

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 15

The Exodus and Archaeology (Part 4)

We live in a numbers age. I, like many of you, have a driver's license number, a social security number, a PIN number, numerical passwords, numbered bank accounts, credit card numbers, a house number, a zip code number, *etc.*,—more numbers than I can count!

We have both “cardinal” numbers (one, two, three four, *etc.*) and “ordinal” numbers (first, second, third, fourth, *etc.*). We also employ the 21st century offspring of numerals (the written signs for numbers: “0,” “1,” “2,” *etc.*) that started in India in the fifth and sixth centuries, were taken up by the Arabs, and then brought into Europe around the tenth century. Accordingly, we call them “Hindu-Arabic numerals.”

The 21st century is well equipped as a numbers age. Hindu-Arabic numerals can combine positions to produce with exacting accuracy any number you should need. We easily fractionalize numbers, taking *pi* to over one trillion digits! Also, we have scientific notation so we can write 10^{12} instead of the word “trillion.”

Even a slight mental pause will remind us that not every age has been a precision “numbers” age. To some degree, the Romans were numbers people. Their construction activities required a good working knowledge of mathematics. We still see remnants of mile markers on many of the Roman Empire roads that helped make positioning accurate. The Romans had words for both cardinal and ordinal numbers, and even though they did not use a zero, they had a sign value system for numerals. Historically, these numerals developed from notches made on sticks.



One slash mark (/) was “1,” two slash marks (//) “2,” continuing until the fifth slash mark. Two co-joined slash marks (∨) were used for the fifth notation. This made the “6” ∨/. The single slash marks then continued until the tenth position, which was double the fifth mark (X). One could readily write “9” simply using the position /X.

Going back beyond the Romans, we have a good understanding of the Greeks and numbers. Some consider the Greeks the fathers of western mathematics. Pythagorus (c.590-c.495 BC) founded a religious movement that was credited with producing many of the contributions to math, including the Pythagorean theorem that many of us learned in geometry class. Like the Romans, the Greeks had words for numbers and signs for numerals. Once the Greek alphabet was settled, however, letters of the alphabet were used for most of the numerals rather than notches on a stick.

If we go further back in history to ancient Israel, then we find still a different time numerically. The ancient Hebrew language had words for numbers, but they were much more limited than the Greeks or Romans. The Ancient Near Eastern societies were not built around numbers the way ours is today. Numbers were important in census figures, in military registries, and in commercial transactions, including taxation, but those numbers were limited in their use by our standards.¹ The more common use would have been counting sheep! Hebrew was also more limited in vocabulary than most languages today—certainly more so than modern languages with Germanic or Indo-European heritage. So, while Hebrew had words for their numbers, certain limitations in vocabulary come into play when deciphering Hebrew numbers.

We should remember that Israel was closer in time and cultural development/knowledge to the Mesopotamian societies of 3000 BC than to us. It was about 3000 BC that we have some of the earliest “numerals” used in counting. They were quite primitive as shown by a tablet found in the Godin Tepe dig in Iran in 1960-1970’s.



The tablet reproduced at left reads “33 jars of oil.” Each of the three indented circles represents ten, for a total of thirty. Each downward indented stroke represents one, for a total of three. Adding the thirty and the three gives a total of thirty-three. The vat of oil is the picture to the right of the numbers.²

¹ See cites in Mendenhall, George E., “The Census Lists of Numbers 1 and 26,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 77 (1958) at 53ff.

² For a thorough discussion of the development of numerals in this early period of history, see, Schmandt-Besserat, Denise and Hallo, William W., *Before Writing, From Counting to Cuneiform*, (Univ. of Tex 1992) at 192ff.

We bother to note this history because our tendency is to read numbers with our own mindset. We always need to be careful to seek first to understand Scripture within its own historical context and frame of reference, for God placed his revelation in historical interactions with his people. This care becomes especially relevant as we conclude our study of the Scriptural account of the exodus in relation to archaeological evidence.

We address questions on the numbers involved in the exodus as well as the insight archaeology gives us into the exodus compared to popular Internet theories on the location of the Re[e]d Sea.

THE NUMBERS

How many Israelites fled Egypt in the Exodus? Exodus 12:37 in the ESV reads,

And the people of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children.

This figure is echoed in Numbers 1:45-46, where a census is credited with counting the number of men suitable for war.

So all those listed of the people of Israel, by their fathers' houses, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war in Israel—all those listed were 603,550.

If we use 600,000 men and try to figure out the full number, we need to make some suppositions about family size. We know from other passages, the Hebrews consistently sought and had large families, at least by today's standards. Moses was one of three children, but that is a small family compared to many others in ancient Israel.³ Still, if we use his family size of three children and a wife to average out for the Israelites, then the 600,000 men becomes the large total of 3,000,000 people.

So, were there 3,000,000 Israelites in the Exodus?

Many smart, well meaning, Bible believing Christians reading these passages readily accept this number, going on to see the miracles of the LORD in the

#####

³ Nahum Sarna works through the math involved in determining how 70 Israelites ("All the number of the house of Jacob who came into Egypt were seventy" Gen. 46:27) could have grown to over two million within the time frame given for the sojourn in Egypt (Ex. 13:40). Sarna argues the math works with an average of eight children per family. Sarna, Nahum M., *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (Schocken 1996) at 96. Of course, using eight children per family means that the 600,000 men of fighting age could easily top the three million figure we use in this lesson.

wilderness. For a number of similarly devout readers, however, and certainly for the skeptics, this figure raises alarms. Let me suggest three reasons why:

1. Try evacuating Houston, Texas, with 3,000,000 people during a hurricane. Even with modern transportation (cars, buses, trains, planes, *etc.*) and the extensive highway and road system, it is nearly impossible, as Hurricane Rita demonstrated in September 2005.

In this regard, one scholar’s math showed that if the 600,000 figure is literal,

When on the march, they would constitute a column twenty-two miles long, marching fifty abreast with one yard between each rank.⁴

Add to those people their livestock, groceries, and all other possessions, and the idea that three million Israelites left and made it through the Re(e)d Sea, or from Rameses to Succoth, or anywhere else over night, is difficult for many to accept.

2. Three million people leaving Egypt, wondering for forty years in the wilderness without leaving any signs, and then invading the Promised Land pose additional questions. Such numbers would likely create a “demographic disaster,”⁵ at each place—Egypt, Sinai, and Canaan.

Consider, for example, the demographic effects on Egypt. Emily Teeter is an Egyptologist at the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago. In a book she co-wrote with anthropologist Douglas Brewer, we read,

By the New Kingdom [c.1570-1069BC], Egypt may have had a population of as many as 3 million people.⁶

Needless to say, an exodus of around 3 million from an entire population of 3 to 3.5 million would leave a noticeable hole!

#####

⁴ Snaith, N. H., “Numbers,” *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible* (Routledge 1962) at 254.

⁵ Hoffmeier, James K., *Ancient Israel in Sinai*, (Oxford 2005) at 153.

⁶ Brewer, Douglas and Teeter, Emily, *Egypt and the Egyptians* (Cambridge 2007) at 47. We should note that Teeter and Brewer give no basis for their number, but the number is consistent with that determined by others. Typically, these numbers are derived from studying the archaeological evidence like housing, combined with potential food supplies. Karl Butzer gives the figure of 3.5 million in *Early Hydraulic Civilization in Egypt*, (U. of Chi. Press 1976), 76-77. Butzer based his figure on two “unpublished” studies by Klaus Baer and Fekri Hassan, both noteworthy professors and scholars in areas of Egyptology and archaeology.

Aside from Egypt, consider the invasion of Canaan. In a 1986 study, Magen Broshi and Ram Gopher determined that the population of Canaan in the Middle Bronze Age II (the time of the Israelite invasion) *totaled* just 150,000 people. The implications for 3,000,000 invading Israelites are huge. First, there should be evidence in the archaeological record for this immediate twentyfold increase in people. Furthermore, 3,000,000 invading Israelites would hardly have feared a total of 150,000 men, women and children, even if they seemed gigantic! Yet, Scripture tells us in Numbers 13:28 that after spending 40 days spying the land, the Israeli spies reported in fear:

The people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large.

Large cities? Consider Jericho, the first city attacked by Israel. It was less than one acre in size. The population would have numbered in the thousands, not millions. The campus of the home church for this lesson is much larger in size than all of Jericho. One does not get the impression that three million Israelites would consider Jericho or any of the other nearby villages “large.”

Similarly, if the Israelite army was over 600,000 men, when 36 men were killed in the fight over the town of Ai, it seems odd that it was regarded as a major defeat and a cause for great mourning (Josh. 7). The loss of 36 men while definitely tragic, was not a significant loss in terms of *numbers* of fighting men.

Finally, we should note that God explained to Moses that the Israelites were going to conquer Canaan “little by little” as there were not enough Israelites to occupy the whole territory so the land would “become desolate and the wild beasts multiply” (Ex. 23:29). Yet if there were 3,000,000 Israelites and only 150,000 Canaanites, this passage seems difficult to understand.

3. A historical examination challenges the military implications of these numbers. The Biblical text points out the fear Pharaoh invoked by sending 600 chariots “with officers over all of them” (Ex. 14:7) after the Israelites. This hardly seems a match for 3,000,000 Israelites, especially if 600,000 of the Israelites were fighting men. Each chariot would have to kill 1,000 just to tie the Israelite army! Admittedly, the weaponry would favor the Egyptians, but did a chariot even carry a thousand arrows?

Estimates beyond chariots indicate that Pharaoh's entire army, from every corner of his empire was at most 20,000 to 25,000 men.⁷ Could the Israelite army have truly been 30 times the size of Egypt's? If so, could not the Israelites have walked off from slavery at the time of their own choosing? Perhaps even the Israelites could have enslaved the Egyptians!

So with these difficulties, we examine more closely the passage in Exodus 12:37.

And the people of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children.

A number of scholars have weighed in on this issue offering a wide range of ideas. Before we offer a number of competing theories, we suggest that the translation of 600,000 men may itself be in error. The alternate translation will be given at the end of this discussion as the last theory considered, but first we list the other prominent explanations:

Exaggeration? Some scholars dismiss the number as an exaggeration or hyperbole to magnify the tremendous work of YHWH in rescuing the people. Eryl Davies argues that the numbers were purposefully exaggerated,

To demonstrate the miraculous power of Yahweh who was able to sustain such a large throng during the trials and tribulations of the wilderness wonderings.⁸

That theory we set aside both as inconsistent with our view of Scripture and as not the best understanding of the text in question. While the numbering in Exodus is general, "about six hundred thousand men on foot," in Numbers 1:45-46 it is very specific, "So all those listed of the people of Israel, twelve men, by their father's houses, from twenty years old and upward, every able man to go to war in Israel—all those listed were 603,550."⁹

Hyperbole or exaggeration on the number of Israelite men "to demonstrate the miraculous power of Yahweh" is totally unnecessary in a story about God's redemption that includes miracles of the plagues and Passover, a divine parting of the Re[e]d Sea, manna and quail in the wilderness, water from rocks, *etc.* The

#####

⁷ Gnirs, Andrea, "Military: An Overview," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, (Oxford 2001) Vol. 2 at 404.

⁸ Davies, Eryl W., "A Mathematical Conundrum: The Problem of the Large Numbers in Numbers I and XXVI", *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 45, Fasc. 4 (Oct. 1995) at 468.

⁹ The exactness of the number in Numbers, "603,550," also mitigates against the idea of verbal hyperbole in the sense that we might today say, "he tried *a million times* and just couldn't make it work."

miracles themselves show God’s divine power and awesome accomplishments, whether they were for 60,000 people or 600,000 people. Furthermore, it seems if the effort was being made to make the number seem larger than life, that it would have included all Israelites rather than simply the men of fighting age.

One danger of this type of view, as seen by those who question the accuracy of the translation, is that it propagates what might be a poor translation, rather than at least giving the alternate possible meaning of the Hebrew text.

Ignorance? Another set of scholars see the 600,000 figure as evidence that the writers of the Pentateuch were too far removed in time and knowledge from the era of which they pretended to write. In other words, many of these scholars believe the exodus was a fiction set to writing around 600 or 700 years *after* the Ramesseside period, and out of ignorance, the authors unknowingly used preposterous numbers in the story.

This view does not do justice to many aspects of the story already detailed in earlier lessons.¹⁰ Time after time, we have seen that the writer clearly knew of places and Egyptian practices that were valid only during the New Kingdom of Egypt, disappearing by the first millennium BC.

Accurate? Some see these numbers as accurate and a shibboleth of faith, even though notable conservative Old Testament scholars and Egyptologists consider the idea “implausible.”¹¹ Our suggestion here is that while nothing is beyond our God, we should not force an understanding on Scripture that is not inherent in Scripture. To do so risks not only injustices to God’s word, but also risks making faith seem devoid of reason.

Poorly understood? Nahum Sarna is Emeritus Professor of Biblical Studies at Brandeis University outside of Boston, Massachusetts. He is an editor and translator of the Jewish Publication Society’s English Bible. Sarna believes that this passage was likely written during the monarchy of David/Solomon. He asserts that as the Israelites were celebrating the building of the Temple, they recorded these numbers at the temple time.

This population figure [600,000] more or less represents the historic reality of the period of the united monarchy, the period of David and Solomon.¹²

#####

¹⁰ See the lessons on the class website: www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

¹¹ Hoffmeier at 157.

¹² Sarna, at 101-2.

The immediate objection to Sarna's theory¹³ is the context of the passages. The passages clearly state that these were men that "Moses and Aaron listed" (Num. 1:44), the number of people who "journeyed from Rameses to Succoth" (Ex. 12:37).

If the authors were writing at the time of the united monarchy, they could have listed the figures as those who were descendants. In an anticipatory defense against this criticism, Sarna suggests that we err when we "equate 'truth' with literalism."¹⁴ He sees the historical time as that of an era, spanning from the Exodus up to the Temple construction. As such, the history is more "historiosophical," a complex understanding of a flow of historical thought and effect, rather than simply a factual dissertation of events.

Examining his defense, one may fairly focus on the full text that encapsulated the time period through Joshua, Judges, Samuel, I Kings, and the Chronicles up to Solomon's temple. This full array of history gives contradictions that seem unlikely if the history was written from Sarna's "temple celebration" perspective. While in Numbers 26:4, God orders a census of the people *after* a plague of judgment upon the people, by the temple time, the situation was quite different. David, Solomon's father, had himself conducted a census. As noted in 1 Chronicles 21, however, that census brought about a plague upon the people. In light of that, it seems unlikely that Solomon would have conducted a similar census or made use of census numbers in celebration of the Exodus finding ultimate fruition in construction of the temple.

Poorly translated? Before we discuss the translation, consider the English word "lock." "Lock" can mean a number of different things. It might reference one's hair ("She left behind a lock of her golden hair!"). It might mean a mechanism that stops thieves ("He locked the door after he left"). Or, it might even refer to the mechanisms used to change water levels in a canal ("The shipped traversed the locks at Panama"). "Locks" is a multipurpose word that requires context to determine its meaning. We suggest that while this is common in English, in older less verbose languages like ancient Hebrew, it is even more common.

Toward this end, we examine the Hebrew consonants used in "thousand." They are 'lf and depending on how they are vocalized the same consonants can mean "thousand" ('*elef* in Gen. 20:16 "Behold I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver"), "chiefs/leaders" ('*alluf* in Gen 36:15 "These are the chiefs of the

¹³ We should note that Sarna was neither the first, nor the only scholar to suggest this idea. See also Albright, W. F., *From Stone Age to Christianity*, (Doubleday Anchor 1957), at 253. Albright suggests that attributing the figures to Moses involved some garbling and misunderstanding by the scribes who wrote the scrolls.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* at 100.

sons of Esau”), or “group/clan/family” (*’elef* in Judg. 6:15 Gideon says, “Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh”).

The wording for “clan” in the Judges passage is identical to that of “thousand” in Exodus and Numbers. From this a number of scholars have advanced theories that understand the numbers given for the Exodus as not meaning 600 thousand, but instead meaning 600 clans or groups. Over fifty years ago George Mendenhall, the Professor of Near Eastern Studies at the University of Michigan wrote,

There seems to be a consensus among those who have treated the census lists in the Book of Numbers since 1903, on at least two points: first, that the word *’elef* does not mean “thousand” but rather is a designation of some subsection of a tribe; and second, that the numbers are impossible.¹⁵

In its core sense, this means that the passages are not giving 600,000 men, but rather 600 groups of men, either divided by family, military unit, or even tent, depending upon which scholar you read. This puts the exodus figures into a range of 15,000 to 50,000 people altogether, a figure very compatible with the archaeological evidence and the accounts given in Scripture.¹⁶

Kenneth Kitchen uses this explanation not only to make sense of the exodus, but also to look at other Hebrew passages where the translation seems to go awry. For example in 1 Kings 20:30, we read of the wall of the city of Aphek falling upon “27,000” men left of the Syrian army. The idea of a wall that size would be unheard of in that era, especially of a small town like Aphek. It is much more likely that it fell on the men of either 27 officers or even what was left of 27 groups from the fighting force.¹⁷

James Hoffmeier joins the chorus of those who believe the text records a much lower number writing,

#####

¹⁵ Mendenhall, George E., “The Census Lists of Numbers 1 and 26”, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (Mar. 1958) at 52.

¹⁶ An added problem with these figures arises from extrapolating the various census counts of families as well as the taxes levied for constructing the items of worship. Still, most conservative authors give sensible ideas on how these factors fit in. Because the details extend beyond the scope of this paper, those interested are encouraged to research more. See, e.g., Humphreys, Colin J., “The Number of People in the Exodus from Egypt: Decoding Mathematically the Very Large Numbers in Numbers I and XXVI”, *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 48, Fasc. 2 (Apr. 1998) 196-213.

¹⁷ Kitchen, Kenneth, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, (Eerdmans 2003) at 264.

The problem does not lie with the text but in how one translates the word *'elep* [an alternate transliteration of *'elef*].¹⁸

Noting that translation options include “clans,” “tent groups,” “military unit,” or “some subsection of a tribe,” Hoffmeier concludes the text(s) in question when properly translated,

...leaves little doubt that the number of individuals would have been in the thousands, maybe a few tens of thousands, but certainly not hundreds of thousands, let alone millions.¹⁹

Before leaving the translation issue, we should note one further level of concern. As discussed in previous lessons, Scripture makes a claim, which we believe is well supported, that Moses was the author of a good bit of the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy). As Moses composed, his primary language would not have been the Hebrew we read in Scripture. A layer of translation was already done putting Moses’ more ancient language into what we consider classical Hebrew.²⁰

Summary.²¹ The approaches to the textual/archaeological issue can be considered in three groups:

- (1) For those who believe the 600,000 translation is proper and accurately reflects the history, the plain meaning of Scripture is accepted and archaeological/historical considerations are deemed misunderstood.
- (2) For those who believe the 600,000 translation is the proper translation, but is not accurate, the plain meaning of Scripture is rejected, trumped by archaeology/history.
- (3) For those who believe the 600,000 translation is improper, both the integrity and accuracy of Scripture is upheld, and the archaeological/historical considerations are given common sense acceptance as well.

#####

¹⁸ Hoffmeier, James K., *Ancient Israel in Sinai*, (Oxford 2005) at 156.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* at 159.

²⁰ Later in Hebrew language development, the alphabet became used for numbers. But earliest Hebrew seemed to take its numbers from the Egyptian system. For a full discourse on this see Chrisomalis, Stephen, *Numerical Notation, A Comparative History* (Cambridge 2010).

²¹ There are several other ideas for understanding this difficulty that we have culled out of this lesson since they are not in the mainstream. These include symbolic use of the numbers (“gematria”) and a zodiac interpretation placing the numbers within star signs.

The net of this is a warning against ever dismissing a challenging Scripture as error, without first researching and probing to see the fullest story available! This is especially true when dealing with unusual numbers in an age very different from our own!

HAVE WE “FOUND” THE RE[E]D SEA CROSSING?

Some time ago, a very dear friend of mine sent me a PowerPoint presentation on the crossing of the Re[e]d Sea that was circulating on the Internet. The PowerPoint originated from the work of now deceased Ron Wyatt. Wyatt was devoted to finding evidence to substantiate early biblical stories. He believed he found Noah’s ark. He also wrote extensively about his belief he had found evidence of the Israelites crossing the Re[e]d Sea. Over the next few months, the email continued to make it into my mailbox from a number of Christian friends who found the presentation compelling. The information and photos behind the presentation can be found on a website dedicated to Wyatt and his work at www.wyattmuseum.com.

Before we explore this popular email, I should add that I never met Ron Wyatt and have no reason to doubt either his motives or his sincerity. That said, his opinions on the exodus are difficult to accept under a closer examination of the Biblical and archaeological record. This portion of the lesson serves as a second layer of concern that we not only should study our Scriptures carefully (as discussed earlier) but that we should also carefully examine the opinions of others, especially those we get on the Internet!



Wyatt believed that in Scripture, the “Red Sea is used to refer to all sections of that sea—the main body, the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Aqaba.”²² Wyatt walked through a number of landmarks given in the Bible and assigned them to various places along the way to the Gulf of Aqaba. On the shoreline of the Sinai Peninsula and Aqaba, Wyatt found a satellite picture that he thought showed only one area where 3 million Israelites could stand. From there, his subsurface sonar work seemed to indicate a shallow land bridge that,

#####

²² www.wyattmuseum.com/red-sea-crossing-04.htm.

once waters parted, would have allowed the Israelites to pass through the gulf. Wyatt then had photographs of coral growth that he thought was shaped like chariot wheels. He believed these coral growths must have started on the crashed wheels of Pharaoh's chariots.

The entire story is well written, but conspicuously missing footnotes for anyone to cite-check his asserted facts. Consider his comments on Exodus 13:18 ("But God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness of the Red sea...") Wyatt states,

It was the Wilderness of the Red Sea - the mountainous land of the mid and southern Sinai Peninsula. This was along a route that was commonly taken in those days by both caravans and the army, and it was called "the southern route." This route was taken because it was safer than traveling along the coast, where the Philistines were.²³

Yet, we know that the Philistines were not even dwelling in the land at that point of time. Furthermore, the "Southern Route" was not as clear as Wyatt indicates. Similarly, Wyatt takes Numbers 33:8 ("And they departed from before Pihahiroth, and passed through the midst of the sea into the wilderness, and went three days' journey in the wilderness of Etham") and asserts, with no support, that

Etham is not believed to be a singular location. It was a designation of the land that lay around the mid-northern edge of the Gulf of Aqaba. We know this because once they cross the sea, they are still in an area called Etham.²⁴

Instead of accepting this perhaps well intentioned website, we should look to some other sources to ferret out what we can understand about the Re[e]d Sea and its location.

Toward that end, we must first ask whether it seems odd that we repeatedly reference the "Re[e]d Sea" rather than simply the "Red Sea." Our reasoning concerns the proper translation of the Hebrew text. In Hebrew, two words are used for "Re[e]d Sea": *yam sup*. "Yam" means "sea" or "lake of water." "Sup" means "reeds" or "rushes." It is the same word used when Moses is placed in a

#####

²³ Scripture speaks of the coastal route as the "Way of the Philistines" but *not* because, as Wyatt puts it, "the Philistines were" there. It is because later in time the Israelites reading the text would have understood the area as that of the Philistines.

²⁴ www.wyattmuseum.com/red-sea-crossing.htm.

basket among the “reeds” (*sup*) of the Nile in Ex. 2:3.²⁵ So, the literal translation of the term is “Reed Sea” not “Red Sea” of which we often read.²⁶

If the “Red Sea” is in fact the “Reed Sea,” then why is it often translated as “Red Sea?” This translation comes through time and earlier translations. When the Alexandrian Jews were translating their Scriptures into Greek several centuries before Christ (the “Septuagint”), they translated the Hebrew word “reed” into the Greek word for “red.” To be more accurate, as Kitchen notes, the Septuagint:

...translation “Red” is simply an interpretation (not strictly a translation!) of dubious origin, and has no inherent authority.²⁷

If we are to dismiss the Red Sea and concentrate on finding the “Reed Sea,” then how shall we do it? While the temptation is to get on Google maps and find a good satellite image of the Egypt/Sinai region to determine the candidates for the “Re[e]d Sea, we must note the little likelihood of success in that regard. Over the last 3,000 plus years, the shorelines of Egypt, Sinai, and the delta region have all changed dramatically. Lakes/seas have dried up, canals have disappeared, and even the shape of the Nile has changed significantly.

We do know that at the time of Ramesses II, there was a region in the area where the Jews were fleeing that was “the reed area.” Hoffmeier advances good arguments in favor of understanding this area as a body of water known as the “reeds,” in other words, the “Reed Lake” or “Reed Sea.” A discovered piece of Papyrus called “Papyrus Anastasi VIII” speaks of the Egyptian “Reed” area as east of Pi-Ramesses, in the precise area where Scripture sets the Israelites fleeing. This papyrus, now in the British Museum, is dated from the middle of the reign of Ramesses II.

There are some marvelous works of scholars that sift through the Scriptures and the archaeological evidence to deduce, not only the location of the Re[e]d Sea, but also the routes of the exodus after crossing the sea. Those interested should seek out these scholastic works by Bible believing experts in Egyptology and archaeology, rather than read the easy and convenient “too good to be true” stuff making it through Internet chain mailings. The works cited in the footnotes of this

²⁵ There is a general consensus among scholars that the word *sup* comes from an Egyptian word *twf* which, although it looks quite different, has a similar sound to the Hebrew word when each is pronounced correctly! See Hoffmeier at 81ff and Kitchen at 261ff.

²⁶ In Scripture, we see the words “*yam sup*” referring to a number of different bodies of water with reeds. Almost always it refers to that one which the Israelites crossed through God’s miraculous parting of a certain body of water, yet once it refers to the Gulf of Suez (Num. 33:10-11) and four times to the Gulf of Aqaba (Num. 14:25; 21:4; Dt. 1:40, 2:1). See Kitchen at 262.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

lesson are a wonderful place to start. These works in turn have full footnotes to send a student closer to the primary sources that help best focus one's opinions.

CONCLUSION

We took a step back this week to address some basics about Scripture. As we understand Scripture to be God's revelation to man, we must always be mindful that God spoke and produced this through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3:16) working through the hand of man in the time and culture of various eras and civilizations.

Does this mean that the common person has no chance of understanding Scripture? Of course not! The story of God's salvation is so clear and simple that a child can understand and put faith into the saving work of Christ. Yet while there are easy-to-understand passages, there are also those that are challenging. Even Peter found some of Paul's writings challenging as he explained,

...there are some things in them [Paul's letters] that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures (2 Pet. 3:16).

The beauty of God's word is that we are never "finished" in our study of it. New insights in the world often open up new layers of understanding of Scripture. It should produce an excitement in us to anticipate the ways that the Lord has revealed his plan, and the ways we can better understand that through study.

In this class, we are purposely addressing some of the more difficult issues found in Scripture. We have not spent as much time on the 99 percent of Scripture that is readily understandable at face value. Our directed focus must not discourage anyone to the point where they feel Scripture translation is unreliable or incomprehensible absent a seminary education. In other words, enjoy the journey unraveling some of the thornier areas of Scripture, but do not ever lose sight of the plain and easily understood gospel message of God's saving love expressed in Christ's sacrifice!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”* (2 Tim. 2:15).

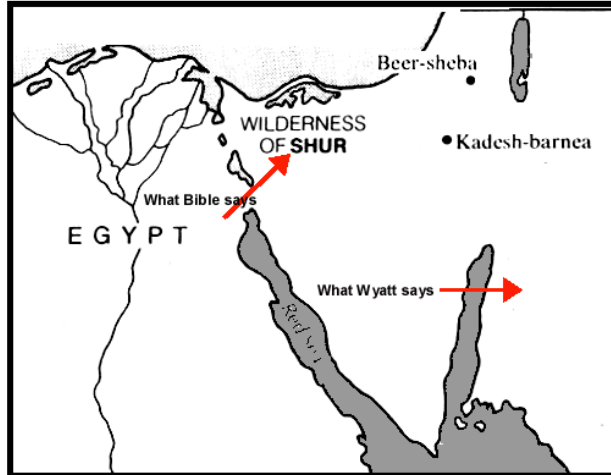
The world watches the church! They watch what we say and what we do. A church pastor with a few dozen members gets national media attention for days on end because he is planning a burning ceremony of the Koran. When believers accept poor scholarship without examination, it does not reflect well to those who watch for truth. Let us renew our efforts to take study of God’s word seriously. To engage the minds he gave us in efforts to best use and handle his Scriptures, with no shame!

2. *“And the people of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children.”* (Ex. 12:37).

600,000 men? Or 600 groups of men? Study and make your choice. But never get lost in the figure where you miss out on what happened! God saved his people. God was faithful to his promise, and with a mighty outstretched arm, brought his people out of slavery into covenant with him. At that point, the number that really counts is *one*—YOU! Each of us has a choice to live as masters of our destiny or in faith before Jesus as Lord. God is faithful to his promises. He offers each a choice between a life of slavery to sin and death, or a covenant relationship with him that gives freedom and life. The real question is not 600,000 or 600 groups or even 6. The question is individual.

3. *“Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur.”* (Ex. 15:22).

Israel left the Re[e]d Sea and entered into the Wilderness of Shur. This is an area discussed in several places in Scripture and there is a general consensus among scholars as to where it is located. This is one of many geographical issues that challenge Wyatt’s conclusions.



The point for home on this is, *before passing on Internet chatter about Biblical matters, take some reasoned time and study to consider its merits.* Things that seem too good to be true often are! This is especially important in how we often use these materials. If we are using them to enrich our own faith, then how does our faith suffer when we discover something was wrong? If we are using these types of emails to push others into belief, we might remember that Jesus pointed out those who would not believe if they saw someone raised from the dead! Paul warned of a time

...when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

May this never be said of us!

WANT MORE?

Draw the tabernacle and email it to me at wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com. Next week, we discuss both the tabernacle and the legal code for Israel.