

Red or Reed Sea? – Hebrew = (יָם סוּף) = *yam suph* – Floyd Nolen Jones, Th.D., Ph.D.

Since c.1870 scholarship has proposed that the Hebrew phrase *yam suph* (יָם סוּף) recorded in the Holy Writ as the Israelite Red Sea crossing in Exodus 13–15 should be “sea” (*yam*, Strong’s #3220) of “reeds” (*suph*, Strongs #5488-89) rather than Red Sea. As most modern Bible versions read “sea of reeds”, confusion and doubt as to Bible accuracy prevails among many of today’s pastors, seminary professors, their students, laymen, and even entire denominations.

Now the Hebrew word *yam* does mean “sea”, and *suph* by itself literally could mean “reed”. However, often a literal translation does not convey that which is intended. Sound exegesis dictates that no etymology may take precedence over context.¹ As *suph* also means seaweed² the dishonesty is exposed; for is it not at least equally conceivable that this sea was originally named for having red seaweed causing its color. It has abounded in seaweed (fn. 2). Although today little is red, can any prove it had none in 1491 BC? Really? And why is “reed” insisted upon when, regarding the Exodus, God clarified & settled the matter as New Testament Greek reads Red sea [ἐρυθρός θάλασσα: transliteration = *eruthros* (red) *thalassa* (sea): Acts 7:36; Heb. 11:29]; not reed (κάλαμος = *kalamos*) *thalassa*. Furthermore, this Greek term was used by the LXX (Exo. 15:4), Josephus (*Ant.* 2.11.1, 15.1), & Herodotus (in 430 BC, *Histories*, ii, 8) for “Red Sea”.

Moreover, Greek & Roman writers (300 BC-150 AD) say the Red Sea extended much farther north: to Pithom in the Wadi Tumilat (c.50 mi.) and that the sea was navigable!³ This took in Lake Timsah and both Bitter Lakes.⁴ So Israel could cross anywhere 50 miles or so to the north and still have gone thru the Red Sea! (Map, page 3) These reasons are why *yam suph* has over the centuries been interpreted as the Red Sea. We shall show Scripture both reveals & demands *suph* is intended as “seaweed” with regard to Israel’s Exodus sea crossing. Although today’s man-engineered Suez Gulf is in its location, it obviously is not exactly the same body as the Red Sea of the Old Testament.⁵

Yet since c.1870 many scholars have come to believe that, rather than this Red Sea extension, either Great Bitter lake, Lake Timsah, lakes Ballāh, or Menzaleh (shallow water-filled depressions along a narrow strip from the north tip of the Gulf of Suez to the Mediterranean coast; Map p. 3) is the body of water the Israelites crossed. Of course, over the centuries all have been somewhat altered. Part of this conclusion was based on Archaeologists having discovered ancient Egyptian mining camps on the Suez Gulf’s shore, indicating today’s level was nearly the same 5,000 years ago; hence, they have concluded the northern head of the Suez Gulf has been at today’s location since the days of the Pharaohs – and thus that of the biblical

¹ The opposite is popular today among those who overemphasize etymology & lexical word studies; yet such can be the path to error. Etymology may confirm context or assist in clarification, but it is not an exact science. When used as sole judge it must be with extreme caution – even then, only when nothing else is available. It must never be used to overturn clear context!

² *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Funk & Wagnall, Vol. 10 (1905), p. 345. Gesenius, *Lexicon*, 1979, Baker Book House, p. 5479.

³ *Ibid.*, and Samuel R. Driver, *Authority & Archaeology* (1899), p. 20. *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia* (1950), pp. 411-12). James Hoffmeier also wrote of evidence indicating the Suez Gulf extended farther north in antiquity (1997, *Israel in Egypt*: Oxford University Press: p. 209). As a result, before the mid-1900’s many historians & geographers believed the Red Sea receded over the centuries – its coastline moving south from Lake Timsah & Great Bitter Lake.

⁴ These along with Lakes Menzaleh & Ballāh were present in antiquity as Herodotus mentions Pharaoh Necho II’s (610-593 BC) beginning a canal from the Nile to the Arabian Gulf (aka the Red Sea; today’s Suez). Lake Menzaleh, largest of the northern deltaic lakes, is brackish with a depth of but 4 to 7 feet. Like Menzaleh, Ballāh is also a salt-marsh. Today, Lake Timsah is mostly marshy & depth rarely exceeds 3 feet. The Bitter Lakes are connected as they form one continuous sheet of water and Great Bitter Lake is referred to in the ancient Pyramid Texts (mean depth = c.59 ft. - max = c.92). Kitchen wrote that the ancients may have applied “Red Sea” to all the reedy lakes that ran the full north-south length of this area and even extended it to the Red Sea (Kitchen, Kenneth. 2003, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, Eerdmans, p. 262).

⁵ The great fault structures of the Red Sea are extensions of the great 4,300 mile long African rift faults. These faults form huge elongated valleys (grabens) between two faults or groups of faults that are almost parallel to one another. The Dead Sea Rift in southeastern Turkey runs thru Lebanon to the northern end of the Red Sea Rift (just offshore of the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula). An extension formed a series of depressions, or pull-apart basins, which drowned the Red Sea trough as far as the Gulf of Akaba, today’s Gulf of Suez, a valley (the Arabah) connecting Ezion-geber to the Dead Sea, the Jordan River, Sea of Galilee, and Hula basins (old maps often designate the Gulf of Akaba as the Red Sea’s eastern branch). The mid-line of the gulf is the boundary between Africa and Asia.

Red Sea. But such is both a foolish and mistaken conclusion in view of authentic history as recorded in Holy Scripture, along with other included considerations.

First, the Hebrew phrase *yam suph* occurs 26 times in the Old Testament:⁶ the context of seven definitely equates it with the Gulf of Akaba, which was previously known as the eastern arm of the Red Sea. The 7 are boldfaced in footnote six. To meet the Bible requirement of at least two witnesses for establishing truth (2 Cor. 13:1) we offer the following examples.

1 Ki. 9:26: And king Solomon made a navy of ships in Ezion-geber, which is beside Eloth, on the shore of the Red sea, in the land of Edom. (Eloth: same as Elath & today's Akaba)

Num. 21:4 And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way.

Now it is absurd to imagine that Solomon used one of the 5 shallow water-filled depressions in which to build & place "a navy of ships". Further, 1 Ki. 9:26 tells us the seaport was Ezion-geber (very close to ancient Eloth = Akaba) on the shore of the Red Sea and absolutely places its location as "in the land of Edom". This completely eliminates the five northern lakes and proves beyond any doubt that a literal translation of *yam suph* does not always mean "sea of reeds" in Scripture. Clearly, Red Sea is the correct rendering here as well as in Num. 21:4 above (by context) and the 5 other boldfaced verses in footnote 6. Having established this, it should be evident that all 26 *yam suph* verses could be and indeed *are* speaking of the Red 'seaweed' Sea and *never* the 5 northern lakes.

Moreover, the northern lakes do not at all fit the recorded facts. These say Pharaoh pursued Israel with 600 chosen chariots, plus all his other chariots, horsemen (cavalry) and his army (foot-soldiers: Exo. 14:7-9, 17, 23, 28; Deut. 11:4).⁷ The parted sea formed walls on either side (Exo. 14:22, 29) so high that when they collapsed the entire horde were "dashed in pieces" (Exo. 15:4-6, 28). Indeed, the sea was said to be of "mighty waters" (Neh. 9:11) and also deep (Psa. 106:9).

Now Israel had 603,550 men 20 & upward (to 50, Num. 4:3?) who were able to go to war (Num. 1:45-46); thus, c.3-6 million in all. Having fled Raamses to Succoth on Abib 15 and on to Etham on the 16th, Israel departed Pi-hahiroth near Migdol on Abib 17 and began crossing the Red Sea. As Scripture indicates Israel clearly "saw" the Egyptians, the context demands daylight – not merely light from the Abib 15 full moon (Exo. 14:10 & 13). Moreover, Exo. 14:19-20 say the pillar of cloud moved between the two armies; confirming it was still daylight when they began to cross. It would have been a pillar of fire were it night (Exo. 13:21-22, 14:24). Finally, to prevent any from escaping & ensure the slaughter of all 3 to 6 million, Pharaoh had to muster an enormous horde & begin the attack long before dark. It took all night for all Israel to reach the safety of the eastern bank by the end of the morning watch (2:00-6:00 AM: Exo. 14:20, 24-29) on Abib 18.

Of course, for so many to cross in so little time requires an *immense* opening of the Red Sea: at the very least a mile – and water is quite heavy (seawater = c.8.6 lbs. per gallon or c.64.2 lbs. per cubic foot). We have already mentioned that the collapsing walls of water dashed to pieces all that entered. So how tall would the walls have stood? It is not recorded but, in order to so crush, the columns would obviously have been extremely high; yet not as high as half our suggested mile or so. Such was not necessary, for when the water crashed downward it would have sent huge powerful tsunami-like waves inward with the same devastating effect. Of course the horses bound to the chariots perished, but so did even the horses of the cavalry (Exo. 15:19, 21), and horses are very powerful swimmers. Yet again, the shallow, marshy northern lakes as recorded *after* c.200 AD until now are not at all adequate for the divinely chronicled history.

⁶ Occurrences: Exo. 10:19, Exo. 13:18, Exo. 15:4, Exo. 15:22, Exo. 23:31; Num. 14:25, **Num. 21:4**, **Num. 21:14**, **Num. 33:10**, **Num. 33:11**; **Deut. 1:1**, Deut. 1:40, Deut. 2:1, Deut. 11:4; Josh. 2:10, Josh. 4:23, Josh. 24:6; **Judg. 11:16**; **1 Ki. 9:26**; Neh. 9:9; Psa. 106:7, Psa. 106:9, Psa. 106:22, Psa. 136:13, Psa. 136:15; Jer. 49:21.

⁷ As to the chariots, Josephus only mentions the 600 but adds the cavalry numbered 50,000 plus 200,000 footmen (Antiquities, 2.15.3). Although this is not submitted as historical fact: Josephus was a Pharisee by 19, a Jewish priest, a general against Rome, and at only 14 rabbis came to him for advice. Therefore, though his work has been heavily edited by others & his latter figures were almost certainly the verbal tradition handed down thru the priesthood, he is nonetheless an ancient authority of note, brilliant, and should never be dismissed without due consideration. For Pharaoh's task, his numbers are logical.

As none of the people were “feeble” (Psa. 105:37) and knowing Pharaoh, as well as being under God’s guidance, Moses realized the king would pursue and thus was able to lead fleeing Israel c.25 miles to Succoth the first day and some 55-75 miles by day 3. Obviously, Egypt did not pursue immediately.



Otherwise Israel would have been overtaken long before this. (Jewish chronology agrees: it declares Israel crossed the Red Sea on the third day: *Seder Olam*, Heinrich W. Guggenheimer, 2005, p. 60.) Numbers 33 gives a comprehensive listing of the encampments from Egypt to the plains of Moab opposite Jericho (see my Old Testament chronology, page 262). As only a few were actually villages or towns but rather mere places of encampment, few sites along the Exodus route have been conclusively identified.⁸

⁸ As *yam suph* and the Red/Reed Sea location as well as Mt. Sinai are the heart of our exposé, we list them first: Raamses, the cite of origin, Succoth (the first encampment c.25 miles south of Raamses), Mt. Sinai (aka Jebel Musa), Elath (Elath = Akaba), Kadesh-barnea, Arad (c.17 miles south of Hebron), and Brook Zered. Others with an approximate location: Dophkah, Dizahab (Deut. 1:1, Dahab on map), Jotbathah (Num. 33:33, 7 miles south of Ezion-geber), Punon, and the Land of Edom itself.

After that of the traditional southern historic sea crossing, the most important location on to Mt. Sinai is the entry into the Peninsula after the encampment “by the Red Sea” (Num. 33:10). The next cite (wilderness of Sin) is too nondescript to aid us. Being the major approach route to the Mount, many have chosen Wadi Feiran. It is the longest (81 miles) & widest wadi in the Sinai Peninsula. Feiran goes east inland from the Red Sea and turns south thru the mountains to Rephidim: the last encampment before Mount Sinai (Num. 33:15; Exo. 19:1-2: here Moses struck the rock & God caused water (cont., page 4)

Having already shown that those who insist *yam suph* be rendered as “reed sea” and totally ignore the possibility of “sea weed sea”, most archaeologist compound the problem by ignoring the biblical account of actual history. Thus, modern scholars began to theorize over Israel’s trail to the *yam suth* crossing. This led them to illogically misplace Etham⁹ (the station after Succoth) to the north of Succoth and *west* of the 5 shallow lakes. However, Etham is “in the edge of the wilderness” (Exo. 13:18 & 20) and the wilderness is *east* of the lakes! This blunder brought them to conclude one of the 5 marshy northern lakes to be the biblical Red Sea. But as already noted, these are far too shallow to “dash in pieces” & drown the enormous Egyptian host as well as their horses.

As it is the most popular route by those who reject the historically accepted traditional southern route (since at least 350 AD), let us evaluate the most northerly route displayed on our map (green, p. 3). Exodus 13:18 reads “God led the people about”: proponents of the northern route theory insist this means Israel turned *around* & fled northerly from Succoth. Such is hardly provable. Besides, Raamses and Pharaoh are to the northwest. The people are fleeing *from* them – Exo. 13:18 is merely saying God didn’t lead Israel the shortest way to the Promised Land but turned them away from it to a more southeasterly path for His planned Red Sea clash. Moreover, north is the direction of the narrow 20 mile strip of coastline known as “The Way to the Land of the Philistines” – the very route our Lord knowingly would not lead His people (Exo. 13:17).

So why disobey and flee northward? And if they had what judgment did God inflict? None is given. Yet such would have been for, after the Law was given at Mt. Sinai¹⁰ and the level of rebellion grew during the 40 years, the judgments are recorded (e.g., fire-Num. 11:1, plague-Num. 11:33 & 14:37, leprosy-Num. 12:10, men of war won’t enter Canaan, so are soon defeated-Num. 14:29-30 & 45).

All left for the north route supporters is to have Israel cross the “sea” at the southern extension of Lake Menzaleh. A major problem for this northern course is that its Migdol is near the Mediterranean Sea and Pelusium – the main border-fortress city on the eastern frontier built & fortified to protect Egypt from northern invaders. There were also numerous Egyptian defenses along this coastal area. Their presence is one reason why God did not lead Israel the way to the Philistines.

Yet these proponents continue by having 3-6 million Jews avoid the Egyptian ramparts by going along a 2-3 hundred yard wide, 55 mile long sandy spit that narrowly separates Lake Sirbonis from the Mediterranean. Madness! The Egyptians at these fortifications could have easily cut such a slow moving multitude off at both ends of the bar and, without a miraculous deliverance from the Lord, the Exodus would have ended. As Scripture does not record this incident, no such miracle ever occurred, and the highly favored northern route theory dies a deserved death – based as it is upon so-called scholars insisting *yam suph* must be taken as sea of reeds, which alone casts doubt on the reliability of God’s Word. Yet it could equally be translated “sea of seaweeds” and thereby cause no difficulty whatever with the “Red Sea” rendering.

Etham’s location in the North Theory is total conjecture, and from all the preceding it should be obvious its Migdol cannot be the biblical Migdol. Further, that Israel would turn from its southern flight and go northward toward numerous Egyptian ramparts only to have her millions continue across a narrow sandy bar while fleeing from soldiers who intended their extermination: and all this is to be taken as “science” (i.e., of archaeology, logic, and so-called historic fact) – Really? The old Traditional Exodus Route may occasionally need tweaking but even as it is, the tradition depicts the general passage and actual history.

So why has such drivel been foisted on the Word of God. The sizable circumstantial evidence points to the Archaeologists who placed Etham, Baal-zephon, and our Migdol north of Succoth. They were Egyptians whose state religion is Islam – c.90% Sunni Muslim. And who gains the most from this duplicity? Islam: anything demeaning the Bible elevates Koran to the world. The most important events in Israel’s history are the Red Sea crossing, receiving the Law and being taken into covenant with Jehovah at Mt. Sinai. Casting doubt on the location of both sea & Mount is a great victory in the eyes of Islam. Selah.

to spring forth like a river). The 3 mile long Feiran Oasis lies 28 miles above the wadi’s mouth. Appealing as this is, it is not the correct way inland from the sea. The entry was toward Dophkah (Num. 33:12) whose road was c.30 miles north. Still, it is likely that from Dophkah Israel came to this large oasis, refreshed but not encamped and continued on south through Wadi Feiran to Rephidim.

⁹ And likewise misplace Baal-zephon & Migdol (Israel’s third encampment, near her Red Sea crossing: Num. 33:6-8).

¹⁰ Jebel (Arabian = mountain) Musa: traditionally identified as Mt. Sinai since c.AD 350. Israel lost its exact location after 850 BC.