EXEGETICAL AND CONTEXTUAL FACETS OF ISRAEL'S RED SEA CROSSING

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If one accepts the inerrancy of the Bible, locating Israel's crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 14–15 any place other than the northwestern arm of the Red Sea (i.e., the Gulf of Suez) is practically impossible. Reasons for such a placement involve direct references to yam sûph *in Num 33:10-11; Exod 10:19; 23:31; Num 21:4; Deut 1:40; 2:1; Judg 11:16; 1 Kgs 9:26; Jer 49:21 and an indirect reference to the body of water in Isa 11:15. The writings of Herodotus, Pindar, and Strabo furnish further evidence that* ἐρυθρὴ θάλασσα *(erythrē thalassa, "Red Sea") was the name correctly applied to the place of Israel's crossing. From writers involved with translating the LXX and* The Genesis Apocryphon *and from Josephus comes even more proof of that location. In two instances the NT verifies the "Red Sea" terminology as correct when referring to the exodus. Sûph means "end" or "termination" rather than "reeds." Details of the Red Sea crossing require a supernatural intervention that created a substantial opening in the sea to allow so many Israelites to cross in such a short time.*

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INTRODUCTION

Some scholars doubt or openly deny the historical reality and validity of the biblical account of the exodus. One example of this was seen in a conference of historians, archaeologists, and Egyptologists at Brown University in 1992. Speakers made such statements as the following: "The themes of the Sojourn and the Exodus, as embellished in the Pentateuch, belong in the realm of folklore to a large extent,"[1]

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[1]Donald B. Redford, "Observations on the Sojourn of the Bene-Israel," in *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence*, eds. Ernest S. Frerichs and Leonard H. Lesko (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997):63.

and "Not only is there no archaeological evidence for an exodus, there is no need to posit such an event. We can account for Israelite origins, historically and archaeologically, without presuming any Egyptian background."[2] Concerning the crossing of the Red Sea a participant said, "Moving on to the Sinai tradition, the crossing of the Red (Reed) Sea is obviously a miraculous tale that can in no way be validated or even illuminated by archaeological investigation."[3]

The purpose of this article is not to argue against such positions. Instead, it accepts the presupposition that "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written, and therefore inerrant in the autographs."[4] With that assumption, the problems related to the events of the exodus, including the crossing of the Red Sea, are worthy of careful investigation.

Among interpreters who do interact with the problems of the exodus, many commonly accept that Israel crossed a "sea of reeds" (*yam sûph*), rather than actually crossing the northwestern arm of the Red Sea (that is, the Gulf of Suez). In 1965 Snaith wrote that the "rendering 'the sea of reeds'" had lately "become fashionable."[5] Proposed sites for the crossing include: Lake Sirbonis,[6] Lake Menzaleh,[7] Lake Ballah,[8] Lake Timsah or the northern Bitter Lakes,[9] or the southern Bitter Lakes.[10]

Predominant reasons for postulating a crossing site distinct from the Red Sea itself include: identifying the phrase "Sea of Reeds" as a common noun rather than a proper name, that the Gulf of Suez has no reeds (and the word *sûph* is taken to mean that in Exod 2:3), that the Shur Desert is in northwest Sinai (too far away

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[2]William G. Dever, "Is There Any Archaeological Evidence for the Exodus?," in *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence* 81.

[3]Ibid., 71.

[4]Part of the doctrinal statement of the Evangelical Theological Society.

[5]Norman H. Snaith, "ים-סוף [sic]: The Sea of Reeds: The Red Sea," *VT* 15 (1965):395. Nearly thirty years earlier Montgomery observed, "It has become customary to explain the name by a revision of the tradition of the crossing of the Red Sea at the Exodus, whereby the waters crossed were those of the swampy pools in the isthmus of Suez, with which theory the identification of the word *sûp* with Egyptian for papyrus would agree" (James A. Montgomery, "Hebraica," *JAOS* 58 (1938):131.

[6]T. V. Brisco, "Exodus, Route of the," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed., Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) maps a proposed route through Lake Sirbonis.

[7]Charles F. Pfeiffer and Howard F. Vos, *The Wycliffe Historical Geography of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody, 1967), map 2, map of a proposed route through Lake Menzaleh.

[8]Eugene H. Merrill, "Numbers," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor, 1985) 253, has a proposed route through Lake Ballah.

[9]Pfeiffer and Vos, *Wycliffe Historical Geography* 90, map of a proposed route through the area of Lake Timsah and the Northern Bitter Lakes.

[10]George L. Kelm, *Escape to Conflict: A Biblical and Archaeological Approach to the Hebrew Exodus and the Settlement in Canaan* (Fort Worth, Tex.: IAR, 1991) 64, maps of a proposed route through the Southern Bitter Lakes.

from the Red Sea), that the Gulf of Suez is too far south from Pi Hahiroth and Migdol, and that Baal Zephon is to be associated with Tahpahnes in the northeast delta region. In view of these reasons, the conclusion is that Israel must have crossed north of the Gulf of Suez arm of the Red Sea at another location. Many conservative scholars who fully accept the miraculous nature of the crossing of the sea, with its attendant judgment on the Egyptian pursuers, advocate this position.[11]

This essay does not interact with those arguments. However, an exegetical and contextual evaluation of relevant biblical references to the Red Sea may require reconsideration which will lead to another conclusion. The tables at the end of the essay identify the biblical references to the Red Sea, and the quantity of references indicates the importance that biblical writers placed on this body of water. Exegetes need to consider carefully, therefore, the total impact of their conclusions when evaluating the term in any particular location, particularly that in Exodus 14–15. The essay will focus attention first on significant OT references to the term *yam sûph* apart from those in Exodus 14–15. Pertinent observations will then be made concerning additional historical references and the NT references to the Red Sea. Finally, a few comments concerning the context of Exodus 14–15 will culminate the present study.

THE OT AND THE *YAM-SÛPH*

In order to visualize correctly the location of the bodies of water under discussion, a map showing the entire Red Sea, the Arabian Sea (northern part of the Indian Ocean), and the Persian Gulf will provide helpful reference points. The gulfs of Aqaba and Suez extensions of the Red Sea have special relevance to the exodus since the Peninsula of Sinai is between those two gulfs.

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[11]In contrast to conservatives, liberal scholars have various positions regarding the *yam-sûph*. For example, Kloos connects the whole story of the "Reed Sea" with an alleged Canaanite mythological influence on Israel (Carola Kloos, *Yhwh's Combat with the Sea: A Canaanite Tradition in the Religion of Ancient Israel* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986] 191).

Towers has another theory. He asserts that it cannot be proved whether or not an actual place called the *yam-sûph* ever existed, but that some Egyptian texts indicate "that the 'Sea of Reeds' referred to the 'world beyond'" (John Robert Towers, "The Red Sea," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 18 [1959]:150).

McCarthy takes yet another approach. He provides a literary analysis of Exod 5–14 and concludes that chapters 11–13 are not "an originally integral part of a literary whole which included the introduction in ch. 5 and the stories of the plagues in chs. 7_8-10_{27} with their special structure and vocabulary" (Dennis J. McCarthy, "Plagues and Sea of Reeds: Exodus 5–14," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 [1966]:149).

Childs, while agreeing with the idea "of a mythological battle with Yam which was common throughout the Ancient Near East" (413), also agrees that distinct traditions of the exodus and the wilderness cycle were combined over an extended period (Brevard S. Childs, "A Traditio-Historical Study of the Reed Sea Tradition," *Vetus Testamentum* 20 [1970]:413, 418).

Yam-Sûph and the Gulf of Suez

The Hebrew term סוף ים (*yam sûph*) appears in many OT passages. Some of these refer directly to the western arm of the Red Sea known as the Gulf of Suez.

Numbers 33:10-11

Numbers 33 summarizes the journeys of Israel from their exodus to their arrival at the eastern side of the Jordan River. The miraculous crossing of the sea is given in 33:8. After that event they journeyed three more days and camped at Marah. They then traveled to Elim where they camped. Leaving Elim they moved on to an encampment by the "Red Sea" (33:10). Leaving that location they next journeyed from the "Red Sea" to the wilderness of Sin (33:11). This text thus indicates that Israel journeyed at least five days after the miraculous crossing of the sea (33:8), and they were still alongside the "Red Sea" after all that movement.

Ashley finds it surprising that the *yam-sûph* "is not mentioned until three stops after the crossing through the midst of the sea." He theorizes that in this text traditions were combined which did not originally belong together, but he also admits, "While the words [*yam-suph*] are clearly used to describe the Gulf of Aqabah, they may also designate the Gulf of Suez."[12] Snaith, like Ashley, sees strands from JEPD through the Pentateuchal narrative, and thinks that "Apparently the sea which the Israelites crossed was somewhere by the Bitter Lakes," but he also recognizes that in Num 33:8-10 "the *yam-sûp* mentioned here is the Gulf of Suez."[13] Budd concurs: "The Sea of Reeds in this itinerary is probably the Gulf of Suez itself."[14] Although Allen makes no specific identification of the Red Sea in this text, he does locate the Desert of Sin "in the south-central Sinai Peninsula"[15] which requires that the Red Sea here be the Gulf of Suez. Kitchen also agrees, saying that this encampment was "somewhere on the Gulf of Suez coast of Sinai, if Mount Sinai/Horeb be located in the S of that peninsula."[16]

Numbers 33:10-11, therefore, testifies that Moses and the Israelites camped along the *yam-sûph* at least five days after they crossed miraculously through the sea, which Exodus identifies as the *yam-sûph*. That indicates that the identical body of water, the *yam-sûph*, is at the least long enough to parallel five days of journeying.

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[12]Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed., R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 628.

[13]Snaith, "The Sea of Reeds" 396.

[14]Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 5, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1984) 354.

[15]Ronald B. Allen, "Numbers," *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein; (Grand Rapids: Regency-Zondervan, 1990) 987.

[16]K. A. Kitchen, "Red Sea," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 47.

Any identification of this body of water as a small lake in Egypt is exegetically improbable.

Isaiah 11:15

Although the precise term, *yam-sûph*, is not used in Isa 11:15, its reference to the Red Sea crossing of Israel is unmistakable and pertinent to the discussion because of its contribution to the overall identification of the body of water involved. This prophecy of Isaiah refers to a future time when Israel will return to its land. Different eschatological viewpoints of individual writers affect their understanding of the time of fulfillment, but the identification of the body of water involved remains unaffected by those differences.

The verse states, "The LORD will utterly destroy the tongue of the Sea of Egypt." The crucial word here is "tongue" which occurs about 117 times in the OT, usually referring to the tongue as a physical organ. However, Kaiser states that this word, by extension, "carries geographical meaning such as the 'tongue' of land which protrudes into the Dead Sea (Josh 15:2, 5; 18:19; Isa 11:15). . . ."[17] Kaiser is correct concerning the verses in Joshua, but he has missed the significance of Isaiah, since the Dead Sea is nowhere in that context. Kedar-Kopfstein is more accurate when he observes that the Isaiah reference is the reverse of the Joshua references: "The topographically opposite phenomenon is intended in Isa. 11:15, which speaks of Yahweh's threat to destroy (or dry up) the *lᵉson yam-misrayim*. This refers to a water-filled bay in Egypt, namely, the Gulf of Suez."[18] The comments by Martin,[19] Young,[20] Oswalt,[21] and Motyer[22] seem to concur with this identification.

Commentators correctly observe parallels between the prophecy of Isaiah and Israel's crossing of the Red Sea. Grogan is an example:

> The nations mentioned in v. 14 were small and insignificant when compared with the great militarist regimes of Egypt and Mesopotamia. God's hand of power will be stretched forth in fulfillment of his purposes for his people in both areas. He had dried

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[17]Walter C. Kaiser, לָשׁוֹן (*lāshôn*) **tongue**, in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, eds., R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago, Moody, 1980) 484.

[18]B. Kedar-Kopfstein, לָשׁוֹן *lason*, *TDOT*.

[19]John A. Martin, "Isaiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1985) 1058.

[20]Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: The English Text, with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 399-400.

[21]John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 289.

[22]J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993) 127.

up the water of the Red Sea before. He would act again to dry it up—and for the same liberating purpose (v. 15). He had used a great wind (Exod 14:21) at the Exodus; he would do so again to bring the people back from Mesopotamia, for the wind would produce a delta there not unlike that at the mouth of the Nile. The highway promised (v. 16) may contain an allusion to Exodus 14:26-29, the dry road through the Red Sea; or it may mean that God will bring them back safely across the desert that stretched between Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean sea-board (cf. 35:8).[23]

Watts also notices the parallel between Isaiah and the exodus concerning the waving of the hand and the wind: "The parallel to Moses' outstretched arm and staff and the mighty East wind (Exod 14:21) is unmistakable." He further comments, "The return of captives from Assyria is being seen as a parallel to Israel's exodus from Egypt," and he specifically identifies the "tongue of the Sea of Egypt" as "the upper end of the Gulf of Suez which is referred to simply as הים 'the Sea' Exod 14:2,9; 15:4,8,22; Isa 51:10; 63:11 and as the ים־סוף 'the Reed Sea' Exod 13:18; Num. 14:25; Deut. 1:40, etc."[24]

The prophet Isaiah, therefore, stands as a witness to the crossing of the Red Sea as parallel to the "tongue" of the Sea of Egypt. Since this "tongue" is a reference to the Gulf of Suez, an evidence for the crossing as being at that Gulf becomes integral to the discussion.

Exodus 10:19

At the conclusion of the plague of locusts (the 8th plague) in the land of Egypt, Exod 10:19 testifies that God used a strong wind to drive "them into the Red Sea." Difference of interpretation concerning this verse does exist. Some writers make no particular identification of this body of water.[25] Being more specific, Hyatt states that this "is not properly the Red Sea as we know it today, but the 'sea of reeds,'"[26] which he later identifies as "a very shallow body of water or only a wet marsh,"[27] "that is, at the southern end of Lake Menzaleh, or in the marshy lagoon just S. of it."[28]

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[23]Geoffrey W. Grogan, "Isaiah," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Regency-Zondervan, 1986) 91.

[24]John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, Word Biblical Commentary, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1985) 179.

[25]For examples, see R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary,* Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1973) 100; and Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, The Old Testament Library, eds. Peter Ackroyd, et al. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 159-60.

[26]J. Philip Hyatt, *Exodus,* New Century Bible Commentary, ed. Ronald E. Clements (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 125.

[27]Ibid., 154.

[28]Ibid., 159.

However, a more consistent contextual interpretation is that it refers to the Gulf of Suez,[29] 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 and the wind that blew them into the sea.

The biblical text is clear 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. 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."[30] This wind, therefore, "originated from the Mediterranean to the north or northwest."[31] Durham writes,

> רוח־ים is often translated "west wind," because of the orientation of the land of Israel to the Mediterranean Sea to the west. As the sea is not to the west of Egypt, however, the more literal translation above [sea wind] is preferable. The locust swarm is blown by this wind into the ים סוף "Sea of Reeds," the sea which Israel is later to cross in exodus from Egypt, and the miraculous nature of the mighty act is emphasized by the pointed statement that every single locust was removed from the whole territory of Egypt.[32]

Concerning the dispersement of the locusts, Fretheim states that they "were driven into the Red Sea and 'not a single locust was left' (10:19; see 8:31). This is precisely what happens to the Egyptians in 14:28."[33] To imagine that this extensive mass of locusts was destroyed by being blown into a marshy lake is unfathomable. Even such a body of water as the present Bitter Lakes is woefully too small to handle

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[29]Concerning Exod 10:19, Snaith writes, "[T]he *yam-sûp* here apparently means the Gulf of Suez," ("The Sea of Reeds: The Red Sea" 396).

[30]Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1987) 72.

[31]John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Studies in Exodus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986) 132.

[32]John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987) 137. Cassuto makes the following interesting observation on this text: "There may be a preparatory allusion here to what will subsequently be stated concerning the host of Pharaoh, who also sank in the Sea of Reeds, 'and not so much as one of them remained' (xiv 28). Even if we assume that the Sea of Reeds [ים סוף *Yam Sūph*] in chapters xiv-xv is not actually the same as that mentioned here . . . , the parallelism remains valid" (U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* [Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1983] 129).

[33]Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, ed. James Luther Mays (Louisville: Knox, 1991) 128.

the disposal problem adequately. However, 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. The cultivated land of Egypt, which is where "every plant" and where "all the fruit of the trees" (Exod 10:15) would be located, stretches from the Delta region south along the Nile to a distance some 300 miles south of the Mediterranean.[34] Logistically, only the Gulf of Suez and/or the Red Sea itself could possibly be the disposal areas for those locusts which devastated such a geographical stretch. A northwest wind would blow the locusts in a southeasterly direction, straight into that body of water.

Yam-Sûph and the Gulf of Aqaba

In addition to the OT references outside Exodus 14–15 which identify the Red Sea as the Gulf of Suez, several others use the term for the Gulf of Aqaba. Those references are important because they contribute to a knowledge of the general identity of the body of water involved.

Exodus 23:31

While Israel is camped at Mt. Sinai, God again assures Israel concerning their promised land. In Exod 23:31 He identifies the land's boundary as extending "from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the River *Euphrates*" (NASB). Some writers do not find a reference to the Red Sea in this text.[35] However, by examining the context and observing the location of Israel in its travels, other writers are more definitive.

Childs concisely states, "By the *Yam Sûp̄* (Reed Sea) the Gulf of Aqaba is undoubtedly meant as in I Kings 9:26 and elsewhere. The Sea of the Philistines is naturally the Mediterranean Sea and 'the river' is the Euphrates."[36] Cole agrees: "*The Red Sea* (literally 'Sea of Reeds') must clearly be the Gulf of Aqaba here (whatever area of water is meant in Exodus 14), because it is considered as the eastern border, as opposed to the Mediterranean in the west."[37] Kaiser takes a similar position, "The borders God would establish would be from *Yam Suph* (here an eastern boundary), the Gulf of Aqabah with its port city of Elath; to the 'Sea of

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[34]A map of John Baines and Jaromir Malek (*Atlas of Ancient Egypt* [New York: Facts on File, 1980] 21) shows much cultivated and pastoral land in Egypt.

[35]For examples, see Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*, 248; and Fretheim, *Exodus*, 252-54.

[36]Childs, *The Book of Exodus* 488. Montgomery connects Exod 23:31 to Ps 72:8: "May he also rule from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth," thus identifying the "River" as the Euphrates, and the two seas as the Mediterranean and the Red Sea ("Hebraica" 132).

[37]Cole, *Exodus* 184.

the Philistines,' the Mediterranean Sea on the west. . . ."[38]

Sarna states that in this text the reference must be to "the modern Red Sea."[39] Does this mean that he takes it as including the Red Sea proper along with both of its two gulfs? Sarna is imprecise, but that is precisely the view that McQuitty takes.[40] However, this seems to be stretching the bounds of the context of this passage. The Gulf of Aqaba is the body of water involved, and that body is specifically named the Red Sea.

Numbers 14:25

The event of Israel's failure at Kadesh-barnea is detailed in Numbers 13–14. In the judgment of God, Israel must turn away from the promised land and experience years of wilderness wandering. Numbers 14:25 instructs the nation as to which way they are to travel: "[T]urn tomorrow and set out to the wilderness by the way of the Red Sea."

Some writers do not even attempt to locate this "Red Sea."[41] Others recognize that this probably refers to a specific route, but say that the "precise location of the sea remains uncertain."[42]

Wenham, however, speaks more directly to the issue when he observes, "Geographically this probably means they were to head south-east from Kadesh toward the Gulf of Aqabah, one of the recognized north-south routes across the Sinai Peninsula."[43] Ashley correctly expands on this by writing, "Although some commentators see this as a general directive to turn back south, others have realized that it is not likely that so large a group as the Israelites could hope to survive in the wilderness apart from a well-known road or path; *the way of the Reed Sea* was such a road. It stretched from the area of Kadesh to the north shore of the Gulf of Aqabah."[44]

Once again, therefore, the biblical text distinctly refers to the *yam-sûph* and identifies it as a body of water which is a physical extension of the actual Red Sea.

Numbers 21:4

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[38]Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Exodus," *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Regency-Zondervan, 1990) 447. See also Snaith, "The Sea of Reeds" 397.

[39]Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* 107.

[40]Joel D. McQuitty, "The Location and Nature of the Red Sea Crossing" (Th.M. thesis, Capital Bible Seminary, Lanham, Md., May 6, 1986) 141-42.

[41]Allen, *Numbers* 821.

[42]Budd, *Numbers* 159.

[43]Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction & Commentary,* Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1981) 123.

[44]Ashley, *Book of Numbers* 262; cf. also Kitchen,"Red Sea."

As the Israelites moved toward the eastern side of the land of Canaan after their years of wandering, the Red Sea again came up for mention. The setting for Num 21:4 is found back in 20:14-21 where Edom would not permit Israel to travel through its land, and in 20:27-29 where the account of Aaron's death on Mt. Hor is given. Instead of traveling north and west, which lead to the promised land, they had to detour south and east where, as Allen observes, they "rejoined the road to the Sea of Reeds to make a broad circuit around Edom."[45] Although Allen does not here identify this "Sea of Reeds," his identification of the geographical location of Israel necessitates that this is the same one as seen in Num 14:25.

Wenham observes, "Whether Mount Hor is to be located near Petra or near Kadesh-barnea, it seems clear that the Israelites were heading south down the Arabah towards Timna."[46] In corroborating this, Ashley writes, "Whatever the specific meaning, this term [*the way of the Sea of Reeds*] must indicate a southerly route from Mt. Hor, because by it the Israelites *go around* . . . Edom as they had been forced to do in 20:20-21."[47] In this text, therefore, the reference must be to "the modern Red Sea," as seen in its extension, the Gulf of Aqaba.[48]

Deuteronomy 1:1

Deuteronomy 1:1 locates the children of Israel "across the Jordan in the wilderness, in the Arabah opposite Suph," at the apparent border of the land of Canaan. The reference to Suph is the integral element here. As Craigie points out, the Arabah denotes "the great rift valley that extends from the Sea of Tiberias in the north to the Gulf of Aqaba in the south." Craigie tentatively identifies Suph as being "in Moab in the vicinity of the Arnon River," but says this is uncertain.[49] Thompson does not suggest a location.[50]

Kitchen, however, proposes that this naming of Sûph refers to a place in "the wilderness in the vicinity of Kadesh-barnea (Num 10:12; 13:26; etc.), and the Arabah is the S end of the Jordan rift valley, between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba. Hence, Suph is some place in this vicinity, if it is not merely an abbreviation for *yam-sup*, the Gulf of Aqaba itself."[51] Similarly, Tigay connects Suph with the *Yam Suph*, which he equates with the "Gulf of Elath" (Aqaba) in this text, adding

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[45]Allen, *Numbers* 875.

[46]Wenham, *Numbers* 156.

[47]Ashley, *Book of Numbers* 403.

[48]Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* 107.

[49]Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy,* The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, eds. R. K. Harrison and Robert L. Highboard, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 90.

[50]J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1974) 81-82.

[51]Kitchen, "Red Sea" 48.

that "Suph could also be a name for some site on the shore of Yam Suph. If 'in the Arabah' and 'near Suph' go together, the phrase refers to the southern Aravah, where the Israelites began their march through Seir-Edom toward Moab (2:1-8)."[52] Since the rift valley ends at the Gulf of Aqaba, it is probable that this is indeed the meaning in this text. If that is the case, then the Scriptures add another reference to the Red Sea as being that of the geographical body of water itself.

Deuteronomy 1:40; 2:1

In both Deut 1:40 and 2:1 the reference is to events immediately following Israel's disobedience at Kadesh-barnea. Deuteronomy 1:40 is similar in thought to Numbers 14:25, describing how God told Israel they would wander after their disobedience. Deuteronomy 2:1 again indicates that they wandered for "many days" (some 38 years in totality). Interpreters have identified the locale in which this all occurred.

Kalland writes, "In obedience to the Lord's command in 1:40, the chastised Israelites returned to the desert, the area between Kadesh and the Seir range. This range east of the Arabah in Edom ran roughly from the area south of the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Aqabah . . . . The period probably encompassed both departures from Kadesh recorded in Numbers 14:25 and 20:22."[53] Brown makes no comment on this question,[54] but Craigie concurs precisely: "After spending a long time in the oasis at Kadesh-barnea, the Israelites set out once again at the command of the Lord through Moses. . . . They set out in a southeasterly direction toward the Gulf of Aqaba, and spent many days travelling in the vicinity of Mount Seir, the mountain range of Edom, south of the Dead Sea and extending down the eastern flank of the Arabah."[55] Tigay agrees: "That is, 'on the Road to the Sea of Reeds,' a road leading from Kadesh-barnea to the Gulf of Elath."[56] Thus, here is further testimony that the term *yam-sûph* refers to an arm of the physical Red Sea.

Judges 11:16

Jephthah is judge of Israel in Judges 11. The king of Ammon threatened war against Israel on the basis of his contention that Israel had unjustly taken his land

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[52]Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996) 4.

[53]Earl S. Kalland, "Deuteronomy," *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Regency-Zondervan, 1992) 31.

[54]Raymond Brown, *The Message of Deuteronomy: Not by Bread Alone*, The Bible Speaks Today, ed. J. A. Motyer (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1993) 45f.

[55]Craigie, *Book of Deuteronomy* 107; others who recognize that the Red Sea mentioned here is the Gulf of Aqaba include Derek Kidner, *Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, Scripture Union Bible Study Books (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 62-63, and Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 6A, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word, 1991) 32.

[56]Tigay, *Deuteronomy* 20.

years before when the nation had first come to Canaan under Joshua. Jephthah attempted to reason with that king, rather than go to war, and in the process provided a history lesson of Israel's journeys and battles to demonstrate that they were innocent of the king's charges. In that explanation, Jephthah states that after leaving Egypt, "Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and came to Kadesh" (11:16).

Many commentators give no identification of what the Red Sea is in this context.[57] Goslinga also makes no direct reference to the Red Sea, but he does provide helpful contextual data:

> When they arrived at Kadesh on their journey from Egypt (this was their second stay at Kadesh, in the fortieth year of their desert wanderings; Num. 20;1, 14; cf. Deut. 1:46; 2:1, 14), they asked the king of Edom (Num. 20:14-21) and probably also the king of Moab (Numbers does not mention this, but Jephthah could easily have known it from oral tradition) for permission to pass through their territories.[58]

Other writers have shown that the reference to the Red Sea at this stage of Israel's history is the same as the Gulf of Aqaba.[59] Fausset writes that "the *Yam Suf*, Israel's last station before reaching Kedesh, was Ezion Gaber [sic], on the gulf of Akaba, the eastern tongue of the Red Sea (Numb. xxxiii. 36, 37; 1 Kings ix. 26. . . ."[60] Fausset's mention of Ezion-geber leads to the next reference for investigation.

1 Kings 9:26

First Kings 9–11 summarize the later years of Solomon's reign, providing information about his many accomplishments. One of those, detailed in 9:26-28, relates to Solomon's fleet of ships and their successes in international trade.[61] That endeavor centered at Ezion-geber, which is near Elath on the shore of the Gulf of Aqaba, in the land of Edom.

Although Gray is uncertain about the exact location of Ezion-geber, his

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[57]For examples, cf. John Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, New Century Bible Commentary, ed. Ronald E. Clements (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 317; Robert G. Boling, *Judges: Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, eds. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981) 202; and Leon Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges* (Grand Rapids: Academie-Zondervan, 1975) 281.

[58]C. J. Goslinga, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, trans. Ray Togtman, Bible Student's Commentary, 1927 (Grand Rapids: Regency-Zondervan, 1986) 384.

[59]Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges & Ruth: An Introduction & Commentary,* Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1968) 143.

[60]A. R. Fausset, *A Critical and Expository Commentary on the Book of Judges* (reprint of 1885 ed.; n.c.: James & Klock, 1977) 189.

[61]Richard D. Patterson and Hermann J. Austel, "1, 2 Kings," *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Regency-Zondervan, 1988) 99.

possibilities all place it clearly on the Gulf of Aqaba.[62] Other writers, however, are precise in identifying the place.

Keil observes, "*Eziongeber* a harbour at the north-eastern end of the Elanitic Gulf [Gulf of Aqaba], was probably the 'large and beautiful town of *Asziun*' mentioned by Makrizi . . ., and situated on the great bay of *Wady Emrag*. . . ."[63]

Davis provides a more contemporary opinion:

> Solomon had an extensive fleet of ships located at Ezion-geber which is located on the Gulf of Aqaba. In all probability the port was under the supervision of Phoenicians who were known for their ship building capabilities (cf. 10:22). Archaeological work conducted at Tell el-Kheleifeh or Biblical Ezion-geber indicates that it was not only extensively occupied in the days of Solomon, but was used as a smelting operation.[64]

DeVries states that "Ezion-geber, with Eilat slightly to the west, lay at the head of the Gulf of Eilath/Aqaba, the eastern arm of the Red Sea."[65] Kitchen cogently observes that this reference to Ezion-geber identifies "a location which fits the Gulf of Aqaba but neither that of Suez or Lake Ballah."[66] Thus, once again the biblical writers identify the *yam-sûph* indisputably with an arm of the geographical Red Sea.

Jeremiah 49:21

The final OT reference to be examined in this section is found in Jeremiah 49:21. This text is interpreted in two ways. Some connect it to the Red Sea crossing of Exodus 14–15, saying that the cry of Edom in their time of destruction "would carry **to the Red** (Reed) **Sea**—the site of God's first destruction of a nation that threatened His Chosen People (cf. Exod 14:21-31)."[67] If this interpretation is

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[62]John Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary,* 2nd ed., The Old Testament Library, eds. Peter Ackroyd, et al. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 255.

[63]C. F. Keil, *The Books of the Kings,* Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 147.

[64]John J. Davis, *The Birth of a Kingdom: Studies in I-II Samuel and I Kings 1–11* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974) 185; cf. also James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*, The International Critical Commentary, ed. Henry Snyder Gehman (Edinburgh: Clark, 1951) 211-12.

[65]Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1985) 139. DeVries goes on to comment, "It is striking that this body of water is called 'the sea of Reeds,' ים־סוף, for that is also the sea of the Exodus crossing according to Exod 13:18, 15:4, etc." However, as this essay asserts, if the "Red Sea" is used in a broad sense to refer to several connected bodies of water, then this is not so "striking" at all.

[66]Kitchen, "Red Sea."

[67]Charles H. Dyer, "Jeremiah," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1985) 1198. Other scholars who concur with this view include John Bright, *Jeremiah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2nd ed., The Anchor Bible,

adopted, then this prophetic text provides no direct contribution to the identity of the Red Sea in Exodus 14–15.

An examination of the overall context of this verse, however, helps to identify the Red Sea reference properly. Feinberg summarizes the context of 49:13-22:

> Here the destruction of Edom is underscored. Bozrah (vv. 13, 22) is referred to because it was the capital of Edom in Jeremiah's time. It was midway between Petra and the Dead Sea, and here it represents all the Edomite cities (cf. Isa. 63:1). It is the modern el-Buseirah. The completeness of Edom's overthrow is left beyond doubt (v. 15). The cause of Edom's downfall was her inveterate pride (v. 16; cf. 48:7, 29; 49:4; Obad 3, 10-14). Jeremiah's message from the Lord (v. 14) is that the nations have been summoned to war against Edom. Because of her fortifications and topography, Edom had convinced herself that she was impregnable. The "rock" (*sela`*; NIV, "rocks" [v. 16]) referred to was later called Sela (*Petra* GR.)—the capital city and chief fortress of the Edomites. The ruin of Edom will be irreversible (v. 17), like that of Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighboring cities Admah and Zeboiim (v. 18; cf. Gen 14:2, 8). Edom's foe will pounce like a lion scattering a flock (v. 19). (Verses 19-21 are repeated in 50:44-46 where they refer to Babylon). Dispersion, destruction, and devastation will be the lot of Edom. Its doom shows how fearful a thing it is to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb 10:31).[68]

In his comments on 50:46, which substitutes a reference to the "nations" for that of the "Red Sea," Feinberg states, "The phrase 'among the nations' (v. 46) indicates a wider audience than the one in view in 49:21 because of the greater prominence of the Babylonian power."[69]

If Feinberg's comments concerning the context of Jeremiah 49:13-22 are accurate, it is more in keeping with that context to identify this reference to the Red Sea as being in the vicinity of Edom, rather than across the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. This would, therefore, point to the Gulf of Aqaba. Kitchen agrees when he says that this verse "alludes to the *yam-sup* in an oracle on Edom, again prob. the Gulf of Aqaba."[70] Holladay adds, "It is not appropriate here to undertake a full treatment of the meaning of *yam-sup* in the OT, whether the 'Red Sea' or (in the interpretation since the end of the nineteenth century) 'the Sea of Reeds' in the Egyptian Delta, but it is clear that in the present passage the intention is 'the Red Sea' rather than (as Duhm, Giesebrecht, Cornill, Volz, Rudolph, Bright, *JB,* and *NJV* have it) 'the Sea

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eds. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984) 331; J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 722; R. K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1973) 181.

[68]Charles L. Feinberg, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 311-12.

[69]Ibid., 323.

[70]Kitchen, "Red Sea."

of Reeds.'"[71]

       Therefore, if Jer 49:21 is interpreted as the Gulf of Aqaba, as seems best, then another biblical writer identifies the *yam-sûph* with an arm of the physical Red Sea.

       The other direct references to the Red Sea in the OT point to the event of Israel's miraculous crossing of the sea at the time of their exodus from Egypt. These passages do not contribute to the meaning of the biblical title, Red Sea, as to a precise geographical identification. However, concerning these examined biblical texts where the term *yam-sûph* refers to the Gulfs of Suez and Aqaba, McQuitty draws this conclusion:

> In every case where there is sufficient information to determine what body of water is referenced, יַם סוּף [*yam sûph*] without exception is to be identified with the Red Sea including its two gulfs. In no case is there ever a usage which in any way suggests that any body of water other than the Red Sea and its gulfs is referenced by this name. The biblical usage of the name יַם סוּף [*yam sûph*] provides absolutely no support for the supposition that יַם סוּף [*yam sûph*] could be applied to any number of marshy areas or lakes. On the contrary, there is the strongest indication that the biblical authors were not themselves confused nor desiring to confuse their readers, but that they used the name יַם סוּף [*yam sûph*] in a completely consistent manner, always as a reference to the Red Sea including its two gulfs.[72]

LATER CONTRIBUTIONS

       In 1 Cor 10:1-2 Paul clearly has in mind the crossing of the sea in the time of the exodus. Yet he refers to it only by the general term "sea." Because of that, the verse does not contribute to the study at hand. However, two specific NT references do name the Red Sea, Acts 7:36 and Heb 11:29. They are important to the identification of this body of water. The Greek term for Red Sea, used in both Acts and Hebrews, is ἐρυθρὴ θάλασσα (*erythrē thalassa*, "Red Sea"). This is also the usual name for the Red Sea in the LXX and among ancient Greek writers.

Greek Writers

In the Classical Period

       Among the Greek writers, one of the most helpful is the Greek historian Herodotus (ca. 485–425 BC) in his *The Persian Wars*.[73] He refers to the Red Sea in various contexts, and demonstrates that the name had extensive application. He

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[71]William L. Holladay, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 26–52*, ed. Paul D. Hanson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 378.

[72]McQuitty, "The Location and Nature of the Red Sea Crossing" 143 (transliteration added).

[73]Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, trans. George Rawlinson, The Modern Library of the World's Best Books (New York: Random, 1942).

writes, for example, that the River Euphrates "empties itself into the Red Sea,"[74] a clear reference to the Persian Gulf. He further writes, "In Arabia, not far from Egypt, there is a long and narrow gulf running inland from the sea called the Red Sea."[75] That "gulf" is the body of water presently called the Red Sea, and the water that he calls the Red Sea is that which is presently identified as the Arabian Sea, the northeast part of the Indian Ocean. At this point, George Rawlinson, the translator of Herodotus, explains, "The Greeks generally did not give the name Red Sea to the Arabian Gulf [the Gulf of Suez], but to all that part of the Indian Ocean [today's Arabian Sea] reaching from the Persian Gulf to India. It was also applied to the Persian Gulf and Herodotus sometimes gives it to the Arabian Gulf [of Suez], and even the western branch between Mt. Sinai and Egypt."[76] Just such a reference to this "western branch," the modern Gulf of Suez, is found when Herodotus refers to a canal that Pharaoh Neco started to build to join the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Suez, and which was nearly completed by Darius I of Persia. Herodotus states that the Egyptian started

> the construction of the canal to the Red Sea, a work completed afterwards by Darius the Persian, the length of which is four days' journey, and the width such as to admit of two triremes being rowed along it abreast. The water is derived from the Nile, which the canal leaves a little above the city of Bubastis, near Patumus, the Arabian town, being continued thence until it joins the Red Sea.[77]

Herodotus even gives the length of this canal as 115 miles.

Herodotus again refers to the Gulf of Suez when he writes that Phoenician sailors "took their departure from Egypt by way of the Red Sea, and so sailed into the southern ocean."[78]

In 5th century B.C., therefore, the Greeks commonly referred to the waters of the Gulf of Suez, today's Red Sea, the Arabian Sea part of the Indian Ocean, and the Persian Gulf all by the name of ἐρυθρὴ θάλασσα. The extension of the name to include all these bodies of water is "understandable since the waterways are connected and maritime trade was the primary means of establishing the geography

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[74]Ibid., 1.180.

[75]Ibid., 2.11.

[76]Ibid., 121 n. 10; see also LSJ 693.

[77]Ibid., 2.158.

[78]Ibid., 4.42. Brawer and Avi-Yonah agree with this evaluation of a connecting canal used by ancient sailors: "The Gulf of Clysma (Suez) was used by the rulers of Egypt as the shortest route to the Mediterranean above the Isthmus of Suez. It was connected via the Bitter Lakes with the Nile and the Mediterranean by a canal which already existed in the days of Necoh and which was repaired by Darius I, the Ptolemies, and the Romans" (Moshe Brawer and Michael Avi-Yonahm, "Red Sea," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972) 15.

of the seas."[79] No reference in extant Greek literature points to any of the lakes in Egypt as ἐρυθρὴ θάλασσα.

Herodotus is not alone in the Classical Period in identifying the Red Sea. The Greek lyric poet Pindar (ca. 520–ca. 438 B.C.), in presenting the story of Jason and his search for the fleece, writes that "they reached the streams of the Ocean, and the Red Sea," pointing to the same general bodies of water as Herodotus.[80] In a similar way, the Greek historian Xenophon (431–ca. 357 B.C.), when discussing the "Education of Cyrus," asserts that the Indian Ocean along with the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea formed the Eastern boundary of the Persian Empire under Cyrus. He also regarded them as one connected body of water.[81]

Strabo

The Greek geographer Strabo (ca. 64 B.C.–A.D. 21) in his *Geography*[82] further confirms how the ancient peoples identified the same bodies of water. He refers to the Red Sea, as it is presently identified, and observes that sailors could start "from the Red Sea" and eventually sail into the south Atlantic,[83] which would, of course, take them around the southern tip of Africa.

Strabo also writes that connecting to the "Exterior Sea," which is the Arabian Sea (that between Arabia and India), are various gulfs, gulfs including the "Persian Gulf" and the "Arabian Gulf." The Arabian Gulf is also called the Red Sea. This is "particularly" identified as having a "narrow inlet,"[84] which is exactly the case geographically. Strabo's knowledge of the Arabian Gulf (the modern Red Sea) included the fact that its "head consists of two recesses: one extending into the region near Arabia and Gaza, which is called Aelanites [the Gulf of Aqaba], after the city situated on it, and the other, extending to the region near Aegypt [the Gulf of Suez] in the neighbourhood of the City of Heroes. . . ."[85]

In describing the area around Egypt, Strabo writes about the ancient canal connecting the Arabian Gulf to the Mediterranean that was nearly completed by

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[79]McQuitty, "The Location and Nature of the Red Sea Crossing" 146. A map which shows the connection of the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea to the Persian Gulf will demonstrate the validity of these ancient observations.

[80]Pindar, *Pythian Odes* 4, 448, in John Sandys, *The Odes of Pindar including The Principal Fragments with an Introduction and an English Translation*, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1961).

[81]Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 8.6.20-21 and 8.8.1, in Walter Miller, *Xenophon's Cyropaedia with an English Translation*, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1961).

[82]Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, 8 vols., trans. Horace Leonard Jones, The Loeb Classical Library, eds. T. E. Page et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1959).

[83]Ibid., 1.2.26.

[84]Ibid., 2.5.18.

[85]Ibid., 16.2.30.

Darius I. He writes:

> There is another canal which empties into the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf [of Suez] near the city of Arsinoe, a city which some call Cleopatris. It flows also through the Bitter Lakes, as they are called, which were indeed bitter in earlier times, but when the above mentioned canal was cut they underwent a change because of the mixing with the river, and now are well supplied with fish and full also of aquatic birds.[86]

His description is especially pertinent to the discussion of the route of the exodus, since it clearly indicates that ancient writers drew a sharp distinction between the Bitter Lakes and the Red Sea/Arabian Gulf (of Suez). In contrast to modern writers who advocate that Israel crossed the Bitter Lakes and that Exodus calls the Bitter Lakes the Red Sea, ancient geographers made no such identification. Such would have been the accepted thinking in the time of the LXX and the NT.

Just as modern scholars wrestle with why this great body of water was called the Red Sea, so ancient writers struggled with the identification. Strabo describes in detail some of the theories in his day about the name's origin, although he does not actually know what the origin of the name is.[87]

Even in early times, considerable discussion of the origin of the name Red Sea indicates that uncertainty abounded. However, for purposes of this study, the significant item that must not be overlooked is that the Red Sea is always identified as the same body of water. That body of water is never a lake in Egypt or anywhere else. The body of water is what encompasses the gulfs of Suez and Aqaba to the present Red Sea to the Arabian Sea to the Persian Gulf.

Jewish Writers

The Septuagint

The LXX normally uses ἐρυθρὴ θάλασσα in its translation of *yam-sûph*.[88] Although modern scholarship debates the exact origin of the LXX, it seems

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[86]Ibid., 17.1.25.

[87]Ibid., 16.4.20.

[88]Exceptions to this are found in two OT texts: Judg 11:16 and 1 Kgs 9:26. The LXX editions of both Swete and Zondervan (Bagster) in Judg 11:16 give the reading θαλάσσης Σείφ, Sea of Siph, instead of ἐρυθρὴ θάλασσα, with the Hebrew word *sûph* being transliterated rather than translated. This reading is based on the strength of Codex Vaticanus. However, Codex Alexandrinus does have the variant reading ερυθας. In 1 Kgs 9:26, both editions have the phrase ἐσχάτης θαλάσσης, "last (part) of the sea," or "the extremity of the sea," the sea which was "at the end of the land" (Snaith, "The Sea of Reeds" 395). Montgomery opines, "This gives a novel but admirable name for that Sea, which as an arm of the Indian Ocean is *ultimum mare*" (Montgomery, "Hebraica" 131). See Henry Barclay Swete, ed., *The Old Testament in Greek According to the Septuagint* (Cambridge: University Press, 1887) and *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament, with an English Translation; and with Various Reading and Critical Notes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975).

that "the Pentateuch was translated in Alexandria by the middle of the third century B.C.,"[89] and that "most of the OT existed in Greek by the late 2nd cent. B.C."[90] If the LXX was translated in Alexandria, Egypt, during the 3rd-2nd centuries, the LXX translators lived in Egypt during a time when ἐρυθρὴ θάλασσα referred to the bodies of water discussed above, none of which was a lake in Egypt. That is evident from the writings of Herodotus and Strabo. Rather, the Greek name was used of the Gulf of Suez, the modern Red Sea, and even the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. Unless the LXX translators were totally isolated from a knowledge of world and Egyptian geography, did not understand the term ἐρυθρὴ θάλασσα, and were completely insensitive to accuracy, one must conclude that their use of ἐρυθρὴ θάλασσα for *yam-sûph* points to that body of water now identified as the Gulf of Suez for the exodus of Israel from Egypt.

The Genesis Apocryphon

The scroll known as *The Genesis Apocryphon*,[91] one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, retells and expands stories of the patriarchs in the Book of Genesis, usually with a first person narration. The scroll from the first century B.C. confirms the identification of the term Red Sea. In Column XXI.17-19, Abraham summarizes some of his travels stating, "I traveled along the Euphrates, until I came to the Red Sea in the east. (Then) I moved along the Red Sea, until I reached the tongue of the Reed Sea, which goes forth from the Red Sea. (From there) I journeyed to the south, until I reached the Gihon River. Then I returned, came home safely and found all my household safe and sound."[92]

Fitzmyer observes that the reference to the Red Sea here "cannot designate anything else but the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, into which the Euphrates River empties."[93] Although Fitzmyer asserts, erroneously in this writer's opinion, that the *yam sûp* of the Bible is normally "an inland lake east of Baal-zephon," he also recognizes that ancient mariners considered the Red Sea as "the sea between Asia and Africa and was gradually extended from the Gulf of Suez to the Persian Gulf including the Indian Ocean. The color was probably derived from the neighboring mountains, desert sands, corals and phosphorescence."[94]

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[89]J. W. Wevers, "Septuagint," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon, 1962).

[90]S. K. Soderlund, "Septuagint," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

[91]Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave 1: A Commentary*, 2nd rev. ed. (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971).

[92]Ibid., 69.

[93]Ibid., 153.

[94]Ibid., 154.

Josephus

The Jewish historian Josephus (ca. A.D. 37–ca. 100) adds further confirmation of the identity of the Red Sea. Commenting on the rivers that flowed out of the Garden of Eden, he writes that the "Euphrates also, as well as Tigris, goes down into the Red Sea,"[95] in other words, the Persian Gulf. In addition, he specifically identifies Eziongeber[96] and Elath (or Elat)[97]—areas located on the Gulf of Aqaba—as being on the Red Sea. Once again, evidence points to an identification distinct from any lake in Egypt.

The New Testament Writers

Though some modern writers do not discuss the location or identification of the Red Sea in Acts 7:36,[98] some older commentaries on Acts do. Alexander, for example, identifies the location of the Red Sea, and also discusses the origin of its name, in a fashion reminiscent of Strabo:

The Red Sea, in the earlier Greek writers, is what we call the Indian Ocean, with its two great arms, the Persian and Arabian Gulfs, to the last of which the name is given in the Septuagint version. It was called Red, as some of the ancients thought, from the colour of the water; but even Quintus Curtius speaks of this as an ignorant mistake, and derives the Greek name from that of an old king (Erythra). The moderns trace it to the colour of the sea-weed which abounds in it, and from which it was called in Hebrew (and in the Peshito here) *Yam Sûph* (*Mare Algosum*) the Sea of seaweed. The name Red Sea is still applied to the same narrow gulf between Arabia and Africa, about 1400 miles in length, through the northern extremity of which the Israelites passed (Exod 14, 21.22.). Local tradition still identifies the spot as the Bahr-al-Kolsum or Sea of Destruction, in allusion to the fate of Pharaoh's host (Exod 14, 28).[99]

The case of Heb 11:29 is similar to that of Acts 7:36 in that many

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[95]Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews,* 1.1, 3, in William Whiston, trans. and ed., *The Works of Josephus* (New York: Hurst & Co., n.d.).

[96]*Antiquities* 8.6,4.

[97]*Antiquities* 9.12,1.

[98]For examples, see Simon Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 260; Richard N. Longenecker, "Acts," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 9, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 341-42; F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 151-52.

[99]Joseph Addison Alexander, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (reprint of 1875 ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956) 286; cf. E. H. Plumptre, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Ellicott's Commentary on the Whole Bible, ed. Charles John Ellicott (reprint of 1903 ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957) 117.

commentaries do not identify the Red Sea.[100] Westcott makes only a brief comment that the Greek word comes from "the LXX. rendering of סוּף יַם 'the sea of weed [sic].'"[101] Kent and Bruce express contrasting views. Kent, following much contemporary opinion, writes,

> **The Red Sea** translates the Greek expression in Hebrews (*eruthran thalassan*) which in turn reproduced the Septuagint rendering of Exodus 13:18 (et al.). The Hebrew text in Exodus calls it the Sea of Reeds (*yam sup*). Its precise location has been a problem of long standing. Good reasons exist for placing it in the Bitter Lakes region, north of the Gulf of Suez.[102]

In contrast to Kent, Bruce comments, "Heb. *yam suph* (Ex. 13:18, etc.), used of the Gulfs of Suez and Aqaba, in this instance of a northern extension of the Gulf of Suez. LXX renders it ἡ ἐρυθρὰ θάλασσα ('the Red Sea')."[103]

The significance of the two NT uses is pertinent to the issue at hand. Evidence supports the position that Greek writers prior to the time of the NT (e.g., Herodotus), and virtually contemporary with the NT (e.g., Strabo), along with the LXX translators, *The Genesis Apocryphon*, and Josephus consistently identified the Red Sea as water distinct from any lakes of Egypt, the Bitter Lakes in particular. Such evidence, therefore, invariably supports the fact that Israel miraculously crossed the water at a place identified as the modern extension of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Suez.

A person could advocate that Herodotus was wrong in his historical identifications, and that Strabo was mistaken in his geography. One could also argue that the LXX translators, *The Genesis Apocryphon*, and Josephus likewise were in error. Considering the widespread knowledge of maritime identifications of that day, however, such arguments are weak. Furthermore, as McQuitty cogently points out, even if it is admitted that ancient Greek and Jewish writers are erroneous,

> it is another matter to argue that the NT writers shared in this error. To do so would be to deny that God communicated through them, for He of all persons knows where the crossing took place and He cannot lie. The NT identification of the body of water crossed by the commonly used Greek name Ἐρυθρὴ θάλασσα would be misleading

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[100]E.g., Leon Morris, "Hebrews," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 128; cf. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 497-501.

[101]Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 375.

[102]Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974) 243.

[103]F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: the English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 325 n. 214.

if it were not accurate.[104]

One may conclude that the testimony of the NT to the identity of the Red Sea, based upon the historical and geographical identifications that precede it and the acceptance of its God-breathed character, points to the location of the Israelite crossing of the sea in the exodus as the Gulf of Suez. In addition to the consistent testimony of the OT, which invariably specifies that location, the totality of Scripture is clear. Hence the interpreter who approaches Exodus 14–15 cannot do so in a vacuum. To postulate that this one section of Scripture must be understood in a manner at odds with the seemingly unanimous testimony of the rest of Scripture places an interpreter in a precarious position. That is especially the case if substantial reasons exist for rejecting the commonly held identification of the Red Sea crossing as being over some body of water renamed the "Reed Sea."

EXODUS 14–15

To attempt a full study of all the problems connected with this passage is beyond the scope of the present study. Brief observations, however, will show that a viable understanding of the Exodus account points to Israel crossing the Red Sea at the northern end of the Gulf of Suez.

The Word *Sûph*

A mainstay of the position that Israel crossed north of the Gulf of Suez in another body of water is the argument that *yam-sûph* should not be translated Red Sea, but rather "Sea of Reeds." This is often given in modern Bible translations. The NIV and NASB, for example, consistently have footnotes when the Red Sea is named, giving a literal meaning of *Yam Sûph* as "Sea of Reeds." The argument is that the word *sûph* is etymologically borrowed from the Egyptian *twf(y),* which means papyrus reed. The word, the argument continues, occurs in Exod 2:3, 5 to refer to papyrus reeds, so it must refer to that in the name of this body of water.

A recent translation which does not follow this reasoning is the English Standard Version. This version always translates *yam-sûph* as Red Sea, and has no footnote to explain it differently.

The position that *yam-sûph* means "Sea of Reeds" is, therefore, not as firmly established as often considered. Concerning this matter, Batto has cogently written that the title "does not designate an expanse of water, but rather a district or area where not only papyrus grows but also where pasturage for animals was found and agricultural enterprises undertaken."[105]

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[104]McQuitty, "The Location and Nature of the Red Sea Crossing" 146.

[105]Bernard F. Batto, "The Reed Sea: *Requiescat in Pace*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 (1983):29.

Furthermore, the biblical usages of the term *sûph* can point in another direction, as McQuitty observes:

> The verb סוף means "to bring to an end, to consume, to cease, or to fulfill" (Ps 73:19; Amos 3:15; Esth 9:28; Isa 66:17; Jer 8:13; Zeph 1:2, 3; Dan 4:30; 2:44). The noun סוף means "end, conclusion" (2 Chr 20:16; Eccl 3:11; 7:2; 12:13; Joel 2:20), and in the Aramaic portion of Daniel the Aramaic equivalent סוף has the identical meaning (Dan 4:8, 19; 6:27; 7:26, 28). The סופה was the terrific storm which brought an end to life and property (Job 21:18; 27:20; Ps 83:16; Pro 1:27; etc.), and the verb סָפָה means "to consume or destroy" (Jer 12:4; Ps 40:14; Gen 18:23, 24; etc.). The common element in all of these words is the idea of "end" or "termination." Even the seemingly remote meaning of סוף as "reed" or more probably "marsh" is nicely understood as that which was customarily found at the end or edge of the water. This is why סוף did not refer to a particular water plant but to the marsh area in general, which was ordinarily composed of a variety of weeds.[106]

This description could easily fit the coast of the Gulf of Suez, and it could also be appropriately applied to the area in Exod 2:3, 5.[107]

Further Areas

Significant terms are used in the text of Exodus which indicate that Israel's crossing of the Red Sea was not facilitated by natural phenomena. The strong wind was supernatural as indicated by the fact that it caused the water to rise in heaps on the right and left hands (Exod 14:22, 29). A crucial item here is that the waters did not merely get blown in the direction of the wind, but were instead "piled up" (15:8). After the waters were divided, the people crossed over on "dry land" (14:22). The emphasis of the verbs in Exod 15:8, "piled up," "stood up like a heap," and "congealed" all point to a supernatural event.

The number of the people involved is another crucial matter. Although some scholars interpret the numbers involved as referring to only a few thousand people, the Scriptures indicate frequently that over 600,000 men were involved in the exodus from Egypt (Exod 12:37; 38:26; Num 1:46; 2:32; 11:21). Adding women and children, the number probably increased to about 2,000,000.

As Wood correctly observes, "A marching line of two million people, walking ten abreast with an average of five feet separating each rank, would be 190

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[106]McQuitty, "The Location and Nature of the Red Sea Crossing" 138.

[107]A recent, well-researched, and cogently written study of the many problems connected with Israel's entire history in Egypt is by James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Hoffmeier ably defends the position that Israel crossed at "most likely the Ballah Lakes, Lake Timsah, or Bitter Lakes region" (215), and interacts at length with many questions that surround such an identification. Although his arguments are persuasive, he does not give adequate weight to the many OT passages where *Yam Sûph* cannot be compatible with such an identification.

miles long."[108] Obviously, therefore, a much wider path must have opened to permit the nation to cross the sea within the few hours of night during "the morning watch" indicated in Exod 14:24 (from approximately 3:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m.). On the other hand, if the sea opened to allow a path a mile wide and if Israel walked 1,000 abreast (which allows each person to have about 5.28 feet of "personal space"), with an average of five feet between each line, then the distance from front to back would still be 10,000 feet, almost two miles. Since Israel had flocks and herds with them and probably did not march in rigid rank order, requires even more space. The mathematical calculations require a substantial opening in the sea.

Other areas of concern involve such problems as: the identification of all the places named in the Exodus account, many of which are uncertain while others are unknown; the route taken by Israel in their exodus, whether northern, central, or southern; and the significance of the Lord's command for Israel to "turn back" (Exod 14:2). Did Israel turn north or south at that point? Although some scholars favor a turning north, Hubbard builds a substantial case for turning south, which accords with an actual Red Sea (Gulf of Suez) crossing.[109]

CONCLUSION

Assuming the integrity of the biblical accounts of the exodus of Israel from Egypt and the biblical consistency of the terms used in those accounts, this essay has argued that the Hebrew term for Red Sea, *yam-sûph*, is invariably used in Scripture passages not specifically referring to the exodus to identify either the Gulf of Suez (and probably the modern Red Sea itself in one instance) or the Gulf of Aqaba. In no instance does the term refer to any other body of water, especially not a lake in Egypt. A study of ancient Greek writers verifies that the Greek translation of *yam-sûph*, ἐρυθρὰ θάλασσα, consistently refers to the Red Sea and to larger bodies of water with which it connects—the Gulf of Aqaba, the Persian Gulf, and the Arabian Sea. NT references to the Red Sea continue that consistent identification.

When an interpreter explains the biblical text of Exodus 14–15, that passage should harmonize with the testimony of other Scriptures.

Table 1—OT Passages Naming the "Red Sea"

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[108]Wood, *Judges* 106 n. 88.

[109]R. L. Hubbard, Jr., "Red Sea,"in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988). Maps for a possible southern route for the Red Sea crossing reaching the Gulf of Suez itself are provided by McQuitty, "The Location and Nature of the Red Sea Crossing" 105, 121.

Exod 10:19	Num 14:25	Deut 11:4	1 Kgs 9:26
Exod 13:18	Num 21:4	Josh 2:10	Neh 9:9, 11
Exod 15:4	Num 33:10-11	Josh 4:23	Ps 106:7, 9, 22
Exod 15:22	Deut 1:40	Josh 24:6-7	Ps 136:13, 15
Exod 23:31	Deut 2:1	Judg 11:16	Jer 49:21

Table 2—Indirect OT References to the "Red Sea"

Num 33:8	Ps 78:13, 53	Isa 43:16	Nah 1:3-4
Ps 66:6	Ps 114:3	Isa 51:10	Hab 3:8, 15
Ps 74:13	Isa 10:26	Isa 63:11-13	Zech 10:11
Ps 77:16-21	Isa 11:15		

Table 3—Additional Pertinent OT References to *Sûph*

Exod 2:3, 5	Deut 1:1	Isa 19:6	Jon 2:5(6)

Table 4—NT References to the "Red Sea"

Acts 7:36	1 Cor 10:1-2	Heb 11:29