

On the Edge

Exodus 13:17-22

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I. Led to the Edge vs. 17-18

a. Pharaoh

- i. The use in this verse of the piel of שלח in reference to Pharaoh's "sending," literally, "hurling, driving" the people of Israel forth from his battered land, is an important rhetorical connection with Exod 3:20, where the same verb is used, also in the piel stem, in Yahweh's prediction to Moses of the proof-of-Presence sequence. As Yahweh has said, no human force could bend the proud king of the proudest kingdom. Under the power of Yahweh's hand, however, Pharaoh has become an enthusiastic participant in the exodus, not only permitting but demanding, even forcing it.

- b. God Leads- Leads, term for the guidance in the wilderness "So God turned" indicates the continuing divine guidance of Israel "God" guided (נחה) them. A deliberate contrast is made between the direct and therefore logical route east, "the route of the land of the Philistines" and the way in which Yahweh instead led Israel, a route in the direction of the wilderness via the ים־סוף "sea of rushes."

i. Way of the Philistines

1. The shortest route to Canaan, it ran from near the Nile Delta to the land of Canaan itself, thus running along the northern edge of the Sinai Peninsula very near the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. The route ran from Sile (Tjaru) along the shoreline into the Plain of the Philistines via the cities of Raphia, Gaza, and Ashdod. In ancient times Thutmose III (1479–1425 BC)
2. We know, however, that the Philistines were so daunting a fighting force at the time of the conquest, forty years later and beyond, that even at Joshua's death their territory remained unconquered (cf. Josh 13:1–5). We also know that they were bold enough to attack Egypt proper in an effort to capture territory in the days of Ramses III, that is, about 1188 bc
3. Accordingly, God did not want his people to try to enter Canaan directly by the well-established coastal road from Egypt, the *Via Maris*, even though that was by far the shortest and easiest route from the point of view of travel time and theoretical convenience. The *Via Maris* led right through the heart of Philistine territory. Based on their behavior as recorded in Judges and 1 Samuel, the Philistines were looking to expand their territorial control and

would hardly have been willing to let the Israelites enter Canaan, on which they themselves had designs, without an all-out fight.

4. Moreover, the Philistines were latecomers to Palestine, as compared to the Amorites/Canaanites, and therefore did not fall under the blanket condemnation of the “sin of the Amorites” that God had announced to Abraham in Gen 15:16 as the basis for the conquest of Canaan. So the Philistines were to be dealt with later rather than immediately; it was not part of God’s plan that they should be fought and subdued at this early stage. He therefore did not call Israel to try to conquer Philistine territory, and had they tried on their own to do so, they would surely have been defeated, just as happened when they tried later, on their own, to defeat the Canaanites (Num 14:44–45).

ii. Even though it was near

c. The People

i. Change their Mind – remorseful

1. He knew their hearts (cf. Deut 5:29; 30:6). He judged the way of the wilderness to be the best route to test and develop their character and their morale. But even the “best” way proves to be too much for the Israelites to handle. He would test his people in the wilderness, but they would put their God to the test also (Exod 15:25; 16:4)
2. The theological message in Yahweh’s words reveals a world of spiritual and psychological insight into the disposition of Israel before they start out. Their disposition is already set; environment does not later create the disposition, though it aggravates it. The propensity to rebel is intrinsic to Israel before the journey begins; Yahweh the master psychoanalyst knows the “heart” of his people (Gen 6:5; Deut 5:29; Jer 17:9–10). But it also is clear that Yahweh had his plans worked out long before the exodus from Egypt began.
3. God’s compassionate words in the second sentence of this verse, “If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt,” demonstrate his concern for the unpreparedness of the Israelites to fight any other military force at this point.
4. Return to Egypt
 - a. Not only did this very plan to return to Egypt actually occur less than two years later (Num 14:3, 14), but one must not forget that the Israelites were accustomed only to Egypt; they had lived nowhere else for 430 years. A properly chastised Egypt, which had perhaps “learned its lesson” about mistreating the Israelites by force of the plagues, might have seemed to them the very place they would now

be most safe and happy, especially if they had been beaten in war by the Philistines

b. Complained and Said let us die in Egypt

d. God Led

i. Martial Array - arrayed in groups of fifty, **lined up for war**

1. The term “orderly array” translates a word of dubious meaning (see note to Exod 13:8). The claim is generally made that this is “apparently” a military term, but this assertion is far from evident in the context in which it is used. The form, a plural adjective, is found five times in the OT (Josh 1:14; 4:12; Judg 7:11; Num 32:17). In Judg 7:11 the term does seem to refer to a camp of the enemy, laid out in an orderly way.

2. Again Moses reminds us that the Israelites were God’s army: “The Israelites went up out of Egypt armed for battle The term does not literally refer to groups of fifty men but is part of the “thousand-hundreds-fifties-tens” language employed to delineate military units. The Israelites were at this point not armed at all. Later they would carry mainly short swords (cf. Exod 32:27).

II. Edged Out v. 19

a. Bones of Joseph

i. Even so, the report serves the double function of fulfilling the expectation raised by Gen 50:25 and of asserting yet again that Elohim has made possible the exodus of Israel.

ii. Joseph’s bones and body had been mummified (Gen 50:1–3). His hope was to be buried in the promised land of Canaan, in Yahweh’s promised land, not in the graves or tombs of the dead in Egypt, where some type of life after death was hoped for. He did not remain in the “land of tombs.” His desire even after his death is providentially fulfilled—to be buried in Canaan—to experience the exodus post mortem

iii. God never forgets his covenant. Even in the most tense situation imaginable the minute details of God’s covenant faithfulness to his servants is demonstrated. But more is at issue than merely taking Joseph’s bones from Egypt. God and Joseph had said that the people would be taken up from Egypt. The removal of Joseph’s bones to Canaan is a witness to that fact (Gen 49:29; Josh 24:32). Israel did not die in Egypt, and now Israel could trust their God to be faithful to his covenant promises. God brought them out after multiplying them into a great multitude. God brought Israel, represented by Joseph’s bones, out of Egyptian captivity.

iv. Joseph understood the promises of God to Abraham. He was well aware that someday the Israelites would leave Egypt and take their promised place “up” in the promised land. So important to him was his

identification in faith with the people of God and their eternal destiny that he exacted a deathbed promise from his brothers to the effect that they would be sure that his remains were brought out of Egypt and buried in Canaan (Gen 50:24–25). Since Joseph had been embalmed (Gen 50:26),

III. Edge Up vs. 20-22

- a. On the Edge The “edge of the wilderness” (בְּקֶצֶה הַמִּדְבָּר in this verse is a key phrase, for on entering the wilderness, Israel has exited Egypt. In the wilderness, God’s guidance will continue. Israel is not left alone. Yahweh’s name, given in the wilderness (Exod 3:14), will continue to be revealed as he is “with his people” (3:12).
- b. Going Before Them
 - i. Pillar - standing before
 - ii. The verses are clear enough: Israel saw the “pillar of cloud” and “pillar of fire,” the second making travel at night possible. Yahweh not only led his people during the day, but he also led them as the Lord of the night as well. His presence was normally at the head of his hosts. Yahweh’s snatching of his people out of Egypt and traveling with them was unprecedented in ancient history, according to the author (cf. Deut 4:32–34).
 - iii. The text, however, does not say that the cloud provided a shade over the heads of the Israelites. Rather, it went ahead of them to lead them—representing God’s leadership as they moved through unknown territory. Looking at a cloud ahead of one is pleasant and easy on a bright, hot day; looking at a comforting fire is similar at night. That was the main function of the pillar—a way of allowing the Israelites to look at God so as to be able to follow him without actually seeing him in his very person (33:20; cf. John 1:18; 1 John 4:12). The pillar-cloud was a manifestation of Yahweh himself, not merely something he sent them. By reason of being guided by the pillar, the Israelites knew all day every day that God was present with them. Here was a supernatural, huge, and visible reminder that Yahweh was at the head of his people as they marched or encamped, whether by day or by night. Therefore, even the seemingly erratic route described by 13:20 in combination with 14:1–3 could be trusted because Yahweh was directing them on it. Yahweh chose the odd route—not they. Again, the pillar was not merely a sign from Yahweh—it *was* Yahweh