

THE RED SEA IN THE NT

By Scott Lanser and Erich D. Schwartz

Israel Crossed the Reed Sea (*Yam Suph*)

The voice of the Tanach, the Hebrew OT, is simple and clear—the Israelites crossed the *yam suph*. *Yam* is “sea,” *suph*¹ is “reeds”; together, they mean “Sea of Reeds.” In the OT, the *yam suph* was a definite location, and a large one. There God deposited the locusts that devoured Egypt (Ex 10:13-19). After crossing the miraculously parted *yam suph*, the Israelites traveled some distance over an unspecified period lasting several days, then encountered the *yam suph* again (Nm 33:10-11). The *yam suph* had a shoreline in the land of Edom, where were situated the cities of Ezion-Geber and Eloth. And the *yam suph* was to be a border of Israel (Ex 23:21).

The *yam suph* is mentioned throughout the Hebrew Scriptures—a dozen times in the Law,² and as many in the Prophets and Holy Writings. The majority of instances are found in passages that chronicle God’s miraculous deliverance of the Israelites in their exodus from Egypt.

Can *Yam Suph* be Expressed in Greek?

Certainly, any Mediterranean writer could express “Sea of Reeds,” and the term’s rendering into a language other than Hebrew would have been a simple matter of translation. The Greeks, for instance, had seas and reeds, and wrote of them. Their *kálamos* reed was used in jubilant celebration of the gods, as a reed-pipe (Pindar 1937 and 1990: Nemean poem 5, lines 38-39; Olympian poem 10, line 83). The *kálamos* was used in the construction of Indian fishing boats, of Egyptian boat apparatus, of houses in Sardis, and of the brick walls of Babylon (Herodotus 1890 and 1920: bk. 1, chap. 179; bk. 2, chap. 97; bk. 3, chap. 98; bk. 5, chap. 101). Many soldiers under Xerxes had bows and arrows of *kálamos* (Herodotus 1890 and 1920: bk. 7, chaps. 61, 64, 65, 67, 69, 92). Xenophon, under Persia’s Cyrus the Younger, despaired of finding anything but fragrant shrubbery and *kálamos* as they marched among the nomad Arabs just east of the Euphrates at the end of the fifth century BC (1894: bk. 1, chap. 5, par. I).

According to the writers of the Septuagint (LXX), *kálamos* was used in an anointing oil (Ex 30:23), was part of behemoth’s habitat (Jb 40:21), and part of the garden representing the bride (Sg 4:14). Along with papyrus, it lined the waterways of Egypt (Is 19:6), and would spring up for Zion when the desert blossomed “as the rose” (Is 35:1-7, KJV). Egypt was a bruised *kaláminos* (little reed), unreliable and not to be leaned upon (2 Kgs 18:21 [4 Kgs 18:21 in LXX]; Is 36:6; Ez 29:6 [29:7 in LXX]), but a bruised *kálamos* would not be broken by the Messiah (Is 42:3).

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It was the *kálamos* that served as a measuring rod for Ezekiel’s Temple (Ez 40-42).

The Gospel writers also used *kálamos* for various reeds, including that given Christ as a scepter, then employed as a rod against Him (Mt 27:29-30; Mk 15:19), and that used as a pole to lift vinegar to Him on the cross (Mt 27:48; Mk 15:36). John used a *kálamos* for writing (3 Jn 13), and saw such a *kálamos* as Ezekiel likewise saw in the glorious Temple (Rv 11:1).

So the Greeks could certainly write about reeds, and the vocabulary doesn’t stop at *kálamos*. Other Greek “reed” words include the *puthmēn* (Gn 41:5,22, LXX) on which grew the grain in Pharaoh’s prophetic dream, and *hēlos*, a swamp or marsh featuring good vegetation. There could be a “flowering stretch” of *hēlos* (Aristophanes 1907 and 1994: line 352), and one of Homer’s similes describes thousands of cows grazing in a *hēlos* (Homer 1931: bk. 15, line 631).

The Persians were often running into this *hēlos* or that. Xerxes was campaigning in Macedonia near a *hēlos* when lions attacked his camels (Herodotus 1890 and 1920: bk. 7, chap. 124). In his assault on Babylon, Cyrus the Great diverted the River Euphrates to feed a swampy area—a *hēlos* (Herodotus 1890 and 1920: bk. 1, chap. 191). Cyrus’s son Cambyses, in his advance on Egypt, ran into a great *hēlos* where he lost many of his men; his next stop was Pelusium (Diodorus 1989: bk. 16, ch. 46, secs. 4-6), so he wasn’t far from the reedy area, the *yam suph*, where the Egyptians had met their catastrophe almost a millennium earlier.

Hēlos can refer to a reedy area, as it does in the LXX Exodus 2:3, 5 and Isaiah 19:6. *Hēlos* is the perfect Greek word to translate the Hebrew *suph* if *suph* is recognized as meaning “reeds” or “area of reeds.” *Suph* is indeed what *hēlos* is translating in Exodus 2:3, 5. But the LXX translators used a very different term for the *suph* of *yam suph*.

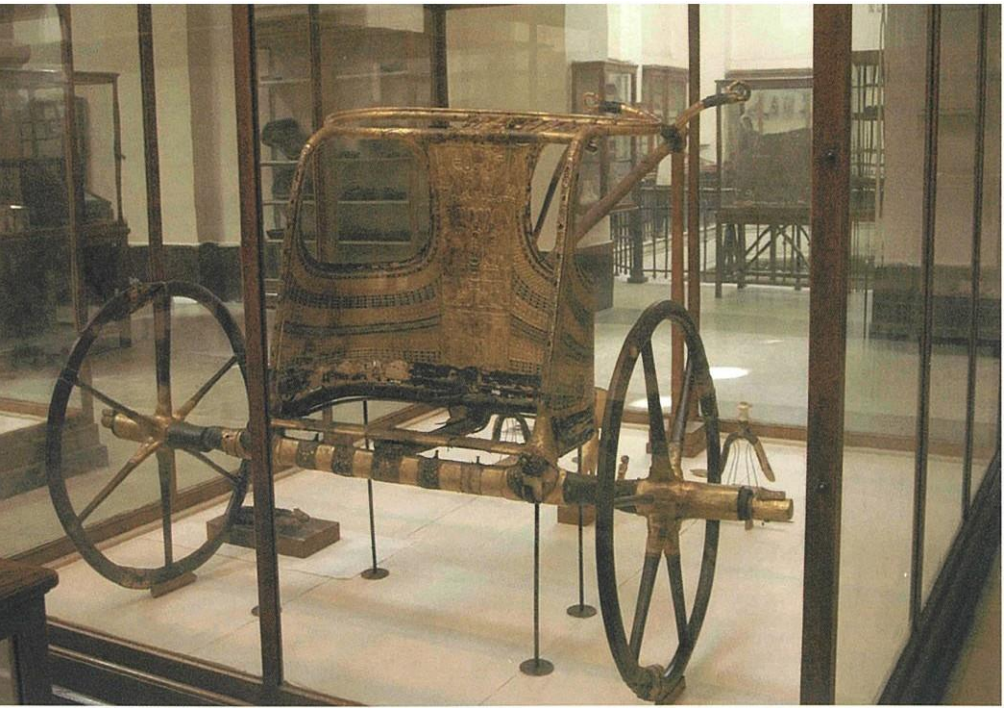
Israel Crossed the Red Sea (*Erythrá Thálassa*)

The Septuagint Writers

Yam Suph = “Red Sea”?

The LXX writers, in translating *yam suph* throughout the Pentateuch, Joshua, Nehemiah and the Psalms, used a term that has no apparent literal connection to *suph*. *Erythrá thálassa*³ is their rendering—“Red Sea,” not “Reed Sea.” After *yam suph*, this was a second and different word concerning the Israelites’ crossing and God’s great work. Was it a false word, or was the word true?

In the LXX, a comparison of those “Red Sea” texts with those few that do not translate *yam suph* as “Red Sea” helps to answer that question. All 21 verses in which the LXX



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transliteration of the Hebrew *suph*. Why the *erythrá/Siph* variation?

In Judges 11:16, Jephthah recounts to the Ammonites that Israel journeyed through the wilderness unto the *yam suph*, and came to Kadesh at the border of Edom. His reference is to the history of Numbers 21:4, where Israel journeyed from Mt. Hor by “the way of the *yam suph*” in order to go around Edom. “The way of the *yam suph*” is arguably a way they had been in ever since crossing the *yam suph* 40 years earlier: thus we have the Alexandrinus “Red Sea” reading for Judges 11:16, since the LXX always uses “Red Sea” in reference to the miraculous crossing. Numbers 21:4 was thus Jephthah’s reference. Jephthah’s own construction, however, places the *yam suph* after the wilderness wanderings, so his *yam suph* is presumably at the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba, at the border of Edom; he makes no apparent reference to the *yam suph*/Red Sea crossing. Thus, we have the Vaticanus “Siph Sea” reading for Judges 11:16, to set this

An Egyptian chariot. “The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea...Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots...’ Exodus 14: 23, 26

translates *yam suph* as “Red Sea” (Ex 10:19; 13:18; 15:4,22; 23:31; Nm 14:25; 21:4; 33:10,11; Dt 1:40; 2:2; 11:4; Jos 2:10; 4:23; 24:6; Neh 9:9; Ps 106:7,9,22; 136:13,15 [Ps 135:13,15 in LXX]⁴ refer to the miraculous crossing, either directly or as a general theme. An example of a direct use is, “The chariots of Pharaoh and his host He cast into the sea; and his choice officers are sunk into the *yam suph*” (Ex 15:4, authors’ translation, as are all Scripture quotations henceforth.) At the beginning of the wilderness-wandering judgment, a more general thematic instance is found: “Tomorrow turn and take your journey [into] the wilderness, the way of the *yam suph*” (Nm 14:25), where thematically the mention of the *yam suph* / Red Sea indicates that the Israelites were obliged to return to Square One of their Salvation.

Both verses in which the LXX translates *yam suph* as something other than “Red Sea” (1 Kgs 9:26; Jer 49:21) refer geographically to the Gulf of Aqaba and thematically not to the miraculous crossing. In 1 Kings 9:26 (3 Kgs 9:26 in LXX), *yam suph* is rendered *eschátē thálassa*, “the last sea.” It was the sea on whose shore Solomon’s direct influence ended and his navy set sail. In Jeremiah 49:21 (30:15 in LXX), *yam suph* is rendered simply *thálassa*, “sea,” where the cry at the fall of Edom would be heard.

One *yam suph* verse remains. For Judges 11:16 the renderings are split between two codices, or ancient versions, of the LXX-Alexandrinus and Vaticanus. Alexandrinus renders *yam suph* as *thálassa erythrá*, “Red Sea,” as with the 21 verses listed earlier; Vaticanus, however, renders *yam suph* as *thálassa Siph*, “Siph Sea,” wherein *Siph* is a Greek



The Codex Vaticanus originally contained a complete copy of the Septuagint (LXX) and has been stored at the Vatican Library since the library was founded by Pope Nicholas V in 1448. Some scholars have argued that Codex Vaticanus was among the 50 Bibles that were produced by Eusebius of Caesarea under orders from Emperor Constantine I in AD 322.

passage apart from all of the *yam suph*=Red Sea, miraculous-crossing passages.

In all the OT, Judges 11:16 is alone in referring to an apparent miraculous-crossing passage (Nm 21 :4), while being itself a non-miraculous-crossing, simple-geographic-designation passage. Perhaps because of this distinction, only here among *yam suph* verses do we see the split in LXX manuscripts, and we further see that Vaticanus reserves the transliteration of the word *suph* to this one verse.

The above account serves to highlight the care the LXX translators exercised to set apart the miraculous-crossing passages with this “flag” term, “Red Sea.” Yet the questions remain: why did the translators use that non-literal term rather than another; was the term even geographically correct; and

“Solomonic solution” (200; 54), would satisfy the Church for many generations.

In our day, the recent discussions related to the location of the Reed Sea/Red Sea crossing have brought the translation issues of the LXX into fresh focus. Stated simply, we need to understand how the Jewish translators of the LXX came to render the Hebrew (*yam suph*) as “Red Sea,” instead of its literal meaning, “Sea of Reeds.”

An equally important question must also be answered in relationship to these concerns: In Acts 7:36 and Hebrews 11:29 the NT authors, under the inspiration of the Spirit, record that the place of the crossing of the Hebrews was the Red Sea. It is generally agreed among scholars that these NT writers (and Stephen, as the speaker in Acts 7) were using the text of the



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These reeds at Tell Daphnae, a remnant of Ballah Lake, are an excellent example of the type of reeds that can be found in the region of the Nile today. The Hebrew term *yam suph* (sea of reeds) was used of the place of crossing of the Israelites.

most significant of all, how did the Holy Spirit influence, if at all, the LXX writers?

The Church in the “Reed Sea”/ “Red Sea” Debate

When Augustine sought to explain the differences that arose in translation between the LXX and the Hebrew scriptures, he asserted that the Seventy translators were inspired by God in the same way that the Hebrew prophets were. His novel approach, what LXX scholar Martin Hengel called Augustine's

LXX in communicating this singularly extraordinary event in the history of the Jewish nation. The fact that these early believers and writers of Scripture would select a text from the LXX that is different from the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT), and presumably from a Hebrew parent text, raises many important issues for us today:

1. Is the text of the LXX inspired in the same way as the Hebrew text? If viewed as simply copies of Scripture, do these copies retain the same authority as the

Hebrew manuscripts from which they were translated?

2. Is the rendering “Red Sea” for the Hebrew *yam suph* an error on the part of the LXX translators, or were there other factors and motives that led them to this rendering?
3. In quoting the LXX, did the NT writers validate, through divine inspiration, the rendering “Red Sea,” even if it is

crossing is a well-established tradition in the history of the church; we want to uncover whether there was another tradition supporting the literal translation of *yam suph* as a Sea of Reeds crossing.)

Even if one is to conclude that the translation of *yam suph* is “Sea of Reeds” and not “Red Sea” (which is readily apparent), we are not out of the theological woods yet. Indeed, we have



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The Red Sea at Elim. The location and boundaries of the Red Sea have changed over the course of the centuries. Herodotus described a vastly different “Red Sea” than the body of water we call by that name today.

an erroneous translation of *yam suph*?

4. Is there some way we can understand that both “Red Sea” and “Reed Sea” translations are from the Lord, and are valid for our understanding and instruction? (This was Jerome’s begrudging conclusion... as well as Augustine’s.)

In addition to these issues surrounding the LXX, we must also investigate whether there are other ancient versions of the OT that did not translate *yam suph* as “Red Sea,” but instead followed the literal translation of *yam suph* as “Sea of Reeds.” If there is such versional evidence, the question of “inspiredness” of translations must be revisited. Coupled with this inquiry must be an investigation to determine evidences in Christian history for an understanding of the Crossing that supports the rendering “Sea of Reeds.” (The understanding of the Crossing as a Red Sea

entered an even larger discussion—one that will drive us back to some of our most fundamental views of the doctrine of Scripture and its transmission.

The Doctrine of Inspiration

Central to our inquiry must be a clear understanding of the inspiration of Scripture. Unfortunately, many operate with a very misguided concept of this doctrine, leading to theological confusion. *We must understand that inspiration is the direct action of the Holy Spirit in carrying along the writers of Scripture, so that they would write exactly what He wanted them to write. This initial writing, what we call the autographs, is the inspired Word of God.* We no longer possess these original documents, but we do possess many ancient copies, some almost complete, and others just fragmentary. In what sense, then, do the copies of the original documents contain the quality of “inspiredness”?

Can we trust the copies to contain the same inspired authority as the autographs?

A key to understanding this issue is the way NT characters and authors used the OT scriptures. In Luke 4 Jesus is handed the scroll of Isaiah, likely a LXX copy (Jobes and Silva 2000: 194) of a line of Hebrew copies from the autograph. Reading the first two verses of chapter 61, Jesus then sits down and proclaims, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” This clear affirmation by Christ reveals that the copies of Scripture were considered as equal in authority to the originals. Here, the Son of God sets an example for all of us, that we can indeed trust a copy of the original text (something we do every day when we open our King James Version or English Standard Version!).

What is most interesting is that “New Testament writers frequently quote the Greek OT directly—perhaps as many as three hundred times” (Jobes and Silva 2000: 24). Clearly, the LXX was accepted and used by at least the Hellenized Jewish communities, and—most importantly for our inquiry—it was used extensively by Jesus, the Apostles, and the writers of the NT. This reality explains the use of the expression “Red Sea” in the Acts 7 and Hebrews 11 passages. Luke, in recording Stephen’s speech, and the author of Hebrews simply used the phrase used in their copy of Scripture, the LXX. It is apparent that they understood the expression “Red Sea” to be fully a part of the inspired text. This leaves us with some intriguing and important questions that need to be answered.

Is the Septuagint Inspired?

The Church Fathers grappled with the complexities with which we are confronted with great energy and earnestness. Justin, Irenaeus, Clement, Tertullian, Jerome, and Augustine all weighed in on this matter.⁵ Going back to the *Letter of Aristeas*,⁶ a legend appeared and was passed along down the centuries to Augustine and beyond concerning the supernatural work of the Seventy(-two) Jewish translators who created the LXX text.⁷ The legend states that the translators were sent at the behest of the librarian of Alexandria and were to bring the Hebrew Torah scrolls for the purpose of producing a copy in Greek for the library of Alexandria. These men were sent under the auspices of the High Priest in Jerusalem. It was reported that, individually or in twos, the translators separated themselves in order to produce a Greek version of the OT. The legend went on to claim that when the translators came back together, they discovered that a miracle had occurred—they had all separately translated the OT into Greek identically! This legend was seriously questioned by Origen, playing a role in leading him to create his Hexapla.⁸ Origen, as Jerome in the 4th century, desired to return to the primacy of the Hebrew text, due to the discrepancies discovered in the LXX text.

It was Irenaeus who would most notably promote and establish the legend, but especially the concept that the LXX was created by inspiration—in the same way the prophets were inspired in the creation of the OT, or Ezra to re-create the lost pre-exilic Hebrew manuscripts. Thus, the Church adopted the concept that the LXX was a miraculous production, of equal status with the Hebrew Scriptures as an inspired document.

The Eastern Orthodox Church (Greek, Russian, Syrian)

adopted the LXX as the inspired OT for their branch of the Christian faith (Jobes and Silva 2000: 25). Today, however, scholars from within their tradition are re-evaluating this decision, renewing again the debate concerning the primacy of the Hebrew text versus the LXX text.

Over time the legend grew, and when Jerome faced the issue squarely, he was found to be a voice crying in the wilderness. His cry was that the Hebrew text should receive primacy as the text closest to the autographs, and the most authoritative text. Like Origen before him, he saw clearly the discrepancies in the LXX. With much controversy, the scholar from Bethlehem worked diligently to translate a new version into Latin directly from the Hebrew, and in so doing bypassed the LXX altogether. It was nothing short of a miracle that Jerome received papal support for this project, and that the Vulgate was completed without the direct influence of the LXX. This fact deeply disturbed Augustine. He lamented the acceptance of Jerome’s translation, because to him the legend of the creation of the LXX was utterly true, and the text of the LXX should thus be received as equal in authority to the Hebrew text. His solution was to promote both texts as inspired, even harmonizing apparent contradictory texts (Hengel 2000: 47-54).

It is fascinating to note that Jerome, although maintaining the primacy of the Hebrew text, confronted the Red Sea/Reed Sea dilemma by actually moving closer to the position of Augustine.

Jerome postulated that *suph*, while meaning ‘red,’ might also mean ‘reed.’ In short, Jerome thought that *yam suph* could apply both to the Red Sea and the Reed Sea through which the Israelites passed (Hoffmeier 1997: 207).

To summarize, although many Church Fathers embraced the legend of the LXX and even promoted the inspiration of the LXX, Origen and Jerome maintained that the authority of the OT Scriptures must be found in the Hebrew text. They noted the discrepancies within the LXX text and understood the implications for the Church.

How do these findings help us in the Red Sea/Reed Sea debate? It is helpful to observe the tendency on the part of the Church Fathers to allow fanciful legends to become “historical” accounts with the authority of God and to “spiritually” harmonize clearly discordant texts. Much could be said about this phenomenon, but it is important to remain focused on the central issue. In our case, we need to go back to our doctrine of inspiration and re-cast the entire historical process described above with that doctrine clearly in our minds. Here are a few observations that may be helpful in our quest:

1. We should always seek to get back to the closest original text (ultimately, the work of textual criticism is attempting to do this as misguided and over-reaching as its efforts often may be).
2. Copies of a biblical text are only authoritative insofar as they accurately express what was first communicated in the autographs. Manuscripts containing copyist errors can lose their value as authoritative conveyors of truth.
3. Any and all materials brought into the NT documents, whether quoting from a deuterocanonical/apocryphal

text (e.g., Jude 9 and 14), or an extra-biblical text (e.g., Acts 17:28), or quoting from a translation that alters an inspired text (as is the case of a number of texts of Scripture brought into the NT from the LXX), are inspired due to the superintending work of the Holy Spirit in the writing of the NT.

4. Only the Holy Spirit can establish a change from the written text of the OT to the written text of the NT. (There are many examples of this in the transmission of the OT to the NT text through the LXX.)

In the end, we are left with an inspired account of a Red Sea crossing. Inspired—but what does it mean? What is it, geographically speaking, to cross the Red Sea?

Josephus

Josephus, a contemporary of the NT writers, wrote of the Red Sea and echoed the LXX writers in affirming that the Israelites' miraculous crossing was at that Red Sea. Josephus declared that Moses, at 40, fled Egypt after killing an Egyptian and settled



ABR File photo

Josephus, contemporary of the New Testament writers, echoed the terminology of the Septuagint writers in affirming that the Israelites crossed the Red Sea (*Erythrá Thálassa*).

in Midian on the Red Sea (1737: bk. 2, chap. 11, par. 1). At 80, Moses led Israel across the miraculously-parted Red Sea, which closed on the pursuing Egyptians.

The Egyptians were not aware that they went into a road made for the Hebrews, and not for others; that this road was made for deliverance of those in danger, but not for those that were earnest to make use of it for others' destruction (1737: bk. 2, chap. 16, par. 3).

These uses of “Red Sea” agree with our own. But Josephus also used the term “Egyptian Bay of the Red Sea” in locating Ezion-Geber (1737: bk. 8, chap. 6, par. 4; 1 Kgs 9:26; 2 Chr 8:17), and he declared that the Tigris and Euphrates flow into the Red Sea (1737: bk. 1, chap. 1, par. 3). These uses of “Egyptian Bay” and “Red Sea,” while foreign to us, are in keeping with a larger, centuries-old Greek tradition.

The Ancient Greeks

The vocabulary for “Red Sea”—that is, *erythrós* or *erythraíos*, meaning “red”; and *thálassa*, meaning “sea”—was employed in Greek as far back as we have record, in Homer who recited his poems in the eighth century BC (1931; Bauer 1979: 310). Homer, however, used the words “red” and Red Sea

“sea” separately.

Our earliest extant use of “Red Sea,” where the two words are combined as one term, is in Herodotus, the great Greek historian from the fifth century BC. His phrase, “that which is called the Erythraian Sea” (1890 and 1920: bk. 1, chap. 1; bk. 2, chaps. 8, 158-59; bk. 3, chap. 9; bk. 4, chap. 37; bk. 6, chap. 20), reveals that the term “Erythraian Sea” (basically the same term as *erythrá thálassa*, “Red Sea”) predated him. Moreover, his Red or Erythraian Sea differed from ours, and needs to be understood as part of his greater picture of world geography.

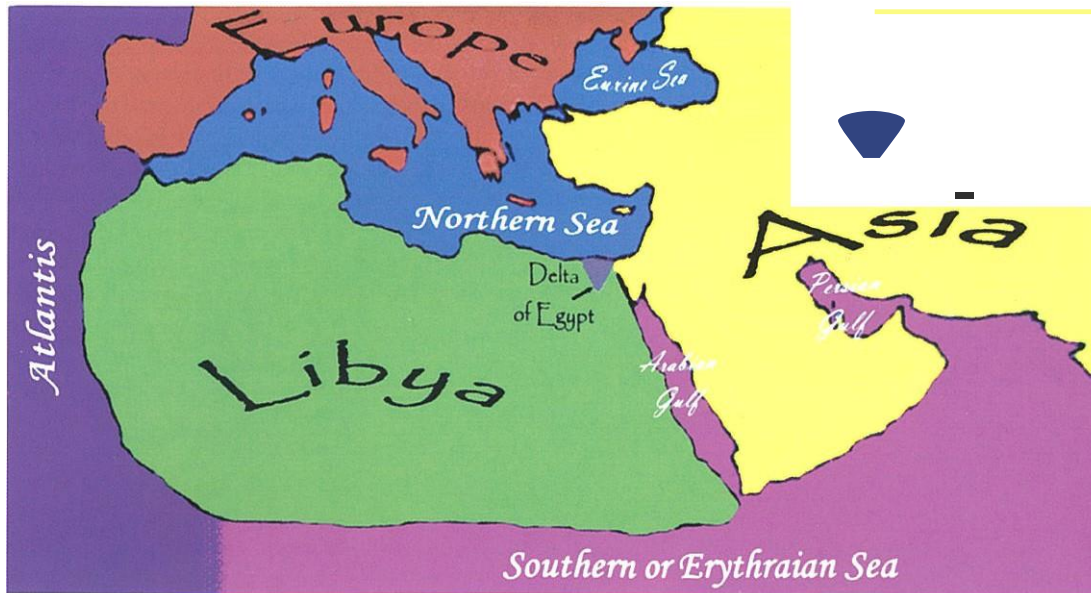
On a longitudinal line through Herodotus' hometown, he knew of only two great seas, which he termed “northern” and “southern” (1890 and 1920: bk. 2, chaps. 158f; bk. 4, chap. 42). His geographical knowledge did not extend far north of Greece, but it did extend far south; moreover, along latitude, his knowledge extended from Spain to India. Thus, the Egyptian delta (which is close to saying, the point of the *yam suph* crossing) was at the center of his world. He considered that delta to be a fourth continent, after Europe, Asia and Libya (1890 and 1920: bk. 2, chaps. 16-17).

Herodotus's northern sea was north of Africa—his Libya (1890 and 1920: bk. 4, chap. 42). His northern sea corresponds to our modern-day Mediterranean Sea. Herodotus also called the northern sea “our sea” i.e., the sea of the Hellenes or Greeks (1890 and 1920: bk. 4, chaps. 39, 41). Herodotus knew this sea well; he was born on its eastern shore in Ionia (Greek Asia Minor) and would have sailed its waters in traveling to Egypt, and he defined its western limit as the sea's end at the Pillars of Heracles (our Straits of Gibraltar; 1890 and 1920: bk. 1, chap. 203).

His southern sea was south of Africa and Asia. It is our Indian Ocean and its northern shore waters, our Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, and perhaps the Bay of Bengal (1890 and 1920: bk. 4, chap. 37). The Atlantic is the sea that connected the northern and southern seas. Thus all the great waters of Herodotus's world are accounted for.

Herodotus often used “southern sea” and “Red Sea” interchangeably (1890 and 1920: bk. 2, chaps. 158-59; bk. 4, chaps. 37-40; but cf. bk. 4, chap. 42). Both were represented as the great sea that met the Atlantic in the west (1890 and 1920: bk. 1, chap. 203), and from which extended the Arabian and Persian Gulfs (1890 and 1920: bk. 2, chaps. 11, 158; bk. 4, chap. 39). Either of those gulfs could themselves be termed “Red Sea” or “southern sea” (1890 and 1920: bk. 1, chaps. 180, 189; bk. 2, chaps. 158-59; bk. 3, chap. 30; bk. 6, chap. 20). So the ancient Red Sea extended far beyond its modern designation, and what was once called the Arabian Gulf of the Red Sea (Josephus's “Egyptian Bay of the Red Sea”) is now the entire Red Sea (1890 and 1920: bk. 2, chap. 102).

Ancient historians, including the Babylonian Berossos (third century BC), the Greek Strabo (first centuries BC and AD), and the Jewish Josephus (first century AD), all writing in Greek; the Semitic writer of *The Book of Enoch* (second or first century BC); and the Roman Pliny the Elder (first century AD), who wrote in Latin—all continued the use of the Herodotus terminology, describing a massive Red Sea stretching from Africa to India (Berossos 1999:44-48; Enoch 1973: bk. 31; bk. 76, chaps. 6-7; Pliny 1855 and 1906: bk. 6, chap. 28; Strabo 1877 and 1924: bk. 11, chap. 1, par. 5; chap. 14, par. 7).



Herodotus 1890; Weldon 2005

Herodotus's World. Herodotus divided his known world into four continents-- Europe, Asia, Libya and the delta of Egypt. Moreover, his geographical notions featured a small Africa ("Libya") and a large Red Sea ("Erythraian Sea"). His Arabian and Persian Gulfs were part of the Red Sea system. *Euxine* means "kind to strangers," his name for our Black Sea.

It was that Red Sea that the LXX writers nominated as the crossing place for Israel.

"Reed" vs. "Red": A Conflict of Voices?

What were the LXX translators up to? In attempting to discern what the LXX translators were seeking to accomplish, some initial observations are necessary:

1. The LXX was not all translated at the same time by the same people. Even if we accept the broad outlines of the legend of Aristeas as historically accurate, most scholars believe that the Seventy only translated the Pentateuch. Later, over the course of 300 years, other portions of the LXX were translated, ultimately leading to what we now call the LXX.
2. It is likely that the LXX was translated under the decree of Egyptian King Ptolemy Philadelphus (reigned 285-247 BC) by Jewish translators, and was eventually embraced by the Jewish people living in and around Alexandria (Egypt).
3. The LXX was not created by or for the Gentiles. It became the standard for the Jewish people in Alexandria as they became more and more Hellenized during their time in Egypt. It was Providence that saw fit to deliver to the Jews of Palestine this translation, which was in use at the time of Christ and was for the Apostles to use in establishing the church.

The LXX translators have left modern scholars with a vast field of ongoing study in regard to key questions concerning their renditions of Scripture. For our purposes, we need to understand why the translators rendered the Hebrew *yam suph* ("Reed

Sea") as *erythrá thálassa* ("Red Sea") and not by an appropriate Hebrew equivalent. It is apparent that the LXX translators had various theological, hermeneutical, textual, and exegetical motives in conducting their work.

A Parallel Problem-- "Edom" or "Men"?

A good example that parallels our Red Sea issue is unfolded by Karen Jobes and Moises Silva in their excellent work, *Invitation to the Septuagint*. They explain that at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, James quotes from Amos 9:11-12, with Luke putting the words from the LXX (and not the MT) in his

mouth. The issue is with Amos 9:12. The MT reads: "so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations"; but the LXX reads, "so that the remnant of men and all the nations may seek [me]." The authors state:

Since the Hebrew preserved in the MT is not particularly difficult, we may consider the possibility the LXX translator-- whether or not he made a mistake in reading the Hebrew characters-- was primarily motivated by hermeneutical concerns... Possibly inspired by the parallel concept of "all the nations," he in effect harmonized "Edom" to the context, an instance of the part for the whole, that is, one pagan nation representing all nations. In line with the spiritual thrust of the rest of the verse ("upon whom my name is called"), the translators then expressed the concept of possessing Edom in terms of human response to God (2000: 195).

This example is representative of many such issues between the MT and the LXX. For our purposes it is especially helpful for us as we ponder the Reed Sea/Red Sea translation issue. Indeed, when we consider that the LXX translators were oftentimes interested more in theological meaning than in a pedantic literalness, it points us toward an explanation for our Reed Sea/Red Sea dilemma. As the translator considered a rendering for the text, he evidently considered the broader theological meaning of *yam suph*. Desiring to expand the meaning to broader theological ground, the translator embraced the term *erythrá thálassa*, understanding the Red Sea to best express God's spiritual work in saving His people (and all of mankind?). As in the former example, where "Edom" (MT) becomes "men" (LXX) in order to capture the greater vision of all men seeking after God, so too, *yam suph* becomes *erythrá thálassa* to expand the greater salvific purpose of God in the world of men. We see

how the translator moved from lesser to greater: Edom to all men; Reed Sea to Red Sea. This theological movement (and translational process) is at least one way we see how the LXX translators were working to accomplish their task, and how *yam suph* could come to be rendered *erythrá thálassa*, “Red Sea.”

A Stumbling Block in Translation Theory?

This process is a stumbling block to many modern evangelicals since it contradicts our sense of order in the translational process, not to mention the Reformed tradition held by many of us (are we not always trying to “get back” to the original wording?). The implications of Jesus and the Apostles embracing, and the Spirit of God inspiring, changes from the Hebrew (MT) into the LXX-based language of the NT, take us on to uncomfortable theological ground many have never considered. But we must follow where the text and the Lord lead us.

A great example of this tension is seen in Hoffmeier's discussion of the Coptic (Bohairic) version, in reference to our Reed Sea/Red Sea texts. The Coptic translators chose an appropriate equivalent to *yam suph* in order to maintain the literalness of the translation: the Hebrew *yam suph* (Sea of Reeds) becomes the Bohairic *pyom n sa(i)ri* (Sea of Reeds or Rushes) (Hoffmeier 1997: 204). This example does indeed provide one excellent versional example of translating *yam suph* as “Sea of Reeds,” in contradistinction to the translation of the LXX. But Hoffmeier's conclusion to the matter is certainly unwarranted:

If this is the meaning of Coptic *pyom n sa(i)ri*, then translating Hebrew *yam suph* as “sea of reeds” has ancient versional evidence and the Greek tradition *must be regarded as a secondary, erroneous interpretation of the Hebrew* (1997: 205, emphasis added).

This conclusion fails to take into account two important points. First, identifying one OT version in support of translating *yam suph* as “Sea of Reeds” is not sufficient evidence to dismiss the entire Greek tradition (LXX) as secondary and erroneous. Second, since NT authors in Acts 7:36 and Hebrews 11:29 are using LXX terminology (“Red Sea”), and fail to use the MT (Hebrew) terminology (“Sea of Reeds”), and their writings are under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it appears that God is affirming the choice of terminology. Indeed, it is presumptuous to call what God has affirmed “erroneous.”

In saying this, however, it does not follow that the Holy Spirit inspired the LXX, but only those texts placed into the NT under the Spirit's direction. This issue is critical and central. Indeed, those who become so immersed in the minutiae of the language issues can sometimes overlook the larger and essential issues of the theological spectrum. If the Holy Spirit inspired the NT, then the words He chose (from any source) are exactly what He wanted included in the text. And He chose words, many of them, from the text of the LXX.

Salvation Declared: Two Words, One Voice

Why do the LXX text and MT differ from one another? We suggest there is a spiritual purpose to be found in these differences. It is clear that the Hebrew OT focuses upon a *yam*

suph crossing, supplying important and explicit geographical detail, directing us to that point of crossing. We are to look into those details not only to find its location, but to understand the great climactic spiritual battle that was won there. This was no “general” victory for the world, but indeed, a profound victory for Israel, the chosen people of God. There, at Baal-Zephon, Pharaoh's last hope of victory was vanquished. His trust in his god Baal-Zephon, represented by this cultic high place, would be totally and completely undone. Yahweh defeated Satan there, humbling Pharaoh, and displaying His power over all the false gods of Egypt. The Hebrew text is clear; the Israelites crossed the *yam suph*, a real place in space and time, with actual names and descriptions, and were saved that day. Generation upon generation, the children of Israel could say, “Look there...that is the very place where our victory was won.”

Why would the LXX translators wish to remove the clarity and specificity of *yam suph* and replace it with *erythrá thálassa*? Truly, God would pluck these LXX terms and place them within the voice of the NT. The Holy Spirit, at the time of the great Africa-to-India “Red Sea,” affirmed by NT Scripture that the children of Israel crossed that sea. “By faith,” wrote the writer of Hebrews, “they crossed over the Red Sea as through a dried land, which the Egyptians attempting were swallowed up” (Heb 11:29). The martyr Stephen proclaimed, “This one led them out, doing wonders and signs in Egypt land and in the Red Sea and in the desert forty years” (Acts 7:36).

Here, under the New Covenant, the Reed Sea crossing has now become the Red Sea crossing—that great and mighty spiritual sea that undergirds the world would now become a testimony to the saving power of God for the world. Indeed, it would point us to Christ, that great Reservoir of Life and the One who offers us spiritual water that will quench our thirst forever. It would point us to Christ, Who would pour out His life-giving blood, that whosoever will may come, and wash, and be made white as snow. Jesus indeed is our *erythrá thálassa*, which washes away our sins and leads us on to spiritual victory.

It is not by accident that the Holy Spirit chose to transform the language of this text. May we always proceed with humble caution when we encounter such textual issues...it just may be that God has delivered a new word to the Church, a word that is important for each of us.



Notes

¹ Most scholars render *suph* as “reeds,” but some prefer “sea weed” or, more generically, “water plants.”

² The count of 12 *yam suph*'s in the Law (Genesis through Deuteronomy) does not include the *suph* of Deuteronomy 1:1. If that *suph* be taken as a short form of *yam suph* (scholars disagree on this point), and one were to add it to the list, the count would be 13.

³ ἐρυθρά is variously transliterated *erythrá*, *eruthrá*; it is the feminine form of ἐρυθρός (*erythrós*).

⁴ The LXX translates the Deuteronomy 1:1 *suph* as *erythrá*. “Sea is absent in both the MT and LXX.

⁵ See Martin Hengel's helpful overview in *The Septuagint as Christian Scripture* (2002). In chapter 4, “The LXX as a collection of writings claimed by Christians,” he provides evidence of the discussion and debate among church fathers in regards to the legend of Aristeas

⁶ See Aristeas 1951. This edition provides helpful notes along with the Greek text and an English translation on facing pages. Also see Shutt 1985.

⁷ Most Septuagint scholars understand that this initial work of translating the OT was limited to the Pentateuch; over the course of the next 2.5 centuries the rest of the OT translation into Greek would be completed.

⁸ The Hexapla is a Greek word that means “sixfold,” and was the term used for Origen’s momentous edition of the OT. Origen set in six columns the following versions of the OT:

1. Hebrew
2. Greek characters that were transliterated from Hebrew
3. Aquila of Sinope’s Greek translation
4. Symmachus the Ebionite’s Greek translation
5. The Septuagint
6. Theodotion’s Greek translation

A complete copy of the Hexapla is no longer extant, and the fragments have been collected into various editions.

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