

Exodus: The Miracle: Phase 2, Parting of the Water, Exodus 14:21-23

2. Phase Two: The Parting of the Water Exodus 14:21

Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind which blew all night, turning the sea into dry land and the waters were divided.

Exodus 14:22 - The Israelites went through the midst of the sea on dry land and the waters were a wall on their right and on their left.

Exodus 14:23 - Then the Egyptians took up the pursuit and all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen went in after them into the midst of the sea.

Several years ago, we studied the ten plagues in a bit of detail. In that study we learned that, in the performance of His miracles, God employs natural phenomena where possible, only supplementing the event with divine omnipotence where necessary to accomplish His will.

In the parting of the waters at Little Bitter Lake, we see a combination of three elements:

- a. The natural power of a meteorological phenomenon not unusual to the areas surrounding the Red Sea, identified in Scripture as a “*strong east wind*.”
- b. The omnipotence of God who withheld the waters on each side of the breach all night long.
- c. The omnipotence of the Lord Who used the concentrated power of the Shekinah Glory's light to assist the wind in drying out the lake bed.

That an east wind might be strong enough to cause the waters of a lake to part in such a manner might sound miraculous but it is a common occurrence in the area around the Red Sea.

Details of this phenomenon are the subject of several sources on the Exodus:

Orr, James (ed.). The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia. Vol. 2. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956; pp. 1052-53:

We are told that the water was driven back by “a strong east wind” in the night and the sea (or “lake” as the word yam often means in the Hebrew) was divided, a shoal being formed and the waters being heaped up, so that when the wind ceased they rushed back; whereas, during the passage, they were a “wall” or “defense” against any flank attack by the Egyptians. The effect of the wind on shallow waters can be seen at the mouth of the Kishon River (in northern Israel), where a shoal exists which is dry with a west wind, but under water and impassable when the wind blows down the river. In 1882, Sir Alexander Tulloch saw the waters of Lake Menzaleh (north of the Bitter Lakes) driven back more than a mile by the east wind.

Keil, C. F. and F. J. Delitzsch. The Pentateuch. Vol. 2 of Biblical Commentary on The Old Testament. Translated by James Martin. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968; p. 47n:

As the ebb at Suez leaves the shallow parts of the gulf so far dry, when a strong wind is blowing, that it is possible to cross over them, we may understand how the legend could have arisen ... that the Israelites took advantage of a strong ebb, and ... that the passage through the sea may be so accounted for.

Encyclopaedia Britannica, 15th ed., s.v.: “Egypt, Arab Republic of”:

In the desert, cyclones stir up sand and dust storms, called khamsin, which can occur from March to June. The khamsin are accompanied by a sharp increase in temperature of from 14° to 20° F, a drop in relative humidity (often to 10 percent), and thick dust; they can reach gale force.

Note: The Beaufort Scale rates gale force as a sustained wind of around 60 miles per hour.

This natural phenomenon combined with divine omnipotence and heat from the pillar of fire both held the waters back and dried out the lake bed. Thus, was opened a breach in Little Bitter Lake which was sustained for between six to eight hours.

During this time, the pillar of cloud—west side—kept Pharaoh’s army immobile, while the pillar of fire—east side—lit the Israelites’ way of escape through the breach after drying out the “*wheel-track*.”

Very logical questions from inquiring minds arise at this point: how deep was the water at Little Bitter Lake, how wide was the breach, how high were the walls created on each side of the breach, and how far across the lake bed was it to the other side?

Answers:

1. The water level fluctuated throughout the year dependent upon rainfall. The Bitter Lakes could therefore be a shallow marshland or a long narrow body of water some 30-miles long. We do not know their depth at the time of the Exodus other than that their waters were deep enough to drown Pharaoh’s army.
2. We may infer the width of the breach by the following deductive reasoning:

- a. There are two-million Jews plus herds, wagons, and pack animals which must move through the breach.

Exodus 13:37 - Now the Israelites journeyed from Ramses to Succoth, about 600,000 men on foot, aside from children.

Note: Women are never included in numbers such as these unless so indicated. The actual number of adult men in the Exodus was 603,550, cited in Exodus 38:26; Numbers 1:46; Numbers 2:32; and Numbers 11:21.

Exodus 13:38 - And a mixed multitude (the goyim and the hoi polloi) also went up with them, along with flocks and herds, and a very large number of livestock.

Note: The generally accepted estimate of the total number of souls in the Exodus is about 2 million.

- b. We know that the Exodus was accomplished during a period of time that was not more than eight hours and not less than six.

Note: We have just observed that the Lord moved the pillar of cloud in early evening, shrouding the Egyptians in a fog while simultaneously lighting up the night for the Israelites. We know that the crossing was completed during the “*morning watch, or sometime between 2 A.M. and sunrise*.”

Exodus 14:24 - And it came about at the morning watch that the Lord looked down on the army of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and cloud and brought the army of the Egyptians into confusion.

Note: The Jews divided the night into three parts during which sentries would post watch outside the camp:

1. The “*beginning watch*” mentioned in Lamentations 2:19 refers to the shift between sunset, around 6 P.M., and 10 o’clock.
2. The “*middle watch*” referred to in Judges 7:19 lasts from 10 P.M. to 2 A.M.
3. The “*morning watch*” is the one noted in our passage as the period in which the Exodus was completed.

c. **Leon J. Wood** mentions the following as a footnote in his book, **A Survey of Israel's History, page 106:**

A marching line of two million people, walking ten abreast with an average of five feet separating each rank, would be 190 miles long. Had this path been only as wide as a modern highway, the first Israelites through would have been in Canaan before the last started, and several days would have elapsed.

d. Further insight is provided by **Keil and Delitzsch's Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, volume 2**, where they quote Robinson on **pages 47:**

As the Israelites numbered more than two millions of persons, besides flocks and herds, they would of course be able to pass but slowly. If the part left dry were broad enough to enable them to cross in a body one thousand abreast, which would require a space of more than half a mile in breadth, still the column would be more than two thousand persons in depth, and in all probability could not have extended less than two miles. It would then have occupied at least an hour in passing over its own length, or in entering the sea. There will remain only time enough, under the circumstances, for the body of the Israelites to have passed, at the most, over a space of three or four miles.

e. **Keil and Delitzsch** then comment as follows:

If God sent the wind, which divided the water and laid the bottom dry, as soon as night set in, the crossing might have begun at nine o’clock in the evening ... and lasted till four or five o’clock in the morning. By this extension of the time we gain enough for the flocks, which Robinson left out of his calculation. The Egyptians naturally followed close upon the Israelites, from whom they were only divided by the pillar of cloud and fire; and when the Israelites had reached the opposite shore, they were in the midst of the sea.

f. The final analysis we will note is that of **Leon J. Wood**, again from **His Survey**, this time from the text of **page 106:**

We are told that God, “all that night drove the sea back with a strong east wind.” The wind is said to be particularly effective on the Bitter Lakes in changing water levels. But certainly wind alone did not do all that was necessary in this instance. God had to intervene with additional, supernatural power. We know that the water involved was deep, and not merely that of a marshy area, for later the Egyptians were drowned in it. Moreover, the lake bottom was made sufficiently dry so that Israelites could drive their wagons over it. Still further, the path had to be very wide, perhaps as much as a mile, to permit more than two million Israelites to cross during part of one night. To push back water for a half mile on one side and a half mile on the other would indeed take the miraculous power of almighty God. The startled Israelites moved into the broad path that was now open to them. The great amount of water pushed back was now a wall on both sides of them.

The length of this miraculous path is uncertain. Three factors have a bearing on the matter. First, the length could not have been greater than the distance the people could travel in perhaps five or six hours. Darkness had fallen by the time the first of the people started since the light from the cloud was already needed. And it was during the “last watch” that all were across. By then the Egyptians were already in the path pursuing. Second, the length of the Israelite line going through the path, even on a front of up to a mile wide, would have extended close to two miles, which means that an hour or more would have been consumed in merely passing over its own length. Third, progress would have been slow, with wagons having

to be driven and flocks and herds shepherded. These matters together suggest that the distance was not more than three or four miles.

g. From all of this we may infer the following:

1. The Jews in their divisions were marched across with women, children, animals, and wagons in ranks that spanned some two miles in length.
2. The time window of only six to eight hours demands that from front to rear the Jewish columns had to be at least a mile wide.
3. Consequently, the breach which miraculously occurred in Little Bitter Lake had to be up to one mile or more wide.

The question of how high the resultant walls of water reached is impossible to calculate without knowledge of the configuration of the Bitter Lakes. I read one commentary which stated they were 40-to fifty-feet high but that is merely speculation. However, we are able to learn something about this phenomenon from:

Blaiklock, Edward M. and R. K. Harrison (eds.). *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983; p. 386:

It has been observed that this area (the Bitter Lakes) can be affected by an east wind in the same way as in Exodus

14. In 1882 Major-General Tulloch was engaged in military investigations relating to the Suez Canal. He noticed that the waters of Lake Menzaleh, about 5 to 6 feet in depth, had been affected by an easterly gale during one day. The water had receded for about 7 miles.

Note: Lake Menzaleh is only a few miles north of the Bitter Lakes and in the same system of rivers and lakes that connects the Mediterranean with the Red Sea. Assuming the Bitter Lakes were the same depth as Lake Menzaleh, then the wall of water had to be greater than six feet as it was pushed back against its shores to create a mile-wide breach. But your guess is as good as the next person's. Regardless, there was enough water to drown Pharaoh's army.

The trip across the bed of Little Bitter Lake is estimated to be about two to four miles which is consistent with the calculations we observed in paragraph two on the mechanics of the Exodus. Two million people moving through a one-mile-wide breach would take about six hours to move through a two-to four-mile-long passageway.

The two-mile estimate is given by **C. R. Conder** in:

The **International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, s.v.: "Exodus"**:

The probable point of passage was the narrow channel about 2 miles across by which the lakes discharged into the sea, and was about 10 miles north of Suez. (See Wood, p. 1660, "three or four miles.")