

The Route of the Exodus

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Israel's Origins

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“I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt; and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites...”¹ God ordained Moses to lead the people of Israel out of captivity in Egypt back to Canaan, the land He promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The journey, however, would take God’s chosen people out of the fertile Nile delta, through the “harsh, mountainous, arid and forbidding”² wilderness of the peninsula that connects the African and Asian continents, into the “land flowing with milk and honey.”³ The actual route the Israelites took, however, can be considered “a subject of controversy among scholars.”⁴ For those who study the Bible, only two places cited in scripture, “Ramesses and Succoth (Ex 12:37) may be identified with some degree of confidence. But the other Egyptian place-names mentioned in the narrative are not clearly identifiable.”⁵ As a result, the exact locations of two very important events in the story, the crossing of the Red Sea and Mount Sinai, are not known, and therefore three very different theories have evolved about the route. Such debate, however, is generally limited to those who concern themselves with proving every word of Scripture. The Fathers of the Church concentrated, rather, on the content of the message, not on the literal significance.⁶ Nevertheless, the Church holds traditions with regard to these contested locations, allowing for a route to be determined with a fair amount of confidence, not dissimilar to one that the scholars have identified.

From an archaeological standpoint, several problems have contributed to the uncertainty of the actual route of the exodus. First, no permanent populations have existed in most of the locations cited in the narrative, which could have continued to use the names from the account, and associate them with a particular place. Second, the nomadic Israelites did not leave much behind during their movement that could be later found and used as evidence of their presence in a particular site. Finally, vagueness in the story and inconsistency in translation of Scripture have raised doubt about certain aspects of the account and traditional interpretations. Based on

¹ Herbert May and Bruce Metzger, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford Press, 1977), Ex 3.16-17. For all bible references.

² Dr. Evangelos Papaioannou, *The Monastery of St. Catherine, Sinai* (Sinai: St. Catherine’s Monastery, 1980), p. 5.

³ Ex 3.8.

⁴ Papaioannou, p. 6.

⁵ Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament: a Christian survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), p. 108.

⁶ Cf. Origen, *Exodus Homily V*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), pp. 275-284.

different hypotheses with regard to the location of Mount Sinai, scholars have essentially identified three routes: a northern route, called the “Way of the Sea,” generally follows the Mediterranean coast; a central route, places Mount Sinai in Saudi Arabia; a southern route, most similar to the traditional route of the Church.⁷ However, none of these routes gives a certain location for the crossing of the sea,⁸ primarily due to an inconsistency between the Septuagint and Hebrew texts, which translate the body of water as the “Red Sea” and “Sea of Reeds,” respectfully.⁹ Most scholars take this translation to lead to the conclusion that:

the body of water Israel miraculously crossed is one of the freshwater lakes east of the Nile Delta where such reeds were found: Menzaleh, Ballah, Timsah, or the Bitter Lakes (some would add Lake Sirbonis to this list). The Red Sea’s Gulf of Suez probably should be ruled out, as may the Gulf of Aqaba, since these larger salt water bodies lack the reedy vegetation necessary to qualify them as the “Sea of Reeds.”¹⁰

Yet, there is obvious disagreement between scholars about which freshwater body could be the “Sea of Reeds.” As the narrative states, “they moved on from Succoth, and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness.”¹¹ Later, the people followed Moses, who was instructed by God to “Tell the people of Israel to turn back and encamp in front of Piha-hi’roth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Ba’al-ze’phon.”¹² Although Succoth is accepted to lie just west of the Bitter Lakes, the locations of Etham, Piha-hi’roth, Migdol, and Ba’al-ze’phon are uncertain, and therefore there is dispute concerning how far south the Israelites traveled before turning back, and exactly how drastic this turnaround may have been. As a result, while Eerdmans’ commentary puts the crossing at Lake Menzaleh, a freshwater lake adjacent to the Mediterranean, Arnold and Beyer suggest the Bitter Lakes, about 60 miles to the southeast, as the likely location for the conflict with the Egyptians.¹³

⁷ Arnold and Beyer, pp. 108,109.

⁸ Cf. Ex 14.

⁹ Arnold and Beyer, p. 108. David Alexander and Pat Alexander, ed. *Eerdmans’ Handbook to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 163. GORP, 703. For space reasons I site only three of my sources here, but actually every scholarly commentary I consulted used the Hebrew translation “Sea of Reeds,” and therefore assume that the body of water crossed must have contained reeds.

¹⁰ Arnold and Beyer, p. 108.

¹¹ Ex 14.20.

¹² Ex 14.21.

¹³ Erdmans’, p. 163. Arnold and Beyer, p. 111, map.

As mentioned previously, the three most likely routes identified by scholars are defined, mainly, by where each locates Mount Sinai. The northern route identifies Moses' mountain as present day Jebel Helal, in the northern part of the Sinai Peninsula, around 40 miles from the Mediterranean. The path to the mountain either follows the thin strip of land that separates the sea from Lake Sirbonis,¹⁴ or follows the main road to Canaan from Egypt, the Way to Shur.¹⁵ Although these routes were potentially the easiest to navigate, since both were essentially direct routes to Canaan, and both follow major highways of the day, neither fits biblical accounts that "God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near,"¹⁶ nor do they account for archaeological evidence showing a large Egyptian military presence as far north and east as Gaza.¹⁷ As such, most scholars generally disregard these northern routes. The central route, conversely, places Mount Sinai in the extreme northwestern part of present-day Saudi Arabia, just east of the Gulf of Aqaba. This area is attractive to scholars, because of its concurrency with various biblical accounts:

the Bible's references to the theophany at Sinai describe an active volcano (Ex 19:18; 24:17, etc.). Geological evidence points to volcanically active areas in Arabia at that time, while mountains of the Sinai Peninsula were not. Also, the land of Midian was located east of the Gulf of Aqaba. So when Moses settled in Midian, and eventually met God at Mount Sinai (Ex 3:1), a region in northwestern Arabia was intended.¹⁸

Despite these rather convincing arguments, one could say that it would be odd for God to appear in the form of a volcanic eruption, as suggested by this theory. Furthermore, the land of Midian was not limited to the area east of the Gulf of Aqaba, but rather, the narrative states that Moses "led his flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God."¹⁹ Lastly, since the path "across the barren, waterless limestone shield of central Sinai was impracticable,"²⁰ it is very unlikely that Moses could have lead a large band of men, women, children, and livestock across such terrain successfully. The last route, which generally follows the southern coasts of the Sinai Peninsula, is also mostly in line with the route traditionally accepted by Christians and Muslims. This route places Mount Sinai at Jabel Musa, translated as

¹⁴ Arnold and Beyer, p. 111, map.

¹⁵ May and Metzger, Map 2.

¹⁶ Ex 14.17.

¹⁷ Arnold and Beyer, p. 109.

¹⁸ Arnold and Beyer, pp. 109,110.

¹⁹ Ex 3:1. Note, Horeb, the mountain of God, is Mount Sinai.

²⁰ GORP, 704.

the Mount of Moses, at the foot of which the Orthodox Monastery of St. Catherine is located.²¹ Most scholars accept the southern route, since it “answers more questions than the others,”²² or “in any way fits the circumstances,” outlined in scripture.²³

Generally speaking, the fathers of the Church didn’t concern themselves with trying to speculate about the actual route of the exodus. For example, Clement of Rome affirmed that Moses “by the command of God, whose providence is over all, led out the people of the Hebrews into the wilderness; and, leaving the shortest road which leads from Egypt to Judea, he led the people through long windings of the wilderness.”²⁴ He only affirmed what was stated in scripture, but didn’t offer any further commentary or insight. More significantly, the fathers tended to disregard the historical accuracy of the events, concentrating instead on the theological significance associated with the story. Origen demonstrates this course of thought as he preaches:

Let us see, however, what sort of rule of interpretation the apostle Paul taught us about these matters. Writing to the Corinthians he says in a certain passage, “For we know that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all were baptized in Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. And they drank of the spiritual rock which followed them, and the rock was Christ.” Do you see how much Paul’s teaching differs from the literal meaning? What the Jews supposed to be a crossing of the sea, Paul calls a baptism; what they supposed to be a cloud, Paul asserts is the Holy Spirit.²⁵

The theological importance of the exodus to the Orthodox, can, perhaps, most vividly be seen in the liturgical life of the church. The first Biblical Canticle, to be sung with the first ode of any canon of the Church,²⁶ is the Song of Moses, sung by the people after crossing the sea and escaping Pharaoh in glory to God.²⁷ Likewise, the theme of the irmos of the first ode of every canon refers to the crossing of the Red Sea. The significance of the event is clear, but the depth

²¹ Papaioannou, p. 8.

²² Arnold and Beyer, p. 110.

²³ GORP, 704.

²⁴ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, ed. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), VIII, 87. Henceforth referred to as “ANF.” Despite the “Recognitions of Clement” being of disputed origin, I assume for the purposes of this paper that the author of the work is Clement of Rome. None of the content I refer to appears to be in dispute with the teaching of the Orthodox Church, and therefore I quote it as an indicative example of patristic thought.

²⁵ Origen, p. 276.

²⁶ *The Horologion or Book of Hours, the Daily Offices*, (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 2000), pp. 660-665.

²⁷ Ex 5:1-19. Horologion, p. 702.

of the theology surrounding it can conceivably be seen best in of the foreshadowing of the Holy Cross, as demonstrated by the irmos to the first ode of the canon of the Universal Exaltation of the Cross:

Inscribing the invincible weapon of the Cross upon the waters, Moses marked a straight line before him with his staff and divided the Red Sea, opening a path for Israel who went over dry-shod. Then he marked a second line across the waters and united them in one, overwhelming the chariots of Pharaoh. Therefore let us sing to Christ our God, for He has been glorified.²⁸

Moses is thus seen as the first prophet of Christ, foretelling Jesus' fate upon the wood. Putting aside the theological significance of the exodus, there is a clear implication in the irmos to what the Church tradition is with respect to the route. The scholars who argue that the Hebrew translation dictates a crossing of a "Sea of Reeds" tend to believe that the Israelites waded through a marshy area filled with reeds, and that the Egyptians got caught in the mud and were swept by tides of some sort. However, in the Septuagint, and again in the hymns of the Church, a clear explanation that the **Red Sea** was crossed, that the Israelites walked on dry ground, and that the waters were **divided** by **Moses raising his staff**, not some unpredictable water currents. This was all done for the Glory of God, so His "wonders [might]²⁹ be multiplied in the land of Egypt."³⁰ Therefore, clearly, the Church holds the tradition that the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, not some freshwater lake to the north. Furthermore, the Church maintains the location of Mount Sinai as undisputed, for the Monastery of St. Catherine is located at the foot of the mountain, at the location where the burning bush that was not consumed³¹ stands to this day.³²

Despite attempts by modern critics to de-emphasize the theological importance of the exodus, and focus, rather, on trying to prove or disprove its historical accuracy to serve a particular agenda, the Orthodox Church maintains her agenda of glorifying God. Although the Church professes, through her tradition, a particular side of the story, the importance of the account is the foreshadowing of Christ, the sanctity of God's people (those who profess faith in Him), and God's glory. Therefore, the lesson to be learned is the lesson the Church teaches, that one is not to focus on personal glory, but on the glory of the God who created all.

²⁸ Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, *The Festal Menaion*, (South Canaan: STS Press, 1998), p. 144.

²⁹ Orig. may

³⁰ Ex 11.9

³¹ Ex 3.2.

³² Papaioannou, p. 24.