

Exodus, Part 8

Having been literally driven out of Egypt, the Israelites begin their wilderness sojourn. There are about two million of them including a mixed bunch of non-Israelites who identify with them either through marriage or some other association. The journey facing them will last some 40 years before they enter the land promised to them. God will lead them on a circuitous route through the wilderness as He prepares them to take over the land from the Canaanites.

Exodus 13:17 When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, “Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.” ¹⁸ But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. ¹⁹ Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here.” ²⁰ And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. ²¹ And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. ²² The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.

The shortest route to the land of Canaan was through the territory of the Philistines along the Mediterranean Sea coast. This was the military road of the Egyptians called the “Way of Horus”. The Egyptians had established forts garrisoned with troops along the route well into Canaan nearly to Syria. But the route chosen by God was southeastward toward the Sinai Peninsula to avoid possible military confrontations with Egyptian garrisons on the Way of Horus that might engage the Israelites and encourage them to give up and return to bondage in Egypt. The term “armed for battle” can be translated as “bath array” and probably means organized for march rather than equipped with armor, bows, and arrows for warfare. At this point of their journey, the Israelites were not yet “armed for battle” much less trained for it.

Moses had heard of Joseph's request that his bones be taken from Egypt, so he honored that request. Later Joseph's bones were buried at Shechem (Josh. 24:32).

Note here in verse 21, "And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night." The "pillar of cloud" guided their march by day and the "pillar of fire" guided them by night. This implies they traveled both during the day and also at night for at least some of their journey, likely the early part while they were escaping Egypt and fleeing Pharaoh's army. This day-and-night travel ability explains how they covered so much ground at the beginning of their journey.

Exodus 14:1 Then the Lord said to Moses, ² "Tell the people of Israel to turn back and encamp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea. ³ For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, 'They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.' ⁴ And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord." And they did so. ⁵ When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the mind of Pharaoh and his servants was changed toward the people, and they said, "What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?" ⁶ So he made ready his chariot and took his army with him, ⁷ and took six hundred chosen chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. ⁸ And the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the people of Israel while the people of Israel were going out defiantly. ⁹ The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and his horsemen and his army, and overtook them encamped at the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.

From Succoth God told his people to "turn back" from their direct course to Sinai and encamp near Pi Hahiroth. The purpose of this unexpected directional change was to lure Pharaoh into thinking that they were lost and confused. By this move, God would harden Pharaoh's heart, i.e., create the occasion by which he would determine to make the effort to enslave the Israelites again. God's purpose here, as during the ten plagues, was to

perform a wonder so spectacular that the Egyptians would come to “know” him as the supreme deity.

Pharaoh was probably informed immediately of the Israelites’ departure from Rameses on the 15th day of the month. He did not react immediately because the Egyptians were involved in burying and mourning their dead, and because Moses had repeatedly referred to “a three-day journey”. Later, realizing the Israelites’ departure was not temporary, he had a change of heart

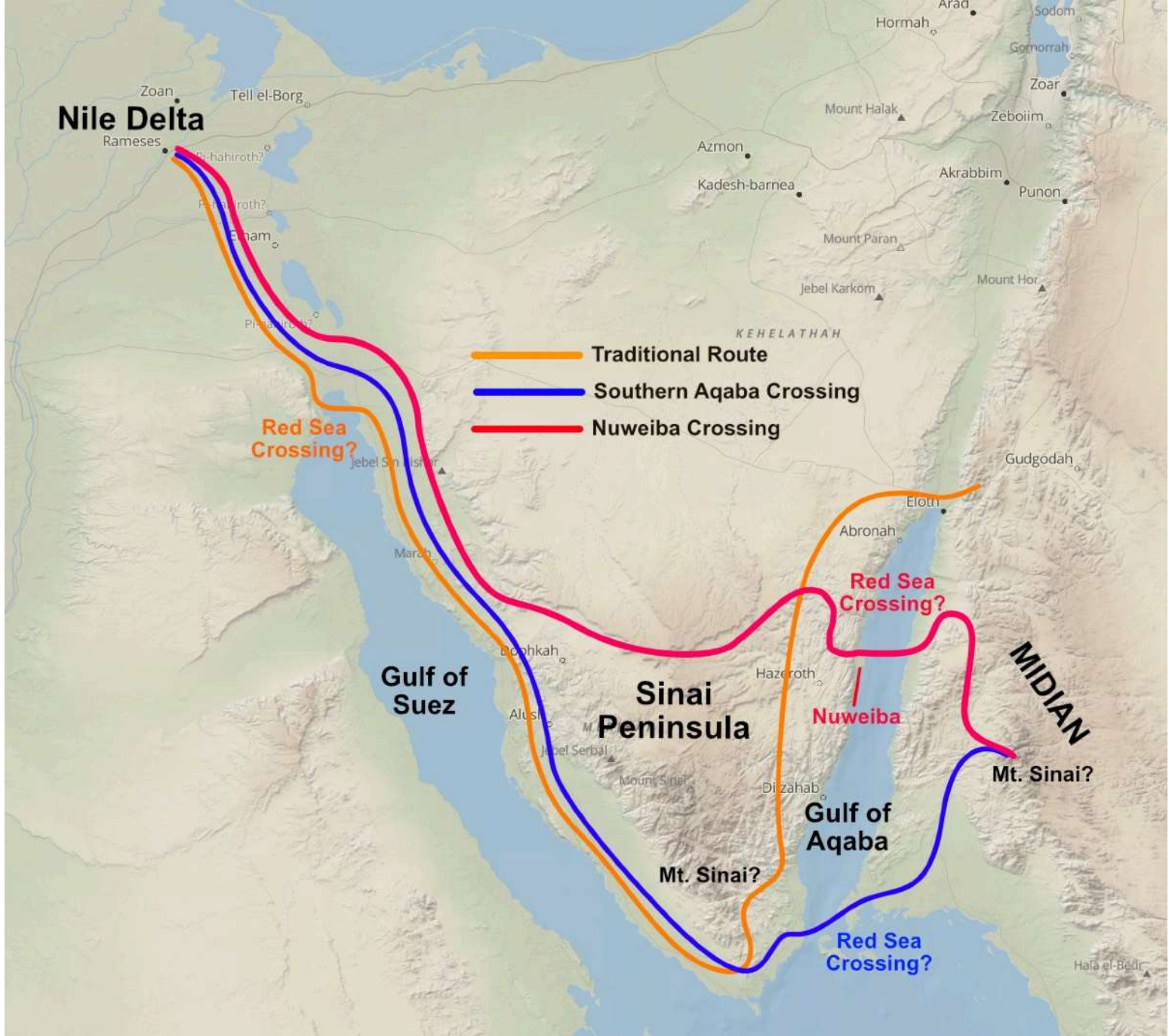
This change in direction would have led Pharaoh to think the Israelites were confused. As a result of God’s hardening of his heart, Pharaoh would attempt to enslave the people again, and then God would demonstrate His awesome power through another great judgment.

Pharaoh was apparently encouraged by their seeming indecisiveness concerning their change of direction and by his own superior military prowess. Just as God predicted, when Pharaoh received word of the whereabouts of his former slaves, he and his officials reevaluated their options. Realizing the implications of the release of the Hebrews – “We have let Israel go from serving us” (verse 5), Pharaoh and his officers were determined to prevent the escape. An army, led by six hundred of the best chariots, set out to capture the runaway slaves.

Normally such chariots were manned by a driver and an archer. In this case, each chariot had a third man, “an officer”. The king probably led the army out of his capital a short distance and then returned to his palace. The text indicates that *the Egyptians*, not Pharaoh, overtook the Israelites as they camped by the sea.

Which route?

It gets complicated when trying to determine exactly which route the Israelites followed. This is because the exact location of most of the way-points mentioned in the Scriptures is unknown today, and often hotly debated. It is impossible to be dogmatic about most of these locations. We can, however, sometimes draw conclusions based on Scripture and archeological evidence.



Several routes have been suggested. The problem begins with the term “Red Sea” or *Yam Sup* in Hebrew. It is mostly translated as “Red Sea” but the name is better translated as the “Sea of Reeds”. The Red Sea proper includes two fingers: the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Aqaba. Both gulfs are technically parts of the Red Sea. It is one of these two gulfs that the Scriptures refer to when describing the escape of the Israelites from Pharaoh’s pursuing army. The question is which one?

The traditional route of the Israelites is they crossed *Yom Sup* up near the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez, either the actual northern tip of the Gulf of Suez or possibly one of the many lakes between the tip of the Gulf of Suez

and the Mediterranean Sea. In the time of the Exodus, there were numerous freshwater lakes between the tip of the Gulf of Suez and the Med, a few of which remain. Today the Suez Canal connects the Gulf of Suez and the Mediterranean Sea.

The traditional route with the parting of the “Red Sea” has the Israelites crossing either one of these lakes or the narrow northern tip of the Gulf of Suez. But there are problems with this location. The main one is that none of the proposed crossing places fit the descriptions of the place of the parting of *Yom Sup*. Looking at a map of the region, it would appear that it would have been easy for the Israelites to march around and between these lakes mentioned to avoid being trapped by them. Furthermore, the Scriptures do not name one of these lakes as a crossing point but rather call the body of water they crossed *Yom Sup*.

If we rule out a crossing near the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez as not fitting Scripture well, we must turn to the Gulf of Aqaba east of the Gulf of Suez on the eastern side of the Sinai Peninsula. The Gulf of Aqaba is part of the Jordan Valley rift and is extremely deep in places with the sides of the underwater valleys much too steep for travel even if dry. There are, however, two places where the sea bed is reasonably shallow and flat to allow some two million people to cross. The first is at the southern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba where it meets the Red Sea proper (Blue line on map). This would be at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. Thus, the proposed route of the Israelites after they departed Avaris (later named Ramses) would have followed down the western shoreline of the Sinai Peninsula along the Gulf of Suez to the tip of the Sinai and crossed over “out of Egypt” and into the land of the Midianites (modern-day Saudi Arabia).

A second and more likely crossing site is about halfway up the Gulf of Aqaba at a location called Nuweiba Beach (Red line on map). Nuweiba Beach is a broad sandy beach jutting out from the surrounding mountains of the Sinai Peninsula. It is easily large enough to accommodate some two million Israelites. On the beach, they would have been trapped by the surrounding mountains on three sides and the Gulf of Aqaba on the other side. With the army of Pharaoh approaching the beach down the Wadi Watir, a dry riverbed and the only route through the mountains to Nuweiba,

the Israelites would have been trapped with no means of escape other than the one provided by God.

Eight pieces of evidence point to this being the location of the crossing of the Red Sea:

1. The book of Exodus says that the Israelites crossed at a place where “the wilderness had shut them in” (Exodus 14:3). The topography of this location fits perfectly with the descriptions found in Scripture of the location of the crossing of the Red Sea: surrounding mountains, the sea, and no means of escape. The number that pursued after them was six hundred chariots, fifty thousand horsemen, and two hundred thousand footmen, all armed. According to Josephus, Pharaoh’s army also seized the passages by which they imagined the Hebrews might fly, shutting them up between inaccessible precipices and the sea. As Josephus describes the location, “For there was on each side a ridge of mountains that terminated at the sea which were impassable by reason of their roughness and obstructed their flight.” (*Antiquities of the Jews*) This description cannot be applied to any locations near the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez.
2. The Gulf of Aqaba is generally very deep with steep sides under the water except for two points. One is the previously mentioned site at the southern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba and the other is about halfway up the gulf at Nuweiba where the relatively shallow sea bottom from the Sinai side to the Arabian side is wide enough to accommodate two million people.
3. There are underwater coral formations found at the Nuweiba location that resemble broken chariot wheels and axles with many right-angle coral formations that are extremely rare in nature. Dr. Lennart Möller and a team operating remote-controlled cameras filmed some of the area. Dr. Möller is a professor of medical sciences in Sweden with an interest in marine biology and archaeology and the author of *The Exodus Case*. He says the coral formations are unique from corals in other parts of the world he has observed. Instead of forming a reef, the coral is scattered. He described the seabed as resembling a “junkyard” with scattered coral formations having 90-degree angles and circular shapes that suggest man-made objects. Unfortunately, further research is largely prevented by Egyptian and Saudi

regulations. The Egyptian government prohibits the retrieval of coral or underwater objects. The Saudi government is even more prohibitive of such explorations in general.



4. Furthermore, the coral formations seem to be of four, six, and eight-spoked chariot wheels. This is important because the only time all three types of chariot wheels were in use by Egypt at the same time was during the time of the Exodus. It is unlikely any wooden wheel or axle parts would be found because such would have been consumed by the sea long ago. However, underwater metal detectors have signaled the existence of metal in the coral formations resembling chariot wheels.
5. There has been located there under the water part of what resembles a chariot wheel that is encased in gold sheeting. Coral does not grow on gold, and all that is left is the thin gold coating that

is much too fragile to move. Some of Pharaoh's chariots had gold-plated wheels.

6. Mineralized human and horse bones were found at the site.
7. At Nuweiba there is a section of beach where the sand and rocks are fused into one mass by high heat. Is this where the Pillar of Fire stood before the Israelites?



8. There were two 25' tall granite columns found, one on each side of the Gulf at Nuweiba that were supposedly placed there by King Solomon commemorating the location as that of the Red Sea crossing. One was found in the water on the Nuweiba side with its inscriptions eroded. The other was found on the Arabian side with inscriptions intact, but it has since been completely removed by the Saudis.

All of this evidence is of course contested by those who favor the traditional Red Sea crossing near the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez. One argument against the Nuweiba location is that the Israelites had to travel a considerable distance in a relatively short time.

Exodus 13:21 And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. ²² The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.

The Lord made provisions for travel during the day and the night. One would assume they made use of this provision during their flight.

Where is Mt. Sinai?

All this raises another question about the location of Mt. Sinai.

1. If Moses and the Israelites went to Mt. Sinai after they crossed *Yom Sup* and the Gulf of Aqaba is indeed the actual crossing point, that means that Mt. Sinai, where Moses encountered the Burning Bush and later received the Ten Commandments *after* crossing the Red Sea, must be on the eastern side of the Gulf of Aqaba in modern-day Saudi Arabia.
2. Though the traditional location of Mt. Sinai is on the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, Paul in Galatians 4:25 says that Mt. Sinai is in Arabia.
3. The Sinai Peninsula was not called Sinai until a much later date. Rather it was referred to as part of Egypt. The Israelites were not “out of the land of Egypt” until they crossed the *Yom Sup* (Gulf of Aqaba).
4. They entered the Land of Midian. Where is the Land of Midian? It is traditionally held that Midian was in the western part of Arabia along the Gulf or Aqaba. It is where Moses fled to escape Pharaoh after he killed the Egyptian taskmaster for abusing an Israelite. It is where he met his father-in-law, a priest of Midian, and where he met and married his wife. It is also where Mt. Sinai is located.
5. If Mt. Sinai is located in the land of Midian in western Arabia, then it is likely identified today as Jamal Magla. This mountain exhibits a blackening of its peak suggesting fire.



6. There is a split rock formation not far from Jamal Magla that fits the description of the rock from which abundant water flowed to quench the thirsts of the Israelites after Moses struck it with his rod. The rock formations at the split rock and below it exhibit much evidence of water erosion wearing them smooth.

7. One must conclude then that Mt. Sinai is indeed in western Arabia on the eastern side of *Yom Sup* (Gulf of Aqaba) and not at the southern tip of Sinai or anywhere else east of the Gulf of Aqaba.

Without being able to determine the actual locations of most of the way-points of the journey mentioned in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, it is impossible to be dogmatic about the actual Red Sea crossing location or that of Mt. Sinai. The Nuweiba location, however, seems to have much to recommend it.

Returning to our story now ...

Exodus 14:10 When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the Lord. ¹¹ They said to Moses, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? ¹² Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” ¹³ And Moses said to the people, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. ¹⁴ The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”

We resume our story with the Israelites at Nuweiba surrounded by mountains with their backs against *Yom Sup* and the army of Pharaoh coming at them down the Wadi Watir, their only means of escape. God has led them by His pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night to a place where He will demonstrate His ultimate power to do whatever He promises He will do.

And the Israelites are scared. Though they cried out to the Lord, they had no confidence He could help. Quickly forgetting the past, they bitterly accused Moses of deceiving them by leading them into the wilderness to die. There appears to be no means of escape. They are about to be slaughtered, and those who survive the slaughter will be taken back to Egypt as slaves to live a life even worse than the one they lived before being “liberated” by Moses.

But Moses tells them, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see

today, you shall never see again. ¹⁴ The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent” (vs. 13-14).

Exodus 14:15 The Lord said to Moses, “Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. ¹⁶ Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground. ¹⁷ And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. ¹⁸ And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.”

Moses privately cried out to God in desperation, and God gently rebuked him for it. He told Moses He would miraculously deliver the people through the sea. Moses only needed to raise his staff over the sea, and the water would divide leaving the floor of the sea as dry ground. Pharaoh’s charioteers would foolishly pursue the Israelites into the sea. There, as with the plagues, God would demonstrate His power and glory in the destruction of the Egyptian army. The Egyptians, God said, will know that I am the Lord.

Exodus 14:19 Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, ²⁰ coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night. ²¹ Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. ²² And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.

The Israelites had protection as they prepared to cross the sea. The “pillar of cloud,” perhaps the angel of God, a theophany, or an angelic messenger, that had been leading the host moved to the rear of the encampment and stood between the Egyptians and the Israelites. The cloud brought darkness to the Egyptians that night preventing any attack by them, while

on the other side of the cloud, light shone throughout the night to light the way for the Israelites.

That night God was performing another miracle: splitting the sea by a strong east wind and drying the sea floor.

1. The Lord used a strong east wind to drive the waters back all night.
2. The path through the sea was dry land.
3. The passageway was wide enough to allow about 2 million people and their flocks and herds to walk through.
4. A wall of water was upon the left and right-hand side of that path. This detail eliminates the explanation that they crossed during a prolonged low tide.
5. The sea was deep enough at the crossing location that it later drowned the Egyptians. This was a miraculous wind!

In a mighty display of His power, God freed Israel.

Exodus 14:23 The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. ²⁴ And in the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down on the Egyptian forces and threw the Egyptian forces into a panic, ²⁵ clogging their chariot wheels so that they drove heavily. And the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from before Israel, for the Lord fights for them against the Egyptians."

²⁶ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen." ²⁷ So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal course when the morning appeared. And as the Egyptians fled into it, the Lord threw the Egyptians into the midst of the sea. ²⁸ The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen; of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained.

As the Egyptians pursued the Israelites into the dry sea bed, in the morning watch (sometime between 3 a.m. and dawn) the Lord slowed their progress and they were panic-stricken. According to Psalm 77:16–19 God caused a rainstorm, lightning, thunder, and an earthquake. Perhaps the rain quickly soaked the sea floor, which affected the wheels of their chariots which

began to swerve or jam up, as some ancient versions have it. There was also the noise and buffeting of the wind that was banking the waters.

The Egyptians realized that the God of the Hebrews (the Lord) was fighting for Israel. At daybreak, when the Israelites could witness the miracle, God ordered Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea. When he did so the waters rushed back together and the Egyptians were swept into the sea (lit., “thrown downward”). The crashing walls of water crushed the Egyptians into the sea so that not a single man or animal survived. The dead Egyptians washing up on the shore reinforced faith among the Israelites in the power of God to save. The people feared Yahweh, and put their trust in him and his servant Moses (14:26–31).

Exodus 14:29 But the people of Israel walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. ³⁰ Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹ Israel saw the great power that the Lord used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

God delivered His people through dry land, while He destroyed the Egyptians in the sea; their dead bodies floating ashore were a grim reminder of the awesome power of God in judgment. As a result, the Israelites feared and trusted the Lord.