

# UNIT 25

## THE LEADING OF THE LORD

### (Exodus 13:17-22)

#### INTRODUCTION <sup>1</sup>

#### Text and Textual Notes

**13:17** When Pharaoh released<sup>2</sup> the people, God did not lead them<sup>3</sup> on the way to the land<sup>4</sup> of the Philistines,<sup>5</sup> although<sup>6</sup> that was near, for God said,<sup>7</sup> “Lest<sup>8</sup> the

---

<sup>1</sup> This short section marks the beginning of the journey of the Israelites toward the Sea and Sinai. The emphasis here is on the leading of Yahweh--but this leading is manifested in a unique, supernatural way--unlikely to be repeated with this phenomena. Although a primary application of such a passage would be difficult, the general principle is clear: God, by His clear revelation, leads His people to the fulfillment of the promise.

This section has three short parts: the leading to the sea (17,18), the bones of Joseph (19), and the leading by the cloud and pillar (20-22).

<sup>2</sup> The construction for this temporal clause is the temporal indicator with the *waw* consecutive, the *piel* infinitive construct with a preposition, and then the subjective genitive “Pharaoh.”

<sup>3</sup> The verb *nakhah*, “to lead,” is a fairly common word in the Bible for God’s leading of His people (such as in Psalm 23 for leading in the paths of righteousness). This passage illustrates what others affirm, that God leads His people in a way that is for their own good. There were shorter routes to take, but the people were not ready for them.

<sup>4</sup> The word “way” is an adverbial accusative of place, “on the way”; it is in construct so that “land of the Philistines” is a genitive of either indirect object (“to the land”) or location (“in” or “through” the land).

<sup>5</sup> The term “Philistines” is viewed by modern scholarship as an anachronism since the Philistines were not believed to have settled in the region until the reign of Ramses III (in which case the note would not fit either view of the exodus). But the Old Testament clearly refers to Philistines in the days of the patriarchs. The people there in the earlier period may have been Semites, judging from their names; or they may have been migrants from Crete in the early time. The Philistines after the exodus were of Greek origin. The danger of warfare at this time was clearly with Canaanitish tribes. For further details, see Kenneth Kitchen, “The Philistines,” in *Peoples of Old Testament Times*, ed. by D. J. Wiseman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 53,54; J. M. Grintz, “The Immigration of the First Philistines in the Inscriptions,” *Tarbiz* 17 (1945):32-42, and *Tarbiz* 19 (1947):64; and Ed Hindson, *The Philistines and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), pp. 39,59.

<sup>6</sup> The particle *ki* introduces a concessive clause here (see Williams, *Hebrew Syntax*, par. 448).

<sup>7</sup> Or, “thought”

people change their minds<sup>9</sup> when they see war, and return to Egypt.” **13:18** And so God led the people around on the way of the wilderness to the Red Sea.<sup>10</sup> And the Israelites went up from the land of Egypt prepared for battle.<sup>11</sup>

13:19 And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had made the Israelites solemnly swear,<sup>12</sup> saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry<sup>13</sup> my bones up from this place with you.”

---

<sup>8</sup> Before a clause this conjunction *pen* expresses fear or precaution (Williams, *Hebrew Syntax*, par. 461). It may be translated “lest, else,” or “what if.”

<sup>9</sup> *yinnakhem* is the *niphal* imperfect of *nakham*; it would normally be translated “repent” or “relent.” Here in this non-theological usage we have a good illustration of the basic meaning of having a change of mind or having regrets.

<sup>10</sup> Hebrew *Yam Suph* cannot be a genitive because it follows a noun that is not in construct; instead, it must be an adverbial accusative, unless it is simply joined by apposition to “the wilderness”--the way to the wilderness [and] to the Red Sea (Childs, p. 217).

The translation of this title as “Red Sea” comes from the LXX. The Red Sea proper as we know it is much farther south, below the Sinai Peninsula. But the title Red Sea may very well have been extended to cover both the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Aqaba (see Deut. 1:1; 1 Kings 9:26). The name Red Sea has been replaced in many sources with “Sea of Reeds,” perhaps referring to Lake Menzaleh or Lake Ballah, north of the ancient extension of the Red Sea on the western side of Sinai. The word “reeds” may be an Egyptian word for “papyrus.” Whatever exact body of water is meant, it was not merely a low marshy swamp that they waded through, but a body of water large enough to make passage impossible without divine intervention, and deep enough to drown the Egyptian army. Lake Menzaleh has always been deep enough to preclude passage on foot (Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 66). Among the many sources dealing with the geography, see Bernard F. Batto, “The Reed Sea: Requisite in Pace,” *JBL* 102 (1983):27-35); M. Waxman, “I Miss the Red Sea,” *Conservative Judaism* 18 (1963):35-44; and George Coats, “The Sea Tradition in the Wilderness Theme: A Review,” *JSOT* 12 (1979):2-8.

<sup>11</sup> תנ/חַמֻּשִׁים (*hamusim*) is placed first for emphasis; it forms a circumstantial clause, explaining how they went up. Unfortunately, it is a rare word with uncertain meaning. Most translations have something to do with “in battle array” or “prepared to fight” if need be. The Targum took it as “armed with weapons.” The LXX had “in the fifth generation.” Some have opted for “in five divisions.”

<sup>12</sup> The construction uses the *hiphil* infinitive absolute with the *hiphil* perfect to stress that Joseph had made them take a solemn oath to carry his bones out of Egypt.

<sup>13</sup> The form is the *hiphil* perfect with the *waw* consecutive; it follows in the sequence of the imperfect tense before it, and so here is equal to an imperfect of injunction (because of the solemn oath). Israel took his bones with them as a sign of piety toward the past and as a symbol of their previous bond with Canaan (Jacob, p. 380).

**13:20** So they journeyed from Sukkoth, and camped in Etham, on the edge of the desert. **13:21** And Yahweh was going before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead them in the way; and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light,<sup>14</sup> so that they could<sup>15</sup> go by day and night.<sup>16</sup> **13:22** He did not take away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of the fire by night, from before the people.<sup>17</sup>

## EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

The idea of “leading” is a rather involved issue today with many fanciful ideas getting in the way of the truth. With a passage like this you will have to be very careful, for it describes a phenomenon unlikely to happen today. The passage seems to fall into three sections---the LORD led them to the Sea (17, 18), the people took the bones of Joseph (19), and the leading by the cloud and pillar (20-22).

### *I. The LORD leads his people (17, 18).*

The LORD leads His people in ways that are for their own good (vv. 17, 18). The verb for “lead” here is *nakhah*, the same as in Psalm 23 for leading in paths of righteousness. The verb, suffixed, forms a word play with the motivation for this direction: he led them (*nakham*) the long way lest if they saw war they would repent (*yinnakhem*) and return to Egypt. In other words, there were shorter ways to go, but the people were not secure enough in the LORD to withstand that possibility of war. They needed further demonstrations.

---

<sup>14</sup> Driver says, “the symbolism had no doubt some natural basis” (p. 113). The events described here are by no means legend. God chose to guide the people with a pillar of cloud in the day and one of fire at night, or, as a pillar of cloud and fire since they represent His presence. God has already appeared to Moses in the fire of the bush, and so here again is revelation with fire. There is some question about whether everyone could see these phenomena; but the point of the text is clear that this was a supernatural provision to lead the people. Whatever the exact nature of these things, they formed direct, visible revelations from God. God was guiding the people in a clear and unambiguous way. And both clouds and fire would again and again come to represent the presence of God in His power and majesty, guiding and protecting His people, by judging their enemies.

<sup>15</sup> The infinitive construct here indicates the result of these manifestations--“so that they went” or “could go.”

<sup>16</sup> These are adverbial accusatives of time.

<sup>17</sup> See T. W. Mann, “The Pillar of Cloud in the Reed Sea Narrative,” *JBL* 90 (1971):15-30).

The second word for “lead” is found in verse 18--the LORD led them about (*wayyasseb*) through the wilderness. So they went up “armed” for hostile action. The term is rare, and calls for further study.

At this point we are not told how God led them, only that he did. Thus, their travels to the Red Sea were his design for a great victory. These were exceptional events.

## *II. The faithful follow God’s leading (19).*

The second part of the passage, essentially verse 19, could be expanded to 8b-20, all of which report the actions of Israel: they went up, they took the bones, and they journeyed to the wilderness. But the important part here is the faith of Moses and Joseph. Joseph's prophecy was of faith: “God will surely visit you.” He knew the future for the covenant people was not in Egypt. He also knew that this life **did not exhaust** the promises of God, and so wished to be taken with them out of Egypt. Then the faith of Moses harmonizes with that of Joseph; he understands too that the future of the promise is in another land and into another life. So he took the bones of Joseph.

So far then we have the obedience of faith in the people (going up) and the leaders (looking for the fulfillment of the promise), joined with the wise leading of the LORD (even though it was a longer way).

## *III. The LORD manifests his presence to the faithful (20-22).*

The third section explains that the LORD traveled before them by a pillar of a cloud, to lead them, and by a pillar of fire, to give them light by night (20-22). These symbols of divine presence are direct manifestations of the LORD's guiding, protecting, and revealing His plan to the new nation.

## **CONCLUSION**

Now if I were going to bring this across to the NT, I would have to say that the pillars are revelation, not some secret, unclear guidance. They are direct, visible revelations of God's plans. The only thing that corresponds to that is the New Testament revelation. That is the way that God reveals his presence, his will, and his protection in such a clear and unambiguous way. Through his direct revelation (that all can see together), he reveals where he wants us to go and what he wants us to do, only this clear revelation is on the corporate level (as it was with

Israel) and that usually is the spiritual way. As we follow his directions, we trust him for a future promised to us, a future even beyond the grave. The central theme? –

*God, by his clear revelation of his presence,  
leads his people to the fulfillment of the promises.*