

The Lost Sea of the Exodus: A Modern Geographical Analysis

Second Edition

AN OVERVIEW

Researcher and Author: Glen A. Fritz © 2016

About 3500 years ago, a sea miraculously parted, but its location has been uncertain for millennia. Its identity has now been deciphered, and can be stated in one sentence. The real enigma is why it remained shrouded in mystery for so long. The explanation is deserving of a book!

This *Overview* is supplied as a courtesy to those who are curious about this topic. It contains the front material, Table of Contents, and a detailed introduction to the *Lost Sea* book.

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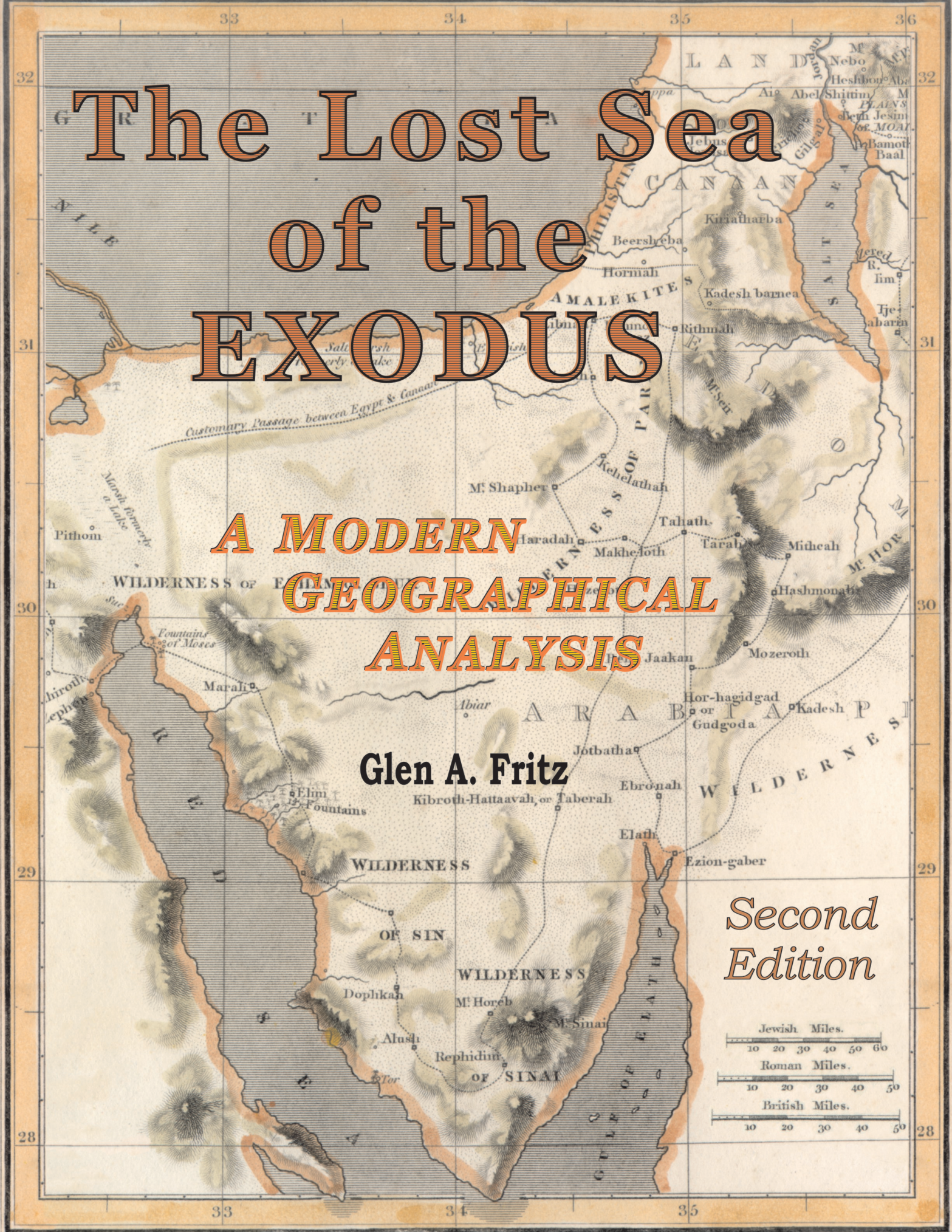
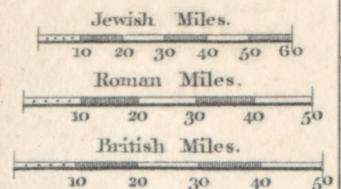
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The Lost Sea of the EXODUS

A MODERN GEOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS

Glen A. Fritz

*Second
Edition*



**THE LOST SEA OF THE EXODUS:
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This work is the second edition of *The Lost Sea of the Exodus*, first published in 2007 under ISBN: 1-59872-745-1. It was derived from the doctoral dissertation of the same title presented to the Texas State University-San Marcos in 2006, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Environmental Geography.

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ISBN: 978-0-692-62887-4

PDF version 160219

Published by GeoTech, San Antonio, TX
geo@satx.rr.com
www.AncientExodus.com

Summary: An extensive geographical investigation of the biblical Exodus that focuses on the identity of the sea that was crossed by the Israelites. The analysis shows that the traditional Red Sea or Reed Sea terms clash with the meaning and geography of *Yam Suph*, the Hebrew Bible name for the sea. This work presents the true location of *Yam Suph* and the specifics of the Exodus route needed to reach it.

Cover: Adapted from “A Map of the Journeys of the Children of Israel from Egypt through the Wilderness to Canaan. As described in Numbers XXXIII,” drawn and engraved by H. Cooper, ca 1808.

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PREFACE

Yam Suph, the Hebrew name for the sea that parted in the Exodus, has traditionally been called the “Red Sea” and placed at the Gulf of Suez near Egypt. More recently, many scholars have defined it as the “Reed Sea” and assigned it to various inland Egyptian estuaries. However, such locations do not harmonize with the biblical data that clearly identify *Yam Suph* as the modern Gulf of Aqaba.

The confusion began over 2,000 years ago with the Greek *Septuagint* Bible, which equated the Hebrew *Yam Suph* with the Greek concept of the Red Sea. The Greeks were unaware of the Gulf of Aqaba, which caused the Gulf of Suez to become the default site for *Yam Suph*. The geographical ignorance of the Gulf of Aqaba persisted until the 19th century, allowing the Red Sea tradition to dominate without challenge.

The various “Reed Sea” theories, which are now favored over the Red Sea tradition, mainly hinge on the linguistic theory that *suph* referred to vegetation. But, these supposed botanical meanings are readily discredited by basic linguistic analyses of the Hebrew vocabulary related to *suph*.

A Gulf of Aqaba location for *Yam Suph* invalidates all of the theories that have placed the Exodus sea crossing near Egypt. More importantly, it mandates that Mount Sinai must be sought in the region of ancient Midian in northwest Saudi Arabia, not within the Sinai Peninsula as previously thought.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The zigzag path leading to this project began in Appleton, WI, where I was born to a civil engineer and a high school teacher. As far back as I can remember, I have been inquisitive and adventuresome. I still recall the intrigue I felt at age four, listening to a shortwave BBC broadcast about the Dead Sea scroll discoveries. In grade school I lived in a Mississippi River town steeped in French and Indian history, and became enamored with archaeology.

My family later moved to Omaha, NE, where I attended high school and eventually earned a DDS degree from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. While in Nebraska, one memorable pastime was tracing parts of the Lewis and Clark expedition along the Missouri River.

I served as a captain in the U.S. Air Force prior to completing an Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery

residency at the University of Oklahoma. Being drawn to the ocean and warm weather, I eventually moved to Vero Beach, FL, where I operated a private practice for fifteen years.

In the 1990s I relocated to San Antonio, TX. At that time, the craft brewing industry was becoming popular and the opportunity arose to study Old World brewing with an English Brewmaster. I subsequently built and operated a small, award-winning microbrewery.

In 1996, I visited Israel for the first time. The trip catalyzed my interest in the ancient history and geography of the Near East. Over the next several years, I traveled in Israel, Egypt, and Jordan as time permitted, and studied Hebrew, which has been important for analyzing biblical geography nuances.

I soon realized that the route of the Exodus was far from settled, and I was challenged by its enigmas. But exploration of the region was a daunting task, hampered by cost, physical and political barriers, and the lack of good topographical mapping. I knew that any geographical analysis would be greatly aided by the availability of digital terrain modeling and high resolution satellite imagery.

At that time, tools like Google Earth® were not available, or even on the immediate horizon. In my quest to gain digital cartography skills, I enrolled in graduate level geography studies at Texas State University-San Marcos. Although it was not my original intent, I earned a PhD in Environmental Geography in 2006. In the course of my research, I was also able to visit the ancient region of Midian in Saudi Arabia and explore the site popularly touted as Mount Sinai.

My hope is to convey the geographical insights I have gained about the Exodus in a thorough and thought-provoking manner in order to advance the understanding of this truly remarkable event.

Glen A. Fritz
San Antonio, Texas
January 2016





CARTE
du VOIAGE des
ISRAËLITES
 dans le desert,
 depuis leur sortie de l'Égypte
 jusqu'au passage du Jourdain.
 Dressée par L'Auteur du Comma
 naire de l'Esode, et exécutée par
LIÉBAUX GÉOGRAPHE.

Figure 0.1 Carte du Voyage des Israélites.
 (Calmet Augustin 1724, Moldovan collection.)

Madiana

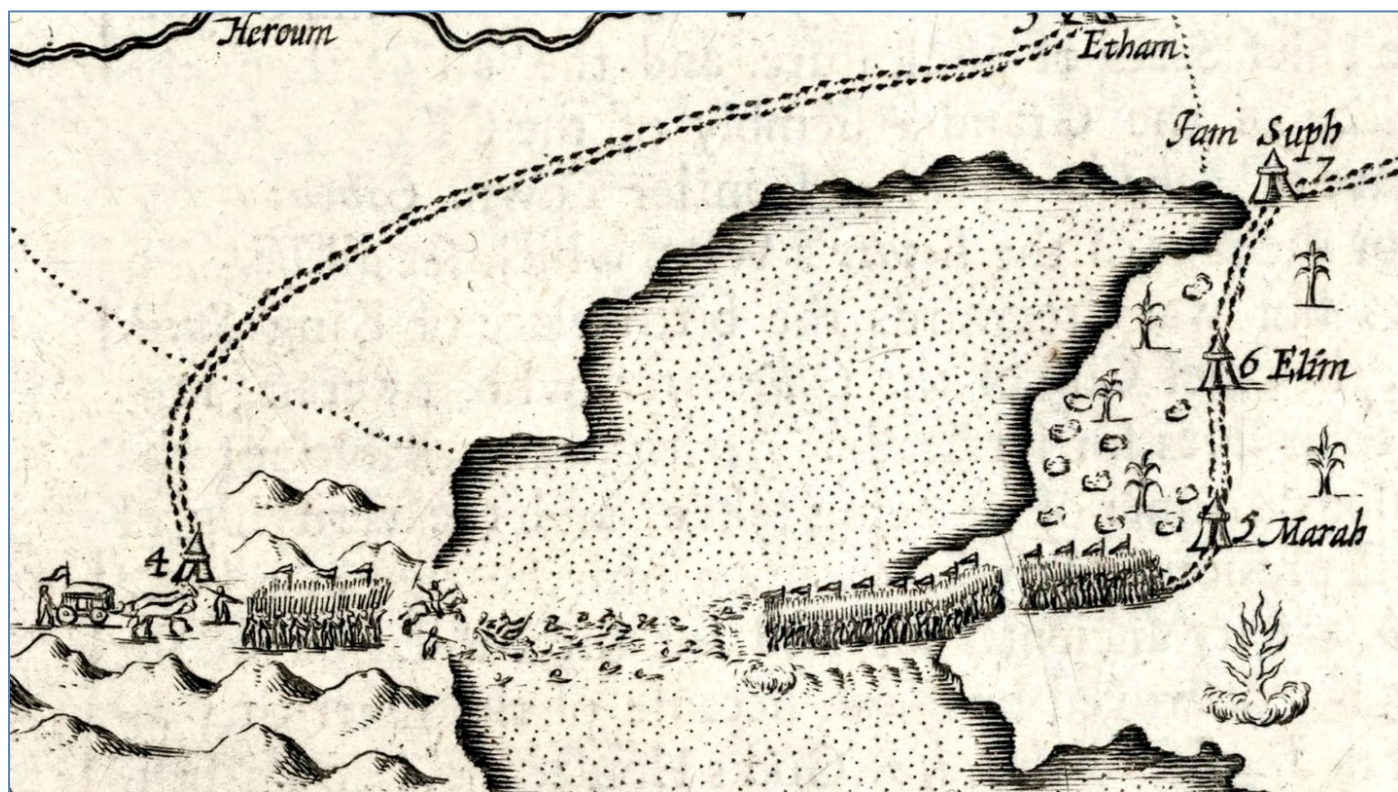


Figure 0.2 The Israelites Crossing the head of the “Red Sea” (adapted from *Canaan*, John Speed 1651, London).

OVERVIEW

Where was the Sea of the Exodus? This question has been probed for centuries. When I discovered that it had been in plain view, but unsuspected for most of history, I had an “Aha!” moment. For many readers, the intellectual adventure will not lie in the simple answer to this question, but in discovering the details that provide the solution to the enigma. For those who have been steeped in the “Reed Sea” theories, grappling with a different geographical perspective may require patience and an open mind. This book approaches the “Lost Sea” topic in this manner:

Chapters 1-2	Introduction and Methodology
Chapters 3-5	Historical, philosophical, and geographical background
Chapter 6	Review of the Exodus Sea theories
Chapter 7	Biblical geography of <i>Yam Suph</i>
Chapter 8	The Red Sea tradition
Chapter 9	Geographical problems with the “Inland Sea” theories
Chapter 10	Geographical problems with the “Reed Sea” theories
Chapter 11	The “Reed Sea” linguistic problems
Chapter 12	<i>Yam Suph</i> conclusions
Chapter 13	Gulf of Aqaba geography and crossing scenarios
Chapter 14	The Exodus route between Egypt and the sea
Chapter 15	The geography of the Exodus encampment by the sea

This grand story provides some extraordinary details concerning *Yam Suph* (ים סוף), the Hebrew name for the sea that was miraculously parted and crossed in the Exodus. This term may be unfamiliar to most readers because English Bibles render it as *Red Sea* or *Reed Sea*. Despite the title of this work, “The Lost Sea of the Exodus,” the Bible is clear that *Yam Suph* was synonymous

OVERVIEW



Figure 0.3 The Region of the Exodus.

with the *Gulf of Aqaba*. This gulf is shown as the misshapen “Golfe Elanitique” in the ca 1724 map of **Figure 0.1**. Its true proportions are revealed in the satellite image map in **Figure 0.3**.

Yes. The answer to the “Lost Sea” enigma has been announced! So, whence the “Lost Sea” title, and the need for an entire book for explanation? In reality, *Yam Suph* was never lost. However, knowledge of its modern analogue, the Gulf of Aqaba, was lacking for most of history, which prevented scholars from ever considering its possible connection with the Exodus.

This topic requires in-depth explanation for two reasons. Firstly, background knowledge of biblical, historical, and modern geography is required to appreciate the arguments for the identity of *Yam Suph*. Secondly, the location of *Yam Suph* has been perennially confused and obscured by the “Red Sea” and “Reed Sea” traditions. These ideas can only be put to rest if their origins, deficiencies, and conflicts with biblical geography are fully explained.

Parameters of the Enigma

A. The Missing Gulf of Aqaba

It is an axiom of medicine that the normal anatomy must be understood in order to recognize the abnormal. A parallel can be drawn with mapping in geography. Because this discussion

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introduces the idea of map deficiencies involving the Exodus region, a “normal” map is shown for reference in **Figure 0.3**.

In 1522, the Magellan expedition completed a circumnavigation of the earth. Yet, the *Gulf of Aqaba* remained unexplored, with no definitive knowledge of its existence. Fifteen hundred years earlier, several Greco-Roman writers had made allusions to this gulf, but they were vague and imprecise. The persistence of this ignorance was evidenced in Renaissance-era maps that portrayed gross distortions of the Red Sea, and a missing *Gulf of Aqaba*. **Figure 0.4** displays such a map, made 38 years after the Magellan expedition.

How could the Greek geographers, with knowledge obtained from widespread military and commercial endeavors, be so ill-informed about this gulf? How could the body of water that skirted the land bridge between Asia and Africa be left in a state of obscurity for millennia? An analogous situation is seen in the longstanding obscurity of the origin of the Nile River. This 5700-mile-long river was the lifeblood of a land that hosted some of the most advanced and powerful cultures in the world. Herodotus (1980, 139) noted this curious mystery in the 5th century BC:

...Concerning the sources of the Nile, nobody I have spoken with, Egyptian, Libyan, or Greek professed to have any knowledge, except the scribe who kept the register of the treasures of Athene...but even this person's account...seemed to me hardly serious.

It was not until 1858 the source of the White Nile at Lake Victoria was discovered by John Speke.

The *Gulf of Aqaba* remained “lost” to geographers until its head was explored by Europeans, beginning in 1822 (Ritter 1866). But, its true proportions were not known until Captain Robert Moresby's 1830-33 expedition provided reasonably accurate charting (Wellsted 1838).

In the midst of this period of exploration, *Calmet's Dictionary of the Bible* (ca 1830) dismissed speculations about the existence of the *Gulf of Aqaba*, noting that it was “...a subject so obscure, that some of our best geographers have inclined to reject it altogether” (Calmet 1830, 485). The important point here is that scholars, throughout most of history, never possessed the knowledge of the *Gulf of Aqaba* needed to even consider it as a candidate for *Yam Suph*.

B. The Septuagint Red Sea

There does not appear to be any explanation why the designation of the sea, which in Hebrew is *Yam Suph*, should be rendered in various translations as ‘Red Sea’ (Towers 1959, 150).

A sizeable quantity of maps and writings dwell on the idea that the Exodus sea crossing occurred somewhere near Egypt (e.g., **Figures 0.1, 0.2, 0.4, and 0.5**). One must ask where the earliest example of this doctrine is recorded. The answer begins with the Greek *Septuagint* Bible, the first translation of the Hebrew Bible, completed around 250 BC. Its scholars equated the Hebrew *Yam Suph* with the Greek *Eruthra Thalassa*, meaning “Red Sea.” Although *yam* clearly means “sea,” it is well known that *suph* does not mean “red” (*eruthra*).

But, this *Septuagint* rendering was not a translation. It was a geographical interpretation reflecting the scholars' knowledge of the two great seas near Egypt, the Mediterranean on the north, and the Red Sea on the south. Based on contemporary writings such as Herodotus, they would have understood this sea as a long shaft of water passing along Arabia and ending near Egypt. The Red Sea termination near Egypt is now known as the Gulf of Suez (**Figure 0.3**).

The Greek Red Sea concept did not include the Gulf of Aqaba as we know it because the Greeks were ignorant of its geography. The *Septuagint* demonstrated this ignorance in the three instances where *Yam Suph* was *not* interpreted as the Red Sea (Judg. 11:16, I Kings 9:26, Jer. 49:21). These verses all mention *Yam Suph* in association with *Edom* (**Figure 0.3**), which was known to have been southeast of *Canaan*, but very distant from both Egypt and the nearby Greek Red Sea.

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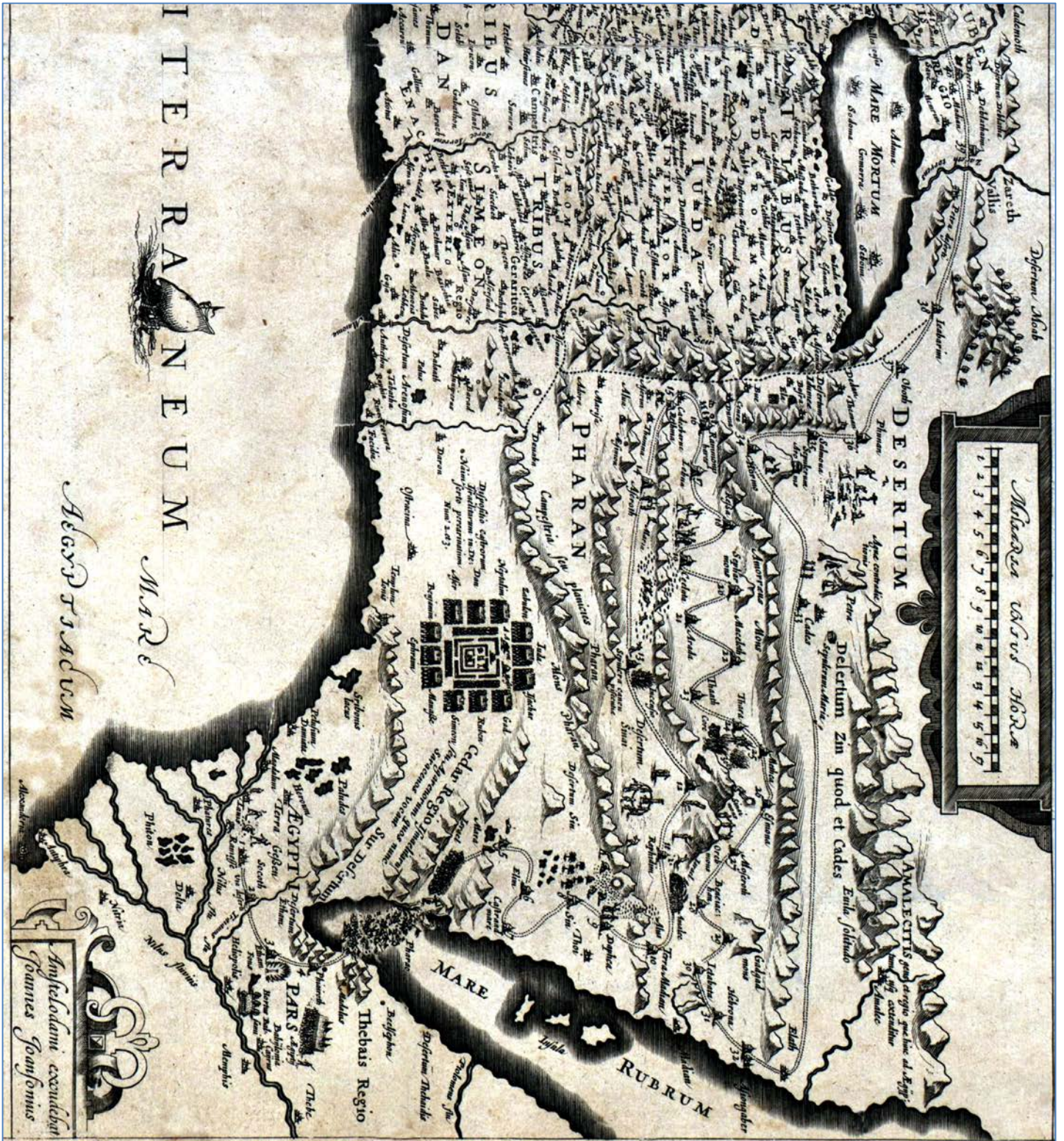


Figure 0.4 The Red Sea ca 1650. This Renaissance-era map is rotated 90° clockwise to put north at the top. The Mediterranean Sea is on the left. The Red Sea (*Mare Rubrum*) is shown as a single channel of water ending at Egypt. It shows no bifurcation at its head and, therefore, no Gulf of Aqaba or Sinai Peninsula. The early Exodus route tradition is depicted as crossing the sea near Egypt, at the head of the modern Gulf of Suez (from *Palestina Siue Terrae Sanctae* by Joannes Joansonius, Library of Congress).

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As a consequence, *Yam Suph* and the Hebrews' sea crossing were envisioned at the Red Sea near Egypt. Comments of the Jewish historian, Josephus (*Ant.* II.xv.3), confirm that this tradition was already established by the first century AD.

C. The “Sea of Reeds”

Early in the Renaissance, “Sea of Reeds” emerged as a synonym for the Red Sea. This nomenclature stemmed from the mention of Red Sea vegetation by Classical writers and the growing penchant of Bible translators to apply botanical meanings to *suph*. For instance, Pliny wrote in the first-century AD that: “in the Red Sea...there are whole forests found growing...the size of the shrubs is three cubits in height...” (1855, 13.50). Such reports clearly influenced modern perceptions, as demonstrated by this remark made 19 centuries later:

The Hebrew word ‘suph,’ though used commonly for ‘flags’ or ‘rushes,’ would by an easy change be applied to any aqueous vegetation...just as Pliny (xiii. 25 [50]) speaks of it as ‘a vast forest’... (Stanley 1918, 3) ...The forests of submarine vegetation, which gave the whole sea its Hebrew appellation of the ‘Sea of Weeds,’ the trees of coral, whose huge trunks may be seen, even on the dry shore... (ibid. n 1).

However, note the leap from Pliny’s vast sea forests to flags and rushes, which are plants that do not characteristically thrive in salt water.

The idea of Red Sea vegetation was given credibility by Martin Luther’s 1534 German Bible, which substituted *Schilfmeer* (Reed Sea) for *Yam Suph*. The widely-read 17th-century work of John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, linked the Red Sea with sedge: “...or scattered sedge afloat, when with fierce winds Orion armed hath vexed the Red Sea coast...” (Milton 1993, 130, I.304-6).

By the early 19th century, the application of this theme to the Red Sea (and thereby to *Yam Suph*) was essentially codified by the report of noted Hebraist, H. W. F. Gesenius. Concerning *Yam Suph*, his lexicon stated: “the weedy sea, i.e., the Arabian gulf¹ which abounds in sea weed...” (Gesenius 1979, 581).

However, as the Gulf of Suez part of the Red Sea underwent exploration, the suitability of the “Sea of Reeds” designation came under scrutiny:

As far back as ancient records reach, we find this sea called, by Moses Jam [*Yam*] Suph, the Sea of Rushes.² This appellation is hardly justified by the few rushes which are found near some springs on the western coast... (Laborde 1834, 264).

The usual translation as ‘Sea of Sedge’ has never explained itself. The Red Sea is a deep body of water without, to my knowledge and upon inquiry, any particular aquatic flora (Montgomery 1938, 131).

In retrospect, the “Sea of Reeds” expression had been naively applied to the Red Sea, and thereby, to *Yam Suph*. But, it never eliciting geographical conflict until the 19th century, when it was moved and applied to various inland marsh lakes, as explained in **Section F**.

D. The Botanical Meanings for *Suph*

It is important to realize that the earliest meaning of *Yam Suph* was not botanical. The Greek Septuagint scholars linked *Yam Suph* with a true sea, the Red Sea, and never with vegetation. Three hundred years later, the Apostle Paul expressed the same assumption, mentioning the Red Sea twice

¹ “Arabian Gulf” was another historical Greek term for the Red Sea.

² This statement reflects the popular assumption that *suph* had a botanical meaning. This work will show that, historically, such was not the case.

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in conjunction with the Exodus (Acts 11:36; Heb. 11:29). Old Testament scholar Bernard Batto objected to the cavalier redefinition of *Yam Suph* on the basis of its supposed botanical meaning:

Thus, even if one were to grant the validity of the Reed Sea hypothesis, the etymology of *yam sup* = Red Sea would still be left unexplained. The burden of proof clearly falls upon those who would posit the existence of a second body of water farther north with the homophonous name of *yam sup*, in addition to the well-known *yam sup* = Red Sea (Batto 1983, 28).

More than a millennium before the use of the “Sea of Reeds” term, botanical meanings for *suph*, such as reeds, emerged and evolved in Bible translations and commentaries. Beginning in the second century AD, they appeared in several Greek, Aramaic, and Latin biblical works. In particular, *reeds* or *papyrus* became popular substitutions for *suph* in the story of finding Moses in the Nile (Exod. 2:3, 5), even though the earlier Septuagint had not done so in these verses.

In the late Medieval Period, the reed idea for *suph* was potentially given stature by a terse comment of Rashi, an 11th-century rabbinical scholar (Ben Isaiah and Sharfman 1950), and by Luther’s Bible. But, the “Reed Sea” idea never appeared in the revered 1611 King James Version, and has not formally entered most modern Bibles.

The vegetation idea hinges on just four verses in which *suph* has been rendered as reeds, rushes, or weeds (Exod. 2:3, 5; Isa. 19:6; Jon. 2:5). The pivotal nature of these verses is commonly recognized (Vervenne 1995). For instance, Snaith (1965, 395) stated that “the rendering ‘the sea of reeds’...depends upon the use of *sup* (reeds) in Exod. ii 3, 5 of the reeds of the river Nile...and again in Isa. xix, 6...”

Egyptologist Heinrich Brugsch, who promoted the “Reed Sea” idea early on, declared that:

...the Hebrew word *Souph*—whose meaning of ‘weeds, reeds, rushes, papyrus-plant’ is certified by the dictionaries of the Hebrew language...also gave its name to the *Yam Souph*, ‘the Sea of Reeds’ (Brugsch 1881, 375-6).

But where Brugsch got this idea is a mystery because the Hebrew authority of his day, *Gesenius’ Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*, did just the opposite. It stated that the meaning of *suph* as “*rush, reed, sea weed*...the etymology is not known, and it cannot be derived from the [root] verb סוף [*suph*]...” (Gesenius 1979, 5488).

These four key verses constitute a dilemma because “every other time that *suph* appears in Scripture without being linked to *yam* (sea) it is the common Hebrew word for ‘end,’ and is also sometimes translated ‘consume or ‘perish’...” (Hurn 2002, 425). Similarly, Batto (1983, 34) noted the core meaning within this word family as *end, cease, edge, or border*. Considering that there are 116 biblical occurrences of the *suph*-like words, the four botanical renderings are conspicuous statistical outliers. Ironically, botanical renderings are not required in these four verses as words with meanings related to *end* can easily be substituted.

In conclusion, the capricious use of botanical interpretations for *suph* presumably reflects innocent embellishment of the biblical scenarios. Unfortunately, the resulting inconsistencies have become problematic distortions.

E. The “Inland Sea” Theories

Two basic traditions existed at the opening of the 19th century:

- 1) The “Sea of Reeds” was a synonym for the Red Sea.
- 2) The Exodus sea crossing occurred at the head of the Gulf of Suez near Egypt.

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However, things changed when the “Inland Sea” theory emerged in the mid-1800s. It modified the Red Sea tradition by envisioning an extension of the gulf over the Isthmus of Suez (**Figure 0.3**), and a “sea crossing” miles north of the head of the Gulf of Suez. The theory rested on the “scientific” proposition that high sea levels and/or low isthmus land levels had existed during the Exodus. This idea was not entirely new as, 2400 years earlier, Herodotus had opined that the Red Sea and the Mediterranean had nearly met in the distant past.

A strong advocate of this idea, geologist Edward Hull, proposed that the isthmus “has been tipping in recent ages from south to north” (Hull 1885, 186). He concluded:

It is not too much to assume that at a period of 4000 years ago the process of elevation had not been completed to its present extent; and that, in consequence, the waters of the Gulf of Suez stretched northwards into the Bitter Lake, forming a channel, perhaps of no great depth, but requiring the exercise of Almighty Power to convert it into a causeway of dry land in order to rescue the chosen people from their impending peril.... In this way, as appears to me, we may bring the Bible narrative into harmony with physical phenomena... (Hull 1889, 186).

This statement reveals a primary impetus behind this theory--to provide scenarios in which natural phenomena could explain a miraculous sea parting. More importantly, the Inland Sea theory is entirely discredited by modern geological and oceanographic data (see **Sections 9.4** and **9.6**).

The Exodus sea crossing became an opportunistic fording of the land--rather than a divine parting of a sea.

F. The Modern “Reed Sea” Theories

It is almost dogma with many modern biblical scholars that the sea of the exodus, through which the Israelites passed in their escape from Egypt, was not the Red Sea, as popularly supposed, but a lesser body of water further north known as the ‘Reed Sea’ (Batto 1983, 27).

Beginning in the latter 19th century, the “Sea of Reeds” appellation for the Red Sea was exploited to justify redefining *Yam Suph* as an inland marsh lake in eastern Egypt. Egyptologist Heinrich Brugsch popularized the break with the Red Sea tradition, reasoning that the traditional “Sea of Reeds” name for the Red Sea was a mistake that would better apply to an inland marsh. He then assigned *Yam Suph* at *Lake Sirbonis* on the Mediterranean coast (1874, 376) (**Figure 0.3**).

The 1902 *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (II: 1438) roundly criticized Brugsch, noting that “this theory is wholly destitute of any solid basis [because] the Reedy Sea occurs too often for the Red Sea to admit a new application to Sirbonis.” But the great mockery in Brugsch’s theory was that it did not originate from some scientific linguistic or geographical analysis. According to his own writings (Brugsch 1881), it emerged from his ruminations about an ancient legend of a lost army at *Lake Sirbonis* provided by Diodorus and repeated later in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

Brugsch’s radical scheme was subsequently adapted by influential Egyptologists like Edouard Naville (1885) and Alan Gardiner. Gardiner assigned *Yam Suph* to the northeast Nile Delta, in the “marshy and watery region that now comprises the southern extremity of [Lake] Menzaleh” (Gardiner 1922, 210). He justified detaching the “Sea of Reeds” name from the Red Sea with the proposition that *suph* was derived from the Egyptian word for *papyrus*. In the process, Gardiner sidestepped biblical geography, only citing one of the 24 *Yam Suph* verses (Exod. 10:19) to justify his *Lake Menzaleh* location:

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The notion that the ‘Sea of reeds’ was a sheet of water lying between Rameses and the desert is certainly suggested by Exodus x, 19, where it is recounted that the Lord sent an exceedingly strong wind that drove the locusts into the ‘Sea of reeds.’ This statement would be strange if the ‘Sea of Reeds’ were the Red Sea, as the favourite theory supposes (Gardiner 1922, 211).

(Application of simple geometry to this verse (**Appendix 5**) demonstrates that this event requires a *Yam Suph* location distant from Egypt.)

Due to the biblical notice that the Exodus did not follow the coastal route (Exod. 13:17), later theorists tended to favor *Yam Suph* sites outside of the Nile Delta in the southern Isthmus of Suez. Haynes (1896, 181) proposed *Lake Timsah* or the *Bitter Lakes* (**Figure 0.3**):

The name “Yam Suph” would very probably have been applied to the continuations of water and marsh which lay to the north or the present position of Suez...a fitting site for the defeat of the Egyptian army at the Red Sea (or “Yam Suph”), ...any site near Lake Timsah or the Bitter Lakes, which should be otherwise suitable, will do.

The linguistic basis for the “Reed Sea” theories eventually became pervasive, to the point that “the majority of scholars now favor the view that the Hebrew *sup* is a loanword from the Egyptian *twf(j)* ‘papyrus (-plant)’” (Huddleston 1992, 5:636). The dominant viewpoint is well-summarized here:

Yam suf in the Hebrew presents a problem. Because it literally means ‘Sea of Reeds,’ it would be expected to apply only to a body of water that is characterized by the lush growth of the papyrus plants or reed thickets. The Hebrew *suf* is generally taken to be a borrowing from the Egyptian *twf*, ‘papyrus,’ ‘reed thicket,’ so that the designation *yam suf* would seem to rule out the possibility of identity with what is traditionally known as the Red Sea (Sarna 1996, 107).

In the final analysis, the “Reed Sea” theories are dependent on linguistics—not biblical geography. They rest heavily on the questionable botanical renderings of *suph* in only four Bible verses. Apart from these botanical interpretations, the proposition that *suph* was an Egyptian loanword meaning *papyrus* has no relevance.

Most importantly, the “Reed Sea” theories must ignore: 1) The body of biblical geographical evidence concerning the *Yam Suph* location. 2) The biblical physical character of *Yam Suph* that requires it to have been a sea. 3) The original Septuagint treatment of *suph* and *Yam Suph*, which clashes with the botanical meanings and inland marsh-lake locations.

The transformation of *Yam Suph* from a sea to a swamp was justified by a linguistic proposition, not biblical geography.

Solving the Enigma

The Hebrew Yam Suph

The biblical descriptions of *Yam Suph* provide ample geographical data to ascertain its location, provided that traditional preconceptions are excluded. *Yam Suph* occurs 24 times in the Hebrew Bible. Seven verses unmistakably link it with the Gulf of Aqaba.

The most pivotal verse, Exod. 23:31, names *Yam Suph* as the southern landmark of the “Promised Land”: “I will set thy bounds from the Red sea [*Yam Suph*] even unto the sea of the

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Philistines, and from the desert unto the river...” The importance of the Promised Land to the Hebrews suggests that a key landmark of its bounds would not easily be mistaken. The *Yam Suph* of this boundary has no possible relation to Egypt. The “Promised Land” included the region labeled “Ancient Canaan” in **Figure 0.3** and “Chanaan” in **Figure 0.5**.

Furthermore, there are no Bible verses that mandate a *Yam Suph* location near Egypt. The Egyptian locations supposed for *Yam Suph* are also contradicted by the ongoing encounters with it during the Exodus. Within days of the miraculous sea crossing, the Hebrews encamped on the far shore of *Yam Suph*. It was subsequently named in their travels beyond Mount Sinai, to and from *Kadesh* (at the foot of *Canaan*), and in association with *Mount Seir*, *Edom*, and the *Aravah Valley*. Even in the 40th and final year of the Exodus, *Yam Suph* appeared as a landmark. These circumstances in no way suggest that *Yam Suph* was a body of water left behind at Egypt.

Egypt to the Sea

Identifying the Gulf of Aqaba as *Yam Suph* naturally generates curiosity about the nature of the sea crossing. In this regard, the Gulf of Aqaba bathymetry (depth characteristics), coastal geography, and sea crossing scenarios are presented in **Chapter 13**.

The likely Exodus route used to reach *Yam Suph* is taken up in **Chapter 14**. It examines the geography and historical travel routes in the Sinai Peninsula, and melds these data with the biblical geography to plot the likely track between *Rameses* and the encampment at *Yam Suph*.

Chapter 15 presents the meanings and locations of *Migdol*, *Baal-Zephon*, and *Pihahiroth*, the enigmatic places associated with the seaside encampment. The chapter demonstrates that these places uniquely fit the geography of the eastern Sinai Peninsula, where they triangulate the position of the route between the *Etham* encampment and the sea.

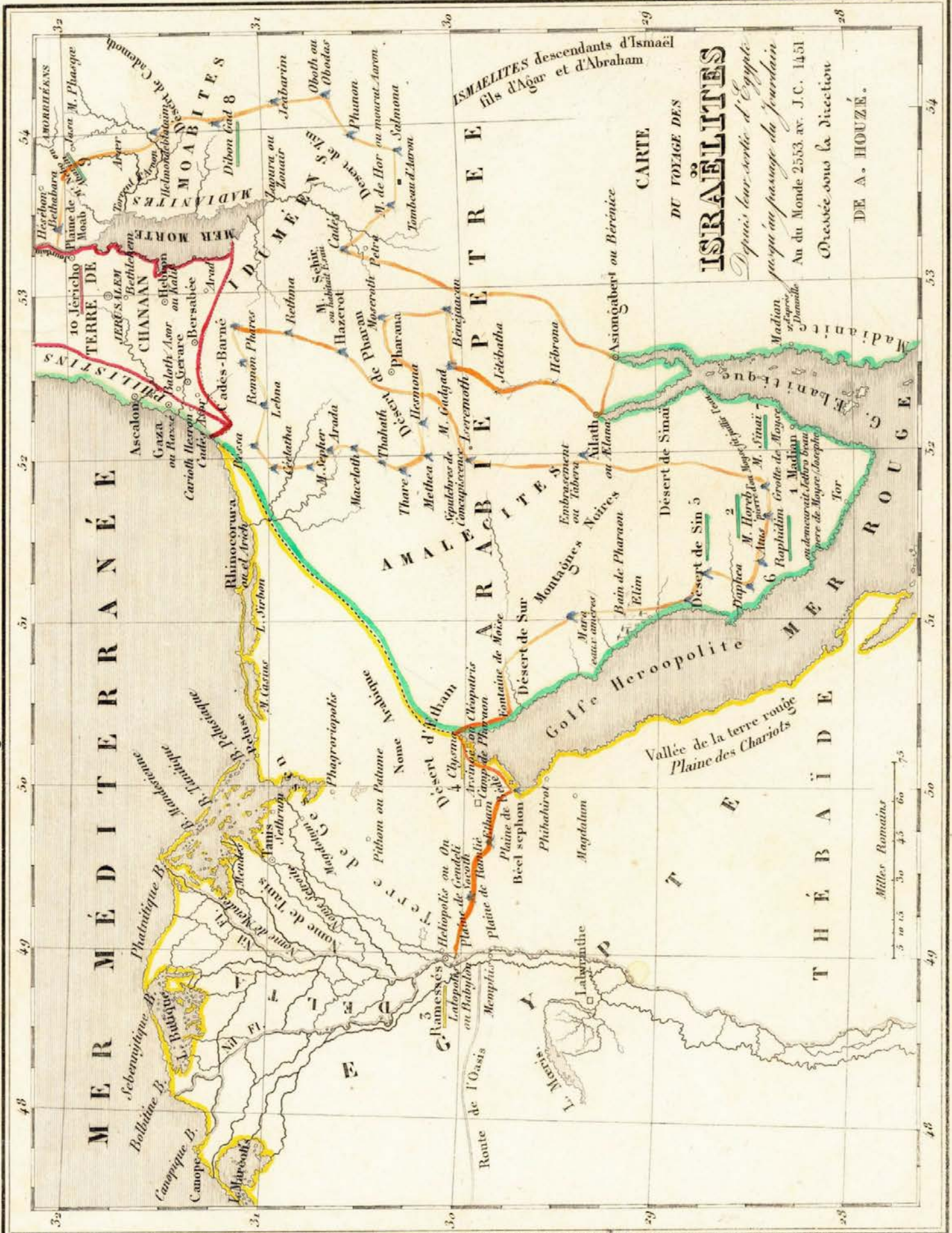
Conclusion

Many investigators have carried out their search for *Yam Suph* without considering its entire biblical context. References to *Yam Suph* that do not match the theory *du jour* have often been ignored. Overreliance on tradition, whether historical, religious, or scholarly, has also led investigators to look in the wrong places for *Yam Suph*. The typical result is that the Sea of the Exodus is positioned at some shallow marsh-lake at Egypt.

A *Yam Suph* at the Gulf of Aqaba vexes the common preconceptions because it is deep, distant from Egypt, and it predicts an even more distant Mount Sinai. But biblically, there are sound geographical reasons to place *Yam Suph* and the Sea of the Exodus at the Gulf of Aqaba. Conversely, there is no biblical indication that *Yam Suph* was ever a marsh, lake, lagoon, river, estuary, or mythical body of water near Egypt.

A recent investigator observed that scholars have been unable “to explain why the Gulf of Aqaba should be called *yam sup*” (Hoffmeier 2005, 81). Considering that seven biblical authors, over a 700-year period, linked *Yam Suph* with the Gulf of Aqaba, the southern landmark of the Promised Land, such a statement is bewildering. It has been suggested that *Yam Suph* marked the “ends of the earth” (Batto 1984), the end of the Sinai Peninsula (BASE Institute 2002), or some mythical land or sea (e.g., Snaith 1965). However, the only land that *Yam Suph* ever marked was the Promised Land. Its meaning as the “sea of ending” or “sea of boundary” would be an apt geographical description of that role.

Next Page: Figure 0.5 A Traditional Exodus Route Map (Houze, ca 1844, author’s collection).



ISMAELITES descendants d'Ismaël
fils d'Agar et d'Abraham

CARTE
DU VOYAGE DES
ISRAËLITES

Depuis leur sortie d'Égypte
jusqu'au passage du Jourdain
Au du Monde 2553. av. J.C. 1451
Ornée sous la direction
DE A. HOUZÉ.

