

The Miracle of Crossing the Red Sea:

Egyptians, Hebrews, Romans, and (not) knowing how to swim

The story of the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt (Exodus 14) culminates in the episode where God parts the waters of the Red Sea so the Hebrews can cross, and then sends a terrible wave to drown the Egyptian soldiers who are chasing them. The miracle is set in the Late Bronze Age, when the real Egyptians had colonized the Hebrews' land, and was written down in the Iron Age. The story remained popular throughout antiquity: mosaics of the drowning Egyptian soldiers appear in the late Roman Huqoq synagogue (Magness 2018), and the Quran repeats the story (26:61–63; 10:90–92). But the miracle becomes much more impressive when we add the crucial cultural context which ancient people would have known: that the Egyptians were known as strong swimmers, while the Hebrews were culturally unable to swim and afraid of the water.

The Egyptians left ample evidence of their ability to swim. Egyptian hieroglyphs include one representing the syllable 'neb' with a swimmer who uses a strong overhand stroke and a flutter kick, because 'neb' is also the ancient Egyptian word for 'swim' (Wilkinson 1999: 104; Petrie 1901: 146–150). In a later Egyptian image, a fisherman dives to the bottom of the river to pull up his net (Ragheb 2011). In another, a young woman swims among the fish to pluck lotus flowers from a pond (Decker and Herb 1994: pl. 436). The handles of cosmetic spoons often are carved into the shape of swimming women (Phillips 1941). In Egyptian literature, children take swim lessons (Breasted 1906: 190), young men bravely swim across the river to meet their lovers (The Cairo Vase 1266 + 25218), and fathers use swimming metaphors to encourage their sons to study (Wallis Budge 1914).

But although no great geographical distance separated these swimming Egyptians from the Hebrews to their north, the Hebrews emerged from a very different cultural background in which people generally did not know how to swim. Like their Mesopotamian, Canaanite, Hittite, and Greek neighbors, the Hebrews tended to be afraid of the water and to regard even disturbing the surface of the water as risky and ill-omened (Carr 2022). We can see this in the story of Noah's Flood (Genesis 7:19–22), and again in Ezekiel 47:5, and in Psalm 69. Echoes of Canaanite sea monsters appear e.g. in the stories of Job and Jonah (Day 1985). But we are not only reliant on the Bible to inform us that the Hebrews were not swimmers. When late Bronze Age artists working in the Levant copy the Egyptian cosmetic spoons, they leave out the swimming women, and retain only the duck-shaped bowls that the Egyptian women carried (Liebowitz 1987). In mosaics from the Huqoq's Roman synagogue, giant fish swallow hapless human victims.

Armed with this cultural distinction, we can bring new insight to the story of the crossing of the Red Sea. Ancient audiences, Jewish or European, would have known that the Hebrews, standing on the shore of the Red Sea, could not swim, and were afraid of the water. No wonder the Jews scream at Moses so angrily (Exodus 14:11–12). Ancient audiences would have known that the Egyptians were still much better swimmers than themselves, and so God's ability to drown the Egyptian soldiers would have seemed doubly miraculous. But today's European-descended colonizers like to identify as swimmers, and they also identify with the escaping Hebrews. We know that today's Egyptians—Muslims, colonized—are not by and large swimmers, and we project these attitudes back to the Bronze Age, weakening the story's impact. Only with the right context can we understand just how powerful this miracle story would have been to ancient audiences.

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