

From generation to generation the story of God saving the Israelites by drowning the Egyptians – chariots and all – has been interpreted for us on the big screen and the television screen. The movie *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston came out in 1956.¹ And we feel compelled to watch Hollywood’s three hour 51-minute movie version of the parting of the Red Sea rather than read and interpret the Exodus story ourselves. In the movie as the waters are blown up as a wall, a blind man describes what he feels to a young boy: “God opens the sea with a blast of his nostrils” and the waters part leaving dry land that the Israelites can pass through. Indeed the Red Sea has been thought to be parted by a great wind.

Those of us who have experienced the winds of a major hurricane know the kind of power that can move enormous amounts of water. Parts of the Gulf Coast were devastated by a 35-foot wall of water. I wonder if Katrina were documented only by our recollections, by the stories we have heard and told, if the recorded narrative would be more like the parting of the Red Sea than the documentation of the power of a storm before the downed towers that could have measured the forces of storms. I wonder if we might see the hand of God (or the breath of God) in who were saved and who were lost.

Let’s take hard at this story of a powerful God who can control the forces of nature. And let’s see if we can find a new meaning of this familiar Old Testament story. The text of the story of the Israelite Crossing of the Red Sea is so much more than a journalistic account of what happened: it is a retelling of an experience that was strongly influenced by the oral traditional of Israelite story telling. The version we know comes from the Septuagint translation which is a translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek – translated as legend would have it by seventy Jewish Scholars late in the 2nd century BC.

The physical setting is important because we have always thought of the Red Sea location as an integral part of the story. But scholars argue that the smaller marshy “Reed Sea” is the location of the parting of the sea. Was God working a miracle in standing the sea waters up like a wall so that the Israelites could pass through unharmed on a dry sea bed, or was God working through the ordinary world of science and nature? And does it matter?

The Red Sea is a seawater inlet of the Indian Ocean that lies between Africa and Asia. It is almost 1400 miles long and more than 200 miles at its widest and has an average depth of 1600 feet. On the other hand the Sea of Reeds – which is the salt water Lake Timsah – is shallow and surrounded with marshy land. East winds strong enough to blow away the water do occur, so say scientists here in the US who have created a simulation of fluid dynamics to show how this may have actually happened exactly as the Book of Exodus described: a mighty east wind blew all night, splitting the waters and leaving a passage of dry land with walls of water on both sides. A 63 mile an hour wind from the east could have pushed the waters back and exposed a mud flat at the bend of an ancient river beneath the Sea of Reeds creating a land bridge. As soon as the wind died down, the waters would have rushed back in.

In ancient times the name Red Sea indicated the direction of the waters – Red was for south, just as the Black Sea was so named because it flows north. So the Red Sea was known as the Southern Sea or Red Sea. Ironically the Red Sea which is still a sea road and a very effective trade route and Somali pirates are very active just to the south of the Red Sea.

Surely the telling of the story as the crossing of the Red Sea is much more dramatic than chariot wheels getting clogged by the muddy bottom of the Sea of Reeds. Did God use a natural phenomenon to achieve his purpose? Or was it a miracle of spectacular proportions? And does it matter which one really happened?

Either sea – the Red or the Reed – have deep meaning. Whether a miraculous event done by direct intervention of God or the workings of God’s own creation, does it really matter to us? If we believe that the word of God can only be taken literally, then we would need to discard most modern scholarship. We could check our brains in the Narthex as we come in.

Archeologists tend to say that this or that never happened because there is no historical evidence. And those who have worked in Egypt have found no evidence to support the account of this Bible story, and there is only one “find” that suggests that the Jews were ever in Egypt. They have excavated and searched and studied and written entire books on the subject, but they are loath to discount the Biblical accounts of the Israelites’ travels and travails in Egypt. Their research has “remained low-key as the empirically minded have tried not to incite the spiritually minded.”² Yet even scientists can find room to hold onto their beliefs. Without proof of the Old Testament story of Moses and the Israelites fleeing Egypt, or wandering in the desert, there still is room for doubt. The head of a recent excavation suggests the theory that “A pharaoh drowned and a whole army was killed,” ... and “This is a crisis for Egypt, and Egyptians do not document their crises.”³ Indeed history is written by the winners of a war or conflict, not the losers. Do we think this is how the parting of the Red or Reed Sea really happened?

What I really am asking – and I am asking myself, as well – is whether the stories we have relied upon since we were wee tiny in Sunday School need to be accurate to be true. We have so many stories about God in our minds that have been there since we were formed as children. As we grew in our knowledge, we likely came to question and doubt what we hold to be true. Can we hold on to the stories we love knowing that we cannot prove God’s action in this or in any of the Bible stories? Can we hold onto our faith as we embrace the ambiguity we face in believing the Bible? Or can the tension over authenticity actually affirm our faith?

Here is what I trust we understand to be the truth: the Israelites always seemed to be in a struggle. And God was with them in their struggle! The battle turned for the Israelites whether God used natural means and the Egyptian chariots bogged down in the soft earth in the Sea of Reeds, or as the story grew in the telling from one generation to another and God used supernatural means in the Red Sea event. What is important is that God saved the Israelites. Their subjugation to the Egyptians was over. The Israelites saw the marvel which God had done for them, so they held God in awe and trusted in God.

We do not know precisely what happened at the Red Sea or the Sea of Reeds, but we know the result. God's people were saved, and Moses led them on their way.

God's angels had gone before and after the Israelites. Angels were with Moses as he stretched out his hands over the Red or Reed Sea and God's people were redeemed. I wonder, do we need to see spectacular results from our "waving our hands over water" or can we simply accept that God will eventually defeat evil and redeem the world? Do we need to see the waters parted in a dramatic miracle or even a natural way to trust that God is active in our world? Do we recognize that angels are at work around us? What do we need to believe to recognize God is at work in our world?

Have we ever had an angel of the Lord stand between us and disaster? I have. I am sure we all have.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ The 1956 movie *The Ten Commandments* was produced, directed, and narrated by Cecil B. DeMille, shot in VistaVision (color by Technicolor), and released by Paramount Pictures. The film is based on the 1949 novel *Prince of Egypt* by Dorothy Clarke Wilson, the 1859 novel *Pillar of Fire* by Joseph H. Ingraham, the 1937 novel *On Eagle's Wings* by A. E. Southon, and the Book of Exodus in the Bible. It is a remake of the prologue of DeMille's 1923 silent movie of the same name. Every year the film is aired in its entirety on a major television network during Passover/Easter season.

² Michael Slackman, reporting from The North Sinai Journal for The New York Times, April 3, 2007, article "Did the Red Sea Part? No Evidence, Archaeologists Say."

³ *Ibid.*