

1

The Song of Moses: *Te Deum* of Triumph¹



NEARLY THIRTY YEARS after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson authored *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, now commonly referred to as the Jefferson Bible. This Bible was Jefferson's private declaration of independence, we might say, from historic Christian theology, for he edited out all the parts of the Gospels which didn't fit his deistic theology. Using his naturalistic and rationalistic grid, he removed all supernaturalism, including references to the Trinity, as well as to the divinity, miracles, and resurrection of Jesus. His Bible begins with the birth narrative, minus mention of angels and prophecy, and it concludes with the cross and the tomb (but not an empty one): "There laid they Jesus. And

1. I am indebted to Phil Ryken for this phrase. See Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus*, PTW (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 403.

SERMONS ON THE SONGS

rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed.” Those words from the nineteenth chapter of the gospel of John are the last words we find. Jesus died and was buried—period, end of story.

While we may not be as bold as Jefferson when it comes to what we do with the pages of our Bibles, there is, nevertheless, a bit of his independence in us all. For when we come to a text like this, the Song of Moses, commonly called the “Song of the Sea” in the history of Jewish interpretation, we are tempted to play God with God’s Word—to leave in what sounds sensible, and to cut out what doesn’t.

So, we can sing verse 1a, “I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously,” but not verse 1b, “the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.” Or we can sing verse 2, “The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him,” but certainly not the beginning of verse 3, “The LORD is a man of war.” And we can sing the beginning of verse 6, “Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power,” but it’s hard for us to finish the thought: “Your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy.”

And when we come to verse 11 (that wonderful verse!) we can stand and shout, “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?” But do we stay standing when we recall the actual deeds? Those we find in verses 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 14, 15, and 16—which speak of Pharaoh and his army being “sunk in the Red Sea” (v. 4), and tell us that “the floods covered them” and that their bodies “went down into the depths like a stone” (v. 5). Or what do we do with verse 7? Can we sing, “In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries; you send out your fury; it

consumes them like stubble”? What about verse 8 (“At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up; the floods stood up in a heap; the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea”) or verse 10 (“You blew with your wind; the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters”) or verse 12 (“You stretched out your right hand; the earth swallowed them”)? Can we sing of God throwing and shattering and casting and consuming?

We can sing verses 13 and 17 and 18, which speak of the Lord’s leading his people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land: “You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode” (v. 13). But can we sing what falls between those verses, of the “terror and dread” that will fall upon “the inhabitants of Canaan” as God will uproot the Canaanites in order to plant his people, to set them upon his holy mountain in Jerusalem?

Maybe Jefferson was right!² Maybe this founding father has something to teach us. Maybe we should cut and paste our Bibles, making them a collage of our culture, a mirror of our worldly minds and its conceptions of God and justice and salvation. Maybe we should declare that God’s only attribute is niceness, that it is somehow “evil” to punish evil, and that I’m okay and you’re okay and God’s okay with us being okay. Or maybe we should just cut out all this cutting out and hear what God has to say, and be open to the fact that our perceptions of reality might be wrong,

2. Or maybe the heretic Marcion was right, who sixteen centuries before Jefferson did nearly the identical thing, taking out certain gospels and other parts of Scripture he didn’t affirm, and declaring that the God of the Old Testament was a different God than that of the New, the first being a God of wrath and the latter a God of love.

our concepts of justice might be imperfect, our thoughts on God insufficient.

Walking through the Wardrobe

I don't know if you have read much C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, or George MacDonald, but there is at least one common thread in the writings of these famous writers. That is the notion of journeying from one world to the next—stepping through the wardrobe, if you will—into a world we didn't know exists, but in fact does. With a song like this, which sings of deliverance but also destruction—the parting of the Red Sea, but also its closing; judgment, but also joy in judgment—we not only need to do a bit of stepping through, but also a bit of climbing back. We need to move from the world and worldview of the Bible back to our world and the way we think. And we need to be willing to mold our minds, and the reality we seemingly see in this world, with a Greater Reality, the truer reality of God's Word and his coming kingdom.

So, what we'll do in this chapter is walk through that wardrobe, taking with us some rope, a few boards or planks, and whatever else we need to build a bridge, a bridge across this conceptual chasm. We will build a bridge so that we might understand why it is right for us to join in the chorus, to sing with Moses, to dance with Miriam, to pound and shake the tambourine along with the generation of the great exodus from Egypt.

The Greatness of God

The first plank we must lay down and secure in place is a better understanding of the greatness of God.

The Song of Moses: Te Deum of Triumph

Whenever I fly in an airplane, I am amazed at how this huge and heavy metal tube filled with hundreds of bodies and hundreds of suitcases lifts off the ground and flies hundreds of miles in the air. I know the basic physics of it. I know how it works. Yet when I'm actually lifted off the ground and I look out the window at those huge engines and straight, hard, metal wings, I think to myself, "Okay. Now, how does all this really work? This is quite unbelievable. What an achievement. We're flying!"

But do you know what I find so ironic about this achievement? Just when I want to stand up in the middle of the plane and shout, "Wow, aren't humans great!" I take a peek out the window at the people on the ground, only a few moments after takeoff, and they look like a bunch of ants. Then, after a few more seconds in the air, even the Sears Tower is but a sliver in the silver sky.

Now, how big do you think we look to the God who created this immense and awesome universe—the heavens (all that is up there and out there) and the earth (all that is down here)? Like ants? No, we're not that big. Like a speck of dust in an ant's eye? No, we're not even that big. Like nothing? No, we're not that small. We are something to God, but so often not what we think. (Of course, all this is what makes the incarnation the most inscrutable act of history—God became a man! How unthinkable, how extraordinary, how beautiful!) We are something to God, but not what we so often think. We think we are so big, when really (once you gain some perspective) we're quite small. And then we think God is so small, when really he is so big.

In the Bible, all the Songs of Scripture, like this song before us, share an important characteristic: they "make" God big. The greatness of God is their theme. I think of Mary's song in the first chapter of Luke (1:46–55). It's called the Magnificat because that's the first word

SERMONS ON THE SONGS

of her song in the Latin translation. It means (as does the original Greek), “makes large.” That’s what Mary’s song is all about. Singing of God’s strength, justice, mercy, holiness, and faithfulness, this little-in-her-own-eyes lady declares, “My soul magnifies the Lord.”

That’s the first song in the New Testament. The first song in the Old Testament, in Exodus 15, is little different.³ Its theme is the magnification of God! Moses is not focused on himself, his role, or the human perspective on this event. Rather, his mind is occupied with the Lord and his mighty and unmediated acts.⁴ Moses makes this hard for us to miss. The name LORD occurs ten times in this text. This is God’s covenant name Yahweh, the one he gave of himself in Exodus 3, at the burning bush, revealing his eternity: “I am who I am.”⁵

3. Nahum M. Sarna speaks of this song as “what may be the oldest piece of sustained poetry in the Hebrew Bible.” *Exodus*, JPS Torah Commentary (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 75. Origen called it the “first song to God.” R. P. Lawson, trans., *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, ACW (New York: Paulist Press, 1957), 47. Cf. Douglas Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 346.

4. In the second half of his section on “The Poetic and Prose Accounts,” Sarna describes well the God-centeredness of this song. He writes, for example, “Moses, of course, plays no active role, for it is not he who holds out his arm over the sea, as in 14:16, 21. Rather, it is the ‘right hand’ of God that is extended (15:12). Nor is there any mention of the angel, the cloud, and the darkness, all so prominent in 14:19–20. These intermediaries signal the distance between God and Israel; by contrast, the ‘Song of the Sea’ celebrates God’s direct, unmediated, personal incursion into the world of humankind.” Also, in his section on “Analogues,” he contrasts ancient Egyptian odes with the Song, stating that the latter is distinguished by its “dominant God-centered theme.” The Egyptian literature celebrates “the superhuman exploits” of the Pharaohs, but in the Torah “it is God alone who attracts the poet’s interest.” See *Exodus*, 75–76. Similarly, Umberto Cassuto states, “In the pagan odes of triumph, the glory of the victory is ascribed to the conquering king, but here there is not a single word of praise or glory given to Moses; these are rendered to the Lord alone.” Israel Abrahams, trans., *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 174.

5. Stuart comments, “Thus the vast majority of Israel’s psalms and music about God use the name Yahweh predominantly—as a safeguard and against misuse and misunderstanding and because there is a greater sense of personal identity to the name Yahweh than to the more generic title God.” *Exodus*, 348.

The Song of Moses: Te Deum of Triumph

But Moses magnifies more than God's name, covenant, and eternity. He also magnifies God's strength: "Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy" (v. 6). He also magnifies God's kingly justice and his warring wrath: "In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries; you send out your fury; it consumes them like stubble" (v. 7).

Surprising to us, this warring wrath is one of the divine attributes Moses most magnifies. And he does so by using military metaphors. Most prominently and most strikingly is what we find in verse 3, where the LORD is called "a man of war" or (in a tamer translation) "a warrior."⁶ To the enemies of God, to those who seek to strike down his people, the LORD comes with sword in hand, so to speak. The picture here is quite close to the one we find near the end of our Bibles, the picture of that mighty King of kings and Lord of lords, clothed in a robe dipped in blood, with a sword protruding from his mouth and an iron rod held firmly within his hand. He rides upon a white horse, leading the armies of heaven, and "in righteousness he judges and makes war" (see Rev. 19:11–16; cf. 1 Cor. 15:24–28).

Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he;
Lord Sabaoth his name, from age to age the same,
And he must win the battle.⁷

6. This is what Moses predicted: that the Lord would fight for Israel (Ex. 14:14). An interesting biblical reference comes in Numbers 21:14, "the Book of the Wars of the LORD." Cf. Rabbi Judah's cross references in *Mekhilta Shirata* 4, II 30, found in *The Classic Midrash: Tannaitic Commentaries on the Bible*, translation, introduction, and commentaries by Reuven Hammer, CWS (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 107. Cf. G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament and Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 121–50. The term is likewise used in Isaiah 42:13: "The LORD goes out like a mighty man, like a man of war he stirs up his zeal; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes."

7. Lord Sabaoth means "Lord of hosts" or "Lord of the armies." This comes from Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

SERMONS ON THE SONGS

This is no mild monarch. This is no wimpy warrior. This is no little God! The God here is like the one Isaiah envisioned: he is “sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple” (Isa. 6:1). Just the train of his robe fills the whole temple! “The foundations of the thresholds” shake (6:4), the holy seraphim cover their eyes, and Isaiah says, “Woe is me! . . . for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (6:5).

So Moses magnifies God’s eternity, his strength, his justice, and even and especially his wrath. But he also magnifies his love or “undeserved magnanimity,” as Nahum Sarna speaks of it.⁸ We read this of the Lord in verse 13: “You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed.” The Lord’s covenant love is patient, enduring, and merciful. He persistently loves his beloved Israel.

Two other attributes of God are addressed in the final strophe of the song, verses 13–18: sovereignty and presence, or what I’ll call incarnational presence. In verse 18 we read of his kingship or sovereignty: “The LORD will reign forever and ever.”⁹ In verses 13 and 17, Moses speaks of God’s presence on earth, likely referring prophetically to Solomon’s temple as God’s “place” or “abode” or “sanctuary.” This reminds us again that the purpose of the exodus was worship—not merely freedom from Egyptian slavery, but freedom from Egyptian idolatry. Also, its purpose was to establish God’s people under his eternal rule, in contrast to, as Sarna suggests, “the ephemeral and illusory nature of Pharaoh’s self-proclaimed royal divinity.”¹⁰

8. See Sarna, *Exodus*, 80.

9. Sarna claims this is the earliest biblical use of the metaphor of kingship in connection with the exaltation of God. *Ibid.*, 82.

10. *Ibid.*

What I have found fascinating in my study of all the songs in Scripture is how this theme and these two attributes progress theologically. The two songs in Samuel continue on this note, if you will, ending by singing of God's eternal (2 Sam. 22:51) and universal (1 Sam. 2:10) reign. These themes flower in the four gospels in the person of Jesus Christ, and then culminate in the songs in the book of Revelation, which speak unapologetically of the Lord's incarnational temple-presence and his universal dominion. At the end of Scripture and history, Christ is worshipped, not merely by the nation, but by all nations (cf. Rev. 5:9). And so, with all this in mind, we can do no better than to hear with Christian ears what the Jewish scholar Umberto Cassuto says of the final verse. He summarizes Exodus 15:18 by saying, "The poem ends by proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven."¹¹

The Prism of God's Light

Through a narrow slit in the shutters of his room at Trinity College, Cambridge, white sunlight struck the glass prism on Isaac Newton's desk, splitting into the colors of the rainbow.¹² Then and there, it dawned on him that light was a complex unity of different colors.

In 1 John 1:5, the apostle writes, "God is light." And here, through the text or "prism," if you will, of the Song of Moses, we see many of our great God's attributes: eternity, strength, justice, wrath, love, sovereignty, and incarnational presence.

The final and culminating attribute or characteristic comes in verse 11, where we learn of God's supremacy or (pick your

11. Cassuto, *Exodus*, 177.

12. I found this illustration in Alister E. McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 23.

SERMONS ON THE SONGS

favorite term) his “incomparability” or “total otherness” or “exclusive uniqueness.”¹³ This central verse is central to this God-centered song: “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?”

Egypt’s gods cannot be compared to Yahweh. Remember the plagues! What an embarrassment, comparable to the yelling and slashing prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Egypt’s armies cannot be compared to Yahweh. The most elite forces of the world’s most elite army eat dirt, the dirt at the bottom of the Red Sea.¹⁴ Effortlessly—as easy as breathing in and out through our nose—the Lord of hosts destroys them.¹⁵ Egypt’s real rulers and awesome army cannot compare. Nor can their gods, which are “no gods” (Deut. 32:17). Nor can any unearthly beings—angels, authorities, and powers (1 Peter 3:22). Nothing and no one can compare to the Lord, our great God!

In 1952, J. B. Phillips authored an intriguing book entitled *Your God Is Too Small*. It was an apt critique of his world, and still serves as an accurate summary of ours. For many today, God is simply too small—too small in our thoughts, too small in our words, too small in our hearts. And here God’s Word, through this Song of Moses, helps us, doesn’t it? It helps us magnify the Lord, to “make large” our God in our souls.

13. Sarna uses the terms “incomparability” and “total otherness,” while Walter C. Kaiser Jr. speaks of “exclusive uniqueness.” See Sarna, *Exodus*, 76, 78, and Kaiser, “Exodus,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 394.

14. On Egypt’s military, see Stuart, *Exodus*, 351.

15. This idea is taken from Peter Enns, who writes, “To call the wind a nostril blast is to say that the wind is *his*. It is his to command as easily as we breathe in and out.” *Exodus*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 299.

The Evil of the Enemy

The greatness of God—that’s the first plank we need to put in place if we are going to walk from the world of God’s Word over into ours. The second plank is the evil of the enemy.

Two times in this text (vv. 6 and 9), God calls Pharaoh and his army “the enemy.” And once they are called Israel’s “adversaries” (v. 7). Now there is nothing inherently wrong with being called an enemy or an adversary. An enemy does not have to be an *evil* enemy. Jesus was an “enemy” of the scribes and Pharisees. But, here in this song, and more so in the whole story of the exodus (Ex. 1–14), we learn something of the character of Egypt’s rulers and people. We learn why the adjective *evil* is appropriate.

The ancient Egyptians were one of the most amazing and advanced civilizations. This is why school children around the world still study them. I would imagine that if you have passed eighth grade you have studied something of the Pharaohs and pyramids. Those pyramids are quite amazing, aren’t they? They are amazing engineering achievements. But do you know what else they are? They won’t teach you this in school, but the pyramids are monuments to their monstrosity!

Who do you think built those pyramids? Do you think it was the Pharaohs and their sons—or perhaps the Egyptian middle class? No, each and every brick was laid by a slave—hundreds of thousands of slaves, decade after decade, century after century, built the pyramids. The Israelites were in bondage for “430 years” (Ex. 12:40)! Imagine all they must have built. We know from Exodus 1:11 that they built for Pharaoh two store cities, Pithom and Raamses. And we know from history that they did not build the pyramids. Those were built even before the time of Abraham.

But that doesn't remove the Egyptians' culpability. It only proves the point. For thousands of years, Egyptian civilization was built on the backs of broken and bloodied slaves—Israelites and others. Such oppression, and the atrocities and injustices associated with it, make the tragic experiment in American slavery seem like a blip on the radar.

“House of Slavery”

Eleven times in Scripture, Egypt is called “the house of slavery” (Ex. 13:3, 14; 20:2; Deut. 5:6; 6:12; 7:8; 8:14; 13:5, 10; Josh. 24:17; Mic. 6:4). This nation was not merely “a house,” but a “harsh” house of slavery (Ex. 6:9). The Egyptian taskmasters would beat their Hebrew slaves (Ex. 2:11). When the early chapters of Exodus speak of their slavery, the words “oppression” (3:9) and “affliction” (3:17; cf. Acts 7:34) are used.¹⁶ Exodus 1:13–14 is a good summary of the four centuries of the Egyptians' shrewd (1:10) and sinful behavior:

They ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.

16. J. A. Thompson notes, “The conquest of the promised land was Yahweh's gracious activity on behalf of those who had been oppressed and outcast. But it was also an act of judgment on the people of the land. Because of their corruption the divine government decreed the end of their rule.” *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1974), 72. Also, W. H. B. Proby says that the “bondage was not merely rigorous and cruel, as might have been the bondage of other slaves, but it was of a peculiarly uncivilizing kind.” *The Ten Canticles of the Old Testament Canon: Namely the Songs of Moses (First and Second), Deborah, Hannah, Isaiah (First, Second, and Third), Hezekiah, Jonah, and Habakkuk* (London: Rivingtons, 1874), 5.

The reality of slavery—that should get to our sensibilities. Egypt was the world’s largest plantation, a place where grace was as common as rain in the Desert of Paran.

Now, along with that, or more than that, the Pharaohs and the Egyptians we encounter in Exodus are often excessively violent. We certainly see this in the first chapter of Exodus, where the first Pharaoh we meet, fearing overpopulation and the growing possibility of rebellion, commands the Hebrew midwives (1:15–16), and then “all the people,” to kill—to cast into the Nile River—every Hebrew baby boy (1:22). That’s how, if you recall, little Moses found himself floating in that basket. The extremity of their violence resurfaces in Exodus 14 and here in 15:9. After Pharaoh (and this is the second Pharaoh) has finally agreed to let God’s people go, he again (for what, the tenth time?) changes his mind. He lies to Moses and God yet again. He wants to do away with Israel. Verse 9 records his self-confident and vainglorious thoughts:¹⁷

The enemy said, “I will pursue, I will overtake,
I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of
them.
I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.”

Egyptian Idolatry

So, first, the Egyptians were cruel slave masters. Second, they were violent oppressors, even to the point of genocide—

17. Sarna comments on the Hebrew text: “By means of a rapid, alliterative succession of words, [the poet] mimics the arrogant self-confidence and vainglorious boasting of the foe. The omission of the conjunctions imparts to the series of verbs a staccato effect that bespeaks expectation of easy victory.” *Exodus*, 79. Ryken notes that Pharaoh refers to himself six times in one verse. *Exodus*, 406.

SERMONS ON THE SONGS

from the slaughter of baby boys to the slaughter of all Israel. Third (and most significantly on God's scale of justice), they were idolaters.¹⁸

In the Bible it is stated often that God's judgment is fair. And so the wrath of God comes upon a person either for "failing to seek [God] so as to secure redemption," based on what theologians call natural revelation or what Paul calls in Romans (and I slightly paraphrase) "what is obvious to all through creation,"¹⁹ or for spurning God, directly rejecting what he has graciously revealed about himself, whether it is the full gospel in the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, or (as we have here) what Pharaoh learned and knew of God.

In Exodus 5:1, Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh and say, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.'" Now Pharaoh's response at this point is fairly innocent: "But Pharaoh said, 'Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD'" (v. 2). I don't know the Lord. He has no authority over me. So I'm not letting you all go. That's his initial thought.

That's chapter 5. But as we get through chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12, you better believe Pharaoh gets to know the Lord. Ten plagues later, he knows very well who the Lord is, more

18. For a classic poem on this same theme, see George Gordon Byron (Lord Byron), "The Destruction of Sennacherib," in *War Poems*, ed. John Hollander, Everyman's Library Pocket Poets (New York: Knopf, 1999), 21–22. The final line is this:

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

19. Robert W. Yarbrough, "Jesus on Hell," in *Hell Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 68.

so than most men in history. This phrase is repeated in these chapters: “in the sight of Pharaoh” (5:21; 7:20; 9:8; cf. 11:3). All that God did in Egypt happened in the sight of Pharaoh, right before his very eyes.

In this way, Pharaoh functions as a Judas-like figure. Judas witnessed with his own eyes the work of God in the incarnation, and yet he rejected that revelation. Similarly, Pharaoh witnessed the power of God over all of nature and over all of the Egyptian gods he believed in, and yet, as we hear over and over, “Pharaoh hardened his heart” (7:13–14, 22, 23; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 34–35). After witnessing all the wonders of God (11:10)—can you imagine witnessing such miracles?—he remained faithful to his false religion, trusting in the magic of his magicians and viewing himself, either in this life or the next, to be divine. What audacity! What arrogance! What idolatry.

An Evil Empire

During the heat of the Cold War, President Reagan called the Soviet Union, for all their atrocities, an “evil empire.” I don’t want to rank evil empires, but the Egyptians are up there. Like the Canaanites, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Romans in Bible times, and many other nations in modern times, they were no saintly society (see Deut. 9:4–5). And so their centuries of oppression and affliction (cf. Gen. 15:13) and murder and idolatry and pride deserved punishment, deserved the heavy weight of the waves of God’s wrath.

So can you start to see why Moses and Miriam and the men, women, and children of Israel could burst into song and start to dance—why they could sing “his praise” when “the waters

SERMONS ON THE SONGS

covered their adversaries”²⁰ Think of it this way: if you were held hostage for only ten days, each day having to work in a sweat shop, and one day the U.S. Army Special Forces crashed through the back door, killed the enemy, and rescued you, wouldn't you sing of your salvation and dance for joy? Wouldn't you rejoice in just judgment? I bet you would.

You see, I don't actually think we are so far removed from what we read here. We simply have this thin layer of unscriptural insensitivity over our eyes; if it were surgically removed by the scalpel of God's Spirit, we would see things as they truly are. We would understand that there is a time for everything under heaven—a time to be gracious, a time to forgive, a time to love our enemies, but also a time to rejoice when evil is eradicated.²¹

A few years ago, I kept track of all the one-line CNN stories on my Google homepage for one month. What I noticed was intriguing. Nearly half of the headlines were designed to tap into the nerve of normal human moral conscience, to get us outraged by injustice. Just look at a few. I think you'll get a feel for what I'm saying:

Explosion kills 41 in Afghanistan
Babies get blood thinner overdose in hospital
Bodies of 2 U.S. soldiers found in Iraq

20. “And the waters covered their adversaries; not one of them was left. Then they believed his words; they sang his praise” (Ps. 106:11–12).

21. I like how Stuart puts the same sentiment. Commenting on verse 7, he writes, “An important theological truth is incorporated here, namely that God's eventual destruction of those who opposed him and his anger against evil are not opposed to God's majesty but are in fact inherent aspects of it. Modern sentimentalist thinking wants God to be ever-tolerant, always softhearted, and thus defines God's justice as something other than how the Bible defines it. . . . Those offended by these facts about God are wishing for a reality that has never existed. He does get mad; he does smash his foes, and he is majestic in doing so.” *Exodus*, 352.

The Song of Moses: Te Deum of Triumph

North Korea blames South Korea for tourist shooting
Sudan's president charged with genocide
Girl, 10, says husband raped, abused her
Pope says sorry for "evil" of clergy sex abuse
Child molester stays out of prison
Police: Preacher killed wife, put her in freezer

Now, Google or CNN doesn't say it any more than the ten o'clock news does. They don't say, "Well, isn't this wrong? Isn't this stuff evil?" They know that such headlines will be of human interest because human beings long for justice in an unjust world. Humans hate inhumanity. And Christians, who are made in the image of God, but are also remade into the image of Christ, like the God we serve, ought to *hate* inhumanity and cruelty and wickedness and arrogance and idolatry. C. S. Lewis once said, "The Jews cursed their enemies bitterly because they took right and wrong seriously."²² Now, that's right, isn't it? You better believe that's right.

The evil of the enemy: that's our second plank.

The Substance of Salvation

So, do you see how we are building this bridge? First we have the good character of God, and second the bad character of the Egyptians. These two concepts can help us get our modern, squeamish, unmanly minds around what is before us in

22. Lewis is quoted in William Sanford LaSor et al., *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 321. And Lewis had what I would deem a less than orthodox view of the imprecatory psalms. See his chapter on "The Cursings" in *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1958), 20–33.

the Song of Moses. These two planks help us walk from their world to ours.

Now, our third and final plank—*the substance of salvation*—takes us all the way across.

Saved from What?

“Are you saved?” If I were to ask you that question, what would you say? If I were to ask most evangelicals across this country, what would they say? Well, they would say, as you would likely say, “Oh yes, I’m saved.” But what if I asked this follow-up question: “Saved from what?” I might hear such answers as these:

I’m saved from loneliness.
I’m saved from poverty.
I’m saved from a bad marriage.
I’m saved from an addiction.
I’m saved from a life without purpose.
I’m saved from my worst life now.

And then someone will say (and thankfully so), “I’m saved from my sin.” But who these days will ever say, “I’m saved from the wrath of God”—the waters or the fire of God’s holy judgment?

Just listen to Christian testimonies. How many of them sound like Scripture? How many of them sound like Christians of old? How many people think and talk about what they were saved from—sin or the devil or fiery judgment?²³

23. The Hebrew in Exodus 15:12, along with other biblical texts, may refer to “the underworld,” as Sarna notes (*Exodus*, 80)—or even “hell,” as Stuart says (*Exodus*, 355). Moreover, Stuart points out how the metaphor for “swallowing” in verse 7 “reflects

But Paul once wrote to the Thessalonians about how they responded to the gospel, saying of them, “You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:9–10). Jesus delivers us. He saves us from something. He saves us from the wrath to come!

Let’s think about the three most prominent images of salvation provided for us in the first two books of the Bible, Genesis and Exodus. See if you see a pattern. First we have the great flood. God sees the world is totally wicked. Noah preaches for a long time (oh, the patience of God!), “Repent, come into the ark, find refuge from the coming storm.” But no one listens, so only eight are saved. Saved from what? They are saved from the judgment of God, the 960 hours of the rain of God’s wrath. That’s the first image.

The second image is the Passover, the final plague. Do you remember it as a plague? It was! Take a lamb, God tells his people—a perfect, spotless lamb. Sacrifice it and brush its blood upon the doorpost of your house. Why? It will be a sign that you believe, but also a protection from the angel of death, who will pass through Egypt judging disbelief and disobedience. And so, the wrath of God comes to town and passes over those who trust and obey God’s word.

The final image is what we have here in Exodus 14 and 15—the parting and closing of the Red Sea. The Egyptian soldiers are about to catch up to the Israelites. The people lament their impending doom, “O great, we’re going to die!” But God says, “Trust me. Moses, strike the water with your rod.” What happens? The waters part, and the Israelites walk safely from one side to the

the common theme of divine judgment by fire” (p. 353). He cites ten biblical texts, including Leviticus 21:9.

other. But that doesn't save the Israelites! No, the Egyptians start to do the same. They start through the Red Sea, down the same parted path. What then saves the Israelites? They are saved when the waters come back and drown the Egyptians.

Are you saved? Saved from what? If you believe in Jesus Christ as your ark of refuge, as your spotless lamb, as the only "way" from this side to that side, then you will be saved from the storm, and from death, and from the waves of the fire of God's wrath on the last day. This is what the first two books of the Bible teach us, as does the last.

The Song of Moses and the Triumph of the Lamb

As mentioned earlier, the book of Revelation contains a number of songs, all of them important to our study. After we leave the throne room and the angelic chorus singing "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" (4:8), we hear the Song of the Lamb, where Jesus is praised as God, for he alone has been found worthy to open the scroll and break its seven seals: "Worthy are you . . . for . . . by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (5:9). Now, what is Jesus alone worthy to do? He alone is worthy to open the seals. And what are these seals? Well, they represent the coming wrath of God. When the wrath comes, the kings of the earth will hide themselves in caves and call out to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (6:16–17).

The Song of Moses: Te Deum of Triumph

Now, this theme of wrath is not going to disappear. No, in the rest of Revelation it grows and spreads like a California wildfire on a windy day. So, when we get to Revelation 15, look at what John sees:

Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished. And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing *the song of Moses*,²⁴ the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,

“Great and amazing are your deeds,
O Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways,
O King of the nations!
Who will not fear, O Lord,
and glorify your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed.” (15:1–4)

24. Michael Tilly takes “the song of Moses” here to be a reference to Deuteronomy (due mostly to similarities of language in Revelation 15:3–5). See “Deuteronomy in Revelation,” in *Deuteronomy in the New Testament*, ed. Maarten J. J. Menken and Steve Moyise (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 154. But I agree with G. K. Beale that the song in Revelation 15 refers primarily to Exodus 15, but also includes Deuteronomy 32 (as it fits in with the theme in Revelation of “judgment on apostate Christians”). See *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 791–95, 783. Note also that this is proof that the Song of Moses was known by the early church. For other evidence that this song was sung throughout Israel’s history, see Pss. 118:14; 136:13; 140:7.

You see, the New Testament doesn't envision salvation any differently than the Old Testament.²⁵ We just have more of the facts and key players in place. The earthly victory has become a cosmic one; "Egypt" has become "the ends of the earth."²⁶ The same story, the identical image, is here. There is evil in the world. God sees it. God is going to do something about it. Flee from the wrath to come. Flee into the arms of the coming judge, the only one who stretched out his hands in love for us, dying in our place, taking on our sin, our judgment, our hell. "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God" (Rev. 19:1).²⁷

Attune Our Voices

If you split certain atoms (and don't do this at home), what happens? Kaboom! Likewise, if one splits or tears asunder what God has joined together—the love of God from the wrath of God, the mercy of God from the justice of God—the gospel, the good news, explodes! Or take water, this necessary, life-giving substance (H₂O). If you remove but one atom of hydrogen from a molecule of water, what do you get? You get hydroxide, which, when combined with various other molecules, produces (if consumed in the right quantities) a deadly substance.

25. While I disagree with much of his exegesis and theology, I fully agree with the first sentence of George A. F. Knight's postscript: "No line can be drawn to separate the theology of the Song of Moses and the theology of the NT, summed up as it is in what Rev. 15:3 calls the Song of the Lamb." *The Song of Moses: A Theological Quarry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 139.

26. See Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991).

27. Sarna notes how in Exodus 15:2 the "Hebrew *yah* is an abbreviation of the divine name YHVH" and how this poetic form "has survived in English in 'hallelujah.'" *Exodus*, 77.

The Song of Moses: Te Deum of Triumph

Today there is something deadly, subtly deadly, in our preaching of the “gospel.” We have either completely removed wrath from the substance of it, or we have simply taken a bit of wrath away, enough to make people “like” God and “like” Jesus, and “like” our church and “like” us—but also just enough to kill them, by not giving them, as our Lord put it, “a spring of *water* welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14).

I believe it was G. K. Chesterton who once wrote, “The danger when men stop believing in God is not that they’ll believe in nothing, but that they’ll believe in anything.” We live in a world where people believe in anything and everything except that which is really real—in reincarnation but not resurrection, in horoscopes but not hell, in luck but not the Lord. We also live in a time when the church thinks so much like the world—not that we believe in reincarnation over against resurrection, but that we believe in God’s love over against his wrath. This is why the Song of Moses matters, and why it is a song to which we must attune our voices—singing of the greatness of God, singing for joy over the destruction of evil, and singing in thanksgiving for the full salvation we have in Christ.