sea, not a single one of them remained. And the Israelites went on dry land in the midst of the sea, the waters a wall to them on their right and on their left. And the LORD on that day delivered Israel from the hand of Egypt, and Israel saw Egypt dead on the shore of the sea, and Israel saw the great hand that the LORD had performed against Egypt, and the people feared the LORD, and they trusted in the LORD and in Moses His servant.

CHAPTER 15      Then did Moses sing, and all the Israelites with him, this song to the LORD, and they said, saying:

“Let me sing unto the LORD for He surged, O surged—  
horse and its rider He hurled into the sea.

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ably in the direction from which they had come, but the flood of water comes down on them from that very direction. The male warriors of the nation that had sought to drown every Hebrew male child now meet a fate of death by drowning.

29. *the waters a wall to them.* This key phrase serves as a formal refrain, and will be picked up in the Song of the Sea.

31. *the great hand.* “Hand” here obviously means something like “demonstration of power,” but it picks up all the previous uses of “hand,” both literal and figurative, in this story of liberation from bondage.

*they trusted in the LORD and in Moses His servant.* The whole story had begun with Moses's understandable doubt as to whether the people would trust, or believe, him. Now all doubt is banished (for the moment) in the great triumph at the Sea of Reeds.

CHAPTER 15      1. *Then did Moses sing.* The conclusion of many large narrative units in the Bible is marked with a relatively long poem (*shirah*). After the destruction of Pharaoh's army, the Egyptian phase of the Exodus story is completed, and the sequence of Wilderness tales (the very first is the Marah story, verses 22–26) that is the narrative skeleton of the rest of the Torah begins.

*Let me sing unto the LORD.* This poetic beginning reflects an ancient Near Eastern literary convention of announcing the topic and the act of song at the beginning of the poem, roughly parallel to the Greek and Latin convention for beginning an epic (as in Virgil's “Of arms and the man I sing”).

*for He surged, O surged.* The poem begins with a vivid pun. The Hebrew verb *ga'ah* means something like “to triumph,” “to be exalted,” “to be proud,” but it is also the verb used for the rising tide of the sea, a concrete image that is especially apt for representing God's overwhelming the Egyptians with the waters of the Sea of Reeds.

*horse and its rider.* Perhaps, as many scholars have argued, rider (*rokhev*) should be translated as “driver” because chariots are stressed, and the evidence appears to indicate