



Bible-study: 2020/09/20 (St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – Exodus 16:2-15

[Ask for a volunteer to read the passage.]

The marvellous “snowfall” of manna has received the same treatment in the literature as we’ve discussed in recent weeks about the other miraculous phenomena of the “exodus.” That is to say, sceptics have put forward various proposals for it having a mundane provenance, none of which fully take account of the textual “data.” “Data” that many (outside of the Church) simply dismiss as wishful thinking; evidence of an “origin-myth” invented for Israel – a nation that some goes as far as to claim arose *within* Canaan, by rebellion or civil-war *and not* by in-migration. (We’ll look into this debate in November.)

I believe we can say, with confidence – *with reason(!)* – that the Israelites did make the journey alluded to in our text from *Exodus* this morning, and in 1446 B. C.. With God’s aid – His sending of ten, *terrible* “plagues” against Egypt, they had fled that Kingdom, and escaped the clutches of Pharaoh – either Thutmose (the) IIIrd or his son Amenhotep (the) IInd, depending on whether you accept the “Low” or “High” chronology respectively. And embarked on a long and dry walk home to Canaan, “the land flowing with milk and honey.” The route, however, that they took, is a mystery.

Firstly, because we don’t even know where they began. That is to say: we don’t know which ‘waters’ were ‘divided’ for them (by the LORD) when they were being pursued [Ex. 14:21b] – there are ‘at least *eight* different options’:¹ The supplied name (in the original Hebrew) – “yam suph” – is ambiguous. The traditional rendering into English, of course, the one with which we likely grew up in church; the one we are accustomed to hearing, is, “The Red Sea.” And we know where that is! – a *long(!)* arm of salt water that divides the *enormous* African continent from the Arabian Peninsula, which, at one end, spills into the Indian Ocean; and, at the other – the northern, splits into two giant fingers – as if holding up a “peace sign” – that form two sides of the mountainous, upside-down triangle that is “Sinai.” [Show on map.]

Our presumption, of course, is that it was the *western* “finger” in question: that the miracle concerned the “Gulf of Suez.” After all, this was nearest to their point of departure – their homes in the Nile Delta region, ‘in the land of Goshen’: [Gen. 47:1]. And, at 195 miles long,² it presented the most obvious barrier to escape to the east – the *general* direction in which the “People of God” hoped to travel. *Yet*, if we look more closely, it isn’t obvious why they would have gone so far south to become trapped up against it: the tip of the Gulf does not, in fact, reach the same latitude as the most expedient route home. This is especially true given that the *specific* point – the actual city in ‘Goshen’ – from which the Israelites set out is named as the city of ‘Rameses’:

¹ Meyers, Carol (2005), *Exodus (The New Cambridge Bible Commentary)*, Cambridge, U. K.; New York, N. Y.: Cambridge University Press, 112. (My emphasis.)

² See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulf_of_Suez.

[Ex. 12:37a], which, we now know, is buried beneath the village of Qantir, by Tell el Dab'a. [Show on map.]

Although you wouldn't know it now – if you visited today and casually glanced around, for hundreds of years this place – dusty, *tiny* “Qantir” and its immediate vicinity – was *the* major metropolis for a number of Egyptian regimes, to which they applied various labels such as “Avaris” – by the Hyksos, and, later, the aforementioned. That Ramesses (the) IInd was the first *indigenous* pharaoh to make it his capital, transforming it into one of the largest cities in the ancient world, would seem to fit the Bible's description of the Israelites suffering ‘lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick’, in the construction of a town bearing his name: [Ex. 1:11-14].

Joyce Tyldesley describes it as follows: ‘[There was a] palace [that,] together with its associated administrative and religious buildings, harem, kitchens, treasury and storehouses....cover[ed] an area of some four square miles. The thick mud-brick walls...were...embellished with limestone columns and brightly coloured faience tiles so that the entire building sparkled in the fierce Egyptian sun. The public throne room, appropriately decorated with tiles showing bound captives, lions eating prisoners and humble vassals paying tribute to their lord, was designed to strike awe into visitors. The private women's quarters, decorated with light floral motifs and aquatic scenes of fish and water fowl, were altogether more relaxing. ... [It was, over all] a garden city, planted with pomegranate and date orchards and vineyards. Around the royal palace were ornamental gardens, a lake and even a zoo; lion, giraffe and elephant bones have all been discovered in the remains of the grounds. Beyond the palace were offices, storehouses, shops, workshops and, of course, the suburbs housing the general population. A large industrial complex included a huge bronze foundry, a glaze-works and the warehouses and docks of a thriving port.’³

This sounds splendid, but, as indicated, [Rameses] ‘did not therefore build a new foundation here.’⁴ The port in particular, called “Peru-nefer,” dated – in some part – to the reigns of the very pharaohs that I said at the beginning were those of *Exodus*, the construction of which could *also*, easily, justify the author Moses' remembrance of his community's circumstances before their liberation. And all of the referenced Pharaohs – Thutmose, Amenhotep, Rameses, *among others* – invested heavily in this area for exactly the same reason: it was the “gateway” to the only other “world” that, globally, rivaled the New Kingdom of Egypt in terms of wealth, “know how” and population density – the “world” of Mesopotamia; and the shortest – *and quickest(!)* – overland way to get there was an ancient road: “The Way of Horus.” This road passed directly through Palestine – the “promised Land;” and it was “dotted” with ‘sites...[that] served as police or customs stations that protected merchants and military traffic’.⁵

Basically, it followed the Mediterranean coastland, up and around. And it

³ *Ramesses: Egypt's Greatest Pharaoh* (2001), London: Penguin Books, 97.

⁴ Uphill, E. P. (October 1968), ‘Pithom and Raamses: Their Location and Significance’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Volume 27, No. 4, pp. 291-316, 315.

⁵ Killebrew, Ann E. (2005), *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel, 1300-1100 B.C.E.*, Atlanta, G. A.: Society of Biblical Literature, 86, n.19.

is *likely* that Moses and the Israelites headed straight for it – to make use of that ‘vital artery’ in and out of Egypt.⁶ But we can’t be sure → Yes, as Gary Byers says: ‘The Biblical statements [in (the Book of) Exodus] are extremely precise, providing a very specific set of reference points.’⁷ *But* ‘...the biblical names of these sites are not those of sites today, not to mention the fact that some or many of these sites may no longer exist at all. Moreover, similarities between some names then and now have no bearing on whether the sites themselves can be identified, since these identifications may be legendary. It is also the case that some biblical names are anecdotal. For example, Meribah and Massah mean quarreling and testing... these names seem to reflect the events of *Exodus* 17 rather than being the original names of the sites. This is not to say that the sites themselves or their events are fictitious, only that the names will not aid in helping us determine their location.’⁸

‘Succoth’, for instance, which is given as the first “reference point” in *Exodus* means only “temporary shelters, tents” or “booths”.⁹ In other words, a literal translation of Moses’ mentioning that the Israelites initially travelled to and stopped at that place in chapter twelve [v.37] would be: “...and the Israelites journeyed from Rameses to the place where they camped, and that’s where they camped.” Not especially helpful. *This could have been anywhere!* Anywhere where ‘about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children’ [Ex. 12:37] could sit and sleep for the night. Which is to say, somewhere remote and uninhabited.

What we find, of course, is that God then actually forbade the Israelites from going any further in making use of the “Way of Horus” – in chapter thirteen it says: ‘When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer’: [v.17]. *Rather*, we’re told, ‘[He] led the people by [a] roundabout way’: [v.18a]. And though here the N. R. S. V. does say what we expect to hear – ‘toward the Red Sea’ [v.18b], ‘many’ commentators – *most*, in fact – argue ‘that Israel crossed a “sea of reeds” ([in Hebrew, the “[*yam sūph*]”])’ that was separate from and *above* the sea proper.¹⁰

The region between the Gulf of Suez, you see, and the Mediterranean, has always been *full* of ‘marshy freshwater lakes’.¹¹ And: ‘The Hebrew [word

⁶ Bergoffen, Celia J. (November 1991), ‘Overland Trade in Northern Sinai: The Evidence of the Late Cypriot Pottery’, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 284, pp. 59-76, 59.

⁷ Byers, Gary (2019), ‘New Evidence from Egypt on the Location of the Exodus Sea Crossing: Part II’, in Windle, Bryan (Ed.), *Evidence for the Exodus and Conquest: Compelling Articles from Bible and Spade Magazine*, Akron, P. A.: Associates for Biblical Research, pp. 42-49, available at <https://islandbiblechapel.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Evidence-for-the-Exodus-FINAL.pdf>, (accessed September 11, 2020), 45.

⁸ Enns, P. (2003), ‘Exodus Route and Wilderness Itinerary’, Alexander, T. Desmond & Baker, David W. (Eds.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, pp. 272-280.

⁹ Byers, Gary (2019), 43.

¹⁰ See: Overstreet, R. Larry (2003), ‘Exegetical and Contextual Facets of Israel’s Red Sea Crossing’, *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, Volume 14, No. 1, pp. 63-86, 64.

¹¹ Byers, Gary (2019), ‘New Evidence from Egypt on the Location of the Exodus Sea Crossing: Part I’, in Windle, Bryan (Ed.), *Evidence for the Exodus and Conquest: Compelling Articles from Bible and Spade Magazine*, Akron, P. A.: Associates for Biblical Research, pp. 31-41, available at <https://islandbiblechapel.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Evidence-for-the-Exodus-FINAL.pdf>, (accessed September 11, 2020), 35.

[“]suph[”] definitely referred to a water plant of some sort’.¹² [It] never meant “red.”¹³ No, as the scholar Kenneth Kitchen observes: “Red” is simply an interpretation (not strictly a translation!) of dubious origin, and has no inherent authority.’¹⁴ Furthermore, the final stated location before ‘the waters were divided’ is, ‘Migdol’: [Ex. 14:2], which means – and this takes us back to an issue just identified – “tower;” it *isn’t* a proper noun. And the region between the Gulf of Suez and the Mediterranean was singularly full of these too: a ‘net of forts along the desert border’ that interacted with the “reedy” swamps to create a perfect “chokepoint” in defence of the Pharaohs’ domain (against invaders).¹⁵

That there was this notable fort – “Migdol” – in seeming proximity to where the Israelites were divinely-enabled to make their crossing, as well as two other specified places mentioned in the same breath – ‘Pi-hahiroth’ and ‘Baal-zephon’, does rather *negatively* impact the likelihood that it was through the Gulf of Suez, for the Egyptian kingdom rarely and hardly reached across the Eastern Desert to its shores. *In fact*, until 1999 only *one* manifestation of pharaonic presence on the Red Sea was known: the site of “Mersa Gawais.”¹⁶ – ‘The harbour was mainly used in the 12th Dynasty’, but ‘a few...potsherds’ suggests it was seeing some use in the period of the “exodus” too (during the New Kingdom). ‘*No evidence* of permanent architecture has been found... The only substantial structures...were small ceremonial monuments, rock-cut chambers and galleries, and possible slipways for ships...[as well as] hearths and abandoned artefacts and debris.’¹⁷ William Ward explains: ‘The Egyptians were good sailors’,¹⁸ but their focus was the Nile. And for the longest time: ‘it is probable that Sumerian ships came to the Red Sea [to trade] rather than Egyptian ships to the Persian Gulf.’¹⁹

In 2001, French archaeological teams discovered and excavated another site “Ayn Soukhna,” on a more direct road from the traditional capital, Memphis, which was used ‘extensively’ during the Old and Middle Kingdoms for

¹² *Ibid.*, 33.

¹³ Kitchen, Kenneth A. (2003), *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, Cambridge, U. K.; Grand Rapids, M. I.: William B. Eerdmans, 262.

¹⁴ *Supra*.

¹⁵ Scolnic, Benjamin Edidin (2004), ‘A New Working Hypothesis for the Identification of Migdol’, in Hoffmeier, James K. & Millard, Alan (Eds.), *The Future of Biblical Archaeology - Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions: The Proceedings of a Symposium, August 12-14, 2001 at Trinity International University*, Grand Rapids, M. I.; Cambridge, U. K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., pp. 91-120, 102.

¹⁶ See: el-Raziq, Mahmoud Abd; Castel, Georges; Tallet, Pierre & Marouard, Grégory (2012), ‘The Pharaonic Site of Ayn Soukhna in the Gulf of Suez: 2001-2009 Progress Report’, in (Eds.), *The Red Sea in Pharaonic Times: Recent Discoveries along the Red Sea Coast – Proceedings of the Colloquium held in Cairo / Ayn Soukhna, 11th -12th January 2009*, Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, pp. 3-20, 3.

¹⁷ Bard, Kathryn A. and Fattovich, Rodolfo (2019), ‘Mersa/Wadi Gawasis: Organisation of an Egyptian Bronze Age Harbour on the Red Sea Coast’, in Manzo, Andrea; Zazzaro, Chiara; & de Falco, Diana Joyce (Eds.) *Stories of Globalization: The Red Sea and the Gulf from Late Prehistory to Early Modernity – Selected Papers of Red Sea Project VII*, Leiden, The Netherlands; Boston, M. A.: Koninklijke Brill N.V., pp. 3-12, 3-4. (My italics.)

¹⁸ Ward, William A. (1965), *The Spirit of Ancient Egypt*, Beirut: Khayats, 170.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23. Though, in fact, it must be said: ‘there is currently no evidence to support such a route.’ – (UnF) Gilbert, Gregory Phillip (2000), *Ancient Egyptian Sea Power and the Origin of Maritime Forces (Foundations of International Thinking on Sea Power: No. 1)*, Canberra, A. C. T.: Sea Power Centre - Australia, Department of Defence, 83.



‘intermittent’ shipping to the Sinai and perhaps further afield.²⁰ And that’s about it. Mining expeditions were sent regularly to the area, for tin, but no trace of *actual* shafts or structures have been left, only ancient graffiti, because the “miners” were temporary workers, and the ores they were after – cassiterite – were simply collected by being picked off the ground where it lay in abundance; there was no need to actually *dig* for them²¹ – in what was – *and is(!)* – an extremely inhospitable ‘land of stark beauty requiring care and planning’.²² ‘[H]ostile’ to humanity.²³

‘Baal-zephon’ also suggests a location very much *north* of the Red Sea among the lakes of the Delta, a region that had been suffused with *Baalism* – that is, Canaanite religion [see, e.g. Num. 25:1-3, 5; Jdgs. 2:13, 6:28, etc.], since at least the Hyksos. But its ‘identification [with a modern site] ...remains problematic.’²⁴ Obviously, what we’re looking for is a shrine or temple, and again this would appear to exclude the Gulf of Suez in particular and the Red Sea generally.

Against this consensus, some conservative contributors have countered. Larry Overstreet, for example, continues to argue that: ‘...a more consistent contextual interpretation is that [*yam suph*] refers to the Gulf of Suez, or even to the main body of the Red Sea itself. That this is the correct identification is indicated by the number of locusts involved [in the eighth “plague”] and the wind that [we’re told] blew them into the sea. The biblical text is clear[, he reminds us,] that the mass of locusts was huge, that locusts settled throughout the entire land of Egypt, that never before or after were there so many, that their sheer numbers covered the entire country so that they darkened all the ground, and that they stripped the entire land of every green plant and tree in Egypt. To eliminate the millions of locusts involved, spread out over the entire length and breadth of Egypt, would necessitate a mammoth disposal unit. That disposal unit was arranged by God when He sent a “very strong west wind” to blow them into the sea.[Ex. 10:19] This “west wind” literally means “a sea wind,” and refers to “a storm coming in from the Mediterranean and blowing the locust swarms down the Nile Valley and into the south, out of the land.” ... [And t]o imagine that this extensive mass of locusts was destroyed by being blown into a [mere] marshy lake is unfathomable. ... the Gulf of Suez, which is some twenty miles wide, and/or the Red Sea itself, which is about 100 miles wide, are more likely candidates. That becomes even more probable assuming a northwest wind is blowing the locusts in a southeasterly direction since that would drive them into the waters of the actual Red Sea or its Gulf of Suez.’²⁵

If this is where there crossed, it raises the question of why there’s no

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹ See: Rothe, Russell D.; Miller, William K. & Rapp, George Robert (1996), ‘New Hieroglyphic Evidence for Pharaonic Activity in the Eastern Desert of Egypt’, *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, Volume 33, pp. 77- 104.

²² Rothe, Russell D.; Miller, William K. & Rapp, George Robert (2008), *Pharaonic Inscriptions from the Southern Eastern Desert of Egypt*, Winona Lake, I. N.: Eisenbrauns, 1.

²³ Bunson, Margaret R. (2002), *Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt (Revised Edition)*, New York N. Y.: Facts On File, Inc., 44.

²⁴ Hoffmeier, James K. (1999), *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 190.

²⁵ ‘Exegetical and Contextual Facets of Israel's Red Sea Crossing’ (2003), *The Master's Seminary Journal*, Volume 14, No. 1, pp. 63-86, 68-70.

archaeological evidence of the Israelites in the Sinai. This is very odd given how many we are told that there were. Would such an enormous multitude really not leave *any* evidence of their passing? Consider, following the famous Glastonbury music festival in 2015, the organizers were faced with ‘1,650 tonnes of waste – including 5,000 abandoned tents, 6,500 sleeping bags, 400 gazebos, 54 tonnes of cans and plastic bottles, 41 tonnes of cardboard, 66 tonnes of scrap metal, 3,500 airbeds, 2,200 chairs and 950 rolled mats’.²⁶ This detritus was left by a “mere” 135,000 attendees.²⁷ On the other hand, of course, the material culture of the Late Bronze Age was in larger part much more decomposable than the plastic one which dominates today. *But*, even admitting this, we must accept, then, I think, one of two possibilities: either, (1) there weren’t as many Hebrews in the Exodus as English translations of the Bible claim; or, (2), the Hebrews didn’t journey to Canaan through the Sinai but went a different route.

What could this be? This “different route”? Well, “*Yam Suph*” occurs 24 times in the Hebrew Bible[, and s]even verses unmistakably link it with the Gulf of Aqaba. [The *eastern* “finger” of the Red Sea. And t]he most pivotal verse, *Exod[us] 23:32*, names [it] as the southern landmark of the “Promised Land”: [‘I will’, says God to Moses, ‘set your borders from the (*Yam Suph*) to the sea of the Philistines [that is, the Mediterranean], and from the wilderness to the Euphrates’].²⁸ Basically, this was the area that the League of Nations entrusted to Britain as a homeland for the Jews – modern day Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. And what’s clear is: ‘The *Yam Suph* of this [God-given] boundary has no possible relation to Egypt.’²⁹ Accordingly, “Succoth,” Migdol, ‘Pi-hahiroth’ etcetera wouldn’t be “reference points” in the Delta *or* in the Eastern Desert at all! And ‘the wilderness’[*Ex. 13:18 & 20*] in which we should be looking for them becomes the Sinai itself.

Many have suggested that this was the case, and of those who do many have suggested that the crossing was made at the Straits of Tiran at the Sinai’s apex.³⁰ [*Show on map.*] This is where the Red Sea is at its extreme narrowest: just 13km. But most professional commentators don’t take this proposal seriously, deriding the books where it is advocated – mostly self-published – as “potboilers.”³¹ Yet, in its favor, the language employed by Moses’ critics in the moment before the crossing, if nothing else, is interesting: ‘As pharaoh drew near ...the Israelites cried out... “Was it because there were no graves *in Egypt* that you have taken us *away* to die...? What have you done bringing us *out* of Egypt?”’[*Ex. 14:10-11*] ← these remarks don’t make much sense at all if they were spoken on the banks of a “reedy” lake just beyond the Delta, which, *unquestionably*, would have been regarded as being still *in* the country, (albeit

²⁶ See: York, Maddie (1st of July, 2015), ‘Glastonbury’s Rubbish: Going Against the Green Ethos Ruins it for Everyone’, *The Guardian*, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jul/01/glastonburys-rubbish-green-ethos-ruin-festival-worthy-farm-tents>, (accessed August 19, 2020).

²⁷ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glastonbury_Festival#Attendance.

²⁸ Fritz, Glen A. (2016), *The Lost Sea of the Exodus: A Modern Geographical Analysis (Second Edition)*, San Antonio, T. X.: GeoTech, xxii-xxiii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

³⁰ See, for example: Blum, Howard (1998), *The Gold of Exodus: The Discovery of the True Mount Sinai*, New York, N. Y.: Simon & Schuster.

³¹ Scolnic (2004), 93.

at its very edge).³² Additionally, an amateur archaeologist – *and Tennessean*, Ron Wyatt – dubbed, “The Adventist Indiana Jones”, claims to have found coral-encrusted chariot wheels there (in the Gulf of Aqaba), *but* his only evidence are some grainy photos which experts say are “inconclusive.”³³

The most obvious question is: could the Israelites have gotten this far? Let me re-phrase that: does *Exodus* give a sense of the timings of the “exodus” that would permit Moses and his followers to reach a juncture this far from where they began? Sadly, not much is said in this regard. We’re told that the Passover took place in ‘the first month of the year’ during the night that began on ‘the fourteenth day of this month’: [12:2,6]. This was ‘the month of Abib’: [13:4]. Then the next “titbit” concerning chronology we hear in this morning’s reading, which is that they ‘came to the wilderness of Sin...on the fifteenth day of the *second* month after they had departed from the land of Egypt.’ [Ex. 16:1] So, from the morning following the Passover to that moment means twenty-nine days had elapsed. Or thirty. And the “exodus” falls somewhere in this “window.”

We know too that after the crossing was made, ‘three days were spent in ‘Shur’: [15:22]. And that was before they got to ‘Sin’, so this means the absolute *maximum* time after the departure from ‘Rameses’ that the miracle happened must be less than 26 days. But other stops are made between ‘Shur’ and ‘Sin’: ‘Marah’ [15:23], for example, and ‘Elim’ [v.27]; so we need to push the maximum backwards by some uncertain amount. 48 hours *at least*, if we imagine the Israelites stopped for one night only in each place. Although they could have lingered longer? They were no longer being chased after all at this point. But the distance under consideration is about 530km. If we divide this evenly over 24 days, which is probably nonsense, that’d require the Israelites – young and old – to have travelled 22km per day. With their ‘flocks and herds.’ [12:38]

Is this plausible? And do other details in *Exodus* – the *claims* of the text – allow this interpretation? Where was Midian, for example? And its holy mountain, Sinai? This was supposed to be on the far side of the ‘divided’ sea. And the view just discussed would force us to believe that they are in Saudi Arabia. [Show on map.] Was it? There’s no short answer to be had: ‘The land of Midian is hard to locate. The Midianites are associated loosely with the Moabites [in the Scriptures] (Gen. 36:35; Num. 22:4, 7; 31:8), suggesting a territory in southern Transjordan. G. Mendenhall concludes from archaeological evidence that the land of Midian *was* located in the region east of the Gulf of Aqaba. [However,] E. Axul Knauf is less sure...’³⁴ And around and around the carousel we go.

³² The language would also support the Israelites being in the Eastern Desert about to cross the Gulf of Suez.

³³ See: Gardner, Jonathan (26th of February, 2019), ‘The Adventist Indiana Jones: Hoax or Hope? Part 2’, *The Compass Magazine*, available at <https://thecompassmagazine.com/uncategorized/the-adventist-indiana-jones-hoax-or-hope-part-2>, (accessed September 16, 2020).

³⁴ Dozeman, Thomas B. (2009), *Exodus (Eerdmans Critical Commentary)*, Cambridge; Grand Rapids, M. I.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 89.