

SERMON: 2017/09/17 - BTR

[Invite children to sit on the floor at the front.]

[Brandish a wooden replica of a khopesh.]

This is an *ancient* weapon (of war) from Egypt.
Or at least it would be if it were made of bronze.

The real thing was not a sword: for a start, one couldn't *really* thrust with it or stab an opponent [shake head] - it doesn't have a point for penetration, you see; and, secondly, whilst Pharaoh's soldiers did use it (in battle) by swinging it at their enemies in a "slashing" motion [slash], it wasn't, actually, very sharp, and though it *could* slice *into* flesh, it certainly wasn't capable of cleaving limbs [n.1]; and the injuries it inflicted were more like those you'd expect from the blows of a wooden-club [n.2].

So, why is this?!

Why is this funny, odd-shaped object not nearly as versatile (or lethal) as a sword but much more sophisticated than what a "caveman" might use?

Because *this* is a "khopesh," and it is a hybrid of both those things, and as such it represents an early stage in the evolution of weaponry (just) *before* mankind had the technology or the "know how" to make long, sharp (metal) blades; but (only) a little later than the Stone Age.

And *that's* why it was the preeminent killing-tool of its day [n.3]; which was, in other words, a long, long, *long* time ago - the *same* time, in fact, when the "Passover" occurred.

Do you remember what that was? (I described it last week,)

It was when God Himself came down from Heaven [Ex. 12:12/29] and used "plagues" of frogs and flies and other unpleasant stuff to persuade the Egyptians to release Jacob's family - the "Israelites," the people we call "Jews" - from being slaves so that they could go home to Canaan-Palestine.

And that's what happened: and they were so happy! And they packed their bags and off they "skipped" into the desert.

And every year, since then, Jewish men and women and boys and girls celebrate this victory, this "deliverance," with a special party. Remember that?

But you know what? There was something else that made the event so

memorable and exciting, and it was this: because not long after they were set free, Pharaoh and his men changed their minds; they were furious; and very upset; and they *chased* the Israelites to the sea. Oh no! They were trapped. And then, *suddenly*, something *incredible* happened: the waters split apart - like curtains being opened in the morning. And a path appeared where, just seconds earlier, fish and sharks had been swimming! And they - the Jews - were able to run to safety.

Wow!

Let's pray: Lord God, thank you for the miracle of parting the sea-waters. We pray You will help us always remember this amazing story, and be "shaped" by it, in Jesus' name, amen.

Bye!

[Ask children to depart]

Close your eyes and imagine that you had been there, with Moses, on the beach. Go on. Thousands of you. Filthy. Tired. And terrified. You've been running all night - in the dark, dragging children and livestock. You tripped and fell countless times, the sand constantly shifting beneath your feet, up and down dunes - exhausting. And now, in the distance, you hear the sound of hundreds and hundreds of hoofbeats, and war-drums too. This is Pharaoh's army and they're out for blood. Your blood.

How does it feel?

You can't swim - it's too far! And not with your baby and your goats. It's either drown or be hacked to death.

And (almost) *exactly* this scene has been playing out all week in Myanmar too: right now, the Rohingyas, a minority Muslim group, like the Israelites, are fleeing awful, bigoted violence for new homes, but between them and freedom is another body of water, called "the Naf," a river-estuary, about 5km wide, which is the border with Bangladesh.

Reports describe desperate scenes of refugees, *under fire with bullets flying*, stripping naked and attempting to swim across; and of others - those with money or something valuable to barter - scrambling aboard the overloaded boats of fishermen and making a getaway like that. [n.4]

And perhaps that's how it was in the Bible as well: many sceptics - and Christians among them - question whether God really 'turned the sea into dry land...[enabling] the Israelites [to walk] through [it]...with a wall of water on their right and on their left.' [Ex. 14:21-22]

That just doesn't happen, right? You can't *stack* a fluid; make it stand up on one end.

[Pause.]

So maybe they also used boats like the Rohingyas, and paid local people to ferry them across.

But I don't think so.

For a start, there *are* natural causes that could explain such a phenomena as the sea "parting," permitting a person to walk where he would normally have to swim: Hurricane winds, for example, can blow so hard that they expose the seabed [n.5].

And anyway, God can do what He likes: He's the Creator of the universe after all, and to momentarily cause hard-ground to appear *within* the sea itself by *supernatural* means and contrary to the laws of physics wouldn't have caused Him to sweat in the least.

To say that the Red Sea anomaly couldn't have happened, therefore, because we can't explain it or because we've never seen such a thing is a terrible, worthless argument.

Furthermore, the "Exodus"-event is easily *the* most important story for the Jewish people: foundational for their identity, so it is *fascinating* that, at heart, it isn't even about them; it doesn't shine some especially good light on their virtues or do very much at all to massage their (collective) ego.

Consider Thermopylae - the "Battle of the Hot Gates."

Here is a great national myth: in 480 BC, 300 insanely tough, hard-as-nails Spartan warriors - that's a small town in southern Greece - defended a narrow, cliff-top trail, preventing a *massive* force of Persians from invading. It was a thousand-to-one odds, but this small band bravely stood their ground; and even now their example is 'a potent...source of inspiration' for modern Greeks.

[n.6]

And it is obvious why.

But in *Exodus*, the Israelites do pretty much nothing but run scared. It is the Lord of Heaven who fights! *They* are merely spectators, deserving *no* credit for what transpires. *He*, on the other hand, positioned Himself between them and their pursuers, shielding them from harm; and then, we read, in chapter 15, "throws" the Egyptian chariots into the waters. Look again at the text: God uses

the sea as a missile against Pharaoh's force - like an artillery barrage: it doesn't just fall on their heads. God *crushes* them with it.

And this is what is so memorable: that on that day, in the very distant past, something otherworldly - something *beyond* human power and experience - took place. It was so stupendous, so miraculous that it *seared* itself on the minds of Moses and his friends who witnessed it.

The best explanation, then, the most *rational* explanation, for the endurance of this wonderful story from the primitive past until today, *is* the most *fantastical* one!

How does it feel? Hearing that.

Coming to this conclusion - that the sea *must* have been manipulated - like the sliding doors at the supermarket - by powerful, benevolent, *unseen* forces, and that though this sounds like a fairytale it is a historical event as real as the signing of the Constitution or the flying of the first plane by the Wright brothers - *this* fills me with *wonder*...

...because that "force" - God - hasn't gone anywhere; He's not diminished: and He's with us now in this room, speaking to us through His scripture.

This *wondrous* reality demands a response from each one of us: "discipleship" - and indifference or half-heartedness makes no sense whatsoever. Be passionate! Amen.

Footnotes:

1. Drews, Robert (1993), *The End of the Bronze Age: Changes in Warfare and the Catastrophe Ca. 1200 B.C.*, Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 196.
2. Darnell, John Coleman and Manassa, Colleen (2007), *Tutankhamun's Armies: Battle and Conquest During Ancient Egypt's Late 18th Dynasty*, Hoboken, N. J.: Wiley, 76.
3. Ibid.
4. See, for example: <http://www.looppng.com/global-news/will-boys-death-make-world-take-notice-rohingya-49425>; or <https://thewire.in/174882/rohingya-escape-myanmar-land-river-sea/>
5. Dress, Carl and Han, Weiqing (30th August 2010), 'Dynamics of Wind Setdown at Suez and the Eastern Nile Delta', *PLOSOne*, Volume 5, No. 8, available at <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0012481> (accessed September 15th, 2017).
6. van Steen, Gonda (2010), *Liberating Hellenism from the Ottoman Empire*:

Comte de Marcellus and the Last of the Classics, New York, N. Y.: Palgrave MacMillan, 114.