

יַם-סוּף

The Sea of Reeds

Ex 13,17-14,31

The concept of ‘miracle’, as accepted by historians, can be defined in its initial moment, as ‘incessant amazement’. Both the philosopher and the religious man look at miracles with the same amazement. However, the former neutralizes his own amazement by his ideal knowledge, while the latter abides in it. No knowledge can weaken his amazement, while every explanation of its possible causes deepens his sense of wonderment.

The miracle is not something supernatural or meta-historical, but an event that can definitely be included in the objective scientific causality of nature and history, and that, because of the vital importance it has for the one who experiences it, it shatters his certainties about scientific causality and makes the props of knowledge – nature and history – evaporate.

Miracle is simply what occurs to someone who is ready to perceive it as a miracle. The extraordinary situation is conducive to that, but does not characterize the event. In the light of the topical hour, even the most common things may reveal themselves as miracles.

(Martin Buber)

We have reached the apex of the first part of the Book of Exodus, the crossing of the sea and the Song of Moses and Miriam.

This section has a very simple structure:

lines 13:17-14:18, the journey from the land of Gosen to the Sea of Reeds;

lines 14:19-31, the crossing of the sea;

lines 15:1-21, the Song of the Sea, the celebration of what the Lord did. This is the more ancient text, going back to oral tradition and to the pre-exilic age. It is the seal of the first part of the book. We will devote a whole Lectio to it.

GOD’S INCESSANT WORK

The God who leads Israel out of Egypt is the God of the forefathers, the God whom we have learnt to know in the Book of Genesis as the companion of the journey of those He has chosen, Abraham’s friend, Jacob’s loved and passionate friend as the *midrāšîm* relate, Abraham’s shield, God the Most High of Melkisedek, *’ēl šadday*, ‘God-who-is-enough’, God who wrestles with Jacob and who blesses him, God who protects and saves Joseph and, through him, his family, God who accompanies the patriarchs’ journeys and who is involved in their lives.

And now we come to know Him as God who is able to lead His people to freedom, to re-generate it for a new future, to accompany it in its growth, to guard it, to protect it on its journey, to lead it with faithfulness and love, by His incessant work, to the place of the promise, a place which is the love relationship of mutual belonging between God and His people.

It is an incessant action, an incessant commitment, an incessant care.

God leads His people, and His is a very original leadership: He leads them on a route different from that which used to be followed by caravans and armies. He asks them to rely on an intuition, semi-darkness, semi-light, that is, on His presence which is fire and cloud. Thus the people who is following Moses – who in his turn is following God – arrives at the shore of the Sea of Reeds.

We will never know what happened exactly: an earthquake, a tsunami, or the strong easterly wind which drove the sea back... We do not know which part was played by the natural phenomenon. As a matter of fact, the crossing of the sea was perceived by the Israelites as the ‘miracle of the sea’. On that day, the people of Israel saw the powerful hand of God at work, and laid the foundations of faith in Him in their hearts.

Miriam’s song ends with the statement that “the Lord reigns”. The verb מִלַּךְ *mālāk*, translated with ‘reign’, in its Assyrian root means ‘to decide, to counsel, to resolve’. The king is the one who has the decisive opinion, and here the meaning is that God is the One who has the power to take a decision about the fate of a people; that He is the one and only who can give meaning to events, to the single individual’s life, to community life; that by His work He sets the definitive seal on human history, and makes of it a history of salvation, the place where He can reveal His love for His people.

THE LONGER WAY

When Pharaoh had let the people go, God did not let them take the road to the Philistines’ territory, although that was the shortest, ‘in case’, God thought, ‘the prospect of fighting makes the people change their minds and turn back to Egypt.’ Instead, God let the people a roundabout way through the desert of the Sea of Reeds. The Israelites left Egypt fully armed. Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, since Joseph had put the Israelites on solemn oath with words, ‘It is sure that God will visit you,’ he had said, ‘and when that day comes you must take my bones away from here with you.’

Then they set out from Succoth and encamped in Etham, on the edge of the desert. The Lord preceded them, by day in a pillar of cloud to show them the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could march by day and by night. The pillar of cloud never left its place ahead of the people during the day, nor the pillar of fire during the night.

(Ex 13:17-22)

The account of the Exodus from Egypt shows elements of light and of darkness: light and darkness occur alternatively in the story. The pillar of fire at night and the pillar of cloud by day really come to life here. Let us follow the text.

The Israelites left Egypt ‘fully armed’: **וַהֲמוּשִׁים עָלוּ**, *waḥāmušîm ‘ālû*, where the term **וַהֲמוּשִׁים** *ḥāmušîm*, comes from **חֲמִשָּׁה**, *ḥōmeš*, one fifth, and could be translated as ‘organized in groups of fifty men’, as if they were some battalions ready for war. According to the rabbis, this text definitely highlights the fact that they did not flee from the land of Egypt full of shame and as slaves, but as a glorious army, fully equipped to fight in a war. However, God did not lead them along the shortest route, because they were weak, prone to fear and discouragement when confronted with the enemy or some obstacles.

There is therefore a high contrast between the show of force and the real weakness.

The shortest route to the destination was the one on the Mediterranean coast, starting from Egypt’s border and ending in Gaza, in Philistine land, after some 200 kilometres, which could be covered in a few days. The Israelites should not take this road anyway, because on their journey to the land of Canaan they first had to stop at Mt Sinai, in order to worship the Lord.

The text, however, gives a different reason for this choice not to go via the way by the sea: if, on one hand, that was the easiest route to leave Egypt, on the other hand it could have been also the easiest route to go back to Egypt. In order to prevent them from going back to Egypt, in order to hinder the temptation not to go on, not to face challenges, Moses led his people on the longest way, so that time and space could make the heart of Israel mature.

Now Moses led the Jews out of that way so that, if the Egyptians changed their mind and started chasing them, they would be punished, having wickedly broken the pact; furthermore, it was also because of the Philistines and the old animosity between the two peoples. He wanted to keep the Jewish move hidden to them, given that they were the Egyptians’ neighbours.

These are the reasons why he did not lead his people on the straighter way to Palestine, but in order to invade the land of Canaan he chose a longer and more demanding route through the desert. In addition to that, he was moved also by the command he had received from God, to lead his people to Mt Sinai and to offer sacrifices to God there.

(Flavius Josephus, ‘Jewish Antiquities’, Book II, 322-323)

This is a very important lesson: the exodus occurred at a time when the people were not yet ready to carry the burden of the freedom they had regained, they were ‘little’, they easily went astray, they were unconvinced, they were still slaves. According to the rabbis, many of the Israelites leaving Egypt left it just because they were moved by Pharaoh’s words, not because they were convinced that they had

regained freedom. It was not Egypt that made them slaves. It was fear, their mentality of slaves which had put down roots in their hearts.

Again, freedom is a process of growth one has to enter, a reality that must be accompanied, cherished, confirmed, longed for in one's heart and in the hearts of all the others. It is not an absolute reality, shining in all its power, but a seed sowed in man's heart, a seed that one has to nourish, and to make room for, and to let it develop according to its nature. Freedom does not come about because everything is clear, everything goes according to one's expectations; and it is not conquered once and for all, but it is exercised firstly when it is still dark, when everything is still indefinite, when there is still fear; when freedom seems to be still very far away. Faith is measured against this mixture of light and darkness, wheat and darnel.

The reality of things is not defined by the presence of the darnel; it is defined by the certain hope that the wheal will ripen.

And we must give to this 'wheat' all the time it needs to grow. Perhaps many setbacks are not simply due to our own inconsistencies, fears or inability to get results. It would not be wise to try to get results from the very start. Longer times may seem unproductive; but they may turn to be providential, perhaps. These longer times are given us so that we may grow, become open to God and to what He wants to work in our lives.

HOPE AND FEAR

The Lord spoke to Moses and said, 'Tell the Israelites to turn back and pitch camp in front of Pi-Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, facing Baal-Zephon. You must pitch your camp opposite this place, beside the sea, and then Pharaoh will think, "The Israelites are wandering to and from in the countryside; the desert has closed in on them." I shall then make Pharaoh stubborn and he will set out in pursuit of them; and I shall win glory for myself at the expense of Pharaoh and his whole army, and then the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.'

And the Israelites did this.

When Pharaoh king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, he and his officials changed their attitude towards the people. 'What have we done,' they said, 'allowing Israel to leave our service?' So Pharaoh had his chariot harnessed and set out with his troops, taking six hundred of the best chariots and all the other chariots in Egypt, with officers in each. The Lord make Pharaoh king of Egypt stubborn, and he gave chase to the Israelites. The Israelites marched confidently away, but the Egyptians, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, his horsemen and his army, gave chase and caught up with them where they lay encamped beside the sea near Pi-Hahigorth, facing Baal- Zephon.

As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up – and there were the Egyptians in pursuit of them! The Israelites were terrified and cried out to the Lord for help. To Moses they said, 'Was it for lack of graves in Egypt, that you had to lead us out to die in the desert? What was the point of bringing us out of Egypt? Did we

not tell you as much in Egypt? Leave us alone, we said, we would rather work for the Egyptians! We prefer to work for the Egyptians than to die in the desert!’ Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid! Stand firm, and you will see what the Lord will do to rescue you today: the Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will do the fighting for you; all you need to do is to keep calm.’

The Lord then said to Moses, ‘Why cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to march on. Your part is to raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, so that the Israelites can walk through the sea on dry ground, while I, for my part, shall make the Egyptians so stubborn that they will follow them, and I shall win glory for myself at the expense of Pharaoh and all his army, chariots and horsemen. And when I have won glory for myself at the expense of Pharaoh and his chariots and horsemen, the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.’

Ex 14,1-18

Chapter 14 relates of violent struggles, dramatic contrasts.

On one side there is Pharaoh, his change of mind, and therefore, his untrustworthiness, both in words and deeds. And also the power of his army, the decision to kill.

On the other side there is the Israelites’ fear, their cry to God, the night of terror, the sea that has still to be opened. Israel seems to be trapped in Pi-Hahiroth, which means ‘the mouth of liberty’, thus suggesting that this place is a gorge between two hills, a narrow valley entrapping the Jews. Rashi notes that they neither know how to go out, nor where to go: it refers therefore to an existential situation, a very confused frame of mind, a lack of reference points.

And finally, among all that, there is the great sign, the presence of the pillar of cloud and fire protecting Israel along the way, guiding it, never leaving it alone, and always making its journey safe, safe both by day and by night.

Fear and hope,
ambiguity and certainty,
terror and trust,
bewilderment and firmness,
confusion and peace,
cries and silence.

And, in the midst of the noise of the carriages chasing the Israelites and of the cries of fear of the Israelites, here come Moses’ words: *‘Do not be afraid! Stand firm, and you will see what the Lord will do to rescue you today: the Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will do the fighting for you; all you need to do is to keep calm.’*

Taking the lead from this exhortation, Rabbi Yishmael’s Mekhilta teaches that when they had to face the Egyptians, the Jewish people were divided into four factions:

On the shore of the Red Sea, the Israelites were divided into four groups. One group said, ‘Let us throw ourselves into the sea’. Another one said, ‘Let us go back to

Egypt'. Another one said, 'Let us fight'. And the last one said, 'Let us cry against them'.

Those who said 'Let us throw ourselves into the sea', got the answer: Stand firm, and you will see what the Lord will do to rescue you today.

Those who said, 'Let us go back to Egypt!', got the answer: the Egyptians you see today you will never see again.

Those who said, 'Let us fight!', got the answer: The Lord will do the fighting for you.

Those who said, 'Let us cry to God!', got the answer: all you need to do is to keep quiet.

The Lord will fight for you: not only this time, but each and every time He will fight against your enemies. Rabbi Meier says: The Lord will fight for you. If when you keep quiet the Lord will fight for you, the more so when you give praise to Him. (Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Parashah Beschallah, III)

The solution for these four reactions is the word that enables them to walk, what God tells Moses in Ex 14:15: *Tell the Israelites to march on.*

It is extraordinary how the word of trust and hope can be intermixed with the words of anger and violence, of doubts and fear, of discouragement and anguish.

This is terrible and encouraging at the same time, as it always demands from us who are believers to look for the Word among the other words, to look for the Way when all the other ways are closed; to listen to the words of a song when all the rest is quiet; to build up peace where it has been destroyed; to live our lives where everything seems to be torn to pieces by death.

And all that by becoming one with that reality, without distancing ourselves, but being involved in, determined by, called by what we are being sent to.

THE CROSSING OF THE SEA

Then the angel of God, who preceded the army of Israel, changed station and followed behind them. The pillar of cloud moved from their front and took position behind them. It came between the army of the Egyptians and the army of Israel. The cloud was dark, and the night passed without the one drawing any closer to the other the whole night long.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the Lord drove the sea back with a strong easterly wind all night and made the sea into dry land. The waters were divided and the Israelites went on dry ground right through the sea, with walls of water to right and left of them. The Egyptians gave chase, and all Pharaoh's horses, chariots and horsemen went into the sea after them.

In the morning watch, the Lord looked down on the army of the Egyptians from the pillar of fire and cloud and threw the Egyptian army into confusion. He so clogged

their chariot wheels that they drove on only with difficulty, which made the Egyptians say, 'Let us flee from Israel, for the Lord is fighting on their side against the Egyptians!'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand over the sea and let the waters flow back on the Egyptians and on their chariots and their horsemen.' Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and, as day broke, the sea returned to its bed. The fleeing Egyptians ran straight into it, and the Lord overthrew the Egyptians in the middle of the sea. The returning waters washed right over the chariots and horsemen of Pharaoh's entire army, which had followed the Israelites into the sea; not a single one of them was left. The Israelites, however, had marched through the sea on dry ground, with walls of water to right and left of them.

That day, the Lord rescued Israel from the clutches of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the sea-shore. When Israel saw the mighty deed that the Lord had performed against the Egyptians, the people revered the Lord and put their faith in the Lord and in Moses, His servant.

Ex 14,19-30

Similarly as for the plagues, the exodus after the first-born sons' slaughter, and any other ancient event, we are unable to reconstruct with scientific certitude what exactly happened when the Jews crossed the sea.

The Jews crossed the sea at a place called 'Sea of Reeds', in the region of the 'Bitter Lakes'. The place should coincide with the present Suez Canal. At the time of the Exodus it was a marsh, that could be crossed only by expert travellers and in particular conditions.

The historical fact was perhaps the crossing of this marsh in a windy night, thanks to the violent *hamsin*, an Eastern wind which quickly dries whatever it encounters.

The biblical story about the crossing unifies two different accounts: the first, more ancient one, describes the strong Eastern wind blowing, רִיחַ קָדִים עֲזָה *rû^ah qādîm 'azzâh*, and driving the sea back and making the sea into dry land, exactly as it happened at Creation in Gn 1:9: *God said: 'Let the waters under heaven come together into a single mass, and let dry land appear.'* And so it was.

It was an event due to favourable circumstances, a natural event in that strip of land that goes from Gosen to Sinai. Natural but exceptional as far as coincidences are concerned: the wind blowing; the expertise of Israel's guides; the land, dry for the Israelites and a marsh in which the Egyptians' heavy carriages sank.

However, in this crossing which is exceptional but, in my view, not supernatural, the Israelites saw the powerful hand of the Lord who saved them. This understanding made that event different from all the rest.

Therefore, it is not the exceptional event which originates faith, but it is faith which is capable of recognizing God's work in what otherwise would be deemed as 'natural'.

How then are they to call on Him if they have not come to believe in Him? And how can they believe in Him if they have never heard of Him? And how will they hear of Him unless there is a preacher for them?

Rm 10,14

Faith originates from listening to the Word.

I do not believe because I have seen, but because I have listened to the Word.

Listen, Israel: the Lord your God is the one, the only Lord.

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength. Let the words I enjoin on you today stay in your heart. You shall tell them to your children, and keep on telling them, when you are sitting at home, when you are out and about, when you are lying down and when you are standing up; you must fasten them on your hand as a sign and on your forehead as a headband; you must write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Dt 6,4-9

Listen is the one and only imperative we can find in this text from Deuteronomy.

You must love is not an imperative, but a Hebrew form called *conversive waw with perfect*, denoting a certainty in the future.

Therefore it should not be translated thus: *Listen, Israel... You must love the Lord your God with all your heart...*

But like this: *Listen, Israel: the Lord your God is the one, the only Lord. If you have listened to this, and this is true for you, then surely you will love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength.*

That the decision to love originates from listening is an extraordinary thing. The one and only imperative.

From listening, and therefore from acknowledging that He is the one and only Lord.

Then, if He is the One, you will *surely* love the Lord Your God with all your strength.

Surely, the words I enjoin on you today will stay in your heart, not in your mouth.

Surely, you will tell them to your children.

Surely, you will tell them when you are sitting at home.

Surely, you will tell them when you are out and about, when you are lying down and when you are standing up.

Surely, you will fasten them on your hand as a sign, if you have listened that the Lord is the one, the only God.

Surely, you will write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

It seems really impossible to separate the imperative *Listen* from what comes next, because what comes next is not an exercise of will-power, it is not simply obedience, but it is the natural outcome of a certainty. The Jews then refer to it as *the certainty (or creed) of Israel*, more than as a commandment.

This is the one and only certainty, not the one and only commandment: that God is the One, and then comes all the rest.

Listening becomes then the sure belief that God acts; listening becomes a new way of seeing history, events, our own days, a new way to call things, our lives' situations, by the name of faith.

When you confide in the Lord and you follow His ways even through the sea, the sea becomes not only 'dry ground' but also 'walls of water' to protect you from all dangers.

Rebbe of Lubavitch

And then faith can sing that Israel passed through the waters, and that the waters became walls to right and left of them, that they crossed the sea on dry ground and that the waters washed right over the Egyptians. All this to sing and celebrate the One who truly makes the history of the world, by making use of what opposes Him too, as we will see in the next lectio.

Faith which opens the sea is at the heart of a Talmudic text.

The Talmud (Sotah 37a) relates that when Moses had stretched out his hand over the sea as God commanded, nothing happened. The sea would open only thanks to *Nahšôn ben 'amînādāb*.

He was the leader of the tribe of Judah, (cf Nb 1:7) Nadab and Abihu's father: his sister was Aaron's wife. (cf Ex 6:23)

According to the Talmud, Nahshon was the only one to understand that, in order for God to act, the people should give a proof of its trust in God. He then jumped into the water and, as a consequence, the sea opened. This midrash is extraordinary. The sea is opened thanks to faith: Nahshon jumps into the sea with the certainty that the sea will open. The Talmud interprets Psalm 114:3 in the light of this very gesture: *The sea fled at the sight*, as if it were: the sea saw him and fled, that is, the sea saw Nahshon's faith and fled.

This prince of Judah that we have just met can be found in the New Testament too: *Nahshon, son of Amminadab*, one of the obscure forefathers of Jesus, one of the infinite series of names the gospels of Matthew and Luke start with:

When He began, Jesus was about thirty years old, being the son, as it was thought, of Joseph son of Heli, son of Matthat, son of Levi, son of Melchi, son of Jannai, son of Joseph, son of Mattathias, son of Amos, son of Nahum, son of Esli, son of Naggai...

son of David, son of Jesse, son of Obed, son of Boaz, son of Sala, son of Nahshon, son of Amminadab, son of Admin, son of Arni, son of Hezron, son of Perez, son of Judah...

Lk 3,23-25, 31-33

We thank you, *Naḥšôn ben 'amînādāb*, prince of Judah,
for your faith,
because you explored the possibility of walking on the waters
to reach the other side of the sea,
you saw the possibility because you knew,
you knew because you believed.

May you beg your God and our God,
that you acknowledged as the only One,
as the Lord, trustworthy, worthy to be given glory,
that He may grant us to perform the brave gestures of daring faith,
of faith that can guess the outcome of the first buds in advance,
of faith that moves those who are in darkness,
of faith that believes everything because knows everything in advance.

May you remember us before your Lord,
given that we are children of the One who was born from your race,
of the One who knows the Father,
Wisdom who has conquered the world.
Amen.

DIRECTIONS FOR PRAYER AND MEDITATION

First of all I suggest that you journey through the Psalter, starting from the psalms that you know better, in order to find out the two voices:

- the cry of lamentation: “Wake up! Why are You asleep, Lord?” “Do not be silent, my God” and so on;
- the cry of faith, of certitude: “You are my God”; “You are my refuge”; “You are my strength”; “You raised me up from the pit of death” and so on.

This may help us to regard the prayer of the psalms that we find every day in the Liturgy of the Hours indeed as our own.

The second suggestion, both on the personal and community levels, deals with the simultaneous presence of darkness and light. How do we feel and what do we do when we have to face setbacks, stumbling blocks, conflicts, betrayals, burdens in our everyday lives? Are we able to perceive the signs of life in those very places where hope seems to be lacking? Are we able to perceive the Word in spite of its apparent absence, the Kingdom of God where it seems that there is no room for it?

In spite of our own contradictions, are we able to carry the Word of faith high as a flag? How? By which means? What helps us to move towards daylight?

When Israel saw the mighty deed that the Lord had performed against the Egyptians, the people revered the Lord and put their faith in the Lord and in Moses, His servant. Faith that perceives and acknowledges, that trusts in what has not happened yet but will definitely happen; and faith as the fruit, the result of God’s action. Faith precedes, accompanies and is ‘the’ fruit. And not only faith in God, but in God and in His servant Moses. To believe in God is not enough, given that in the Scriptures He shows Himself through the people He has chosen and who are His witnesses. In the New Testament the disciples had to learn to believe in God and in Jesus: “...at Cana in Galilee He revealed His glory, and His disciples believed in Him” (Jn 2:11). And Jesus Himself demands of them faith in Him: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You trust in God, trust also in me.” (Jn 14:1)

Daniel Attinger writes:

In the same way as for Israel is not enough to have faith in God but it must trust in Moses too, for us faith in God implies faith in Christ.

And nowadays faith in Christ implies also faith in somebody who is for us Christ’s witness: it may be one’s spiritual father or mother, one’s husband or wife, even one’s children, or a priest and so on, but in any case it must be a real person.

In this case my faith in Christ is shown through obedience, because the God I believe in is not a god that I fabricated, and obedience to God is no longer obedience to myself, but to somebody else, who by his ‘otherness’ in a way represents Jesus Christ and God Himself.

Faith in God always implies therefore a concrete, real obedience to somebody, otherwise it is just 'ideology'.

Therefore we can reflect on the gift and the responsibility of being mutual witnesses, giving witness to God as He really is, and wonder whether we are so free as to accept mediators. In the initial formative path, to accept mediators – such as the novice mistress or the leader – is of the utmost importance. Of course, to welcome mediators is not equal to canonize somebody. However, we must perceive their witness of faith, God's word and action for our lives, even when we see their shortcomings or, alternatively, their good qualities, ie, when we see them as real men or women.

Excursus I

מִהַתְצַעֵק אֵלַי

WHY CRY OUT TO ME?

Ex 14,15

It is very interesting to note what the text says: “The Israelites... cried out to the Lord” (Ex 14:10) and God says to Moses, “Why cry out to me?” (Ex 14:15)

This is Israel’s cry before his oppressors, the cry God listens to, (Ex 3:7) the cry of those that God calls ‘children’, (Ex 3:9) the wailing of the fathers whose sons have just been killed. (Ex 11:6; 12:30)

It is the cry of the people, it is Moses’ cry. Moses is one with his people and if his people cries, he is in its cry and that cry is his own as well. In his ‘Jewish Antiquities’ Flavius Josephus attributes the following prayer to Moses:

You know that to escape from the present dangers is beyond human power and possibilities. There is no other way of salvation for this multitude, who left Egypt according to Your will, but the one You can offer us.

We do not trust in any other hope or refuge, we find refuge solely under Your protection, and we are waiting from Your Providence the means that can save us from the Egyptians’ fury: we look to You.

May Your help come without delay, manifesting Your power: raise the heart of the people who lies prostrate out of despair, raise the people and let it experience serenity and trust in salvation.

The anguish we are experiencing, as we are under somebody else’ rule, is in Your power. Yours is the sea and Yours is the mountain surrounding us. May the sea open at Your command. Let the sea become dry land, or make us escape through air, if Your omnipotence should will so.

Flavius Josephus, Book II, 335-337

The Church Fathers have done much to advance our understanding of this silent cry: it is the very cry of the Holy Spirit of God, the cry God listens to, the cry that makes of us God’s children.

Moses cries to the Lord. How does he cry? We cannot hear any sound from his mouth and yet God says to him: Why are you crying to me?

I’d like to know how the saints can cry to God without uttering a word. The Apostle teaches that “God has sent into our hearts the Spirit of His Son crying, ‘Abba, Father’”. And he adds: “The Spirit Himself makes our petitions for us in groans that cannot be put into words”. And again: “He who can see into all hearts knows what the Spirit means, because the

prayers that the Spirit makes for God's holy people are always in accordance with the mind of God."

Thus, thanks to the Holy Spirit's intercession, the silent cry of the saints is listened to by God.

Origen, Homilies on the Exodus, 5, 4

St Ambrose commented on the moment preceding the opening of the sea, when the Israelites cried out to God. In his view, that cry was but "a querulous lament, showing no certainty at all", and in the end, it was "an infinite offence to God". Moses' prayer was opposed to that. Regarding this, he wrote:

Moses was then standing full of sadness, worry and anguish, on account of both the actual dangers and the people's laments, and he was waiting for the faithful fulfilment of Heaven's promises. In silence, he was just wondering by which means the Lord would finally intervene, forgetting the offence, remembering His love.

To him the Lord says: "Why cry out to me?"

I cannot perceive any sound, still I can recognize His voice:

I can perceive His silence, I am aware of the cry hidden in His works.

The people was crying, still it was not listened to; Moses was silent, still he was listened to.

God did not say "Why cry out to me" to the people. In fact, that people who was showering abuse, was not crying to God. On the contrary, the question "Why cry out to me?" was addressed to Moses. In other words:

you are the only one crying out to me, as you trust in me;

you are the only one crying out to me, as you provoke me into using my power;

you are the only one crying out to me, as you just desire that my name may be proclaimed to all the earth.

Moses was then crying in his heart, as any wise man does.

In fact, wisdom invites everybody to her house – the programme is proclaimed from the heights above the city – saying: Leave foolishness behind and go forwards in the way of perception! Her proclamation comes from above; she is promising wisdom to the fool in a very loud voice. The Lord Jesus Christ used to cry too: "Let anyone who is thirsty, come to me and drink!" And His proclamation was really important, given that He was inviting men to come into the Kingdom of Heaven, and to drink that venerable drink which gives eternal life.

You too, when you pray, ask for the important goods; that is, pray for the things eternal and not for things that pass; pray for the Heavenly things, so that you may be like the angels of Heaven.

Do not pray for money, which is but rust;

do not pray for gold, which is but a metal;

do not pray for possessions that are on the earth;

such a prayer cannot reach the Lord.

*God does not listen to what is not worthy of His beneficial intervention;
on the contrary, He listens to a devout voice, full of faithfulness and love.
St Ambrose, 'Commentary to the Psalm 118', XIX, 10*