

Splitting the Red Sea

My article begins on the next page. But before you read it, would you like to see if by reading the scriptures on this topic, if you can identify what the splitting of the Red Sea was really like?

It will be difficult because of how the many drawings, paintings, and even movies depict it, which has ingrained in our minds a certain image. But see if you can set all of that aside and recognize what the scriptures actually tell us.

Here are the scriptures:

(Exodus 12:37, 38)

(Exodus 14:21-28)

(Exodus 15:8)

(Psalm 66:6)

(Psalm 78:13)

(Psalm 106:9)

Also check this out:

[it-1 p. 776] *Exodus / Width and depth of place of crossing.*

Splitting the Red Sea

Most artist renditions show a stream of Israelites walking across a narrow corridor on the bed of the Red Sea, with a vertical wall of water on either side. But is that accurate?

Let's first look at who crossed the Red Sea. Exodus 12:37 tells us that there were over 600,000 "*men on foot*" (able-bodied men) who crossed the Red Sea. If you add the women, the children, the old men, and the Levites to that number you get 2 to 3 million Israelites. Then add to that the "*vast mixed company (that) also went with them, as well as flocks and herds, a great number of livestock*" you wind up with a very large camp indeed. (Ex 12:38)

So what was required to allow this very large group, along with all of their belongings, to cross the Red Sea in a single night?

[it-1 p. 776] Exodus / Width and depth of place of crossing. Since Israel crossed the sea in one night, it could hardly be assumed that the waters parted in a narrow channel. Rather, the channel may have been a kilometer or more in width. Though in fairly close marching formation, such a group, along with what wagons they had, their baggage, and their cattle, even when rather closely ranked, would occupy an area of perhaps 8 sq km (3 sq mi) or more. It appears, therefore, that the sea-opening allowed the Israelites to cross on a fairly wide front. If there was about a 1.5-km (1 mi) front, then the depth of the Israelite column would probably be about 5 km (3 mi) or more. If it was about a 2.5-km (1.5 mi) front, the depth might be about 3 km (2 mi) or more. It would take such a column several hours to get into the seabed and travel across it. While they did not go in panic, but maintained their battle formation, they would no doubt move with considerable haste.

Had it not been for the cloud, the Egyptians would have easily overtaken and slaughtered many. (Ex 15:9) When the Israelites had gone into the sea and the cloud behind them had moved ahead to reveal this fact to the Egyptians, they pursued. Here, again, is emphasized the necessity of considerable breadth and length of dry seabed, for Pharaoh's military force was great. Bent on destruction and recapture of their former slaves, the entire force went well into the seabed. Then, during the morning watch, which ran from about 2:00 to 6:00 a.m., Jehovah looked out from the cloud and began to throw the camp of the Egyptians into confusion, taking the wheels off their chariots.—Ex 14:24, 25.

The Israelites, by the approaching of morning, got safely across on the eastern shore of the Red Sea. Then Moses was commanded to stretch his hand out so that the waters would come back over the Egyptians. At this "the sea began to come back to its normal condition," and the Egyptians fled from encountering it. This also would indicate that the waters had opened up widely, for a narrow channel would have immediately overwhelmed them. The Egyptians fled from the enclosing walls of water toward the western bank, but the waters kept converging until their depth completely covered all the war chariots and the cavalrymen belonging to Pharaoh's military forces; not so much as one of them was let remain.

So a narrow corridor would have been wildly insufficient.

Here is what the scriptures actually say:

(Exodus 14:21-28) ²¹Moses now stretched out his hand over the sea; and Jehovah **drove the sea back with a strong east wind** all night long, turning the sea basin into dry ground, and the waters divided. ²² So the Israelites went through the midst of the sea on dry ground, while the waters formed a wall on their right hand and on their left. ²³ The Egyptians pursued them, and all Phar'aoh's horses, his war chariots, and his cavalymen began going after them into the midst of the sea. ²⁴ During the morning watch, Jehovah looked at the camp of the Egyptians from within the pillar of fire and cloud, and he threw the camp of the Egyptians into confusion. ²⁵ He kept taking wheels off their chariots so that they were driving them with difficulty, and the Egyptians were saying: "Let us flee from any contact with Israel, because Jehovah is fighting for them against the Egyptians." ²⁶ Then Jehovah said to Moses: "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may come back over the Egyptians, their war chariots, and their cavalymen." ²⁷ Moses at once stretched out his hand over the sea, and as morning approached, the sea returned to its normal condition. As the Egyptians fled from it, Jehovah shook the Egyptians off into the midst of the sea. ²⁸ The returning waters covered the war chariots and the cavalymen and all of Phar'aoh's army who had gone into the sea after them. Not so much as one among them was allowed to survive.

Verse 21 tells us that Jehovah used a strong east wind to drive the sea back. A strong wind cannot form vertical walls of water. But on a long narrow body of water, such as the Red Sea and its upper arms, if the wind is strong, and blows in the right direction for a long enough time, such as "*all night long*", the sea itself would be blown away. It is just as when hurricanes or typhoons blow water up into bays and inlets and flood the coastline. That is called a storm surge. There is also what is called a reverse storm surge, like when Hurricane Irma's strong off-shore wind temporarily drained much of Tampa Bay.

So "*Jehovah drove the sea back with a strong east wind all night long, turning the sea basin into dry ground*". And since the sea in that area was basically north to south, that would push the water to their north further north, and the water to their south further south, "*and the waters divided.*" (Ex 14:21)

The water was pushed so far back and so far apart, that the "*sea basin*", not a narrow corridor, was left dry for them to cross over on. The Hebrew word yam, translated as "*sea basin*" merely means "sea". So the sea itself was turned into dry ground. The term "*sea basin*" is therefore apt since it refers to the entire bed of the sea. There were so many people that needed to cross the Red Sea in one night that a very large area of the sea basin was needed to accommodate that many people and their belongings.

(Psalm 66:6) He changed the sea into dry land; They crossed the river on foot. There we rejoiced in him.

(Psalm 106:9) He rebuked the Red Sea, and it dried up; He led them through its depths as through a desert;

Wall

But what about the description of the water as a wall?

(Exodus 14:22) ²² So the Israelites went through the midst of the sea on dry ground, while the waters formed a wall on their right hand and on their left.

A wind strong enough to move and then hold back the waters of the Red Sea, would also be strong enough to blow away the Israelites and their belongings if they were too close to it. So the wind holding back the water while the Israelites crossed would had to have been well away from them.

If you could have stood on the floor of the sea basin, at the very edge of the water being held back by wind, it would have gradually gotten deeper and deeper, looking like a long gentle incline of water. The bulk of the water that was blown away would have been miles away, (otherwise it would have flooded the seashore). If you stood at the edge of the water, from that close perspective it would have looked flat to you since its incline would have been very gradual.

But the Israelites who could see the distant waters, that is to say, those at the edges of their mile-wide column who were standing on the sea basin, would have been looking at the water from a good distance away. Only those at the edges of the column would have been able to see the waters. The saying, "You can't see the forest for the trees," describes the situation. Those not on the edges of the column would have just seen the crowds on either side of them. But from the distant perspective of those at the edges of the column, the water would have looked like a wall to them, since they weren't looking at it up close, and from their distant vantage point they could see its height in comparison to its surroundings so it would not look flat. And since a slope, when viewed from straight-on at a distance has the optical illusion of looking vertical, that may have been why it was described as a wall.

Although the water may have looked like a wall from that distance, the word "*wall*" does not always reference a vertical object. For instance at 1 Samuel 25:15 David's men were a wall of protection around Na'bal's shepherds, and at Nahum 3:8 the sea was a wall for No-a'mon.

Dam

Also note how Moses describes that "*wall*" of water for us at Exodus 15:8. He says:

(Exodus 15:8) By a breath from your nostrils waters massed together; They stood still, holding back the floods; The surging waters congealed in the heart of the sea.

Here is how each original Hebrew word in that text is translated: (each Hebrew word is separated by a comma)

(Exodus 15:8) And with the blast, of Your nostrils, were gathered together, the waters, stood upright, like, a heap, the floods, congealed, the depths, in the heart, of the sea.

The Hebrew word nêḡ, which means a heap, is left out of the NWT. (see 1984 Rbi8 version)

Elsewhere in the NWT that Hebrew word for heap (nêḏ), is translated as "*dam*".

(Joshua 3:13) and as soon as the soles of the feet of the priests carrying the Ark of Jehovah, the Lord of the whole earth, touch the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from upstream will be halted and they will stand still like a dam."

(Joshua 3:16) the waters flowing from upstream stood still. They rose up like a dam very far away at Adam, the city near Zar'e-than, while the waters descending toward the Sea of the Ar'a-bah, the Salt Sea, drained away. They were halted, and the people crossed over opposite Jer'i-cho.

(Psalm 78:13) He split the sea to let them pass through, And he made the waters stand up like a dam.

A heap is domed and does not have vertical sides or walls. Dams in those days were wide earthen mounds with long sloping sides, not vertical concrete like today. The longer the sides protruded away, the stronger the dam was and the more water it could hold. So "*by a breath from [His] nostrils*", the waters of the Red Sea were heaped up, "*like a dam*", as Psalms 78:13 describes it. In other words, the Red Sea was heaped up into a long slope.

Heart of the Sea

Also note where Moses tells us that the winds blew the water to:

(Exodus 15:8) By a breath from your nostrils waters massed together; They stood still, holding back the floods; The surging waters congealed in the heart of the sea.

So the wind blew the waters into "*the heart of the sea*". The upper arms of the Red Sea were not "*the heart of the sea*". The heart was several miles south of where the Israelites crossed.

So the idea that the crossing in the Red Sea had upright vertical walls of water on either side is not really substantiated in Bible text. We only get that idea from our modern conception of a dam.

As for the waters being congealed, if that actually happened and was not merely a description as to the appearance of the water, then the waters would have no doubt congealed in the position that the wind blew them into, which was the long slowly rising angle of



a heap or earthen dam. Note also that it was the breath from His nostrils (wind) that held back the floods, not congealed water.

Water's Return

When the wind abated, the water would have immediately started to flow back to where it was. It would probably have flowed at somewhat of a quick pace, but nowhere near the speeds of a crashing towering wall of water, as the Insight book points out. The water would probably just arrive first at the ankles of the Egyptians, and continue rising at a quick and steady pace like a fast returning tide. As Exodus 14:27 says. *"as the Egyptians fled from (the returning water), Jehovah shook the Egyptians off into the midst of the sea."* If it weren't for Jehovah's intervention many of the Egyptians would no doubt have escaped the returning water and survived since verse 27 tells us that they were capable of fleeing from it.

The Red Sea was probably no more than 20 feet deep or so (6m) where the Israelites crossed. There are many places in the world where the twice daily tides are much greater than that. Those tidal waters come in quickly so you need to be watchful when you are out on the low tidal flats. I would think that the returning waters from the splitting of the Red Sea would have moved in a similar fashion as those returning tides, only faster moving since the water was not matching the rotation of the earth and the pull of the moon, but was flowing back to where it was before due to the pull of gravity.

Note also that verse 25 points out that when the Egyptians saw a simple thing such as the wheels coming off of their chariots, they realized that God was helping the Israelites and they became afraid. Imagine their reaction if they saw two supernatural towering walls of water holding back the sea so that the Israelites could escape. That would surely have evoked a much stronger reaction! But there was no such reaction.

Jehovah commonly uses what could be explained away by non-believers as natural (1 Sa 14:15) or as a trick (Ex 7:22) to accomplish public miracles, and this scenario of wind blowing a narrow sea could easily be explained away by the Egyptians as a natural occurrence, since they were no doubt aware that such things had happened before.

What do *you* think of this hypothesis?

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