

They do a good job because the result is disclosed in Isaiah 19. From being a belligerent and invading force against Jesus, Syria and Iraq turn to be part of the nucleus of the Kingdom of God on earth.

These concepts of prophetic fulfilment were unimaginable a hundred years ago. Today they are an eminently sensible solution to the horrendous problems confronting the world in the Middle East. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!".

(Concluded)

Red Sea or Reed Sea?

Debbie Hurn

THAT THE Israelites of the Exodus passed through the Red Sea (that is, the Suez Gulf or its ancient extension, the Bitter Lakes) is not a popular theory amongst the commentators. Many have been the scholars who have jumped to the alternative 'Reed Sea'. One can hardly pick up a translation or handbook that does not include an annotation that the Hebrew phrase *yam suph* means 'Reed Sea'.

If this is so then it provides a contra-indication for a crossing through the Suez Gulf, as it is known that no reeds grow in the waters of the Red Sea, nor indeed in the Bitter Lakes between the Gulf of Suez and the Mediterranean.¹ Reeds require an inflow of fresh water, with which they can even grow at the edge of the Salt Sea (Dead Sea), as they do at Ein Feshka and Ein Bokek. The Red Sea, often known as the Arabian Gulf in ancient times (a name now sometimes given to the Persian Gulf), contains some of the world's hottest and saltiest sea water. No water enters the Red Sea from rivers, and rainfall is scant.

Before the Suez Canal inundated the Suez depression with sea water in the 1860s, there were reeds growing in most of the lakes and marshes in the north of the isthmus between the Gulf of Suez and the Mediterranean, and these were fed by out-flowings of the Nile and a few fresh springs. Many commentators have been particularly willing to accept the 'Reed Sea' translation, for these northern bodies of water were generally seasonal or shallow, which fact tends to reduce the need for a miracle.

We need not, however, prefer a Gulf of Suez crossing just because it is 'more' miraculous, for Yahweh often uses natural phenomena to bring about His purpose—for example, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by a Rift Valley earthquake causing a subterranean explosion of

existing combustibles. But when an explanation does not fit the Biblical record and calls into question the historicity of the text, we must emphatically reject it and await a better theory.

Translation difficulties

Despite the apparent unanimity of Bible commentators on the 'Reed Sea' interpretation, there is some trouble with consistency of translation. Where *yam suph* has nothing to do with the Exodus, as for example in 1 Kings 9:26 and Jeremiah 49:21, and/or where the specified body of water is clearly the Gulf of Eilat (Num. 14:25; 21:4; Deut. 1:40; 2:1), there is no choice but to identify *yam suph* with the Red Sea. Yahweh promised that He would set the borders of the land of Israel "from the Red sea even unto the sea of the Philistines" (Ex. 23:31), that is, from the Gulf of Eilat to the Mediterranean Sea. It would be absurd to identify *yam suph* here with the Sirbonis or Menzaleh lakes, or with any of the other bodies of water close to Egypt and the Mediterranean shore.

In the earliest known translation of the Bible, the Septuagint, a translation by Jewish scholars in Alexandria from Hebrew into Greek in about 300 B.C., *yam suph* is consistently represented by *erythra thalassa* (literally 'Red Sea'), except in Judges 11:16, where *suph* is preserved. The meaning of *suph* may be somewhat variable, but it certainly does not mean 'red', so *erythra* is not simply the transfer of the meaning of *suph* to the Greek.

The Septuagint scholars tended to translate place names rather than to transliterate them,

1. "Reed Sea or Red Sea? How the mistake was made and what Yam Sûp really means", B. F. Batto, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, July/Aug. 1984, p. 59.



The term 'Red Sea' in ancient times incorporated the present-day Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean

especially where familiar Greek names existed.² Living in the country from which the Exodus took place, they were in no doubt that *yam suph* was part of the Arabian Gulf, for they identified it by the common Greek name of the time. Through the subsequent Latin translation known as the Vulgate (by Jerome, from about A.D. 400) the name 'Red Sea' (*Mare Rubrum*) became firmly entrenched in Western tradition, appearing, for example, in the AV. Now only the small coastal African country of Eritrea preserves the ancient Greek name of the gulf.

In ancient times the Red Sea was not what we know as the Red Sea today, that is to say, the long gulf which lies between the western shore of Arabia and the eastern coast of Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia. The classical geographers extended the name to all the seas washing the shores of the Arabian Peninsula—the Arabian Gulf (the modern Red Sea), the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. In Jewish inter-testamental literature, 'Red Sea' included the Persian Gulf and everything to the south. Both Josephus³ and the author of a fragmentary Aramaic text among the Dead Sea Scrolls known as the *Genesis Apocryphon* state that the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates empty into the Red Sea. The book of *Jubilees* (third or second century B.C.) states that Eden and the

lands of India and Elam (Persia) all border on the Red Sea. Thus it is clear that these ancients thought of the Red Sea as a continuous body of water that extended from the Arabian Gulf to the Persian Gulf and included all connecting oceans to the south (see [map](#)).

Origins of the name

Certainly the name 'Red Sea' is a mysterious one, and there has been considerable, and conflicting, speculation as to its origin, whether natural or etymological. The earliest European writers proposed a derivation from Edom (which means 'red' in Hebrew), translated literally by the Greeks, so that the greater Red Sea becomes no more than an extension of the Idumean Sea, now known as the Gulf of Eilat. Alternatively, ancient Egyptian inscriptions refer to desert as 'Red Land' (*deshret*) as distinct from the 'Black Land' of the Nile (*kemet*).⁴ As the Arabian Gulf is in a

2. "When Palestine meant Israel", D. Jacobson, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, May/June 2001, p. 46.

3. Josephus, *Antiquities*, Bk. I, ch. i. 3.

4. *A Test of Time*, Vol. 2, *Legend—The Genesis of Civilization*, D. Rohl, 1998, p. 360. Reviewed in *The Testimony*, S. Pinfield, "Genesis: fact or fiction?", Mar. 1999, pp. 75-7.

desert area, the origin of the name 'Red Sea' may likewise simply rest in a long-observed translation of 'Desert Sea'.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* gives a botanical explanation thus: "Its name is derived from the colour changes observed in its waters. Normally the Red Sea is an intense blue-green; occasionally, however, it is populated by extensive blooms of the algae *Trichodesmium erythraeum*, which, upon dying off, turn the sea a reddish brown colour". Some early seventeenth-century explorers alleged an appearance of redness in the water, speculating that the cause was either the reflection of red islands and coasts, or a supposed redness of the sea bed or coral reefs which abound along the shoreline (which, though colourful, are not red).

The classical historians maintain that the Red Sea was named after King Erythras (whose name means 'red one'), who, according to legend, was buried within a great mound on one of the islands of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf. They firmly deny that the name is derived from any redness of the water. Indeed, the Persian Gulf is shallow and muddy, and is mostly a dull greyish colour. As this, according to the classical commentators, was the original 'Red Sea', we may well decide that the nomenclature of the sea in regard to the appearance of the water is, and was in antiquity, both confused and confusing.

A more ancient theory is that the Red Sea was the path of the original 'red men'⁵ who migrated from Mesopotamia to Egypt by boat, and thence to the Mediterranean. Maverick historian and Egyptologist David Rohl has recently developed this idea.⁶ Drawing on archaeology, legend and the Bible, he proposes that Sumerian civilisation was carried far afield by ancestors of the Phoenician sailors. Although the hypothesis is an elaborate construction involving some linguistic gymnastics and Rohl's own lively imagination, there may be some truth in his historical interpretation. The classical name of the Phoenicians comes from *phoinos*, a Greek word for the reddish-purple dye they derived from the fluids of the murex shellfish. Whether or not there is any coincidence in the colour-names *phoinos* and *erythras*, the name 'Red Sea' may indeed commemorate epic sea-journeys westward from 'Shinar' before Abraham's time.

What does *suph* mean?

The word *suph* first appears in Exodus, translated 'flags' (Ex. 2:3,5), in reference to the veg-

etation that hid baby Moses' basket on the Nile river bank. Here it is a borrowed word, from the Egyptian *twf* (pronounced 'thoof'⁷), which denotes 'papyrus [reeds]' native to the Nile.⁸ *Suph* also appears as "flags" in Isaiah 19:6 in a prophecy against Egypt, confirming that the plant was a local feature. Apart from these references to reeds in the Egyptian context, and to '[sea]weed' in Jonah 2:5, every other time that *suph* appears in Scripture without being linked to *yam* (sea) it is the common Hebrew word for 'end', and is also sometimes translated 'consume' or 'perish', as in Esther 9:28, Jeremiah 8:13 and Daniel 2:44. Where 'end' is the intended meaning the vowel-letter *vav* is pronounced 'o' rather than 'oo', rendering *suph* as *soph*. (A place-name *Suph*, not *yam suph*, occurs in the RSV of Numbers 21:14 and Deuteronomy 1:1 as a site in Moab on the River Arnon. The AV incorrectly gives the rendering 'Red Sea' here.)

The truth may be this, that the Red Sea was known to the Hebrews as the *yam soph* because they regarded it as the 'sea at the end of the world'. Like other nations, the ancient Israelites did not distinguish the Red Sea gulf from the great southern ocean that formed the impassable boundary of the known world. Its waters may have seemed "strange and inexplicable to the inhabitants of the ancient world, whose only knowledge of the sea was the vast tideless lake [the Mediterranean] which washed the coasts of Egypt, Palestine, Greece and Italy. It [the Red Sea] must have always brought to the mind of those who stood on its shores, that they were on the waters of a new, and almost unknown world.

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5. "[T]he Arabs often call themselves 'the red men', as distinguished from the black or Negro, and the yellow or Turanian, races: though they call themselves 'the black', as distinguished from the more northern races, whom they term 'the red'; as this epithet is used by them, when thus applied, as meaning both 'red' and 'white'". ("Red Sea", *Smith's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1863, Vol. 3, p. 1011, footnote i). This rather confusing statement seems to be saying that 'red' was to the Arabs a relative description. They considered themselves 'red' rather than 'black' or 'yellow', except in comparison to the northern races who were 'redder' than they.
 6. *Op. cit.*, pp. 252-3.
 7. A slight modification to 'soof' is required by Hebrew phonology.
 8. The special Egyptian word for the Nile, *ye'or* ('river'), is also brought straight into the Hebrew, as are several Egyptian proper names.

Those tides⁹ come rolling in from the vast Indian Ocean; and with the Indian Ocean these two gulfs [the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Aqaba] are the chief channels of communication from the Northern world".¹⁰

9. It may be noted that bodies of drowned Egyptian charioteers appeared on the shore the morning after

the Red Sea crossing (Ex. 14:30), which indicates tidal activity.

10. *Sinai and Palestine*, A. P. Stanley, 1905, p. 5. By "Northern" in this instance is meant all lands accessed by the Persian Gulf and the Euphrates and Tigris rivers.

Thanks to Sister Adele Deadman for her editing, and Sister Frances Schifferli for referring me to Rohl's work on the subject.