

The Location of the Sea the Israelites Passed Through

Ferdinand O. Regalado
Adventist University of the Philippines

Introduction

Scholars disagree over the exact location of the body of water the Israelites passed through on their way out of Egypt. The disagreement stems from different interpretations of the Hebrew term *yam sūph*, the name given the sea where the miraculous crossing of the Israelites took place. The expression “is too vague a term to locate it.”¹ It has been translated as “Red Sea,”² referring to the large body of water that divides Arabia from North-East Africa.³ It has also been rendered as “Sea of Reeds” or “Reed Sea.”⁴

¹ Siegfried H. Horn, “What We Don’t Know about Moses and the Exodus,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 3 (June 1977): 29. I want to thank Dr. William H. Shea for reading a draft of this paper, making valuable suggestions, and providing materials not available in the Philippines. Also, I am grateful to Jonathan Rodgers of the University of Michigan Library for sending important articles I needed for this paper. Finally, I thank Dr. Kenneth D. Mulzac for making objective criticisms on this paper.

² In the Septuagint, *yam sūph* is consistently translated as *erythrē thálassa*, which means “Red Sea.” This translation is also reflected in the KJV.

³ “The Red Sea is a narrow strip of water extending southeastward from Suez, Egypt, for about 1,200 miles (1,930 kilometers) to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which connects with the Gulf of Aden and thence with the Arabian Sea. Its maximum width is 190 miles, its greatest depth 9,580 feet (2,920 metres), and its area approximately 174,000 square miles (450,000 square kilometres).” *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1992 ed., s.v. “Red Sea.”

⁴ See, for example, R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tynedale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 2:44-45; Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 180. For a listing of those who hold this view, see Bernard F. Batto, “Red Sea or Reed Sea? How the Mistake was Made and What *Yam Sūp* Really Means,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 10 (July/August 1984): 63, n. 3.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

In spite of the general acceptance of the translation “Reed Sea,”⁵ scholars are divided over exactly which one of the reedy lakes (or “Sea of Reeds”) of the Eastern Delta is *yam sâph*.⁶ Suggestions include: “Lake Menzaleh,”⁷ “Lake Ballah,”⁸ “Lake Timsah,”⁹ and “Bitter Lakes.”¹⁰

Moreover, the term *yam sâph* is used in some places in the OT for the Gulf of Aqabah,¹¹ which is the northeastern finger of the Red Sea. In other passages this term is used for the Gulf of Suez,¹² which is the northwestern finger of the Red Sea.¹³ Thus, based on the foregoing, there is a need to re-evaluate the different arguments forwarded in order to answer the question, “Which ‘sea’ did the Israelites really pass through?”

The purpose of this paper is to explore the possible location of the body of water the Israelites passed through on their way out of Egypt. We hope to achieve this by identifying *yam sâph* biblically and linguistically. In identifying *yam sâph* biblically, archaeological findings will be utilized to supplement the data found in the Bible, especially in identifying some geographical places.

Identifying *Yam Sâph* Biblically

Exodus 13-15 gives a detailed narration of the Israelites’ exodus and their subsequent crossing of the *yam sâph*. The text also names the campsites used before the Israelites crossed the *yam sâph*. These help us identify which sea the Israelites passed through.

Contextual Study of *Yam Sâph* in Exod 13-15. Exod 13:18 says: “So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea [*yam sâph*]. The

⁵ See, for example, the annotations in the NIV, RSV, NEB, and Jerusalem Bible.

⁶ See J. L. Mihelic, “Red Sea,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible (IDB)*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 4:20-21; Andrew E. Hill, and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 110.

⁷ “The deliverance through the sea could be located in the north, perhaps on a southern extension of Lake Menzaleh.” T. V. Brisco, “Exodus, Route of the,” *ISBE*, 2:240. See also G. E. Wright, “Exodus, Route of,” *IDB*, 2:198.

⁸ William Shea, “Leaving Egypt: Encounter at the Sea,” *Adventist Review*, 31 May 1990, 18.

⁹ M. Haran, “Exodus, The,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, supplementary vol. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 308.

¹⁰ “[I]t is likely that the Israelites crossed not the “Reed” Sea but the “Red” Sea, specifically the southern end of the Bitter Lakes or the northern end of the Gulf of Suez.” R. L. Hubbard, Jr., “Red Sea,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE)*, completely rev. and reset ed. (1978-88), 4:60.

¹¹ See e.g., Num 21:4; 1 Kings 9:26; Jer 49:21.

¹² See, e.g., Num 33:10-11; Josh 4:23; Ps 106:7, 9, 22.

¹³ Siegfried H. Horn, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, (1960), s.v. Horn has suggested that “Red Sea” points to the Gulf of Suez, specifically to the northern end, as the sea the Israelites crossed. See also, “A Strong East Wind” [Exod 14:21], *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary (SDABC)*, ed. Francis D. Nichol (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1956-80), 1:567.

REGALADO: THE LOCATION OF THE SEA

Israelites went up out of Egypt armed for battle.”¹⁴ From this text, one can see the direction the Israelites took. They took the “road toward the Red Sea [*yam sūph*].” The phrase “toward the Red Sea,” suggests that the route the Israelites took immediately upon leaving Egypt was “in the direction of” the Red Sea.”¹⁵

This direction is the “southeasterly direction,”¹⁶ for it is in harmony with the record of Exod 13:17 that says, “God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, ‘If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.’”

Furthermore, Exod 13:18 gives us an idea of what *yam sūph* is referring to. Logically, *yam sūph* here refers to the Red Sea proper in general, specifically to its western arm at the north—the Gulf of Suez, since it is the nearest arm of the Red Sea to the eastern Nile delta. Also, the text does not say that the Israelites crossed the *yam sūph*, but that the route they followed immediately upon leaving Egypt was in the direction of the *yam sūph*.

Interestingly, Exodus chaps. 13 and 15 use the word *yam sūph*, but in chap. 14 it is not used. When referring to the sea that the Israelites passed through, chap. 14 describes it merely as “the sea” (Heb. *hayyām*).¹⁷

In Exodus 15, however, *yam sūph* is identified as the sea of crossing. In the second half of v. 4, the sea of crossing is implicitly identified as *yam sūph* through synonymous parallelism:

Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea [*hayyām*],
The best of Pharaoh’s officers are drowned in the Red Sea [*yam sūph*]. (Exod 15:4)

From this parallelism, the sea [*hayyām*] is synonymous to the Red Sea [*yam sūph*], thus indicating that the sea the Hebrews passed through is also the sea where the Egyptians were drowned: the Red Sea [*yam sūph*].

Another occurrence of *yam sūph* in Exod 15 is in v.22:

Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea [*yam sūph*] and they went
into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert
without finding water. (Exod 15:22)

The latter verse appears to be a continuation of the narrative recorded in Exod 14:31, after it is interrupted by a poem (i.e., Exod 15:1-18), a short narrative (Exod 15:19-20), and a short poem (Exod 15:21). This interruption is evident from the literary structure below:

A¹ Narrative about miracle on the sea (Exod 14:29-31)
B¹ Poetry about miracle on the sea (Exod 15:1-18)

¹⁴ All scriptural citations are from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted.

¹⁵ “Through the way of” [Exod 13:18], *SDABC*, 1:561.

¹⁶ John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 3 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 185.

¹⁷ See Exod 14:16, 22, 27, 29.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

A² Short Narrative about miracle on the sea (Exod 15:19-20)

B² Short Poetry about miracle on the sea (Exod 15:21)

A³ Continuation of the Narrative from the sea of miracle onward
(Exod 15:22ff)

Although chap. 14 does not identify the sea of the crossing, chap. 15 in its continuation of the story identifies the sea as *yam sūph*. This is how chap. 15 continues the last part of chap. 14:

But the Israelites went through the sea [*hayyām*] on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore (Exod 14:29, 30). . . . Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea [*yam sūph*] and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. (Exod 15:22)

In sum, the sea the Israelites passed through, according to Exod 13-15, is described in Hebrew as both *hayyām* and *yam sūph*. In Exod 15:4, *hayyām* is parallel to *yam sūph*, indicating the sea of the miracle crossing is indeed *yam sūph*. Hence, *yam sūph* and *hayyām* refer to the same body of water. Further, *yam sūph* in the above text is both the sea the Israelites crossed over and the direction of their route when they came out of Egypt.

It is also interesting to note that in the same passage the various campsites before and after the miraculous sea crossing are mentioned. Those campsites are crucial in trying to locate the sea the Israelites crossed.

Campsites before Crossing the Sea. In Exod 13:18-14:3, the various campsites used by the Israelites before they crossed the sea are named. Based on Exod 12-14 and its parallel text in Num 33:3-8, we can list these campsites in this order:

Exodus 12-14

1. Rameses (12:37)
2. Succoth (13:20)
3. Etham (13:20)
4. Places near the sea (13:20)
 - a. Pi Hahiroth
 - b. Baal Zephon
 - c. Migdol
5. Passing through the sea (14:22, 29)

Numbers 33

1. Rameses (v.3)
2. Succoth (v.5)
3. Etham (v.5)
4. Places near the sea (v.7)
 - a. Pi Hahiroth
 - b. Baal Zephon
 - c. Migdol
5. Passing through the sea (v.8)

We will survey the current research on the location of these places. Several studies present the likely location of these places. They utilize both archaeological findings and ancient traditions.

REGALADO: THE LOCATION OF THE SEA



Fig. 1. A general map of the area at the time of the Exodus, showing most of the toponyms mentioned in this paper. The dotted line represents the Wadi Tumilat. This map also shows the location of Lake Ballah and Lake Timsah, one of which may be the "sea" the Israelites crossed over.

A. Rameses. In Exodus 12:37 and Numbers 33:3, the Israelites started their journey from the Egyptian city of Rameses. However, employing the name Rameses does not mean the Exodus happened during the time of Rameses II, the pharaoh the city was named after. Gen 47:11 records how Joseph and his brothers, together with his father Jacob, settled in the "district of Rameses." This is evidence that the mere presence of the name of Rameses II of the 19th Dynasty does not mean the place called Rameses existed in the time of Joseph, any more than the settlement of Joseph and his father and brothers happened in the 19th Dynasty.

The way the name Rameses is employed in Gen 47:11 is similar to the book of Exodus. The use of the toponym Rameses in the Exodus event "represents the

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

modernization or updating of an older name for that region.”¹⁸ Therefore, the use of Rameses “cannot be the final arbiter of the date of the Exodus.”¹⁹ Besides, Gen 45:10 and Exod 8:22 record that the Israelites lived in “the land of Goshen.” If Gen 47:11 is compared with 47:6, it is clear that the biblical author equates Goshen with “the land of Rameses.” Evidently, Rameses was the later name for the district of Goshen, a name it received in a later period, especially “during or after the Nineteenth Dynasty.”²⁰

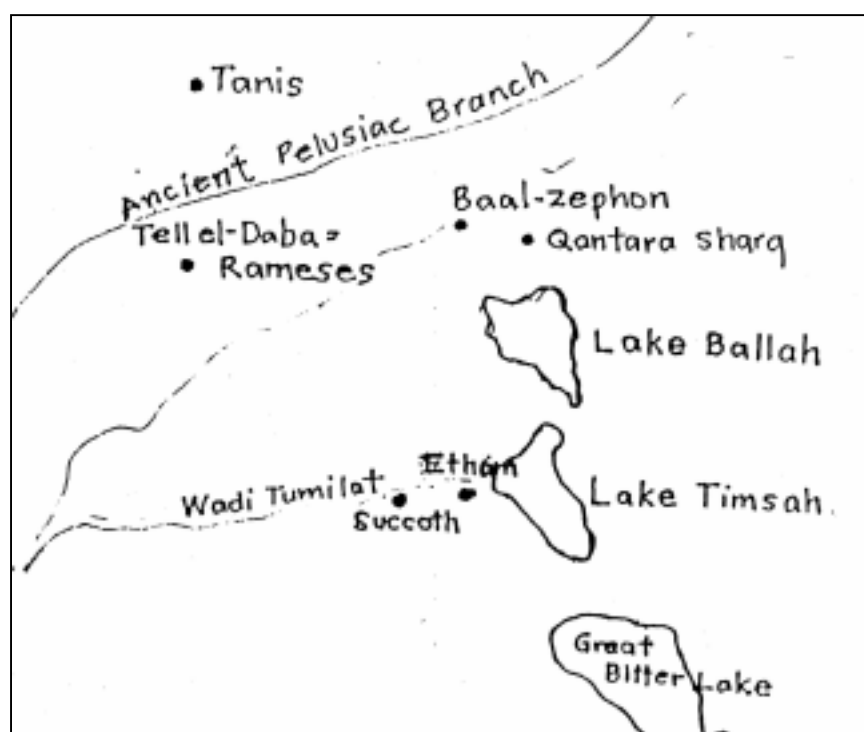


Fig. 2. A close up map, showing the toponyms not seen in fig. 1.

Based on recent archaeological study, it is now widely accepted that modern Tell el-Dab'a is the likely candidate for the city of Rameses.²¹ The traditional view that biblical Rameses is the modern Tanis has been corrected. On geographical grounds, Tanis is not the likely candidate. Since it is located on the

¹⁸ W. H. Shea, “Exodus, Date of the,” *ISBE*, 2:232.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ E. P. Uphill, “Pithom and Rameses: Their Location and Significance,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 28 (January 1969): 38.

²¹ John R. Huddleston, “Red Sea,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary (ABD)*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:639.

REGALADO: THE LOCATION OF THE SEA

farther west bank of the ancient Pelusiac branch of the Nile, the Israelites would have had to have crossed the said Pelusiac, which is unlikely because “it would have involved ferrying all the Israelites and their livestock across the Pelusiac branch of the Nile by barge or boat.”²²

By contrast, Tell el-Dab^{ca} is on the east bank of the ancient Pelusiac branch, so there was no body of water to hinder the children of Israel at the start of their journey. This would fit the biblical record, because there is no mention of Israel crossing the ancient Pelusiac branch of the Nile as they started their journey from Rameses.

Tell el-Dab^{ca}, according to Manfred Bietak, the excavator of that site, has “more than one millennium of settlement activity.”²³ Archaeologists have found “a rich stratigraphy of occupational debris dating from the beginning of the 12th Dynasty down to the Ramesside and Third Intermediate Periods.”²⁴

It is noteworthy that a certain level of occupation of Tell el-Dab^{ca}, from stratum F to stratum E/3-1, has been identified with the Hyksos Period because of the Semitic character of the houses, burial customs, artifacts, and pottery found in those layers.²⁵ These Semitic archaeological remains formed an Asiatic (Canaanite) community that flourished “from the time of the 13th dynasty until the beginning of the 18th dynasty.”²⁶

We know from Egyptian history that the Hyksos established their capital in the Eastern Nile Delta in Avaris, “where Rameses II later built his delta residence.”²⁷ According to Bietak, “in the 19th and 20th Dynasties Tell el-Dab^{ca} was part of a large town site which extended from Qantir, in the north, to Tell el-Dab^{ca}, in the south,”²⁸ pointing to the fact the Tell el-Dab^{ca} -Qantir is the city of Rameses.²⁹

²² William Shea, “Leaving Egypt: The Starting Point, *Adventist Review*, 11 May 1990, 8.

²³ Manfred Bietak, *Avaris: Capital of the Hyksos* (London: British Museum, 1996), 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Manfred Bietak, *Avaris and Piramesse: Archaeological Exploration in the Eastern Delta*, Proceedings of the British Academy (London: Oxford UP, 1979), 65:232-37.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 272.

²⁷ Shea, “The Starting Point,” 10. Cf. K. A. Kitchen, “Egypt,” *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas et al, 2d ed. (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1982), 304; Horn, *SDABD*, s.v. “Egypt.”

²⁸ Bietak, *Avaris and Piramesse*, 282. Cf. E. P. Uphill, “Pithom and Raamses: Their Location and Significance,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 27 (October 1968): 291-316.

²⁹ Bietak, *Avaris and Piramesse*, 282, further notes, “Jean Yoyotte found in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, an inscription on a shrine dating from the 20th dynasty which mentioned a ‘temple of Amun of Rameses, great of victories, at the harbour of Avaris.’ The epithet ‘great of victories’ belonged to Piramesse and its gods. This inscription, which hitherto received little attention, indicates that the name of Avaris was still in use in Ramesside times, specifying that part of Piramesse which lay near its harbour.”

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Both from geographical and archaeological evidence, we can safely conclude that biblical Rameses can be identified with Tell el-Dab³⁰, where Israel commenced their journey to the land of Canaan. The Israelites under the leadership of Moses gathered at this place to start their memorable exodus.

B. Succoth. After Rameses, the next place Israel camped was Succoth (Exod 12:37; 13:20; Num 33:5). It has been widely believed that biblical Succoth is to be identified with Tell el-Mashkutah,³¹ which is in the eastern end of Wadi Tumilat. One of the evidences proposed is that the ancient name of that site is still preserved in the modern Arabic name, *Maskhuta*.

Archaeological excavation in Tell-Mashkutah reveals that there was a period of non-occupation during the New Kingdom period.³² Evidence for this is found in the preliminary report of the dig in 1980 at Field L, where excavators found fragmentary walls belonging to the Persian Period, and further down the tell, they discovered major walls belonging to the earlier Persian phase. Then immediately below the Persian phase, they found two burial remains which they dated to the Middle Bronze IIA Period.³³

From this preliminary excavation, it appears that there was a gap in occupation between the Persian and Middle Bronze IIA period. This preliminary excavation was further validated in 1992, when archaeologists noted “a long abandonment” from the final phase of Middle Bronze II to “the last decade of the 7th century B.C.”³⁴

This description of the period of non-occupation fits the time when the Israelites fled from Egypt in the fifteenth century B.C.³⁵—a figure derived from 1 Kgs 6:1.³⁶ If the Exodus happened in the fifteenth century at the period when Tell el-Mashkutah was unoccupied, the Israelites could have reached the place safely and spent the night without being harassed or threatened by any Egyptian presence in that area.³⁷

³⁰ See also Hershel Shanks, “The Exodus and the Crossing of the Red Sea, According to Hans Goedicke,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 7 (September/October 1981): 43-44, about the arguments of Hans Goedicke in support of this view. Cf. Brisco, 2:240.

³¹ See, e.g., J. E. Huesman, “Exodus from Egypt,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, (1967), 5:745; Brisco, 2:240; Wright, 2:198; Cole, 112; W. F. Albright, “Exploring in Sinai with the University of California African Expedition,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 109 (1948): 15.

³² John S. Holladay, Jr., “Maskhuta, Tell el-,” *ABD*, 4:590.

³³ Burton MacDonald, “Excavations at Tell el-Mashkuta,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 43 (1980): 53-54. Cf., Shanks, 43.

³⁴ Holladay, 4:589.

³⁵ John J. Bimson and David Livingstone, “Redating the Exodus,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 13 (September-October 1987): 40-53, 66-68.

³⁶ Shea, *ISBE*, 2:230-38.

³⁷ Shea, “The Starting Point,” 14.

REGALADO: THE LOCATION OF THE SEA

So from Rameses, the Israelites followed the direction of the Wadi Tumilat³⁸ in a south-easterly direction until they reached Succoth. The important information to note about this campsite is that the Israelites were still at the east end of Wadi Tumilat in the eastern Nile delta, far from the Gulf of Suez.

C. Etham. After Succoth, Etham was the next stop. The Bible precisely describes this as being at “the edge of the desert” (Exod 13:20; Num 33:6). In other words, “the Israelites were still only on the edge of the steppe country.”³⁹

Biblical Etham can be identified through the meaning of its name. It is believed that the name Etham is derived from the Egyptian name *htm*, meaning “fortress.”⁴⁰

Egyptian records reveal that there were fortresses “distributed in a north to south line across the Isthmus of Suez. The purpose of these forts was to serve as watch posts along the border, to monitor the movements of foreigners in and out of the country.”⁴¹ Some of these fortresses “lay at the edge of the eastern desert, [so] it is possible that one of them is referred to”⁴² as the biblical Etham.

If Etham is one of the fortresses mentioned in the Egyptian record, where was it located? The location of this fort remains uncertain.⁴³ However, based on the specific description of the text that it is “on the edge of the wilderness,” biblical Etham appears to be “at the eastern end of Wadi Tumilat, east of Tell el-Maskhuta, perhaps in the Lake Timsah region.”⁴⁴

D. Pi Hahiroth, Baal-zephon, and Migdol. After the encampment at Etham, the Lord commanded Israel to change direction. Exod 14:1-2 notes, “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon.’” Similarly, Num 33:7 states, “They left Etham, turned back to Pi Hahiroth, to the east of Baal Zephon, and camped near Migdol.” Shea admits that “the Hebrew verb used for ‘to turn’ [Heb. *šûb*] in this passage is nonspecific as to the direction in which the Israelites turned.”⁴⁵ Yet,

³⁸ Although Itzhaq Beit-Arieh, “The Route Through Sinai: Why the Israelites Fleeing Egypt Went South,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 15 (May-June 1988): 31, notes the importance of the Israelites tracking along the wadis in the Sinai wilderness because of the availability of water resources—mostly found in the wadi beds. The Israelites may have also traveled along wadis when they journeyed from Rameses to Succoth.

³⁹ Cole, 118.

⁴⁰ H. Cazelles, “Les localisations de L’exode at La Critiques Littéraire,” *Revue Biblique* 62 (1955): 358.

⁴¹ Shea, “Encounter at the Sea,” 16.

⁴² “Encamped in Etham” [Exod 13:20], *SDABC*, 1:562.

⁴³ C. de Wit, “Etham,” *New Bible Dictionary*, 351.

⁴⁴ James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 182; Siegfried H. Horn, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, 1979 rev. ed., s.v. “Etham”; Hubbard, 4:60; Shea, “Encounter at the Sea,” 16. For a different view, see K. A. Kitchen, “Exodus, The,” *ABD*, 5:745.

⁴⁵ Shea, “Encounter at the Sea,” 16.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

he adds the possibilities that “either they turned north or they turned south.”⁴⁶ If we could locate these three places—Pi Hahiroth, Migdol, and Baal Zephon—with certainty, then we could know which direction the Israelites “turned.”

Some commentators maintain that the Israelites turned south, without giving cogent reasons why they turned south.⁴⁷ Gordon Wenham, who opts for the southern direction, contends that if the Israelites had turned north or west, that “would have brought them closer to the Egyptians.”⁴⁸ Although this seems reasonable, there appears to be convincing evidence that the Israelites did in fact turn north.

Based on archaeological findings, all three of the places mentioned in the text are located in the north—somewhere in the northern end of the Isthmus of Suez. The evidences are appealingly suggestive.

1. Baal-zephon means “Baal of the north.” This Canaanite god, Baal, was adopted by the Egyptians into their pantheon of gods. Perhaps the Egyptians built a temple or a city in his honor in the north, where he originally came from. Baal-zephon may then be located along the coastal road by the Mediterranean Sea, which is in the northern end of the Isthmus of Suez, and not in the south.⁴⁹

2. Pi-hahiroth literally means “mouth of the canal,” taken from the Hebrew stem *h-r-t*, which means “to incise, engrave, carve, cut into.”⁵⁰ Pi-hahiroth may indeed refer to the mouth of a canal.⁵¹ In 1967 archaeologists discovered an ancient canal in the north, which could fit to the toponym Pi Hahiroth. This huge canal is “twenty meters wide at the bottom and seventy meters wide at water level.”⁵² According to Shea, this canal could have been constructed since the time of Merikare of the 10th Dynasty (ca. 2070-2040).⁵³ Its primary purpose was for defense in the Eastern Delta from the Asiatics, who were causing prob-

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ “Turn and encamp” [Exod 14:2], *SDABC*, 1:564; Cole, 119, writes, “*Turn back* [italics his] should mean a reversal of direction. Perhaps it means a sudden swing to the south, instead of direct march eastwards.”

⁴⁸ Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1981), 2:224.

⁴⁹ According to Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 71, “Baal was the storm-god and also the patron of mariners. Several cult sites dedicated to him were built along the shores of the Mediterranean. A Phoenician letter from the sixth century B.C.E. seems to identify one Egyptian site named Baal-zephon with Tahpanhes, modern Tell-Defneh, some 27 miles (48 km.) south-southwest of modern Port Said.”

⁵⁰ Shea, “Encounter at the Sea,” 16.

⁵¹ Roland de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel: To the Exodus and Covenant of Sinai*, trans. by David Smith (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978), 379.

⁵² John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 131.

⁵³ William H. Shea, “Date for the Recently Discovered Eastern Canal of Egypt,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 226 (1977): 35.

REGALADO: THE LOCATION OF THE SEA

lems for the Egyptians at the time.⁵⁴ Then, during the time of Amenemhet I of the 12th Dynasty (ca. 1991-1962), this canal was continued and dug out to serve as a defensive “wall” depicted in Seti’s relief.⁵⁵

During the 12th Dynasty, the Asiatics were again troubling the Egyptians. Such chaotic conditions necessitated the building of a wall, which came from the earth “dug out” from the canal. This means that the “digging of the canal would have produced a double wall with a moat in the middle.”⁵⁶ Eventually, this Eastern Canal in the Delta “went out of use” during the 20th Dynasty, “although the idea of a canal from the Nile to the Gulf of Suez cropped up again in the later Saite and Persian Periods.”⁵⁷

Although this Eastern Canal in the Delta went out of use only at the time of the 12th Dynasty, it was still in existence at the time of the Exodus and thus stood as a barrier to the Israelites when they went out of Egypt. Hoffmeier identifies the mouth of this Frontier Canal in the Eastern Delta as the “Pi-ha-hiroth,” translated in its Semitic origin as “mouth of the canal(s).”⁵⁸ This Eastern Frontier Canal, as he calls it, “ran from Lake Timsah, north to El Ballah Lake, and from its north side up to the Mediterranean coast.”⁵⁹ Thus he concludes that the mouth of this canal fits well, with its Semitic reading, as the location of Pi-ha-hiroth.⁶⁰

3. Migdol, which simply means “fort,”⁶¹ could be identified with modern Qantara Sharq, a mound located at the northern end of the line of forts across the Isthmus of Suez. This mound is near to the modern town of Qantara.⁶² Based on excavation at that site, archaeologists discovered that it was actually a fortress city. Furthermore, it was found that this city was a major fort at “the easternmost delta”⁶³ that guarded any group wanting to enter or leave Egypt. This fort could be identified as the Migdol of the Exodus because of its location today as “near the point of where the modern road from Gaza to Cairo crosses over the Suez Canal,” where “the ancient crossing must have been located.”⁶⁴ Although this

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Hoffmeier, 170. Cf. Lawrence A. Sinclair, “Pi-Hahiroth,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1057, for the Semitic origin of the term Pi-hahiroth. However, Sinclair notes that “the name cannot be identified with any known site.”

⁵⁹ Ibid., 187.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 171.

⁶¹ Lawrence A. Sinclair, “Migdol,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, 898.

⁶² Shea, “Encounter at the Sea,” 17.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 123, notes that “the crossing took place not far from the present-day El Qantara on the Suez Canal.” For the identification of Migdol during Jeremiah and Saite’s period, see

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

city has not been dated with certainty, “the settlement that underlies it dates to the Hyksos period in the middle of the second millennium B.C.”⁶⁵

From the foregoing reasons, it is quite evident that the places where the Israelites turned were located in the northern end of the Isthmus of Suez, still far from the northern edge of the Gulf of Suez. If Baal-zephon, Pi-hahiroth, and Migdol were located in the northern end of the Isthmus of Suez, the location of the sea (or *yam sūph* in some biblical texts) that the Israelites crossed was probably somewhere in that area, too.

Thus, from the present findings of the location of these three toponyms, we can suggest that the “sea” that the Israelites passed through was either in the Lake Timsah or Lake Ballah area, since both lakes are located in the northern end of the Isthmus of Suez. The Israelites were trapped by these three obstructions: the “sea,” the frontier canal, and a major Egyptian fort. It appears that the Israelites had nowhere to go, unless they somehow crossed the “sea” in front of them, “the barrier between Egyptian soil and the desert wilderness.”⁶⁶ So Yahweh performed a miracle by dividing the water and making it possible for the Israelites to walk on the dry ground.

Campsites after Crossing the Sea. After the miracle crossing at the *yam sūph*, both texts in Numbers 33 and Exodus 15-16 mention another set of campsites used by Israel before they reached the Desert of Sin. We could better locate “the sea” the Israelites passed through if we could identify these stopping places. We can enumerate these campsites in the following order, based on Exodus 14-16 and Numbers 33:

Exodus 14-16

1. Passed through the sea (14:22, 29; 15:22)
2. Desert of Shur (15:22)
3. Marah (15:23)
4. Elim (15:27)
5. -----
6. Desert of Sin (16:1)

Numbers 33

1. Passed through the sea (v.8)
2. Desert of Etham (v.8)
3. Marah (v.8)
4. Elim (v.9)
5. Camped by the Red Sea (v.10)
6. Desert of Sin (v.11)

According to these texts, the next place after crossing the *yam sūph* was the Desert of Shur or the Desert of Etham. It appears that the Desert of Shur and the Desert of Etham are one and the same area in this parallel account.⁶⁷ In both accounts it is recorded that the children of Israel traveled for three days in this desert (Exod 15:22; Num 33:8) after crossing the *yam sūph*. For those three days

Eliezer D. Oren, “Migdol: A New Fortress on the Edge of the Eastern Nile Delta,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 256 (Fall 1984): 7-44.

⁶⁵ Shea, “Encounter at the Sea,” 17.

⁶⁶ G. Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 61.

⁶⁷ David R. Seely, “Shur, Wilderness,” *ABD*, 5:1230.

REGALADO: THE LOCATION OF THE SEA

they could not find water to drink until they reached Marah. At Marah, there was water available, but it was bitter, so they could not drink it. But we know from the story that God performed another miracle to make the water potable (Exod 15:23-25).

Now, if we could locate the Desert of Shur/Etham, we would have a clear idea about the location of the sea of the miraculous crossing. In the biblical account this area is located between the sea of miracle and Marah. Kenneth Kitchen, the renowned Egyptologist, locates this wilderness region

in the North West part of the Sinai isthmus, south of the Mediterranean coastline and the “way of the land of the Philistines,” between the present line of the Suez Canal on its West and the ‘River of Egypt (Wadi el-‘Arish) on its East.⁶⁸

This description by Kitchen would support our proposal for where the sea of the miracle crossing is located. The wilderness of Shur is directly opposite Lake Ballah and Lake Timsah. Exod 15:22 records that after the Israelites crossed the *yam sûph*, “they went out into the wilderness of Shur” (NASB). In other words, “only then when Israel crosses the sea does she enter into the wilderness.”⁶⁹ G. Ernest Wright correctly observes: “As soon as the sea was successfully crossed, the terrifying, waterless desert was before the fleeing Hebrews, and soon the murmurings of fear and discontent arose.”⁷⁰

If the sea that the Israelites crossed is the Gulf of Suez, the area that they should have entered opposite to it was either the area known as the Way of Seir or the Paran Desert. However, the Bible is quite clear that after the miraculous sea crossing, the children of Israel entered the desert of Shur or Etham.

If we follow carefully the stage by stage account of Numbers 33, we notice that “the station at the sea of crossing (verse 8) is quite distinct from *yam sûph* (verses 10-11), since the Israelites arrive at the latter some three camping stations later.”⁷¹ Kitchen affirms this view. He writes:

After reaching the wilderness of Shur/Etham (Exod 15:22; Num 33:8), the Hebrews in three days (? on third day, our mode of reckoning) reached Marah, went on to Elim and thereafter encamped by the *yam-sup* (Num 33:10, 11) before proceeding into the wilderness of Sin (Exod 16:1; Num 33:11) en route to Sinai which they reached after three more stops (Exod 17; 19:1, 2; cf. Num 33:12-15). On this reckoning, the *yam-sup* (of Num 33:10, 11) would be somewhere on

⁶⁸ Kenneth A. Kitchen, “Shur,” *New Bible Dictionary*, 1110. Although Kitchen (1014) holds the view that the sea that the Israelites passed through is in the Bitter Lakes region because it is opposite to the area of Shur, yet Lake Ballah and Lake Timsah are also opposite to the area of Shur and therefore could also be good candidates for *yam sûph*.

⁶⁹ Brevard S. Childs, “A Traditio-Historical Study of the Reed Sea Tradition,” *Vetus Testamentum* 20 (1970):409.

⁷⁰ Wright, *Biblical Archaeology*, 61.

⁷¹ Batto, “Red Sea or Reed Sea,” 20.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

the Gulf of Suez coast of Sinai, if Mount Sinai/Horeb be located in the South of that peninsula.⁷²

It would suggest that the “sea of miracle crossing” is still far from the Gulf of Suez.⁷³ Hence, the view that the Gulf of Suez is the likely candidate for the sea that the Israelites crossed appears untenable.

Identifying Yam Sûph Linguistically

From the previous discussion, we have learned that the sea the Israelites passed through was either Lake Ballah or Lake Timsah. However, there is also difficulty when the term *yam sûph* in the Hebrew Bible is used to refer to the Gulf of Aqabah or to the Gulf of Suez. I propose that the solution to this problem lies in the possibility that the Israelites and the other ancient peoples did not distinguish between the Red Sea and those lakes along the line of the modern Suez canal and thus called them both *yam sûph*. In other words, *yam sûph* may refer to a specific body of water and at the same time to a general body of water.

There is strong evidence that the term *yam sûph* has a broader and more extended meaning than has been commonly assumed. What follows is the evidence for this hypothesis.

Linguistic Study of Yam Sûph. The connection of *sûph* to the Egyptian *ṯwf* is one of the crucial arguments for the “Sea of Reeds” hypothesis. It has been believed that *sûph* is an Egyptian loanword from the word *ṯwf(y)*, which is translated “papyrus plant,” or “papyrus reeds.”⁷⁴ Two texts in the OT recognize this connection. In Exod 2:3 and Isa 19:6, the Hebrew word *sûph* is translated “marsh reeds” or “rushes.”⁷⁵ However, there is complexity when *sûph* in Jonah 2:5 is translated as “seaweeds,” which “suggests the possibility that *sûph* is a generic term (‘underwater plant growth’) including both marine and freshwater vegetation.”⁷⁶

Moreover, the connection of *sûph* to *ṯwf* has been cogently challenged. William Ward does not see the relation of the Egyptian *ṯwf* with the Hebrew *sûph*. He argues that Egyptian *ṯ* is not equivalent to the *ס* of Hebrew, phonetically. Normally, the equivalent of Egyptian *ṯ* is *š* in Semitic languages and not *ס*.⁷⁷ One can see that the linguistic argument for the connection of the Hebrew *sûph*

⁷² K. A. Kitchen, “Red Sea,” *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, (1975-1976), 5:47.

⁷³ Cf. Albright, 16.

⁷⁴ Huddleston, 5:636. Cf. Thomas O. Lambdin, “Egyptian Loan Words in the Old Testament,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 73 (1953): 153.

⁷⁵ Cf. R. D. Patterson, “*sûph*,” *TWOT*, 2:620.

⁷⁶ Hubbard, 4:59. Cf. Patterson, 2:620; Bernard F. Batto, “The Reed Sea: *Requiescat in Pace*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 (1983): 32.

⁷⁷ William A. Ward, “The Semitic Biconsonantal Root *SP* and the Common Origin of Egyptian *ḤWF* and Hebrew *SÛP*: ‘Marsh(-Plant)’,” *Vetus Testamentum* 24 (1974): 346-47.

REGALADO: THE LOCATION OF THE SEA

to the Egyptian *ṭwf*, which is the basis for the Sea of Reeds hypothesis, is difficult.

A different argument against the connection of the Egyptian *p3-ṭwf(y)* with the Hebrew word *yam sūph* has been eloquently argued by Bernard F. Batto. He argues that *p3-ṭwf* is found in many places in the Egyptian texts referring to

a papyrus marsh *area* or *district* [emphasis his], not to a lake or body of water. In some texts *p3-ṭwf* is used to designate a district or area not only where papyrus grows but also where animals are pastured and agricultural enterprises undertaken.⁷⁸

John Huddlestun, who evaluated the several usages of *p3-ṭwf* in different Egyptian texts, concludes that “it is not possible to isolate all occurrences of *p3-ṭwf* in Egyptian texts to one specific area in the Delta; rather, different passages point to varying locations.”⁷⁹

For that reason, *p3-ṭwf* is neither referring to a specific local area nor to any single body of water. Thus, Batto maintains that “Egyptian *p3-ṭwf* has nothing to do with Biblical *yam sūp*.”⁸⁰

Maurice Copisarow indicates that to the ancient Egyptians the “Red Sea is primarily seen as but a part of the vast domain of the Goddess of the *Great Green*.”⁸¹ The Egyptian term for the Great Green Water is *wadj-wer*, which applies to the “Red Sea, Mediterranean or any other sea.”⁸² Then, over the years of the history of ancient Egypt, this term came to include the Ionian Sea.⁸³ This study of Copisarow suggests the general character of the term “Red Sea.”

The broad and general meaning of *yam sūph* is attested in the way Greeks applied the term and the way it was understood in antiquity. N. H. Snaith succinctly describes this position:

The rendering ‘the Red Sea’ goes back to the LXX *hē Erythrē Thálassa*. According to Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, this phrase was used by Herodotus to denote the Red Sea, the Arabian Gulf and the Indian Ocean (I, 180, etc.), and similarly by Pindar, *Pythian Odes* 4, 448. Later, when the Greeks had discovered the Persian Gulf, the phrase included that also: Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 8.6.10, and it could also be used vaguely of far-away, remote places. The phrase thus means ‘the sea over there,’ as the speaker pointed vaguely in a southerly direction. It was a sea different from the virtually land-locked Mediterranean Sea, though nobody knew how far it extended. It was the sea at the end of the land.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Batto, “Red Sea or Reed Sea,” 59.

⁷⁹ Huddlestun, 5:637.

⁸⁰ Batto, “Red Sea or Reed Sea,” 59.

⁸¹ Maurice Copisarow, “The Ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Hebrew Concept of the Reed Sea,” *Vetus Testamentum* 12 (1962): 1.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ N. H. Snaith, “yam sūp: The Sea of Reeds: The Red Sea,” *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965): 395.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Taking a similar view, Batto adds,

[B]oth the fragmentary Aramaic text from the Dead Sea Scrolls known as the *Genesis Apocryphon* (21.17-18) and the famous first-century A.D. Jewish historian Josephus (*Antiquities* 1.1.3) state that the Tigris and the Euphrates empty into the Red Sea. The book of *Jubilees* (third or second century B.C.) says that Eden and the lands of India and Elam (Persia) all border on the Red Sea (8.21, 9.2).⁸⁵

If *yam sūph* has been understood with a broad and general meaning, most likely the translators of the LXX “may well have understood *sūp* to mean, not ‘reeds,’ but ‘end,’ equaling or perhaps reading *sōp*.”⁸⁶ This understanding of the LXX translators can be seen when they translated *yam sūph* in 1 Kgs 9:26 as *tēs echatēs thalassēs*, which means “‘the uttermost sea’ or ‘the sea at the furthest region.’”⁸⁷ This is another evidence to argue that *yam sūph* has a broad and general sense.

The term *yam sūph* is also translated as the “End or Border Sea.” This alternative translation has been proposed by Copisarow. According to him, when Jacob and his family entered Egypt (Genesis 46) to join his son Joseph there and settled between the Gulf of Suez and the Nile, “Jacob and his family used their Chaldean vocabulary in naming the two terminal features, the Gulf and the bank of the Nile. סוף ים and סוף נה derived from the patriarchal common noun סוף in the sense of end.”⁸⁸ Over time in Egypt this term was extended and “applied to the banks of the Nile, the Gulf of Suez and later to the Gulf of Akaba and the Red Sea” in the sense of border or boundary.⁸⁹ Appealing to the usage of the term סוף in the Targum Onkelos, he further argues that “by replacing קץ (Gen 4:3, 8:6, 16:3; 40:1, and Exod 12:41) by סוף in the sense of end, and then סוף in the vegetative sense (Ex 2:3 and 5) by יערא, Onkelos obviously accepted סוף ים to mean the End or Border Sea.”⁹⁰

James Montgomery suggests the same idea when he favors the Greek translation of *yam sūph* as *hē eschātē thálassa* with *ultimum mare*. He bases his argument on Ps 72:8, where the king “will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.” He admits that “the River” in this text is generally thought to refer to the River Euphrates, but “the seas” not definite. However, he argues from v.10 of the same text that the phrase “from sea to sea and from the River” is referring to “the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.”⁹¹ Thus, for him “the seas” in Ps 72:8 are a reference to the Red Sea. He further supports his

⁸⁵ Batto, “Red Sea or Reed Sea,” 59-60.

⁸⁶ Snaith, 395.

⁸⁷ Huddleston, 5:637.

⁸⁸ Copisarow, 6.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹¹ James. A. Montgomery, “Hebraica (2) *yam sūp* (‘The Red Sea’)=Ultimum Mare?” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 58 (1938): 132.

REGALADO: THE LOCATION OF THE SEA

argument by quoting Exod 23:31, where God sets “your borders from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines and from the desert to the River.” From this text, one can observe that Red Sea (*yam sūph*) is described as one of the borders or boundaries. Hence, Montgomery concludes that the Red Sea is one of the “*Ultima Maria* of Biblical geography.”⁹²

The foregoing discussion strengthens the idea that Red Sea is considered as the “End or Border Sea.” It is quite possible to think of *yam sūph* as such, for the term might come from the root word פָּיֵס, which is literally translated as “come to an end.”⁹³ In ancient times the end of a journey is any area that holds water, which was also considered as “the border, [or] limit of the country.”⁹⁴

The Wider Meaning of the Word *Yam Sūph*. The wider meaning of *yam sūph* is seen in the broader use of the term to refer to different bodies of water. In a number of biblical references, *yam sūph* has a wider meaning than has been generally assumed. The term generally refers to the Gulfs of Suez and Aqaba, yet specifically to “the sea” of the miracle crossing. Again, the hypothesis of this study that no distinction was made at the time of the Exodus between the “Red Sea” and the particular “sea” (i.e., “Lakes Ballah or Timsah”) that the Hebrews passed through is established in the following discussion.

Exodus 13:17-18 mentions that God did not lead the Israelites on the road through the land of the Philistines, which is North of Egypt, but instead “God led the people [of Israel] around by the desert road toward the Red Sea [*yam sūph*]” (v.13a). In this passage, “the desert road toward the Red Sea” [*derek hammidbār yam sūph*] refers to the direction the Israelites took from Egypt. Apparently, *yam sūph* here refers to the Red Sea in general and not just to any particular body of water,⁹⁵ such as the reedy lakes along the line of the modern Suez Canal area.

Exodus 10:13-19 narrates how Yahweh brought a hoard of locusts which were carried by the east wind and settled in every area of Egypt and plagued the country. After Pharaoh repented, the Lord “changed the [east] wind to a very strong west wind, which caught up the locusts and carried them into the Red Sea [*yam sūph*].” If one looks at the map, one sees that the body of water to the east of Egypt is the Gulf of Suez, an arm of the Red Sea. So the strong west wind blew the locusts east, that is, to the body of water east of Egypt, the Gulf of Suez. Thus, there is no likely candidate where the locusts were carried away other than the Gulf of Suez bordering Egypt in the east.⁹⁶

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ See William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1988), s.v. “Swp.” Cf. Patterson, 2:620.

⁹⁴ Ward, 345.

⁹⁵ Some scholars have pointed out the vagueness of this passage. See Huddlestun, 5:634, for a list of these scholars.

⁹⁶ Huddlestun, 5:634.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The term *yam sūph* has also been used to refer to the Gulf of Aqabah or Eilat. Jeremiah 49:21 explains this. The prophet Jeremiah prophesies against Edom that at their fall, “their cry will resound to the Red Sea [*yam sūph*].” The mention of Edom in this passage suggests that the “sea” is the northeastern finger of the Red Sea bordering the land of Edom to the west.⁹⁷ 1 Kings 9:26 is another example of the usage of *yam sūph* to refer to the Gulf of Aqaba. It says, “King Solomon also built ships at Ezion Geber, which is near Elath in Edom, on the shore of the Red Sea [*yam sūph*].” It is clear in this description that the “sea” near to the land of Edom points to the Gulf of Aqabah. The *yam sūph* here (i.e., Gulf of Aqabah) “marks the southernmost border of the territory [of Edom] under Solomon.”⁹⁸

Other places in the OT, *yam sūph* consistently refers to the sea the Israelites crossed over on their way out of Egypt. This sea is sometimes called the “sea of the Exodus” or the “sea of the miracle crossing,” in distinction both with the Gulf of Aqabah and the Gulf of Suez.

In Deut 11:4, Moses reminded the people of Israel about the good things that God had done to them. One of them was God’s overwhelming the Egyptian armies and their horses and chariots with the waters of *yam sūph*.⁹⁹ In Josh 2:10, Rahab told the two spies sent by Joshua to spy out the land of Canaan, especially Jericho, that the people of the land had heard “how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea [*yam sūph*] for you when you came out of Egypt.” Joshua, after crossing the waters of Jordan on dry ground, and after setting up at Gilgal twelve stones taken out of the Jordan, said to the Israelites:

In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, ‘What do these mean?’ tell them, ‘Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.’ For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The LORD your God did to the Jordan just what He had done to the Red Sea [*yam sūph*] when He dried it up before us until we had crossed over. (Josh 4:21-23)

From the foregoing texts, we can recognize the wide and narrow meaning of the term *yam sūph*. The wide meaning is seen in the way it is used to refer to the Gulf of Suez and to the Gulf of Aqabah or Eilat. The narrow meaning is found in the way it is used to refer to “the sea” that God dried up.

In summary, we have established the wider meaning of *yam sūph* through its alternative translation as “the End or Border Sea.”¹⁰⁰ Also, the wide as well as the narrow meanings of *yam sūph* are seen in the various ways the term is used in the Bible. Therefore, most likely the Israelites and other ancient peoples

⁹⁷ Other texts where *yam sūph* is used to refer to the Gulf of Aqaba are Num 21:4; 14:25; Deut 1:40; 2:1; Judges 11:16.

⁹⁸ Huddleston, 5:633.

⁹⁹ See also Ps 106:7, 9, 22; 13:13, 15.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Allen C. Meyers, ed., *Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (1987), s.v. “Red Sea”; Snaithe, 398; Hubbard, 4:59.

REGALADO: THE LOCATION OF THE SEA

did not distinguish between the “Red Sea” and those lakes in the north of Egypt and called them both *yam sūph*.¹⁰¹ According to Kitchen, this wide and restricted use of *yam sūph* is

not specially remarkable or unparalleled. About 1470 B.C., for example, Egyptian texts of a single epoch can use the name Wadjmer, ‘Great Green (Sea),’ of both the Mediterranean and Red Seas, and Ta-neter, ‘God’s Land,’ of both Punt (East Sudan?) in particular and Eastern lands generally.¹⁰²

Conclusion

In the contextual study of *yam sūph*, using the biblical linguistic data and the historical data regarding the different campsites used before and after crossing the *yam sūph*, we were able to locate the “sea” that the Israelites miraculously passed through. The “sea” [*hayyām*] is most likely located in the Lake Ballah or Lake Timsah area, along the line of the modern Suez canal, but definitely not in the Gulf of Suez, the northwestern arm of the Red Sea.

From our linguistic study of *yam sūph*, we have established the wider meaning of *yam sūph* through its alternative translation as “the End or Border Sea.” Moreover, we have learned that the usage of the Hebrew term *yam sūph* in a number of biblical references has a wide as well as a narrow meaning.¹⁰³ It may refer to the Gulfs of Aqaba and Suez and also to “the sea” the Israelites passed through. Thus, *yam sūph* as the sea of the miracle crossing is the narrow use of such term.

At the present time the evidence from both the archaeological and the biblical data points to Lake Ballah or Lake Timsah as the *yam sūph* the Israelites passed through on their way out of Egypt. This particular “sea” Israel crossed over is the narrow use of the wider meaning of *yam sūph*. Having located the sea that Israelites passed through, we can be confident that the writer of the narrative of the Exodus knew very well the different places he mentioned and thus established the historicity of the event.¹⁰⁴

Ferdinand O. Regalado is an Assistant Professor in the College of Theology at the Adventist University of the Philippines, Silang, Cavite, Philippines, where he has until recently coordinated the B.Th. program. He is also a doctoral student in Old Testament at AIAS and has participated in archaeological excavations in Jordan. ferdie@aup.edu.ph

¹⁰¹ Cf. Batto, “Red Sea or Reed Sea,” 62.

¹⁰² Kitchen, “Red Sea,” *NBD*, 1014-5.

¹⁰³ Cf. Wenham, 224; Patterson, 2:620.

¹⁰⁴ Cole, 44.