



The Ancient Near East Today

CURRENT NEWS ABOUT THE ANCIENT PAST

The Location of the Biblical ‘Red Sea’

By Barry J. Beitzel

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road to the land of the Philistines, though that was near. For God thought, ‘If the people face warfare, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.’ Instead, God led the people around on the wilderness road to the ‘Red Sea’ (Exod 13:17-18a).

By faith the people passed through the ‘Red Sea’ as if it were dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do the same, they were drowned (Heb 11:29).

We sent an inspiration to Moses: “Travel by night with My servants, and strike a dry path for them through the sea, without fear of being overtaken (by Pharaoh) and without (any other) fear.” (Quran, Surah Taha, 20:77).

The Israelite exodus from Egypt is arguably the most foundational event recorded in the history of Israel, found in texts that are sacred to both Judaism and Christianity. The question of the location of ancient Israel’s deliverance at the “Reed/Red Sea” has long fascinated and vexed geographers, historians, archaeologists, and biblical scholars alike, as vividly illustrated by the unabated and widely varied publications on the subject.



Satellite image of Egypt and Sinai.

In addition to source-critical or historico-critical paradigms or literary analyses, much of the grist for these discussions has naturally arisen from the biblical expressions employed to locate the event (Hebrew: *yam sūf* ["sea of reeds/papyrus"]; Greek: *erythra thalassa* ["Red Sea"]; Latin: *mare rubrum* ["Red Sea"]). Historically speaking, this aspect of the question has revolved around Hebrew philological and lexicographical examination (sometimes including Egyptian lexicography), biblical exegesis, and/or an investigation of the ancient geography of the northeastern Nile Delta, including the topography and locational coordinates of its contiguous terrain, especially towards the east.



Moses leading the Hebrew from Egypt, Dura Europos synagogue, second-third century CE.



Agnolo Bronzino - The crossing of the Red Sea, 1540-1550 CE.

A more precise geographic placement of the exodus is complicated by the fact that the expression *yam sūf* occurs some 26 times in the biblical record, in a number of distinct contexts. As a result it is understood in scholarly literature to designate either (a) the Gulf of Aqaba/Elat (e.g., 1 Kgs 9:26), (b) the Gulf of Suez (e.g., Num 33:10-11), and/or (c) one of the inland lakes separating Egypt and Sinai (e.g., Exod 10:19). Likewise, in both Greek and Latin literature from the classical era, this expression is attested more than 800 times—however translated—and can be said to denote water located to the south of continental Asia and/or the Arabian sub-continent, ranging specifically from the vicinity of the Gulf of Suez in the west as far as the Bay of Bengal in the east.

Further complicating the search for a precise location is the fact that in the mid-19th century the entire terrain between Port Said on the Mediterranean coast and the Gulf of Suez underwent a massive topographic upheaval occasioned by the construction of the Suez Canal and its auxiliary infrastructure. There is also the historical question of the possible impact of shifting sea level across this lowland over the past millennia, and whether today's Gulf of Suez may have extended farther north to incorporate the Bitter Lakes or even Timsah Lake (as is sometimes similarly argued today for the northern extent of the Persian Gulf in antiquity).



Timsah Lake, Suez Canal.

At the end of the day, one must recognize that beyond a limited and generic description found in the Bible, augmented by textual clues found in both Hebrew and Egyptian lexicography, and by considerations of geographic and terrestrial logic, no *definitive* evidence of any sort exists to support a precise locational tradition, aside from the demonstrable fact that the event must have occurred within relatively close proximity to the eastern frontier of Egypt's Delta.

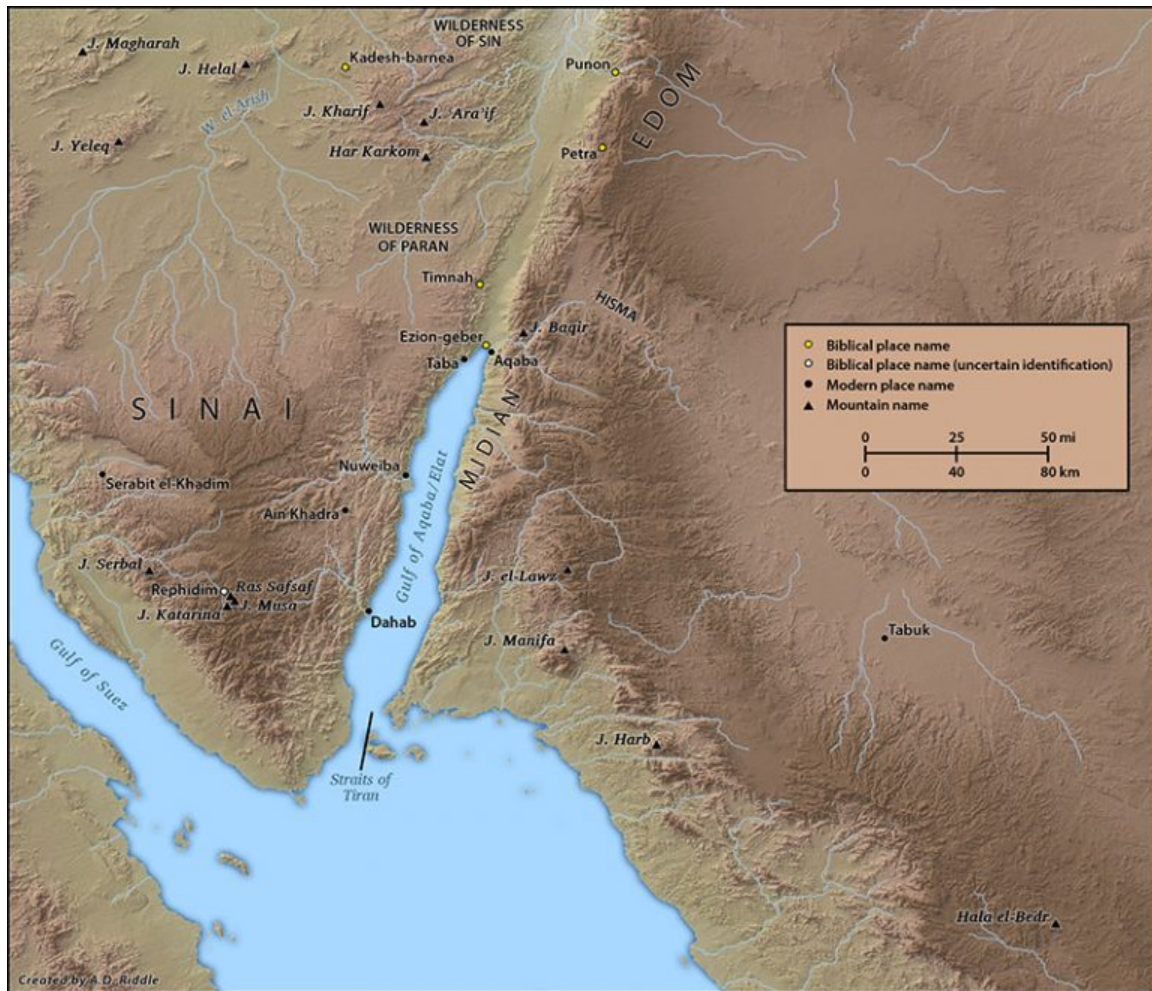


Map showing the Nile Delta, Sinai Peninsula, and potential cross points. Courtesy Barry Beitzel

Scholarship in several disciplines has long sought to locate the exodus event somewhere along the eastern edge of northeast Egypt. The map displays a series of mostly shallow inland lakes that separated Egypt and Sinai, all of which were known and attested in antiquity. Over the past several hundred years, each of these lakes has been proposed or suggested as a possible candidate for the event.

Thus for example, Egyptologist Alan Gardiner and geologist Barbara Sivertsen have posited Menzaleh Lake as the site. Likewise, Egyptologist Heinrich Brugsch, explorer Claude Condor, biblical scholars Otto Eissfeldt and Henri Cazelles, and archaeologist Emmanuel Anati have suggested the Sirbonis Lake. In similar manner, Egyptologists Hans Goedicke and Manfred Bietak, and archaeologists and geographers Yohanan Aharoni, Anson Rainey, and James Hoffmeier have nominated the Ballah Lakes.

The event is proposed to have taken place at Timsah Lake by Claude Condor, Egyptologists Edouard Naville, Georges Daressy, and Kenneth Kitchen, biblical scholars George Robinson, Samuel Driver, Sigmund Mowinckel, and myself. Finally, biblical scholars Umberto Cassuto and Carl Rasmussen, geographer Menashe Har-El, and soldier-scholar T.E. Lawrence, have argued in favor of the Bitter Lakes.



Map showing the Gulf of Aqaba. Courtesy Barry Beitzel.

At the same time, and related to this same school of thought, the northernmost terminus of the Gulf of Suez itself has been set forth as a possible exodus site by biblical scholars Antoine Augustin Calmet, Jean Le Clerc, Edward Robinson, Carl Friedrich Keil, Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., and John Currid, among others. The takeaway here is that one can observe a long and storied academic history associated with this school of thought, in all cases connecting the exodus event with a location in close proximity to ancient Egypt.

Parenthetically, over the past 20-40 years, a scattering of other writers have come to propose an exodus event occurring at a location in or near the Gulf of Aqaba/Elat, more than 400 kilometers removed from Egypt's Delta. In this regard, the crossing has been thought to have taken place near the northernmost terminus of the gulf, south about midway on the gulf at the oasis of modern Nuweiba, and in the southernmost part of the gulf, at the Straits of Tiran. The necessity of near proximity to Egypt argues against any segment of this gulf serving as a host for the exodus event.

Likewise, the discipline of Christian cartography (and some specimens of Jewish mapwork), going back as many as the past 750 years, has also sought to locate the exodus event in close proximity to Egypt, mirroring longstanding scholarship. In most instances, the exodus is cartographically depicted taking place near the northern terminus of the Gulf of Suez (which is also consistent with the history of Christian pilgrimage).

One of the earliest specimens of this genre is known today as the Hereford Cathedral World Map. Dating to ca. 1285 CE, and like dozens of maps from that era, the Hereford is oriented to the east. At precisely dead center one finds a large circle, labeled "Jerusalem" (with a crucifix). Rivers are painted in blue and seas are

displayed in green, except for the Red Sea, which appears in vivid red paint, located in the map's upper-right (southeast). Near the northern extremity of the more westerly of the gulfs—the Gulf of Suez—one can see a narrow perpendicular break in the painted sea, through which a clear pathway line emanates in both directions. This circuitous linework is shown to commence in Egypt (west of the gulf) at “the house of Potiphar” (cf. Gen 39:2), passing through the Red Sea, winding through the Sinai, the Negeb, and around the Dead Sea, eventually crossing the Jordan river and ending at the site of Jericho (cf. Josh 4:19). Immediately to the right (south) of this opening in the sea and the corresponding linework, one reads the added note, translated in English: “The journey of the Israelites from Egypt.”

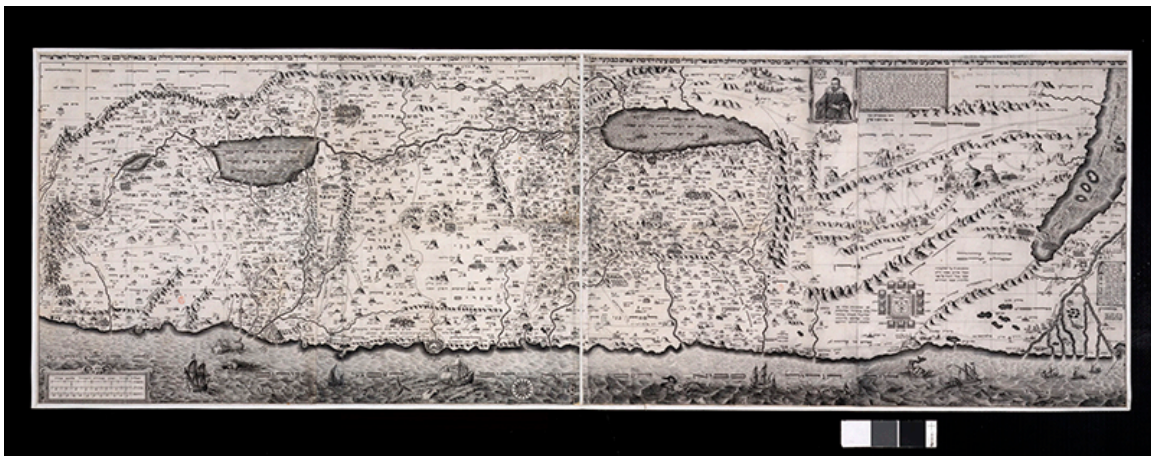


Hereford Cathedral World map, ca. 1300 CE.



Detail showing route of the Exodus.

This cartographic tendency is amply represented in numerous specimens from other sources. Thus for example, a copperplate engraving of the Land of Canaan, the work of Yaaqov ben Abraham Zaddiq (ca. CE 1620 CE)—the earliest known printed map in Hebrew—prominently features linework of an exodus route and numbered stations along Israel’s journey (cf. Num 33:5-49). Again oriented to east, the bottom right of the map displays the outflow of the seven distributaries of the Nile River into the Mediterranean. Nearby, on the east of the Delta, one finds the site of Rameses (numbered as #1) and the commencement of a depicted “*yam sūf* wilderness road” (cf. Exod 13:18a), which goes by the sites of Succoth (#2), Etham (#3), and Pi-hahiroth (#4), before passing through a perpendicular break in *yam sūf* (also identified by Zaddiq as *yam mišrayim*; cf. Isa 11:15) and entering Sinai.



Jacob ben Abraham Zaddiq map 1620-1621 CE.



Detail showing the beginning of the route of the Exodus.

An extremely serpentine Sinai route passes the site of Rephidim (with Aaron and Hur depicted atop a hill, supporting the hands of Moses, #11), and arrives at Mt. Sinai (emitting smoke, #12). The labyrinth-like road continues on to Ezion-geber (#32), and eventually arrives at the site of Kadesh-barnea (#33). From there the road takes a northeast turn, goes by the Dead Sea on the south and east sides, passes Abel-shittim on the plains of Moab (#42), and extends as far as the Jordan River, opposite Jericho, where the road ends.



Detail showing Moses at Mount Sinai.

The theme of the exodus route also figures prominently in the so-called “Psalter World Map” (ca. 1225–1265 CE), which was added to a Latin manuscript of the Book of Psalms. The Psalter map is also oriented to east, with Jerusalem placed conspicuously at dead center, and the Red Sea portrayed in red paint. Essentially to the south of Jerusalem, and in the more westerly of the painted gulfs—the Gulf of Suez—one observes a perpendicular interruption in the paint. Writing on the map immediately to the east of this break reads in translation, “Red Sea crossing.”



Psalter world map, ca. 1260 CE.

So, where is the biblical “Red Sea”? Medieval art and cartography possess its own set of geographical patterns, flaws, and spatial limitations, and even a fair amount of plagiarism. But when linked to other evidence such as Christian pilgrimage a widespread and persistent tradition situating the exodus in close proximity to Egypt’s Delta is unambiguous. Moreover, this same tradition is clearly and overwhelming reflected in biblical and exegetical scholarship over the past 300 years. The same cannot be said on the behalf of other locations, including somewhere on the border of modern Saudi Arabia.

*Barry J. Beitzel is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament and Semitic Languages at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He is the author of **Where Was the Biblical Red Sea? Examining the Ancient Evidence** (2020).*