

## Yam-Suph

### I. The Question

Last week we finished Exodus 13. Now, in Exodus chapters 14-15, we come to the famous “crossing of the Red Sea.” This crossing of the Red Sea has become famous for two reasons. First of all, the Bible makes a huge deal about this – not only here in Exodus, but also throughout the rest of Scripture (we’ll see this in the coming weeks). But the next reason why this crossing of the Red Sea has become so famous is because it’s become the perfect target for the world’s mockery and unbelief.

I’ll always remember what one educated woman said to me once when we were talking about the Gospel: “You really believe the Bible is true? Do you really believe that God parted the waters of the Red Sea?” At its narrowest point all the way at the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez, the Red Sea is still five miles across – and very deep. If we were to stand on the shores of the Red Sea and look out over the waters ourselves, we might not be so “glib” and “nonchalant” about our belief that those waters in that Sea were parted on a specific day in history. But then again, maybe it wasn’t those waters in that Sea that were actually parted? Maybe the Bible itself supports the idea that the Sea that Israel crossed was not the Red Sea at all.

What was crossed was the *yam-suph* – that we know. But what is the *yam-suph*? Is it really the modern day Gulf of Suez? And what does all of this mean for us as Christians – for our *faith* in God’s Word, and our understanding of miracles and, ultimately, redemption?

### II. The Options

*Yam* is the Hebrew word for “Sea” – that everyone agrees on. But what is that Hebrew word, “*suph*”? Exactly what *sea* is this? In Exodus chapter two, the word “*suph*” appears all by itself, and it refers to the marshy reeds that grew along the shallow banks of the Nile River.

- Exodus 2:3 — When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the *reeds* [*suph*] by the river bank.

So there are *many* who suggest that *yam suph* means Sea of Reeds – or they might rather say the “Reed Sea.” Along with this, they also suggest that the Hebrew *suph* is related to an Egyptian word referring to “marsh plants.” And so now, what we have is a shallow, marshy lake known for its abundance of reeds – the Reed Sea – or the Sea of Reeds.

Now another thing we do know for sure, and that is that the Hebrew word *suph* does *not* mean “red.” So the question is: “Is this “*yam suph*” what we know of today as the Red Sea, or is it a shallower, marshier, Sea of Reeds?”

### III. What's at Stake?

Well, first of all, why exactly is everyone so uptight and concerned about all this? Why are we even talking about this? What does it matter? One very famous Christian scholar (Kitchen) has written a book titled “On the Reliability of the Old Testament.” The whole point of Kitchen’s book is to show the historical reliability and truthfulness of the Old Testament against the mockery and the scorn of the world. The author of this book argues that Israel actually crossed one of the shallower lakes north of the Red Sea, and then he points out:

“The phenomenon of E and W winds respectively flooding and uncovering routes in these lakes and fens of the Delta persists even in modern times.” (Kitchen; ZPEB)

“Geophysically, the reedy waters of the Bitter Lakes and Lake Menzaleh can be affected by strong E winds precisely in the way described in Exodus 14:21 and experienced on a small scale by Aly Shafei Bey in 1945-6.” (Kitchen; NBD)

Can you see what Kitchen is doing? He’s arguing for the historical *reliability* of the Bible. He’s presenting a case to the unbelieving world for the truthfulness of God’s Word. And *how* does he do this? By showing that the parting of the *yam suph* can be essentially explained by “*natural*” causes. Yes, God was still very much involved—God was still acting—but He was still just “miraculously” using the normal, everyday “laws” of nature to the advantage and benefit of His people.<sup>1</sup>

I remember very clearly the first time I heard someone talking about this idea twenty-two years ago. A member of our church was talking with his father about a program he’d watched on TV that proved that the parting of the “Red Sea” was physically and historically entirely possible. What I seem to remember is that this man was excited about this because it could be a testimony and evidence to his father of the truth of the Bible. But the question is this: What is it, deep, deep down, that’s really driving us here? Is it really our humble submission to the absolute authority of God’s Word standing *over* us, *or* is it a “sincere” desire to make the Bible more “believable” not only for the world, but even for ourselves? Now these two things aren’t always mutually exclusive, but sometimes in very sincere people they do get out of order – with spiritually dangerous and destructive results. So what’s driving Kitchen? Should we be getting excited about his “Sea of Reeds” argument for the historical *reliability* and *truthfulness* of the Bible?

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<sup>1</sup> “The parting of the sea is described in an unusual manner: a result of ‘a strong east wind’ (v. 21). The mention of what appears to be a ‘natural cause’ for the parting of the sea brings us back to discussions regarding the nature of the plagues, whether they can be explained as natural phenomena. Mention of an east wind seems to encourage such a view, and, in fact, has inspired many scholars to accent this element, even at the expense of the miraculous. What is clear, however, is that the ancient Israelites did not view the parting of the sea in either-or categories.

“The natural-supernatural dichotomy, we must remember, is essentially a modern invention. No Israelite, or inhabitant of the ancient Near Eastern world for that matter, would have considered that God’s acts and everyday occurrences are incompatible. To see the east wind as a veiled reference to some sort of ‘naturalness’ in the parting of the sea is, to say the least, an overly subtle and thoroughly anachronistic reading of the text. God does not need to alter the laws of nature in order to act; he can make use of them.” (Enns)

At some level, and in the proper context, Enns’ point would be helpful and well-taken. But here, it only seems to amount to an unwarranted *denial* that God did alter the laws of nature in the parting of the *yam suph*. For a highly conservative commentator’s explanation of the plagues in natural categories, see Kaiser.

#### IV. Interpreting the Evidence

One of the first objections we might have to the “Reed Sea” idea is the language that’s used to describe the parting of the Sea in Exodus 15 and the Song of Moses:

- Exodus 15:4–5, 8-10 — “Pharaoh’s chariots and his host he cast into the sea, and his chosen officers were sunk in the *yam suph*. The **floods** covered them; they went down into the **depths** like a stone... At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up; the **floods** stood up in a heap; the **deeps** congealed in the heart of the sea. The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake... You blew with your wind; the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the **mighty waters**.<sup>2</sup>

So what about this? How does the language of “floods,” and “depths,” and “deeps,” and “mighty waters” fit with a relatively “shallow” Sea of Reeds? Well the answer is simple! God is taking the historical and naturally explainable event of the crossing of the “Sea of Reeds,” and He’s now using poetry and song to fill up that event in history with “theology.”<sup>3</sup> We’re going to see in the coming weeks that much of the language used to describe the parting of the *yam suph* is language from Genesis one – purposefully **connecting** this “parting of the *yam suph*” back to creation itself. It’s true that God intended the historical event of the *yam suph* to be far more than just a historical event! He intended that it should be filled up with theology – that it should be practically bursting with the themes of Creation and Redemption. So can we still be excited about the “Sea of Reeds” argument for the historical **reliability** and **truthfulness** of the Bible? Is the poetic language in Exodus 15 the “filling up” of a very naturally explainable event with the cosmic themes of Creation and Redemption?

In the Bible, apart from the references to the *Yam Suph* that are connected with the exodus of Israel, every other reference to the Yam Suph is a reference to the Red Sea.

- 1 Kings 9:26 — King Solomon built a fleet of ships at Ezion-geber... on the shore of the **Yam Suph [Gulf of Aqaba]**, in the land of Edom.
- Numbers 21:4 (cf. Num. 14:25; Deut. 1:40; 2:1) — From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the **Yam Suph [Gulf of Aqaba; Kitchen]**, to go around the land of Edom.
- Jeremiah 49:21 — At the sound of [Edom’s] fall the earth shall tremble; the sound of their cry shall be heard at the **Yam Suph [Gulf of Aqaba; Kitchen]**.

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<sup>2</sup> Nehemiah 9:11 — “You divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of **the sea** on dry land, and **you cast their pursuers into the depths**, as a stone **into mighty waters**.”

Psalms 106:9–11 — He rebuked the Red Sea, and it became dry, and he led them through **the deep** as through a desert. So he saved them from the hand of the foe and redeemed them from the power of the enemy. And **the waters covered** their adversaries; not one of them was left.

Psalms 77:16–19 — When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; indeed, **the deep** trembled... Your way was through the sea, your path through **the great waters**.

<sup>3</sup> Kitchen states emphatically (and in something of an arrogant and demeaning manner): “(Contrary to Batto and other biblicists) the ancient Near East did *not* historicize myth (i.e., read it as an imaginary ‘history’). In fact, exactly the reverse is true — there was, rather, a trend to ‘mythologize’ history, to celebrate actual historical events and people in mythological terms.” I assume the likelihood that Kitchen would understand the biblical “mythology” to be in many cases presenting and outlining *theological* categories (cf. other commentators on Exodus like Durham and Enns).

- Exodus 23:31 — And I will set your border from the *Yam Suph* [*Gulf of Aqaba*; Kitchen] to the Sea of the Philistines.
- Numbers 33:5–11<sup>4</sup> — So the people of Israel... passed through the midst of *the sea* into the wilderness, and they went a three days' journey in the wilderness of Etham and camped at Marah. And they set out from Marah and came to Elim... And they set out from Elim and camped by the *Yam Suph* [*Gulf of Suez*; Kitchen].

In all of these verses, *Yam Suph* is obviously referring to what we call today the Red Sea. *Only* in references connected with Israel's exodus from Egypt is it said that *Yam Suph* does *not* refer to the Red Sea. So Kitchen divides the biblical references to the *Yam Suph* into three categories: "1. Waters that parted before the Israelites at their Exodus from Egypt. 2. The Gulf of Suez. 3. The Gulf of Aqaba." (ZPEB)<sup>5</sup> But isn't this completely arbitrary?

What it really all comes back to is Kitchen's conclusion that *Yam Suph must* mean "Sea of Reeds" and so therefore *Yam Suph must* have started out referring to the shallower, marshy, reedy lakes and fens north of the Red Sea.<sup>6</sup> *After* these various watery areas were all collectively named the "Sea of Reeds," that name was simply extended to also include the vast Gulf of Suez to the south, and then even the Gulf of Aqaba over 100 miles to the east. Kitchen puts it like this: "[The Gulf of Suez] was simply taken as being yet another installment of the collective [Sea of Reeds]."<sup>7</sup>

But how can one possibly say that the Gulf of Suez was only treated as another "installment" in a collection of shallow, reedy lakes? To the contrary, the shallow, reedy lakes would have been far more likely to be thought of as mere outliers and extensions of the Sea – more like a tiny afterthought to the Sea.<sup>8</sup> Everything about the Bible's use of the word "Sea" everywhere else

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 13:18 — But God led the people around by *the way of the wilderness toward the Yam Suph*.

This is almost certainly another reference to the Gulf of Suez as "the way of the wilderness toward the Yam Suph" is being contrasted with the "way of the Philistines." (v. 17)

<sup>5</sup> One wonders if Kitchen recognized the arbitrariness betrayed by the wording of these categories, and so he revised them in the NBD to the following: "1. The Bitter Lakes region; 2. The Gulfs of Suez and Aqabah."

<sup>6</sup> There are some who suggest that water levels were higher at the time of the exodus so that the Gulf of Suez actually reached as far north as the Bitter lakes. ("Archaeological evidence suggests that the Bitter Lakes were at one time joined to the Gulf of Suez." [RSB]) However, there are also people on both sides of this debate who deny the existence of these higher water levels. Kitchen writes: "A former theory that the present Gulf of Suez may have extended much further N in antiquity to include, e.g., the Bitter Lakes, seems to be firmly excluded by the siting of the ancient Egypt. Port at Merkhah on the W coast of Sinai in the 15<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C. at levels unchanged into modern times." (ZPEB) And the "biblicist" website [ancientexodus.com](http://ancientexodus.com) states: "The high sea level proposition is not borne out by geological or archaeological data (Fritz 2006, 2016). For example, 3000 years ago at Dor, Israel, the Mediterranean Sea was about 1 meter lower than the modern sea level. Around 4000 years ago, the sea was 2 meters lower (Sneh and Klein 1984)."

<sup>7</sup> In the cases of the two gulfs, we have nothing more than extension of usage. Going from north to south, one passed a series of stretches of often salty water, and on arrival at the area of later Suez, here was another long piece of water, stretching into the hazy distance (as did Menzaleh, up north). So it was simply taken as being yet another installment of the collective *yam Suph*. Across the other side of Sinai, an analogous judgment was made; here was another long body of water stretching out south into the haze or the horizon like Menzaleh or that at Suez. Nothing more sophisticated than that need be assumed."

<sup>8</sup> "Our position is that the sea was indeed the Red Sea, but it is not impossible that the lakes of the Suez region were loosely included in the Hb. Term *yam sup* in Bible times." (Stuart)

argues *against* the idea that this “Sea” could be a loose collection of many different shallow lakes!<sup>9</sup>

So what about that word “*Suph*,” which in Exodus 2 means “reeds”? Well, there are some scholars who believe that *Suph* has another meaning deriving from a different root word which means “end.” (Batto) So *Yam Suph* would mean literally, “The Sea of the End,” referring “to the waters to the far south, the waters at the end of the land. And that, of course, would be the Red Sea [including the gulfs of Suez and Aqaba].”<sup>10</sup> (Currid) Do you know what Kitchen’s response is to this? “The suggested meaning ‘end’ is superfluous and irrelevant.” In other words, since there’s no *need* for such a meaning in the first place, then that must not be what it means. Kitchen sincerely believes that he’s only allowing the Bible to speak for itself – which just happens to result in evidence for the Bible’s historical reliability. But can you see how Kitchen’s desire to prove the reliability of the Bible to scoffers and skeptics is actually *blinding* him to what the Bible really says. Basically, Kitchen has taken the meaning of *suph* in Exodus chapter two, and forcibly interpreted everything else in Scripture in light of this meaning – regardless of all the powerful evidence to the contrary.<sup>11</sup>

So now, just briefly, let’s go back and visit the Bible’s use of language like “*floods*,” and “*depths*,” and “*deeps*,” and “*mighty waters*” to describe the *Yam Suph*. Is this language really just the “*filling up*” of a very naturally explainable event (the crossing of a shallow, marshy lake-bed) with the cosmic themes of Creation and Redemption? The problem here is the fact that this lofty “language of theology” ends up with no real *connection* to the historical event. The parting of a *shallow, marshy lake-bed* simply can’t *hold* a theology that’s expressed with words like “*floods*,” and “*depths*,” and “*deeps*,” and “*mighty waters*.”<sup>12</sup> Either the historical event begins to look ridiculously stupid, or the theology of Creation and Redemption that’s built on this event begins to look very suspicious. So not only do “*floods*,” and “*depths*,” and “*deeps*,” and “*mighty*

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<sup>9</sup> I leave it to the reader to do a study of the word “Sea.” In addition to this, it seems significant that the *Yam Suph* is often and easily referred to in the Bible very simply as “the Sea.” (Exod. 14:2, 9; Num. 33:8; Josh. 24:6; Neh. 9:11; Psalm 106:7)

<sup>10</sup> Even if *Yam Suph* doesn’t mean “Sea of the End,” there’s still no reason why it should have to mean “Sea of Reeds.” As Hamilton points out, by itself *suph* may mean reeds, but there’s no reason it still has to mean the same thing in the *combined* expression *yam suph*.

<sup>11</sup> Kitchen does offer two other supporting pieces of evidence for his view. The first is the “Sea wind” that blew the locusts of the eighth plague into the *Yam Suph* (Exod. 10:19), and the second is the location of the wilderness of Shur which Israel entered after the crossing of the *Yam Suph* (Exod. 15:22). With regard to the first piece of evidence, Stuart uses the same passage to argue the opposite point! It also *appears* that Kitchen himself may have abandoned this argument (compare his article in the NBD [1996] with his much earlier article in the ZPEB [1975]). With regard to Kitchen’s second piece of evidence, it seems most likely that he’s simply being a bit too strict with the boundaries of Shur.

<sup>12</sup> Kitchen references the ancient Near Eastern “trend to ‘mythologize’ history” and then compares this with the “growth of legends about ‘Sesostriis’ or about the Hyksos kings in Egypt; the growth of traditions about Sargon of Akkad; or the divinization of Dumuzi in Mesopotamia, among others.” The first problem, here, is that there is no biblical evidence of any *gradual* “*growth*” in the “mythologizing” of the historical crossing of a “Reed Sea.” The second problem is that these pagan mythologies are, in reality, the growth of “*legends*” which have long since ceased to have any real connection with the historical figures they are associated with. Pagan mythologies were meant to promote the *lies* of idolatry, whereas the Bible’s theological interpretation of history is intended by the one true God to reveal the *truth* about Himself. The theology of the Bible not only grows out of history, but it remains deeply rooted in that history!

waters” basically require a reference to the Red Sea, but so also does the actual narrative description of the crossing of the *Yam Suph* in Exodus fourteen:

- Exodus 14:21–22, 26-28 (cf. Deut. 11:4; Josh. 24:6-7) — The people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a *wall* to them on their right hand and on their left... Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back *upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen.*” So... the waters returned and *covered the chariots and the horsemen; of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained.*

In light of all the Biblical evidence, I have to agree with a scholar by the name of Batto when he concludes:

“At no period in Israelite history is there any evidence that *yam suph* ever referred to a body of water other than the Red Sea... There is no reason whatever to posit the existence of a [different] *yam suph*. In short, the [idea] that the Israelites experienced deliverance... at some historical body of water... accurately preserved as the ‘Red Sea,’ should be laid to rest forever.” (Batto; quoted in Hamilton and Stuart)

## **V. Defending the Faith**

But Kitchen has a name for people like Batto, and anyone else (like myself) who believes that the Israelites actually crossed the Red Sea. He writes: “Contrary to Batto and other *biblicists*...” A *biblicist* is someone who interprets the Bible in an artificial, overly simplistic, and naïve way.<sup>13</sup> So if I believe that the *Yam Suph* is the Red Sea, then that’s what I am – a *biblicist*.

Now here’s the question that’s important for all of us to be asking: Why is Kitchen so irritated? It’s not because he’s our enemy, and he wants to attack the Bible. He’s frustrated because my view only *exposes* the Bible to the world’s mockery and scorn – while Kitchen’s *goal* is to demonstrate to the world the *reliability* of the Bible. But at what cost? In the end, it will ultimately be at the cost of our own salvation and redemption.

The world that Kitchen wants to convince of the reliability of the Bible is a world that denies, or at the very least is highly skeptical of the miraculous. So it’s only logical that if Kitchen wants to convince this world of the reliability of the Bible, then he has to find a *natural* cause for the parting of the *Yam Suph*. Can you see, now, how it’s the world that’s determining our approach to Scripture – so that now the Scriptures are subjected to what we believe is reasonable, possible, and believable? But as soon as we do this, then we have made ourselves the ultimate authority. And in a world where man is the ultimate authority – in a world where we determine what is reasonable and possible, there can be no salvation. Just think about the miracle of the incarnation, and Jesus’ resurrection to glory!

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<sup>13</sup> The *biblicist* awards her- or himself a license for dogmatism, heedless of the necessary tentativeness of the results. (thefreedictionary.com)

We must not be ashamed to say that whenever we approach the Bible, we begin with a humble submission to the absolute authority of God's Word standing over us. We begin by assuming that it's God who must *tell us* in His Word what is possible and reasonable, and what has actually *happened* in history. This is the assumption of the "biblicist." So if the Bible says that the deep and mighty waters of the Red Sea were parted so that they stood like walls on either side of the people of Israel, then I immediately believe that this is what happened. Why? *First of all*, because this is the Word of **God**, and my only other alternative is to trust the word and reason of *men*.

But *after* I've made this assumption, there are two other "reasons to believe" that *grow out of* this faith. First of all, as I said to the woman who mocked my belief in the parting of the Red Sea – "I believe that God created everything out of nothing. So why is it thought incredible by you that God should part the Red Sea? (cf. Acts 26:8) If God created the world, then what we call the laws of nature are only "laws" in so far as God Himself goes on maintaining those laws day after day after day after day. But God is not bound to His own laws as if He could ever break them! So why should it be so difficult for the author of Creation to *alter* a law or make a *different* law at any time or place of His choosing? Of course, it's *not* – *not at all!* So this is the *first* reason to believe that *grows out of* our faith in God's Word.

But there's also a second, and related reason. The world might respond like this: "That's easy for you to say, when the supposed miracle happened thousands of years ago. But what if someone told you today that the Red Sea had just parted. I bet you'd be pretty skeptical, then." And how do I answer? I say: Yes, I would be skeptical. *Very* skeptical. God doesn't work "random" miracles. Jesus was very careful about when, and where, and even *why* He performed His miracles. In the Bible, God's miracles are always intimately tied together with the plan that He's working out in history to redeem His people. The Bible is the story of the miraculous *only in so far* as it's the story of the plan that God is working out in history to save sinners. Now Israel's exodus from Egypt was of massive, central importance in this historical unfolding of God's redemption plan! *Therefore*, the miraculous parting of the Red Sea at this specific moment in history should come as *no surprise at all* to any of us who truly believe God's Word!!! Therefore, we won't be one bit surprised to see, in the coming weeks, that the themes of creation and recreation, and redemption are all carefully rooted in the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea – the parting of the *Yam Suph*.

Do you remember the pillar of fire and cloud from last week? Unless we are to try and find some natural explanation for this (as some do), it's only *reasonable* to ask: "What kind of miracle would be *too great* for the God whose glory and presence is now revealed in this way – at this moment in history?"

Brothers and sisters, in these days our faith is nowhere more violently attacked than in the area of the *inerrancy*, and therefore the *authority* of Scripture. Not only are we attacked by the world, but we're even scorned by apparently "well-intentioned" Christians and Bible scholars. In the face of these attacks, let us remember that our only hope, and therefore the only way for us to offer hope to the world, is to *unconditionally* submit ourselves to the absolute truth and authority of the Scriptures. It's only a "biblicist" who can write like this:

“The opinion that seems to be best supported is that which points to the neighborhood of Suez. This position perfectly satisfies all the conditions of the stupendous miracle as recorded in the sacred narrative.” (EBD)

If we believe that God created the world out of nothing, and if we believe that God is working out his plan in history to redeem sinful man, ***then the only thing that's truly irrational is to think it unlikely that the Red Sea was parted at this specific moment in history.*** In this age of skepticism, may we not be ashamed to be called “biblicists.” Instead, let's thank God for His infallible word – and for giving us faith, and eyes to see.