

## What's the Truth about . . . the Translation of Yam Suf?

**MISCONCEPTION:** Upon leaving Egypt, the Jews crossed the Yam Suf, which is translated as the Red Sea. This translation, however, is an error. Red Sea is a corruption of the correct Old English (OE) translation, Reed (Rede) Sea. (Rede is a legitimate spelling of reed in OE.)

**FACT:** The notion that the Yam Suf is the modern-day Red Sea predates any English translation of the Bible by well over a thousand years. In fact, it seems that until the late eighteenth century no one questioned the translation and identification of Yam Suf with the Red Sea.<sup>1</sup>

Red Sea is the ancient and preferred translation of Yam Suf. While some believe that *suf* refers to reed-like plants growing in or near the sea and that literal translations of proper nouns in the Bible are preferable, Reed Sea remains a questionable translation at best. Unfortunately, the notion that Yam Suf should be translated as “Reed Sea” and not “Red Sea” seems to be gaining in popularity.<sup>2</sup>

**BACKGROUND:** Determining the “correct” translation of Yam Suf is not simply a matter of ascertaining the meaning of the words. Rather, several issues need to be addressed: Is the body of water that is today called the Red Sea the one that was split for the Israelites to pass through? Irrespective of the location, is Reed Sea an accurate translation of Yam Suf? Assuming Reed Sea is the literal translation of Yam Suf, does that make it the *correct* transla-

tion? Every one of these separate but inter-dependent questions needs to be looked at, although not every question has a complete and satisfactory answer.

The name Yam Suf appears in Tanach a total of twenty-three times.<sup>3</sup> However, most people associate Yam Suf with the body of water the Israelites crossed while fleeing Egypt. Many of the sources that translate Yam Suf as Red Sea indicate that literally it means “Sea of Reeds or Rushes” (see, for example, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*<sup>4</sup> [1962, vol. 4, pp. 19-21]). In Exodus 13:18, when describing the Jews fleeing Egypt, the Torah states: “God took the people in a roundabout path . . . to the Yam Suf.” ArtScroll's Stone Edition Chumash translates Yam Suf as Sea of Reeds and includes a note stating that what is today known as the Red Sea is situated too far south for the Jews to have crossed it upon fleeing Egypt. The Jewish Publication Society Tanakh simply calls it the Sea of Reeds, and the Koren Chumash calls it the Sea of Suf with no attempt at translation or identification.

In order to determine which body of water Yam Suf is referring to, it is important to look for parallels in Tanach. The Hebrew word spelled *samach-vav-peh* can be read either as *suf* or as *sof*, i.e., the Sea of Suf or the Sea of Sof,<sup>5</sup> depending upon whether the *vav* is vocalized as a *shuruk* (*suf*) or a *cholam* (*sof*). Ibn Ezra (Exodus 13:18) states that some read the word as *sof* and explain that it is called Yam Sof because it lies at the end of the world;<sup>6</sup> however, he claims, that this is a “big error” because “the Yam Sof is not at the end [of the world]; the Atlantic Ocean is at the end.” The correct reading, he asserts, is *suf*. Rashi (Exodus

13:18) explains that *suf* in Yam Suf is similar to “*agam*,” which means a pond, in that it has reeds (*kanim*) growing in it. Expounding on Rashi, Siftei Chachamim explains that lest one think it is read as *sof* and means “end of the sea,” Rashi is clarifying that it means a sea full of reeds. Despite the controversy among the commentators, it is clear that according to the Masoretic tradition, the word is read as *suf*. Any *ba'al koreh* will confirm this.

How was Yam Suf<sup>7</sup> understood in antiquity?<sup>8</sup> The Septuagint (second to third century BCE) translated Yam Suf into Greek as *Erythra Thalassa* or Red Sea—that is, neither “end” nor “reed!”<sup>9</sup> Thus, 2,200 years ago, long before the Bible was translated into Old English, the Septuagint identified the Yam Suf the Israelites crossed as the Red Sea. Josephus (*Antiquities* 2:15:3) identifies the Yam Suf as the Red Sea as well. This translation was carried over into the Latin when the fourth-century Latin Vulgate translated Yam Suf in Exodus 13:18 as *Mare Rubrum*, and in other places it translates Yam Suf as *Mare Erythrae*, both of which mean Red Sea.

Early English translations of the Bible, such as the 1611 *King James Version*, continued to translate Yam Suf as the Red Sea. Evidently, the theory that Red Sea is a corruption of the correct Old English (OE) translation, Reed (Rede) Sea, is unfounded.

Another important authoritative work maintains the tradition of identifying Yam Suf as Red Sea. In his commentary on the Bible, known as *Tafsir*, Rabbi Sa'adia Gaon (d. 942 CE), who lived in Egypt and Israel as well as in Baghdad, translated Yam Suf as *Bahr al Qulzum*, the Arabic name used for the

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Red Sea till this very day. Thus, it is clear that Jews at the time of the Geonim took it for granted that the Yam Suf in the Bible refers to the modern-day Red Sea.<sup>10</sup>

Another fascinating piece of evidence comes from a tribe in India that claims to be descended from the Lost Tribe of Menashe. Author Hillel Halkin<sup>11</sup> cites evidence in support of this claim, such as a “Red Sea Song.” The song contains many Biblical details regarding the Exodus: cloud by day, fire by night, water split in two, miraculous water from a rock, Divine delivery of quail, et cetera. It also calls the sea that was parted the Red Sea. While the exact age of the song is unknown, it is purported to be ancient.

The Hebrew word *suf* does not mean red literally. So where did the name “Red Sea” come from? There are various suggestions. Let’s first look at the other places where Yam Suf is mentioned in the Bible and is translated as “Red Sea.” In I Kings (9:26) it states that King Solomon based his navy on the Yam Suf near Eilat. (See map on page 64.) This Yam Suf was

probably not the one crossed by the Israelites<sup>12</sup> and may have been termed “red” after the inhabitants of the surrounding mountains, the people of Edom (see Genesis 25:30), which means red. Or the Sea might have been named so due to the reddish coral in the vicinity. (This is also probably why the country Eritrea is called so; Eritrea, whose name is a rendition of the ancient Greek name *Erythraia*, or the “Red Land,” is located on the southwestern shore of the Red Sea.) Or it may be that the mineral-rich red mountain ranges and desert sands surrounding the sea inspired mariners of antiquity to name the sea *Mare Rosstrum*, Red Sea. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (*The Living Torah*, Exodus 2:3, p. 260) suggests that the name Red Sea is based on the fact that in the language spoken in Ethiopia, *supho* denotes a red-topped kind of plant. Alternate possibilities (*The Living Torah*, Exodus 10:19, p. 304-5) include that its name derived from the ancient nation Erythria, so named because its inhabitants painted their faces red; or that it’s based on the seasonal blooms of the

red-colored *Trichodesmium erythraeum* near the water’s surface. The author of the column “Philologos,” in the *Forward* (April 14, 2000, p. 12) suggests that the Gulf of Aqaba, which flows past ancient Edom and into Eilat, was once known as Yam Edom, which can mean the Sea of Edom or the Red Sea. He suggests that this name was eventually transferred, erroneously, to the other side of the Sinai, where it stuck.

Those who translate Yam Suf as Sea of Reeds do so because they prefer to translate it literally. But literal translations do not work all the time. This is especially true in this case since the precise definition of *suf* is unclear. Rashi (Exodus 2:3) identifies it as “*rosel*” in Old French (possibly “*roseau*” in modern French), which means a kind of flexible rhizome found along the edges of shallow, usually stagnant ponds. Like reeds, this is freshwater vegetation, which is not found at the edge of a salt sea such as the Red Sea. Rashi, based on *Sotah* 12b, finds a parallel in Isaiah 19:6, *kaneh vestufka’mailu*—the reeds and *suf* will dry up. From this



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verse it is clear that *suf* may be a plant that is similar to, but not synonymous with, *kaneh*, reed. Thus, Reed Sea is not even an accurate literal translation! Rashi elsewhere (*Sotah* 12b) identifies *suf* as a thin *aravah*, willow. Rabbi Kaplan suggests (*The Living Torah*, Exodus 2:3, p. 260) that *suf* is from *thuf*, the ancient Egyptian word for uncut papyrus. (Indeed the Latin translation of the Bible translates *suf* in Exodus 2:5 as papyrus.) He compares it to other places in Tanach (Exodus 2:3, 5) where *suf* seems to mean a type of reed (Isaiah 19:6; Jonah 2:6). Professor Yehuda Feliks (*Chai Vetzome'ach B'Torah*, 5744, p. 215) identifies the *suf* as the cattail or bulrush (genus *Typha*). This is not the same as *kaneh*, reed, which he identifies (*Hatzome'ach VeHa'Chai B'Mishnah*, 5743, p. 146) as being from the *Gramineae* (*Poaceae*, grasses) family and one of two species: *Arundo donax* (giant cane or giant reed) and *Phragmites communis* (*Phragmites australis*, the common reed).

### The Exodus Route

This discussion also bears on what route the fleeing Israelites took. If Yam Suf is a sea with reeds, it rules out identifying it as either the Red Sea or the Mediterranean. The Red Sea is a long saltwater inlet separating the Arabian Peninsula from the east coast of Egypt. The sea with reeds would have to be freshwater, or at least brackish, in order for reeds to flourish at its shore. This lends credence to the theory that Yam Suf was one of the shallow, marshy, bitter lakes east of the Nile Delta, such as a shallow spot connecting the Great and Little Bitter Lakes. Rabbi Kaplan (*The Living Torah*, Exodus 13:18, p. 321) cites sources that the Yam Suf was located at the mouth of the Nile, possibly identified with Lake Manzaleh. Other Biblical passages, in which Yam Suf refers to a body of water in a context other than the Exodus, indicate that its location was well known in Biblical times and that it was likely near Eilat and the Gulf of Aqaba, and not near the Bitter Lakes region of the Nile Delta (e.g., Exodus 23:31; Numbers 21:4; Deuteronomy 2:1; Judges 11:17-17; I Kings 9:26; and Jeremiah 49:21).



Three basic routes for the Exodus have been proposed by modern scholars who reject the Red Sea theory. Some propose a northern route whereby the Israelites went north to the coast and then eastward, and the “sea” they crossed was part of Lake Sirbonis, an arm or bay of the Mediterranean, and they then turned south into the Sinai Peninsula. Others, suggesting a central route, claim that the body of water crossed was a shallow lake north of the Red Sea called the Reed Sea. Indeed some of the lakes north of the Red Sea are abundant with reed-like plants. Finally, there are those who suggest a southern route and translate Yam Suf as the “sea at the end of the world.”<sup>13</sup> Da’at Mikra (Shemot 13:18) finds support for his claim that the body of water crossed was at the northern end of the Gulf of Suez from Isaiah 11:15, which speaks about the “tongue of the Sea of Egypt.”

Place names in the Bible, particularly those that sound similar or seem to refer to an equivalent location, can cause further confusion. Is the location called simply Suf (Deuteronomy 1:1)

identical to Yam Suf, as many suggest? Might Sufa (Numbers 21:14) be the name of a place, even Yam Suf?

In other Biblical references, Yam Suf unequivocally refers to what is today called the Red Sea or its arms, the Gulf of Suez and Gulf of Aqaba. In I Kings 9:26 it states: “King Solomon also built a fleet of ships at Ezion Geber, which is near Eilat on the shore of the Red Sea [Yam Suf], in the land of Edom.” If this were a marshy lake close to Egypt, this would certainly be a strange place for King Solomon to build his great fleet. The assumption is that the Eilat in Kings is the port at the northernmost end of the Gulf of Aqaba, the same location of modern-day Eilat.

Another reference indicating that it is the modern Red Sea is the list of encampments of the Israelites in the desert, as found in Numbers 33: 8-10. The Torah states that after the Israelites crossed “the Yam,”<sup>14</sup> they camped in Marah, then Elim and then “they camped by the Yam Suf.” How could they have crossed the Sea of Reeds and, after many days of travel, still camped by that same Sea of

Reeds? No body of water in the region except the Red Sea is large enough for them to have traveled for so long and still be close to its coast. Other references that support the identification of Yam Suf with Red Sea are Numbers 21:4, Deuteronomy 1:40, 2:1 and Jeremiah 49:21.

It is likely that the name Yam Suf and/or Red Sea was applied in the ancient world to more than one location. Professor Nahum M. Sarna (*Exploring Exodus* [New York, 1986], 106-110) says that Yam Suf is used in the Torah to refer to both the Gulf of Suez (between Egypt and the Sinai) and the Gulf of Aqaba (between the Sinai and Saudi Arabia). This is also supported by one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, known as the Genesis Apocryphon.<sup>15</sup> In a section of this Aramaic text (1Q20, column 21, lines 17-18; see Michael Wise, trans., *Dead Sea Scrolls Reader*, Brill ed., vol. 3, p. 31) Abraham describes his travels up the Gichon River, to the Mediterranean and beyond. He states, "... until I came to the Euphrates River. I journeyed along the Euphrates until I reached the Red Sea in the east, whence I followed the coast of the Red Sea until I came to the tongue of the Yam Suf, jutting out from the Red Sea." This indicates that the Red Sea branches off of Yam Suf. A tributary can easily be called after the main body; thus, it would not be strange to identify the Yam Suf as the Red Sea. In recounting the story of Genesis, Josephus (*Antiquities* I:1:39) says that the Euphrates and Tigris end in the Erythraean Sea, literally the Red Sea.

In summary, Yam Suf in the Bible refers to multiple places, many of which were translated by the ancients as Red Sea. Similarly, specific bodies of water were referred to by multiple names, such as the Mediterranean Sea, which seems to have at least three names: Yam Plishtim (Exodus 23:32), Yam Hagadol (Numbers 34:6, 7) and Yam Ha'acharon (Deuteronomy 34:2). This leaves a translator in a serious quandary. But it is important to remember that translations are not always meant to be literal but rather to inform the reader of the target language what was intended in the source language. Thus, in general, Yam Hagadol is translated in English as

Mediterranean Sea and not as Great Sea; Moshe is called Moses and not "drawn forth," Yam Hamelach is referred to as Dead Sea and not as Salt Sea,<sup>16</sup> and Sha'ar Ha'ashpot is translated as Dung Gate and not Refuse Gate.

Thus, it is possible that the name Yam Suf has nothing to do with *suf* and was simply the name of the body of water.<sup>17</sup> The name need not have any meaning beyond that, similar to other names of locations (there are not and have never been buffalo in Buffalo, New York, and Beit Lechem, a hilly region, is not known for either its bread or its wheat).

While no one today can state definitively which body of water God split so that the Israelites could pass, the most ancient translations translate Yam Suf in the Exodus story as Red Sea. I would argue that despite the fact that reeds cannot grow in the Red Sea, we should accept the tradition of the Septuagint and of the Geonim and translate Yam Suf as the Red Sea. For those who cannot tolerate anything but a literal translation, they can always simply refer to Yam Suf as the Cattail Sea. ■

#### Notes

1. See *Encyclopedia Mikrait*, vol. 3, 695-699, s.v. Yam Suf.
2. See e.g., *Schottenstein Edition Talmud Bavli, Sotah* 11a, no. 36, 39 and 61.
3. For example: Exodus 13:18; 15:4; 15:22; 23:31; Numbers 14:25; 21:4; 33:10; 33:11; Deuteronomy 1:40; 2:1; 11:4; Joshua 2:10; 4:23; 24:6; Shoftim 11:16; I Kings 9:26; Psalms 106:7, 9, 22; 136:13, 15; Nechemiah 9:9; and Jeremiah 49:21.
4. The translators of this work are so convinced of the accuracy of this translation, they wrote (p. 20): "Luther, who relied on the Hebrew, rendered *Yam Sûph* correctly by calling it *Schilfmeer*, 'Sea of Reeds.'"
5. In Judges 11:16, the Septuagint (Manuscript B) has Yam Siph.
6. That the world has an "end" is not a strange idea. See e.g., Daniel 4:8: "that its sight was to the end (*sof*) of the earth."
7. It may even be possible to read it as *suf* and have it mean end. A similar word, such as in Esther 9:28 "*vezichram lo ya-suf mizaram*, nor the memory of them shall cease from their descendents," with *ya-suf* having a meaning akin to end.
8. The most important ancient translator, from a Jewish perspective, is the first-

to second-century Onkelos. Unfortunately, he does not contribute to this discussion because he translates, or more accurately transliterates, Yam Suf as Yama Suf. However, the transliterated name is sometimes the most accurate "translation." For example, no one translates New York into Hebrew as "York Ha'chadash" but rather as "New York."

9. For references to the Red Sea, see also: 1 Maccabees 4:9; Wisdom of Solomon 10:18, 19:7 and Judith 5:12.

10. I thank Rabbi Dr. Seth Mandel for the information in this paragraph.

11. *Across the Sabbath River: In Search of a Lost Tribe of Israel* (New York, 2002), p. 222 and related notes on 377-378; p. 347 and related notes on 386-387.

12. A recent theory proposes that the crossing did indeed take place at the Gulf of Aqaba; there are even claims of material evidence to prove this.

13. See Bernard F. Batto, "Red Sea or Reed Sea," *Biblical Archaeology Review* (July-August 1984): 57-63, who argues that the correct pronunciation is Yam Sof and the meaning is the "distant, southern sea, at the end of the land."

14. The body of water crossed is also referred to simply as *ha'yam* in Exodus 14:9, 21, 22.

15. See N. Avigad and Y. Yadin, *A Genesis Apocryphon* (Jerusalem, 1956); Maurice Copisarow, *The Ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Hebrew Concept of the Red Sea*, *Vetus Testamentum* XII (1962); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave I: A Commentary* (Rome, 1966); and Eliezer Segal, "Red Sea, Reed Sea...and the Persian Gulf," (Jewish Free Press, March 1991, also at [http://people.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/Shokel/910329\\_Red\\_Sea.html](http://people.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/Shokel/910329_Red_Sea.html)).

16. One has to credit ArtScroll for being consistent in its policy of translating places literally. It translates Yam Hamelach as Salt Sea (Genesis 14:3, Numbers 34:2 and 34:12) and Yam Hagadol as Great Sea (Numbers 34:6, 7). In truth, while the Yam Suf translation may be justifiable because of the ArtScroll policy of translating according to Rashi, the other two translations cited are inexplicable. Even ArtScroll does not translate Abraham's two sons as "He is rejoicing" and "May God listen."

17. This, is in fact, the subject of a Tannaic dispute. In the context of the infant Moshe story, Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani says that *suf* refers to a marsh with reeds and willows. But Rabbi Elazar opines that *suf* was shorthand for Yam Suf, and the Torah was not describing the physical surroundings but the actual location (*Shemot Rabbah* 1:21; *Sotah* 12a-b).