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# “Scientific Theology and the Miracle at the Red Sea”

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**O**URS IS A SCIENTIFIC AGE and theologians are not immune to its influences. The scientific method and the products of its progress have produced a materialistic world view, not only in terms of technological accomplishments, but also in history and human behavior.

With scientifically structured minds concretely oriented in practicality, “Scientific Theologians” readily accept the historicity of Biblical events, but strip them of the supernatural. Exegetical studies of the miraculous begin by questioning. Where theologians of the History of Religions School might be inclined to reject the historicity of Israel’s crossing of the Red Sea altogether, Scientific Theology would view the account as an historical happening, but devoid of the miraculous. Utilizing the scientific method, hypotheses are sought to explain the water’s abatement by purely natural causes.

## “ISRAEL’S CROSSING OF THE RED SEA” (EXODUS 14:21,22)

V. 21: “AND MOSES LIFTED UP HIS HAND OVER THE SEA, AND THE LORD DIVIDED THE SEA WITH AN EAST WIND FIERCELY BLOWING THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE NIGHT; AND HE MADE THE SEA INTO DRYNESS WHEN THE WATERS WERE DISSOLVED.

V. 22: THEN THE SONS OF ISRAEL WENT THROUGH THE CENTER OF THE SEA UPON DRYNESS, AND THE WATERS WERE TO THEM AS A WALL ON THE RIGHT AND THE LEFT SIDE.”<sup>1</sup>

*Scientific Theology comes face to face with this stupendously supernatural event and begins to form explanations in terms of natural phenomena. A good example of such an approach may be found in the booklet, “WHAT ARCHEOLOGY SAYS ABOUT THE BIBLE, where the author writes, “It was not the Red Sea that they crossed. That reference in the Bible is a mistranslation. It was another body of water farther to the north, known as the Weed Sea or Bitter Lakes. This was much closer to their labors at the store-cities, and presumably they had been permitted to pasture their herds on the shores of this water. Knowing this crossing as the Weed Sea gives us another insight into the ancient chronicles. It is not at all uncommon, in certain periods of the year, for the winds to push the shallow waters of this lake back, making it possible to walk across its bed. Undoubtedly it was such a phenomenon that took place when the Hebrews were escaping, and its providential occurrence became so well grounded in the lore which these people carried with them that it*

soon became one of their favorite sagas, later becoming incorporated into their written literature."<sup>2</sup>

By pointing out that "Red Sea" is a mistranslation, the author intends to locate Israel's crossing at a point north of the Red Sea as we know it today, a point where the waters would have been shallow enough to permit the natural force of winds to reduce them for a non-miraculous crossing. Such an explanation could be readily received by our scientifically structured society. It is highly palatable and causes little indigestion for theologians whose theologies necessarily reject the miraculous.

The statement that the term "Red Sea" is a mistranslation is correct. The Hebrew text of Exodus 14:21,22 uses only "YAM" (sea). Exodus 15:4 (The Song of Moses) and Exodus 15:22 utilize the term "YAM SUPH" (sea of reeds; sea of weeds) with reference to the crossing.

"The word "YAM" is used either of the ocean or any of its parts, or of inland lakes."<sup>3</sup> "SUPH" may be translated "rush, reed, sea weed."<sup>4</sup> In commenting on "YAM SUPH," Gesenius states, "the weedy sea, i.e., the Arabian Gulf which abounds in sea weed, Ps. 106:7,9,22; 136:13."<sup>5</sup> Numbers 21:4 uses "YAM SUPH" for the waters of the Gulf of Akaba. Exegetically it can be seen that the term "Sea of Weeds" cannot be limited exclusively to a body of water north of the Gulf of Suez such as the Bitter Lakes. It is also a name for portions of the Red Sea. To state definitely that it refers to the Bitter Lakes would be a theoretical assumption without conclusive exegetical, historical or scientific evidence.

The LXX and St. Jerome translated "YAM SUPH" as "Red Sea." Why they did so has not been conclusively established. However, the mistranslation in no way implies that the Children of Israel did not cross over the Red Sea as we know it today.

The exact point at which Israel crossed the "YAM SUPH" has not been determined. The actual location of Baal Zephon, the landing place on the eastern shore, is also not known. A study of various maps in Bible atlases has revealed at least five different points for suggested crossings and three different locations for Baal Zephon, indicating a divergence of opinion. Some claim the Gulf of Suez has receded at least fifty miles since the birth of Christ.<sup>6</sup> If this were the case, we could expect deeper and wider waters separating Egypt from the wilderness. However, even if the exact location were established, it would be of little use in determining whether the waters were shallow or deep, wide or narrow. Topography changes with time. Ocean bottoms are susceptible to change.<sup>7</sup> The Holy Scriptures indicate that the waters were wide and deep enough to drown an Egyptian army with more than 600 chariots and many horsemen (Exodus 14:7,28).

To claim, therefore, that the crossing took place further north of the Gulf of Suez as we know it today, and, for that reason, the waters were shallow enough for a non-miraculous crossing here is a theoretical assumption without the backing of available scientific data or historical evidence. Actually it seems more scientifically plausible to assume the Gulf of Suez extended further north at the time of Moses and possessed deeper and wider waters at the crossing point.

Perhaps the Gulf of Suez and the Mediterranean were connected at one time. Their respective water levels are relatively the same. Today there are no locks on the Suez Canal.

Scientific Theology would theorize that the allegedly shallow waters of the "YAM SUPH" were abated by the natural force of winds, resulting in a non-miraculous crossing. It is true that today winds can affect a change in the water level of the Red Sea. When a strong wind blows from the northwest, it drives the waters southward. When the winds blow from the southeast, the waters are driven northward to the extent of rising six to nine feet. Such a natural phenomenon also occurs on Lake Erie whenever a strong wind blows from the southwest, causing the water level at Buffalo to become higher than that at Toledo.

Theoretically, then, a northwest wind could cause a natural abatement. The Scriptures, however, do not speak of a north wind, but of an *east* wind, the "RUACH QADIM." It is true that the term "QADIM" (east) could possibly include the southeast or the northeast, since the Hebrew language has developed words for only the four cardinal points of the compass. The term could never, however, refer to the northwest. According to natural laws, a southeast wind would cause the waters to rise at the point of crossing; a northeast wind would pile up the waters on the western shore; a direct east wind would do the same. Yet the Scriptures state, "the waters were divided" . . . "the waters were a *wall* unto them on their right hand and on their left." (Exodus 14:21,22) No wind, from any point on the compass, could accomplish this through natural causes.

The "RUACH QADIM" has been considered the most violent wind in Western Asia and adjoining seas (Ps. 48:8; Job 27:21; Is. 27:8; Jer. 18:17; Ez. 27:26)—scorching plants and herbage (Gen. 41: 6,23; Jon. 4:8). Commenting on Genesis 8:1, Luther writes, "It is nothing new for winds to dry up moisture, especially those from the East, which our people call, "Holewind," but Vergil calls, "Burning," because of the drought they bring upon the earth. Hosea, too, makes mention of this (13:15). The answer is easy. The text says that a wind was brought over the earth, that is, over the surface of the water, until the dried-up waters again revealed the earth to human beings. Thus in Exodus 14:21 it is stated that the Red Sea was dried up by a torrid wind. Even though the Lord could have achieved the same result without the wind, nevertheless He likes to make use of the means that were created for a definite purpose."<sup>8</sup>

A fiercely burning east wind was the means by which the Lord miraculously dried up the waters for a dry passage. The manner in which He used the wind is beyond our comprehension. Attempts to explain the event as it is described in the Scriptures merely upon the basis of natural phenomena fail. The Lord miraculously intervened. Moses credits the stupendous event to God, not the wind. In his song he sings, "And with the blast of Thy nostrils the waters were gathered together, the floods stood upright as a heap" . . . "Thou didst blow Thy wind, the sea covered them: they sank as lead in the mighty waters." (Exodus 15:8,10) We have a right to marvel at the miraculous here even as the men marvelled about Christ saying,

"What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?" (Matt. 8:27)

"Dryness" in our text is a translation of two Hebrew words—"LECHARAVA" and "BAYABASHA." In verse 21 "LECHARAVA" is the same word used in Gen. 8:13 where it is said that on the first day of the first month the ground was "CHARESH," meaning, "free from water, drained." In verse 22 "BAYABASHA" is the same word used in Gen. 8:14 where it is said that on the 27th day of the 2nd month the earth was "YAVESH," meaning, "free from moisture, dry." Apparently the "LECHARAVA" (drying up of the sea) left a muddy soil. "BAYABASHA" denotes the ground being reduced to bone-dryness. With this miracle the gracious generosity and goodness of our Lord is displayed. Israel did not have to clean muddy shoes on the other side of the Weedy Sea! Walking was made easy, especially for the women and children. An abatement of the waters due to purely natural phenomena of winds and tides could hardly accomplish the feat of providing a bone-dry path through the sea in the short span of one night.

"And the waters were to them as a wall on the right and the left side." (verse 22b) "CHOMAH (wall) comes from the Hebrew root "CHAMAH" which means to "surround," as walls surround a town.<sup>9</sup> The picture is that of "walls of water" piled up on Israel's left and right as they crossed the bone-dry ground. The concept of perpendicular walls is consistent with Scripture's statement concerning the destruction of the Egyptian army. The natural movement of winds and tides, no matter how fast or violent, would hardly accomplish such a great and total devastation upon the Egyptians. The direct miraculous intervention of God was necessary.

Action produces reaction. Miraculous action produces historical reaction. The miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea had its effect upon history. In Exodus 15:14-16 Moses prophesies the alarm of neighbor nations concerning the miracle. The harlot Rahab is one instance of the fulfillment of his prophecy; speaking for her people she says in Joshua 2:10a, "We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you, when ye came out of Egypt." The miraculous event was perpetuated historically in the worship ritual of Israel; their miraculous triumph is expressed in the Psalms (114:3; 106:9; 136:13,14; 66:6). The Passover Feast inscribed the event upon the Israelite mind, sensitizing the nation to the miraculous power of God. Hundreds of years after the time of Moses, Isaiah alludes to the miraculous crossing as a fact of the past. (Is. 11:14,15)

The historical impact slices through the New Testament also. Stephen mentions the crossing as manifesting the glory of Moses (Acts 7:36). Hebrews 11:29 refers to it as a striking instance of what faith can do. The chief N. T. reference, however, is 1 Cor. 10:1,2, where St. Paul draws a comparison between Baptism and the crossing. In so doing, he links the greatest personal event in the life of a Christian, i.e., rebirth, to the crossing and thus historically perpetuates the miracle at the Red Sea for all Christendom for all ages to come.

Scientific Theologians never really get past point one of the scientific method, i.e., the hypothesis. Judgments made only in the light of current, observable phenomena are inadequate stepping stones toward proof of a non-miraculous crossing. Scientific evaluations of the crossing prove to be subjective and nonconclusive. A rejection of the miraculous on the basis of supposed natural phenomena ends up totally hypothetical.

In the last analysis, the scientific method is not completely capable of addressing itself to questions pertaining to the miraculous. The method limits itself by its own definition, rules and scope. It works only within the context of concrete, observable phenomena and conditions within the physical framework of nature. The miraculous frustrates the laws of nature upon whose consistency, continuity and irrefutability the scientific method depends.

Scientific Theologians nevertheless utilize scientific hypotheses to strip Scripture of the miraculous in order to make Biblical events historically credible to our materialistic age. Those who strip Scripture of the miraculous, however, also strip God of His omnipotence in the eyes of mankind. God demands from us a faith which believes that with Him all things are possible. Yet Scientific Theology continues to challenge the kind of faith Gabriel demanded from Mary: "With God nothing shall be impossible!" (Luke 1:37) Scientific Theology continues to doubt the power of God to do the impossible. Whatever science cannot explain is non-existent. The miraculous is impossible. God is powerless in His creation. Christ is simply a very good man; Resurrection is impossible. Faith in the Gospel of Christ and the power of salvation is converted into an ethical plea for love, peace and morality. Pastors, saturated with "scientism," no longer preach with authority the Word of God, but are transformed into patient, sympathetic, understanding, condescending listeners to the spiritual whims and fancies of the flocks. In some instances misled sheep lead the shepherds, and, for some, God Himself is dead—if He ever lived.

Science, so called, bids fair to becoming a new "Golden Calf" and is attracting a goodly number of Aarons to serve and worship at her feet. The question of Jesus seems more piercing than ever: "When the Son of Man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8)

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Translated from the Czech Text dated 1613: "Bibli Svatá podle posledního vydání kralického z roku 1613."
2. Albert N. Williams; "What Archeology Says about the Bible"; (New York: Association Press; 1957) pp. 56, 57.
3. "Gesenius' Lexicon"; S. P. Tregelles; (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; 1950) p. 350.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 581.
5. *Ibid.*
6. "Analytical Concordance"; R. Young (New York: Funk & Wagnalls; 1936) p. 799.
7. Frequent revisions of government navigational charts bear this out.
8. "Luther's Works"; Vol. 2; "Lectures on Genesis"; ed. J. Pelikan; (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; 1960) pp. 106, 107.
9. "Gesenius' Lexicon"; S. P. Tregelles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950) pp. 265, 286.