

Drash on Parashat Beshalach

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Parashat Beshalach is found about a third of the way through the second Book of the Torah, Sh'mot (Exodus in English Bibles). The Jewish name of the book means *The Names Of* and the English name means *The Mass Departure* with etymology from the literal Greek for *Road Out* (that's the noun *road*, not the verb *rode*). Indeed, this Book chronicles the history of the Jewish people from the waning of Joseph's influence in Egypt through God's arrival in the newly completed Wilderness Tabernacle.

The name of this parashat is derived from the second Hebrew word meaning *when had let go*, the subject being Pharaoh. To provide the customary summation of the entire parashat, I quote Wikipedia:

In this parashah, Pharaoh changes his mind and sends his army after the Jewish people, trapping them at the Sea of Reeds. God commands Moses to split the sea, allowing them to pass, then closes the sea back upon the Egyptian army. There are the miracles of manna and clean water. The nation of Amalek attacks and the Jewish people are victorious.

I had read this parashat three times before I sensed a nudge towards focusing upon the sea crossing, specifically its location.

Yah-a-mod, Jean bat Yaakov.

Jean will bless us with the Hebrew and English of Exodus 14:1-2 (TLV):

¹ ADONAI spoke to Moses saying, ² "Speak to *Bnei-Yisrael*, so that they turn back and encamp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. You are to camp by the sea, opposite Baal-zephon.

The primary feature of this location is referred to as *Yam Suf* in Hebrew. Was this in fact the Red Sea? Well, after a few millennia, that is *still* uncertain, according to my very recent and Google-powered research. Whatever other bodies of water could have been called *Yam Suf* back then, however, it is clear the Gulf of Aqaba qualifies, for in I Kings 9:26 we read:

²⁶ King Solomon also built a fleet of ships in Ezion-geber, which is near Eloth on the shore of the Sea of Reeds in the land of Edom.

That area corresponds to Eilat, modern Israel's southern-most city. The Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Aqaba are northern extensions of the Red Sea that bracket the Sinai Peninsula. Part of the uncertainty of the *Yam Suf* location is tied to the uncertainty of most of the other geographical references associated with the journey from Goshen to Canaan, and new sites are still being submitted for consideration. Just a few years ago, Carl Drews, a computer programmer with the National Center for Atmospheric Research, co-produced a master's thesis at the University of Colorado that featured an analysis of the possibility of an east wind actually bringing about the phenomena this parashat depicts in the time and place specified. Using NCAR's IBM mainframe infrastructure for modeling marine and atmospheric behavior, the authors concluded a 67 MPH wind could possibly have had those effects if and only if the location was adjacent to the Mediterranean Sea between the Lake of Tanis and the

former Pelusiac branch of the Nile. The work's science has been termed "impeccable"; the linguistic and historical components are perhaps less so.

In the last 50 years, there have been many new theories regarding where the crossing took place such that sites in the Gulf of Aqaba have been garnering adherents, although not so much among the non-theological academics and scientists. Like the Dead Sea, the Gulf of Aqaba lies on the boundary between the African and Arabian tectonic plates. Both move to the north but the Arabian moves about one inch every five years faster. This plate boundary, called the Dead Sea Transform, has experienced many big earthquakes. The 1138 Aleppo earthquake in far northern Syria was probably the third deadliest in human history. Most recently in 1995 there was a 7.2 shaker near the middle of the Gulf of Aqaba. Geologists are persuaded the Jordan valley is due for a quake of comparable strength. Being over the Transform makes the Gulf of Aqaba much deeper than the Gulf of Suez—three areas are over a mile deep. Its most popular crossing candidate is near the epicenter of the 1995 quake. The seabed there has gentle enough slopes to become a land bridge. However, according to recent Israeli bathymetric research, that crossing's low point is about half a mile below sea level (almost five Washington Monuments). Could God have done it? Of course He could, just not by using nothing but an easterly wind; otherwise, all parties would have probably been blown back to Egypt.

The debates about all the location possibilities are not always congenial. The time allotment for this drash is insufficient to present all the theories, let alone their pros and cons; nor does The LORD want me to go that way. Rather, He seems to want one particular geographic reference highlighted (and where it actually was is not what's important). The Torah only tells us Baal-Zephon was opposite where the Israelites camped by the sea, apparently meaning across the sea from the camp. In fact, this is the only direct reference to this name in the entire Bible.

The linguists, archaeologists, and historians help us out here substantially. I'm sure you recognize *Ba'al* as a title having Semitic origin meaning *owner* and by extension *lord*, *master*, and *husband*. It apparently became a title for deities alone, mostly Canaanite, and eventually one named *Hadad* became known simply as *Ba'al*. Along the way the title fell from favor as part of a name for Jewish children even though the title had previously been applied to the God of Avraham, Yeetzhak, and Yaakov. Apparently the Israelites dropped it in response to it becoming predominantly associated with idols.

Zephon is associated with the cardinal direction *north*; i.e., *lord of the north* or *lord to the north*. Some think it references a god of the sea and/or storms revered by mariners who was associated with the prominent mile-high mountain where the Syrian/Turkish border meets the Mediterranean Sea. However, in Ugaritic myth at least, it is another name for *Hadad* himself who dwelt upon this mountain to the north called by some *Mount Zephon* or *Baal-Zephon*.

By the way, in Isaiah 14:4-20, that Ugaritic myth was apparently parodied to taunt Babylon's future king (who turned out to be Nebuchadnezzar). In a question response posted by John Oakes on November 28, 2014 (<http://evidenceforchristianity.org/can-you-explain-the-parallels-between-isaiah-144-20-and-the-ugaritic-story-of-athtar-baal-mt-zaphon-and-the-morning-star/>), the English text of the myth is posted and attributed to *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* by [Victor H. Matthews](#) and [Don C. Benjamin](#). With a caveat that two years after Oakes quoted it, the book was fully revised for a fourth edition, I believe the LORD wants it shared in this drash:

"There was [a] text... concerning 'Baal and Anat' with which Isaiah must have been familiar. The story at this point concerns finding a replacement for Baal who has just died at the hands of Mot, the god of sterility and the dead. It is suggested that Athtar succeed to the throne of Baal but he soon proves to be inadequate and has to step down to become god of the underworld. The text is as follows:

'Then Athtar the Awesome climbed Mount Zaphon,
 Ascended the throne of Ba'al the Almighty.
 But his feet did not reach the footstool,
 His head did not touch the headrest.
 Then, Athtar the Awesome spoke,

.
 'I cannot serve as king,
 I cannot dwell on the heights of Zaphon!'
 So, Athtar the Awesome descended,
 Stepped down from the throne of Ba'al the Almighty.
 He became king of the Underworld,
 Lord of the River of the Dead.'"

So in the Middle East circa 1446 BCE, Mount Zephon on the Mediterranean between Turkey and Syria was clearly associated with a powerful Canaanite god believed by many, perhaps most, to hold dominion over the sea. Interestingly, page 153 of the 1999 edition of [Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible](#) published by Eerdmans references a 14th-century BCE letter from the king of Ugarit to the Egyptian pharaoh. This letter argued Ba'al Zaphon was equivalent to the Egyptian god [Amun](#) that originated in Thebes. Jeremiah 46:25 may address that entity:

ADONAI-Tzva'ot, the God of Israel, says: "Behold, I will punish Amon of No, Pharaoh, Egypt, with her gods and her kings—even Pharaoh, and them that trust in him.

Note the TLV uses the transliteration of the Hebrew pronounced *no* but many versions translate *no* as *Thebes*. There appears to be a consensus among scholars this Amun of Thebes rose in Egyptian prominence as the city of Thebes itself rose in prominence, such that Amun ultimately became blended with Ra in the 16th century BCE, in the time between Joseph and Moses. If so, it may be that landmark opposite the camp of the Israelites represents yet another Egyptian deity that Pharaoh could believe was sufficiently powerful and motivated to finally defeat this aggravating Hebrew god—a lord of the sea where those former slaves could become cornered and repatriated. This site could have been to Mount Zephon as local synagogues were to the Temple.

I could hope the Straits of Tiran were where the crossing occurred because its Baal-Zephon is an entire island containing a 1600-foot mountain that seems to guard the narrows connecting the main part of the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aqaba—a fabulous locale for a powerful sea god! Alas, the main strait, which runs perpendicular to an easterly wind, contains two channels separated by a line of four reefs now reaching above the water but back then were just below the surface (there are still two wrecks of contemporary freighters visible on these reefs using Google Maps satellite images). The western channel is two Washington Monuments deep, adjacent to the shore, and less than a mile wide so the slopes down and up are not gentle. Maybe switchbacks could have been discovered but they would likely be pretty narrow (and don't even think about stumbling on all that coral, let alone falling to the bottom).

Alright, what does all of that have to do with us? In a word, evangelism. These days, most scholars of this parashat's slice of space/time regard the account; indeed, the entire Book as totally fictitious, convinced from the current state of archaeological record and consensus that the Israelites never dwelt in Egypt at *any* time. Most laypeople accept their well-researched points of view, and the sheer magnitude of the supernatural phenomena reported severely opposes willingness to even consider the Exodus could have actually happened as recorded. Thus, unbelievers must be persuaded the remaining Egyptian leaders could have been well-motivated by the scale of such divine repudiation to eliminate every trace of its occurrence. For instance, some evidence suggests the new Pharaoh was given the same name as the hard-hearted one to imply *that* Pharaoh had not died at *that* time—how many people would know otherwise that weren't committed to the cover-up? There is also evidence that all depictions of some high-level woman of the era were defaced beyond any identification—this may well have been Pharaoh's daughter who brought Moses into the Egyptian leadership circle. Such evidence may be dismissed by those whose worldviews and/or worldly positions could be jeopardized by acknowledging the legitimacy or plausibility of such evidence. Sadly, throughout history some scientists, journalists, etc. have chosen self-serving biased positions rather than adhere to the rigorous objectivity and intellectual integrity expected within their professions. The more we are aware of such academic controversies and intrigues, the better we are prepared to make the case for the Exodus when needed.

The next parashat is Yitro and covers Exodus chapter 18 verse 1 through chapter 20 verse 26.