

Hespeler, 13 September 2020 © Scott McAndless

Exodus 14:19-31, Exodus 15:1-11, 20-21; Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

Pharaoh sat listlessly on his throne. Here he was, the most powerful man on the face of the earth – the king of kings and lord of lords who ruled everything between the third cataract of the Nile and the delta, who was overlord to vast kingdoms far beyond that, and yet he couldn't shake the feeling that someone was disrespecting him, that someone was laughing at him.

He called for his vizier, who appeared at his feet with reassuring haste. "Tell me again what's happening with those... *Hebrews*," he spat the word out as if it left a bad taste in his mouth, "when were they supposed to be back?" The vizier bowed so low to the ground that the Pharaoh thought he heard his teeth scraping against the floor as he tried to speak. "Mmff mff mmm ff," he said, prompting the pharaoh to kick him with his gold encrusted sandals and order him to lift his head and speak up. "They promised to go three days into the wilderness and worship their desert God and then come straight back."

The Pharaoh studied his impeccably manicured fingernails. "Three days, huh, and a few days to sacrifice and then straight back. And tell me, Vizier, how long ago did they leave?" The vizier gulped as he said, "About two weeks, my lord. I'm afraid that there has been no sign of them since." "Well," said the king, "don't you think that maybe it's time for us to do something about that?"

The grand stables were the Pharaoh's favourite place in all the land. He tried to make a point of visiting them every day if he possibly could. He loved the horses – hundreds and hundreds of them in an almost endless row of stalls. He loved the smell of them, the sound of their whickers and their nickering. But most of all, he loved them because they were a sign of his great wealth. These were the finest horses in the world and each one of them was worth 150 shekels of silver – more money than most Egyptian men could possibly earn in five years.

But, even more than the horses, Pharaoh loved what was housed in the garages across from them: the chariots! Made with iron and inlaid with ivory and silver, each one was a work of art and, even more important, a terrifyingly efficient killing machine.

But here was the real secret of the chariots. Each one of them was worth four times as much as one of the horses. That meant that this stable, horses and chariots together, as well as all 2 the other royal stables spread throughout the land, constituted the greatest accumulation of wealth in all of Egypt. *This* was more than the temples, the palaces, the pyramids. And the only way it could be created and maintained was through a vast military industrial complex. Pharaoh was angry because someone was threatening that vast military industrial complex.

It was Moses, that traitor to the land that had raised him. He had made the Hebrews think that they had value beyond the labour that they provided. He had deluded them into thinking that some god even knew who they were and actually cared about their worship. Pharaoh had been too indulgent in letting them go. He now understood that such ideas were so dangerous that they could upset the proper order of society. If these slaves could be allowed to shirk their work, then any slaves could. And that would



destroy the supply chain that maintained these magnificent machines of war. Pharaoh did not dare to admit it out loud to anyone, but this was the very kind of thing that could destroy the power of his kingdom. Something had to be done.

And so it was that, days later, Pharaoh found himself riding towards the Sea of Reeds in the midst of a massive company. Six hundred of the Pharaoh's own chariots has been joined by the massed cavalry of his wealthiest nobles. As he felt the wind blowing through his robes, he let out a great whoop as if he were a boy on his first ride. The horses' hooves beat upon the plain in such numbers that it sounded like thunder. The dust that the wheels kicked up must have been visible from many miles away. It was a divine cloud of justice that would drive those rebellious slaves into the sea.

The king knew that he was being extreme. You didn't need over a thousand chariots to take down a miserable huddle of slaves. In fact, just one chariot was enough to make a hundred men turn and run in panicked terror. And the effect was multiplied many times over by even the addition of a few more of the war machines. It was rarely the spears or arrows of the chariots that turned the tide of a battle. The mere appearance of them on the field was enough to make even the strongest men flee. Running through the slaves would be like cutting through papyrus with a sharp sword. What Pharaoh needed was an overwhelming display of terror that would make everyone think deeply before ever trying anything like this again.

Finally the scouts returned and reported to the generals that the slaves had been spotted. They were huddled in a makeshift camp against the edge of the Sea of Reeds, a very marshy lake that was famously treacherous for anyone to seek to cross. "Oh," said Pharaoh to himself, "this is perfect. All my chariots will need to do is a manoeuvre we have practiced thousands of times. We will charge forward, straight at the slaves, wheeling away at just the last minute. It never fails. Those fools will be so terrified that they'll run straight into the bog. They will tumble and fall and they will all be drowned before this day is through." He called out to his men telling them to ride as swiftly as the wind. Their victory was near.

The battle did not go as Pharaoh had imagined. First, the famous cavalry of Egypt took a wrong turn and so did not come to the Sea of Reeds until night had fallen. Pharaoh knew that it was far too dangerous to order a charge when neither the charioteers nor the horses could see the terrain. But worse than the darkness was the thick, heavy fog (so unseasonable for this time of year) that enveloped them. No one see a thing. The men, even the king had to make do with field rations as even the Pharaoh's cook tent and slaves had gone missing in all the confusion. The men began to grumble about ill omens and dark sorcery.

The really infuriating part was that they could hear the sounds of the Hebrew camp – the slaves jabbering in their barbaric language and the occasional shout that could only be coming from that bastard Moses. He was calling out to them, "Yahweh will fight for you, and you have only to keep still."

That was, by the way, the only way to defeat a chariot – you had to stand there and let the thing run straight at you without even flinching. The horses didn't know what to do when people weren't terrified. They often stopped in their tracks full of confusion. They weren't trained, like war horses would be in later ages, to run men down. But, of course, few men had the courage to do such a thing. Pharaoh wasn't worried, but he couldn't help but hear the comments of some of his most seasoned charioteers. They muttered together around the evening campfires of the powers of unknown gods. The darkness and the fog had thrown them for a loop and that led to all kinds of irresponsible talk.

There was one more thing that troubled both the king and his men. All night long there was this strange wind that blew across them from the East. The wind was strong enough to blow down tents and spook the horses, and yet it did not seem to be strong enough to move the dark cloud that had descended upon the camp. The men began to call it a godwind and for many it was the worst omen for the battle that they were all anticipating on the next day. So no one slept well in the Egyptian camp that night, but Pharaoh took comfort from the thought that, on the morrow, victory in battle would wash away all such dark talk of strange gods and omens.

But the dawn brought new surprises. The sun came up red, always a bad sign, and with the sunrise also came, finally, an end to the unrelenting wind that blew from the east. For a while, the stillness of the air was even more eerie than the supernatural wind had been. But nothing prepared the Egyptians for what they finally saw when the sun burned off the heavy fog. Pharaoh looked down to see that the shores of the Sea of Reeds were not where they were supposed to be. The east wind had blown so hard and that the marshy waters had been forced to retreat!

But that was not the thing that attracted Pharaoh's attention. He saw that the Hebrew slaves were taking advantage of the situation and were making their way across the muddy terrain left by the retreating waters. It was an *orderly* retreat. They were not panicking or screaming, just methodically making their way towards freedom. It was that, more than anything, that infuriated the Pharaoh. They weren't afraid of him! He was the scourge of the world and yet it was as if he was nothing to them.

The rage felt by the Pharaoh was clearly shared by the charioteers who surrounded him on every side. The horses were also almost as excited as the men as they tossed their heads and stamped the earth. No one ordered the charge that followed. No one stopped to consider whether it would be wise under the circumstances. It just happened. All the chariots of Egypt charged headlong into the muddy ground left by the retreating Sea of Reeds.

And there, in short order, they stopped. The ground that had been crossed with relative ease by a group of slaves on foot was completely unforgiving to the spoked wheels of the chariots. Within a few moments, the wheels were clogged with mud and the horses, with the muck above their knees, could barely move them. Every effort only seemed to make things worse. Soon the axels were buried and the horses were practically helpless.

In the moment, Pharaoh cared not for the chariots, many of which would be damaged almost beyond repair, nor for the horses' broken legs and torn ligaments. He did not even care about the soldiers who floundered around seeking only to save themselves. He only looked with hatred upon the retreating backs of the Hebrew slaves. They continued to move on without panic or fear and that was what terrified the king.

The story of the Battle of the Sea of Reeds is clearly one of the most foundational stories for the ancient people of Israel. It would have been a story that they told and retold much like Americans tell the story of George Washington and the cherry tree and the British tell the story of King Alfred and the cakes. So it is not very surprising that we have multiple versions of this story in the Bible. There are four in the Book of Exodus alone. We have the poetic versions, known as the Song of Moses and the Song of Miriam, which appear to be quite ancient. And, just before the poetry, there are three prose accounts that have been mixed and mingled together.

There is what I like to call the CGI version where God sends down a mighty and terrible blast of wind that makes the waters of the sea stand up like two walls on either side of the passing Israelites and

in which God casts the Egyptians into the sea. That is the familiar story, of course, the one highlighted in retellings like Cecil B Demille's *The Ten Commandments*. But if you look very carefully, you can see another story, the story I have tried to tell here, in which God acts much more subtly. In this story God sends a gentler but constant wind out of the east, that pushes back the water from the marshy shores of the sea. This creates a passage that allows the Hebrew slaves to escape on foot but, when the chariots attempt the same passage, they become mired in the muck.

Now, there is no question that the CGI version of the story is much more impressive and cinematic. But there must be a good reason for why the other story, let's call it the "East Wind Version," was preserved and not simply edited out of the final version of the Book of Exodus. It seems to me that we learn something different about God in the east wind version. In this story, God takes the thing that is the very foundation of the strength of Egypt, the latest military hardware in which they have invested so heavily, and defeats it with the oldest technology in the world: mud and sandal leather. Chariots were supposed to be Egypt's greatest strength, something in which they had invested so heavily that it distorted their economy requiring them to oppress untold numbers of slaves, and yet God turned them into the cause of their defeat. Now that is a God who I find very interesting.

It is also a God who seems to be very active throughout history. How many times down through the centuries, have great powers and empires invested so much in the technology of war and power only to see those investments wasted by the emergence of a low-tech, low investment response. Think of the massive ships of the Persians rowed by slaves taken from all over Asia brought down by the tiny ships rowed by the freemen of the city of Athens at the Battle of Salamis. Think of the huge numbers of French nobility who were riding horses and wearing armour so expensive that they required the support of millions of peasants, all brought down by the yeoman archers of England at the Battle of Agincourt. It is a pattern that was also seen more recently in the streets of Portland, Oregon in the United States as Federal Agents deployed the latest in non-lethal chemical weapons against protestors only to be effectively countered for a while by a wall of dads wielding leaf blowers of all things. Oh yes, the God we worship has a way of surprising those who seek to rely on the tools of power to maintain their own position.

We have all heard the story of the Reed Sea. Our temptation, when we hear it, is to identify with Moses and the slaves. We want to be those people yearning to be free – yearning for a God who will set us free. But I wanted to tell this story from the other side for one big reason. I suspect that, to the extent that we rely for our security on the tools of power and violence, we ought to be identifying with the Egyptians. And, if that's the case, God might have a bit of a surprise in store for us too.