

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

Since c.1870 scholarship has proposed that the Hebrew phrase *yam suph* (יָם סוּפִי) 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*, Strong’s #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 *seaweed*² 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 and 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, 2.15.1), & Herodotus (in 430 BC, *Histories*, ii, 8) for “Red Sea”.

Moreover, Greek & Roman writers (300 BC-150 AD) say the Red Sea extended c.50 miles north to Pithom in the Wadi Tumilat and that it was navigable!³ This took in Lake Timsah and both Bitter Lakes.⁴ Israel could cross anywhere along this extension and still go thru the Red Sea! (Map, p. 3: They actually crossed the 10 mile wide± north end near *Jabal Ataqah* = Baal-zephon; Exo. 14:2, 9) Regarding Israel’s crossing; Scripture both reveals & demands *suph* is intended as “seaweed”. These reasons are why *yam suph* has for centuries been rendered “Red Sea”. Although the man-engineered Suez Gulf is in its location, it obviously is not exactly the same body as the Old Testament Red Sea.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)

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 and 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 4,300 mile long African rift fault. These form huge elongated valleys between two faults or groups of faults that are almost parallel to one another. The Dead Sea Rift in southeast Turkey runs thru Lebanon to the north end of the Red Sea Rift (just offshore the south tip of the Sinai Peninsula). An extension formed a series of depressions (pull-apart basins) which drowned the Red Sea trough as far as: the Gulf of Akaba, the Arabah valley connecting Ezion-geber to the Dead Sea, the Jordan River, Sea of Galilee, and Hula basins (old maps often show the Gulf of Akaba as the Red Sea’s eastern branch). Lake Timsah lies in a basin developed along faults extending from the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Suez thru the Bitter Lakes. The mid-line of this gulf is the boundary between Africa & Asia.

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 Red Sea. But such is both a foolish and mistaken conclusion in view of the biblical history, 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 seven 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 and 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 fn. 6. Having established this, it should be evident that all 26 *yam suph* verses could be & 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). Indeed, the sea was of “mighty waters” (Exo. 15:10; Neh. 9:11) and 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 clearly indicates Israel “saw” the Egyptians, the context demands daylight – not merely light from the Abib 15 full moon (Exo. 14:10 & 13). Moreover, Exodus 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 and ensure the slaughter of all 3 to 6 million, Pharaoh had to have mustered an enormous horde and begin the attack well before dark. It took all night for every Israelite 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.

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 foot men (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 rabbi 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.

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 5 shallow, marshy northern lakes as recorded *after* c.200 AD until now are not at all adequate for the divinely chronicled history.



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.30 miles to Succoth the first day and some c.70 miles by day three. Obviously, Egypt did not pursue immediately or Israel would have been overtaken before this (Jewish chronology agrees: it declares Israel crossed the Red Sea on the 3rd day: *Seder Olam*, H. W. Guggenheimer, 2005, p. 60).

Numbers 33 gives a comprehensive listing of the encampments from Egypt to the plains of Moab opposite Jericho (my OT chronology, p. 262). As only several were actually villages or towns but rather mere places of encampment, few sites along the Exodus have been conclusively identified.⁸

Like those insisting *yam suph* be “reed sea” and ignoring the possibility of “seaweed sea,” most archaeologist discounted God’s version of actual history and began to theorize over Israel’s trail to its crossing. Thus, modern scholars also theorized over Israel’s trail to the *yam suth* crossing. This led most to illogically misplace Etham⁹ north of Succoth and *east* of the 5 shallow lakes.

However, Etham was “in the edge of the wilderness” (Exo. 13:18 & 20). This wilderness is just *east* of the five lakes: its *edge* is to their *west*! As the encampment *after* Succoth and *before* Pi-hahiroth, Etham was *before* crossing the Red Sea and thus *west* of these lakes. The blunder brought them to conclude one of the 5 marshy northern lakes to be the biblical Red Sea. But as noted, these are far too shallow to “dash in pieces” & drown (Heb. 11:29) the enormous Egyptian host as well as their horses.

As it is the most popular route by those who reject the historically accepted southern route (since at least 350 AD), let us evaluate the northerly route (green on map, p. 3). Exodus 13:18 says “God led the people about”: the northern theory insists this & 14:2 indicate Israel turned *around* & fled northerly from Succoth. Etymology does not so prove.¹⁰ Besides, Raamses & Pharaoh are northwest and Israel is fleeing *from* them, so why northerly? Moreover, north is the direction of the narrow 20 mile coastline “The Way to the Land of the Philistines” – the very route God knowingly would not lead His people (Exo. 13:17; Num. 33:7). Exodus 13:18 and 14:2 are merely saying God turned Israel from continuing on between Lake Timsah & the Great Bitter Lake into a more southerly direction and thus by-pass the cruel wilderness. The Lord had them encamp at its western edge and then continue the next day to the preordained Red Sea crossing site and His reckoning with Egypt.

So why disobey and flee northward? And if they had what judgment did God inflict? None is given. Yet such would be for, after receiving the Law at Mt. Sinai¹¹ and the level of rebellion grew during the 40 years, the judgments are recorded (fire-Num. 11:1, plague-Num. 11:33 & 14:37, leprosy-Num. 12:10, men of war won’t enter Canaan so are defeated & wander 40 years-Num. 14:29-38 & 45).

⁸ As *yam suph* and the Red/Reed Sea location as well as Mt. Sinai are the heart of our exposé, those are listed first. These are Raamses (the cite of origin), Succoth (the first encampment c.30 miles south of Raamses), Mt. Sinai (aka *Jebel Musa*), Elath (Elath = Akaba), Kadesh-barnea, Arad (c.17 miles south of Hebron), & Brook Zered. Others with an approximate location: Dophkah, Di-zahab (Deut. 1:1, modern Dahab along the western shoreline of the Gulf of Akaba & some 30 miles due east of Mt. Sinai), Jotbathah (Num. 33:33 = the oasis Taba? – 7 miles south of Ezion-geber), Punon, & 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 site (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 campsite before Mt. Sinai. (Num. 33:15; Exo. 19:1-2: here Moses struck the rock & God caused water to spring forth like a river)

The 3 mile long Feiran Oasis lies 38 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 (This cite was being mined for copper and turquoise during this event and continued for some time afterward). 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 and Migdol (Israel’s third encampment, near its Red Sea crossing: Num. 33:6-8).

¹⁰ The North Theorist argue Exodus 14:2 (Heb. = שׁוּב = *sub*) must translate “turn back” (i.e., from fleeing south & go northerly). However, the LXX Greek translation gives “*sub*” as ἀποστρέφω (*apostrophō*) here, which means “turn”, “turn away” or “turn from” – but not “turn back” (*Vine’s Expository Dictionary*: see Mt. 5:42; 2 Tim. 4:4; Tit. 1:14; Heb. 12:25). Exodus 13:18 (Heb. = סָבַב = *sābab*) also does not mean “turn back”.

¹¹ Jebel (Arabian = mountain) Musa, a pink granite mountain in the southern region of the Sinai Peninsula: traditionally identified as Mt. Sinai (7,482’) since c.AD 350. Israel lost the exact location after 850 BC (Thomas Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, p. 66-67).

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 & Pelusium – the main border-fortress city on the eastern frontier, built & fortified to protect Egypt from northern invaders. There were also numerous other Egyptian defenses along this coastal area. Their presence is the main reason God did not lead Israel the way to the Philistines.

Yet these proponents continue by having 3-6 million Jews avoid the Egyptian redoubts 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 well-deserved death – based as it is upon so-called scholars insisting *yam suph* must be taken as sea of reeds, which in and of itself casts doubt on the reliability of God’s Word. Yet it could equally be translated “sea of seaweeds” and thereby cause no difficulty whatsoever with the “Red Sea” translation.

Etham’s location in the North Theory is totally conjectured, 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 & go northward toward numerous Egyptian citadels only to have her millions continue across a narrow sandy bar while fleeing from soldiers intending their extermination (Exo. 15:9): and all this is to be taken as “science” (i.e., of archaeology, logic, and so-called historic fact) – Really?

As most of the southern Sinai has never been permanently inhabited and even some campsites were named by these Israelites (Marah-Exo. 15:23, Massah & Meribah-17:7), such did not become fixed; hence, most cannot be precisely located. Nevertheless, although tentative, 2 sites mentioned in the journey to Kadesh-barnea rule out the north route and presuppose a southern Exodus.

The Exodus route depends largely upon Dophkah’s location (Num. 33:12, aka *Serabit el-Khadim*). The exact site is unknown but its general area is, and it demands a southern Exodus. Dophkah is in the southwest Sinai Peninsula where the north’s low mountains begin to give way to the south’s higher peaks. Here, copper & turquoise were extensively mined for Egypt as far back as 3100 BC. Being much older than the 1491 BC Exodus, Dophkah’s existence was then well known.

Second is Di zahab (Deut. 1:1-2 below), which surely must be Dahab. It is located about 30 miles due east of Mt. Sinai along the Gulf of Akaba and on the southeast coastline of the Sinai Peninsula. This identification is firm, not only because both names are phonetic equivalents indicative of “gold”, but also due to logic. When departing Mt. Sinai en route to Kadesh-barnea, the logical pathway for Israel would have been the network of oases in wadi Nasb to its outlet near Dahab.

Although winding and narrow, this would allow the Israelites to bypass the mountain barrier that runs alongside the eastern peninsula. Not stopping to camp, from Di zahab Israel could continue north along the oasis lined shoreline between that mountain range and the Gulf of Akaba; then turn thru a gap bypassing Ezion-geber and continue on northerly to Kadesh-barnea. This is neither set in stone nor Scripture; nevertheless, it is the likely reality. (Ezion-geber’s encampment was 38 years later)

To continue on, we now leap forward to Israel’s completion of the 38 years of wandering since their rebellious failure to obey God at Kadesh-barnea and their having just soundly defeated the two Amorite kings, Sihon of Heshbon and Og of Bashan. After these victories, Israel came back into Moab on the east side of the Jordan River, and Moses began recounting the Lord’s dealings with them beginning with their departing Mt. Sinai until their *first* arrival at Kadesh-barnea (Deut. 1:1-2 & 19, 2:14 to 3:11).

These be the words which Moses spake unto all Israel on this side Jordan (east in Moab, Deut. 1:5) in the wilderness, in the plain over against the Red sea, between...Hazeroth, and Di zahab.

2. (There are 11 days' journey from Horeb (aka Mt. Sinai) by the way of Mt. Seir to Kadesh-barnea.)

19. And when we departed from Horeb, we went through all that great and terrible wilderness, which ye saw by the way of the mountain of the Amorites, as the LORD our God commanded us; and we came to Kadeshbarnea. (Deut. 1:1-2 & 19)

Now all freely admit the Hebrew in verse one is difficult; nonetheless, from the preceding verses 2 and 19 the context becomes clear. Moses' mention of a wilderness encountered in that trek is unmistakably the great and terrible one he referred to in verse 19, which is that of Paran (Num. 12:16).

Numbers 12:16 records that it was from *Hazeroth* that Israel advanced into the wilderness of Paran! Therefore, Hazeroth appears in Deuteronomy 1:1 because it is one of the encampments along the route to Kadesh-barnea, and this passage ties Di zahab/Dahab to Hazeroth with regard to that trek. This connects Di zahab/Dahab to Numbers 33:17, which gives Hazeroth as the second encampment after leaving Mt. Sinai. This in turn places Hazeroth also near the Gulf of Akaba. If we now start at Numbers 33:17 and go backwards to 33:16 verse after verse to 8, it will be seen that Mt. Sinai and, indeed, all the encampments apply to the traditional southern trek!

Other sites often included in such studies are Jotbathah (Num. 33:33) and Ezion-geber (Num. 33:35; Deut. 2:8). However, they do not apply here as both stays take place in 1452 BC, almost 38 years *after* leaving Kadesh-barnea in 1490 BC (see Deut. 2:14). Jotbathah & Ezion-geber are among the last stopovers of the wilderness wandering during Israel's 1452 BC return to Kadesh-barnea for a second stay at that location (Deut. 2:8; Num. 21:11-12; Judg. 11:16-18). The old Traditional Exodus Route may occasionally need tweaking but even as it is, the Tradition depicts the general passageway and actual history.

So why has all the previously presented drivel been foisted on the Word of the living God? The sizeable circumstantial evidence points mainly to the Archaeologists who have placed Etham, Baal-zephon, and our Migdol north of Succoth: they were Egyptian and the state religion of Egypt's 100 million is Islam – c.90% Sunni Muslim. Whereas Muslims believe a Moses led crossing of “a sea” to free the Children of Israel from the Egyptian tyrant really happened, yet they attribute the miracle to Allah – not Jehovah (Allah is *not* their name for the God of the Bible).

Islam's hatred for Israel has led them to cause the biblical account to be altered. Anything that would cast doubt on and demean the Jewish Bible (the Christian Old Testament) would elevate Koran in most of the world's view. Having not done their homework so as to biblically answer such challenges, many conservative Christian academicians also have part in this as these have fallen for the *yam suph* and/or North Theory Route deception. Repent.

The most important events in Israel's history are the Red Sea crossing, receiving the Law and being taken into covenant with the Creator at Mt. Sinai. Casting doubt on any part of this actual firsthand recorded history, such as the location of both sea and Mount, is a great victory in Islam's worldview.¹²

¹² Zahi Hawass, an Egyptian archaeologist and formerly Egypt's Minister of State for Antiquities Affairs, reflected scholarly consensus when he said of the Exodus story: “Really, it's a myth...Sometimes as archaeologists we have to say that never happened because there is no historical evidence.” Oh, what about Israel's as recorded in the Old Testament. Let us compare: “lift thou up thy rod, and stretch out thine hand over the sea, and divide it: (Exo. 14:16, KJB)...And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea...and the waters were divided (Exo. 14:21) – with Allah in Koran: “Strike the sea with your staff (i.e., Moses), and the sea was split, each part was like a huge mountain” (Koran 26:61-63).