

It's time we did a little Bible study again. And we have a very topical subject. I wonder if you read recently in the newspapers an article by a scientist who is also a Christian – though not a Christian Scientist – saying that the exodus of the people of Israel through the Red Sea may have been made possible by a strong wind parting the waters? Well, this is not a new thought. If we open the Bible at *The Book of Exodus chapter 14 verse 21* we read: *The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land and the waters were divided.*

There is some interesting background to this. It used to be thought that the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, were written by Moses himself. But a closer reading of the text makes it plain that these books were not the work of a single author: they contain a great variety of styles. Eventually, this close analysis of those early books revealed clearly the work of four distinct writers and in the 19th century two scholars Graf and Wellhausen identified these four by the letters *J, E, D, P*

J stands for the *Jahwist*. *Yahweh* is of course God as he revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush. *E* stands for the *Elohist* – derived from the Hebrew word *Elohim* meaning *God Most High*. *D* stands for the *Deuteronomist* – a writer who was interested in producing sermons and homilies on the Law. And finally *P* stands for the *Priestly* writer who wrote some four hundred years after the other authors, probably in the Israeli captivity and exile in Babylon – what we now know as Iraq – back in the 6th century before Christ.

So, supplied with this literary knowledge, we can turn back to the story of the exodus and discern the contribution of three of the four sources: *J, E* and *P*. It turns out to have been *J*, the *Jahwist* who wrote that verse *The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land and the waters were divided*. This reveals the character of the *Jahwist* who was very fond of writing about God's use of the forces of nature to bring about his will. So he says that God used that east wind. We see more of *J*'s naturalistic style a few verses further on where it says: *And in the morning watch, the Lord in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down upon the host of the Egyptians and discomfited them.*

The *Elohist* writes the verse in which God tells Moses to: *Lift up your rod and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it; that the people of Israel may go on dry land through the sea*. So, you might say, that the *Jahwist* gives us the most natural account – featuring the east wind – while the *Elohist* prefers a more dramatic view of God's action – by the operation of Moses' rod, almost as if it were a magic wand. The final account, that of *P*, the *Priest*, writing four hundred years later by the waters of Babylon, is frankly the most dramatic and supernaturalist of all the writers when he says, *Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.*

So the story of the exodus from Egypt is really three stories in one. Interestingly, Cecil B. De Mille, 2500 years later in his film *The Ten Commandments* rolls all three stories into one as well, featuring Moses' rod, the strong east wind and the walls of water on the right and on the left.

What else do we know about the exodus from Egypt? Well, we know that the Israelites did *not* go through the Red Sea. The original Hebrew Bible says they crossed over the *Yam Suph* which means *Sea of Reeds*. Nowhere in the whole Hebrew Bible is the Red Sea mentioned. The Latin Vulgate translation of the Hebrew was a mistake – one copied by *The Authorised Version* and many later translations. The *Yam Suph* is to the north of the Red Sea, towards the delta and it would obviously make more sense for the Israelites to leave Egypt and cross into Sinai by that route.

Further strong evidence of the fact that the story of the exodus was put together by many authors is in the verse which says 600,000 Israelites escaped from Egypt while another verse says they had only two midwives: Shiphra and Puah. Both reports could hardly be literally true. We know that Moses and his people were pursued by Pharaoh, but which Pharaoh? The first chapter of *The Book of Exodus* tells us that the Hebrew slaves in Egypt were made to work on two store cities and it names them as Pithom and Raamses which suggests the Pharaoh who chased them was Rameses II. But there are other suggestions in the book that it might have been Pharaoh Mernetaph.

We know that Moses was a monotheist, but where did he learn his monotheism? The Bible says he got it directly from God himself at the burning bush. But were there other influences on him? We are told he met the priest of Midian called Jethro also called Ruel. Jethro means *excellence* and *Ruel* means *friend of God*. So perhaps Moses learnt more than he lets on from this excellent friend of God? On the other hand, there had been a big quarrel back in Egypt, not long before Moses was born between the polytheistic Theban priests and the religious genius Akhnaton who introduced belief in monotheism, in the person of the one God called Aten. We know a lot about Akhnaton and his wife Nefertiti through the archaeological discoveries at his capital Tel el Amarna and the valley of the Kings. His son was Tutankamen. Although, after the death of Akhnaton, the Theban priesthood reasserted itself, there were still many who remained faithful to monotheism – so perhaps Moses learnt it from them.

The way to study the Bible is not to treat it as if it were literally true, like matter-of-fact or arithmetic, but as a pattern of hints and connections, evocations and prophecies which are, by God's inspiration mysteriously linked. So the exodus is not just something which happened to the ancient Israelites, it is a type or foreshadowing of Christ's resurrection. You remember that Moses was succeeded by Joshua. Joshua was the deliverer, pointing towards Jesus the greater deliverer. *Jesus* is the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Joshua*. Joshua also means *a branch* and

of course there is another well-known prophecy of Isaiah which describes the Messiah or Christ as *a righteous branch*.

Joshua chose twelve leaders. Jesus chose the twelve apostles. During the exodus, God fed the people in the wilderness with manna, bread from heaven. Jesus fed the 5000 in the wilderness with bread and followed this act by revealing himself as the Bread of Life: *I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever.*

The forty years which the Israelites spent in the wilderness before they entered the Promised Land, prefigure the forty days and nights when Jesus fasted in the wilderness at the start of his ministry. The Israelites were tempted in the wilderness and they gave in: they turned to the Caananite fertility cult symbolised by the golden calf. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, he did not give in. Moreover, he said to the tempter: *Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and him only shalt thou serve*. This is not only the same monotheism as that of Moses: but Jesus uses exactly the same words that God spoke in Moses' vision of the burning bush: *the Lord thy God*.

Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. Jesus was lifted up on the Cross and thereby defeated that old serpent Satan and drew all men unto himself. Moses pleaded for God's forgiveness for the people after the disgraceful episode of the golden calf. *God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself*.

So many pieces in this interlocking pattern. It is a pattern of truth beyond merely literal, one-dimensional, truth. And the fascinating beauty of the pattern is for our instruction and encouragement. What marvellous connections God's revelation of himself holds before us! So many and so marvellous. Perhaps the most sublime connection is this: the deliverance of the Israelites was through the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb whose blood was sprinkled on their doors. Christ's blood is shed for us, and on Easter morning we repeat the words of St Paul:

Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us: therefore let us keep the peace. Not with the old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness: but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.