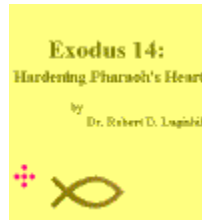


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## Exodus 14: Hardening Pharaoh's Heart

Verses 1-2

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### **Verse 1:**

*Then the Lord spoke to Moses, quote:*

1. Chapter 13 ends with a description of the Lord's manifestation in "a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night" as He led the Israelites forward. The common Hebrew verb *dabar* picks up the narrative again. With the new chapter, however, the topic has changed from the Exodus proper to the specific miraculous deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea. The Lord Himself dictates the change through this conversation with Moses.

2. The place of this conversation is at Etham (see Ex. 13:20). (1)

### **Verse 2:**

*"Tell the Israelites to turn back and camp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea; you shall camp before Baal-zephon, directly opposite it, beside the sea.*

*Israelites:* literally, "sons of Israel".

*turn back:* The use here of the Hebrew verb *shubh* ("to return", or, as here, "to turn back") indicates that although the Israelites have made some progress out of Egyptian territory (following the pillar of cloud and fire: Ex.13:21-22), God now orders Moses to change direction and head *back* into Egyptian territory in order to reach the Red Sea bivouac. (2) This reference to their change of course is further documented by Exodus 13:18:

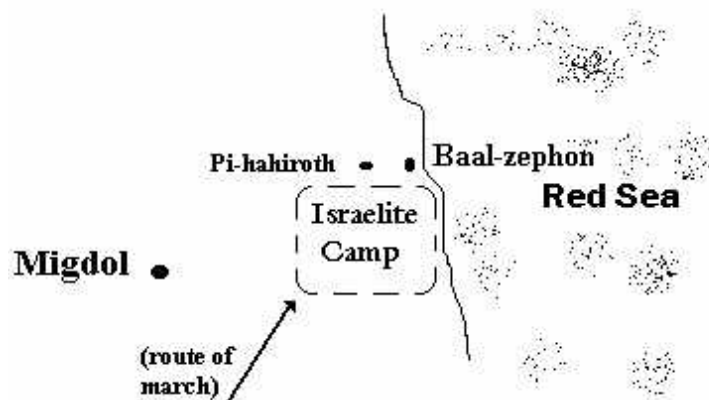
*Hence God led the people around by the way of the wilderness to the Red Sea.*

The verb in the passage above is the causative stem of *sabhabh*, meaning "to cause to turn" or "to cause to go around." BDB(3) explains its meaning in this context as "lead around" - that is, to cause to go by a roundabout way. Thus, as both these passages indicate, the Lord *deliberately* led the Israelites to the Red Sea by an indirect route which necessitated the change of direction ordered in verse two. It is therefore abundantly clear that far from being something to be avoided at all costs, God *intended* for the ultimate confrontation with Pharaoh to take place. As events will show, the seemingly erratic route of the Israelites acts as a lure to draw Pharaoh in to his ultimate destruction. Pharaoh has opposed God to a hitherto unprecedented degree, and God will be glorified by his complete and unprecedented manner of annihilation.

From our human point of view, the change of direction ordered in verse two was unnecessary inasmuch as the road to freedom was clear. It must have seemed a terrible mistake to many of the Israelites to begin to head back in the direction of Pharaoh's forces, just when they had all but made good their escape. Such questioning of God's directions would reach a fever pitch in verse eleven where the people angrily ask Moses whether his purpose in bringing them out into the desert had been to kill them all along. When we truly commit ourselves to following the will of God, to taking up our cross and following our savior, Jesus Christ, we are sure to find many instances when someone seems to have gotten the directions fouled up. "Is this *really* the right way God?" we often are tempted to ask. But the lesson of verse two (and what follows) is that God is, of course, in complete control of things, though we cannot see this so clearly at the time of our testing, whatever it may be. If we could see clearly the exact purpose and method of our God in all things, we would hardly need to "walk by faith, not by sight" (2Cor.5:7) - and faith, after all, is "the assurance of things *not* seen" (Heb.11:1).

So then, believer, what will you do when God makes you change directions, heading you straight back to the same old trouble that you just wriggled your way out of? Will you trust Him, and follow Him - no matter *where* He leads you? Or will you whine and complain like the Israelites of the Exodus generation did? We all know what eventually happened to them for repeated behavior of this sort (1Cor.10:1-13; Heb.3:12-19).

*you shall camp*: The location of the camp as well as that of the various sites listed in this verse is uncertain. Combined with the information at Num.33:6ff. and elsewhere, however, the information given in verse two gives us a good general idea of the relative positions being described here. It must have looked something like this:



*beside the sea*: The sea referred to here is the Red Sea, the body of water which divides Africa from the Arabian Peninsula, and includes both the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Akaba. In our context, the Gulf of Suez is meant. It is true that many commentators on this passage hold that the sea mentioned here is not the Red Sea but rather any one of a number of lesser lakes and swamps north of the Gulf of Suez. Ultimately, however, the primary reason behind incorrect interpretations of this type is an unwillingness or inability to believe that God actually could or did part the Red Sea as a dramatic act of His power. But any honest interpretation of this part of the book of Exodus - even a secular and anti-Christian one which sees the book merely as literature and in no way divinely inspired - should admit the obvious: that the entire narrative has been constructed precisely to demonstrate the awesome power of God. And so it is clear that even apologists for biblical miracles must see that at least the writer of this episode is telling the story in a miraculous way, and should further accept the fact that the *yam*, or sea, referred to here (normally called in Hebrew the *yam-suph* which elsewhere refers to the literal Red Sea) is none other than that famous, large, and never before or since "drained" body of water we know as the Red Sea. Such is the case even if certain of these gentlemen remain unable to accept the true historicity of the narrative.

Further proof that our writer (Moses, in the traditional view) means us to understand that the sea in question is none other than the Red Sea is as follows:

1. The writer of Hebrews expressly identifies this sea as the Red Sea:

*By faith they crossed the Red Sea [erythran thalassan = lit. "red sea"] as if it were dry land - though when the Egyptians tried this they were drowned. Hebrews 11:29*

2. The Septuagint, the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, also identifies it as the literal Red Sea (*en eruthrai thalassai*; Ex. 15:4).

3. The Vulgate, the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. translation of the Bible into Latin, also identifies it as the literal Red Sea (*in mari Rubro*; Ex. 15:4).

4. Although only the designation *ha-yam* ("the sea") is used here in chapter fourteen, from passages such as Ex. 13:18 and 15:4, it is clear that this body of water meant is indeed the *yam-suph*, or Red Sea. All parties agree to this. However, a literal translation of the term *yam-suph* is said by many to be "sea of reeds", and the etymology is in turn thus said to cast doubt on the Red Sea identification. This is patent foolishness. After all, even if the etymology "sea of reeds" has some validity, in any case it must certainly refer to *some* body of water. The question is, to which one? The writers of scripture makes it undisputedly clear that *they* understand the sea to be what we today call the Red Sea. So it is that God parted and Moses with the Israelites crossed the actual, literal Red Sea (or at least the same sea - *but with a different name - sea of reeds!*). There is not a shred of evidence from the Bible to give any support to the many dubious anti-miracle theories such as "the Israelites crossed marshes and the Egyptian chariots got stuck chasing them". One has to reject all the scripture touching this incident to even entertain such a view. In the Hebrew Bible, the phrase *yam-suph*, or, ostensibly, "sea of reeds", refers always and without exception to the body of water we know as the literal Red Sea:

a. I Kngs.9:26: "King Solomon built a fleet of ships in Ezion-geber, which is near Elath on the shore of the *yam-suph* in the land of Edom." Present day Elath on the Gulf of Akaba, part of the Red Sea, is unmistakably meant here.

b. Num.21:4: "Then they set out from Mount Hor by way of the *yam-suph* in order to go around the land of Edom." Once again, this is the Red Sea since to go by way of one of the Bitter Lakes or marshes much further north would entail a senseless detour of hundreds of miles!

c. Num. 33:11: "And they journeyed from Elim, and camped by the *yam-suph*." In verse eight of this context, the Israelites had already "passed through" the *yam-suph* by this time. Now, after journeying southward for some substantial time, and after having made camp successively since then at Etham, Marah and Elim, they find themselves once again at the *yam-suph*. Such a scenario is not physically possible unless the body of water in question is taken to be the Red Sea (specifically here the Gulf of Suez).

*you shall camp ..... beside the sea:* This designates the precise position of the Israelite camp itself as actually by the sea-shore (as indicated by the Hebrew phrase *al ha-yam*).

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#### **Notes:**

1. For detailed discussions of the route to and from Etham as well as the various locations named in chapters 13-14, see John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt* (Grand Rapids 1971), G. I. Davies, *The Way of the Wilderness* (Cambridge 1979), and C. DeWitt, *The Date and Route of the Exodus* (London 1969).

2. This is further confirmed by the use of the Hebrew preposition *al*, "up toward", in Num.33:7.

3. BDB is the standard abbreviation for *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* by F. Brown, S. Driver and C.A. Briggs (Oxford 1907).

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