

The Quran and its Message

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Joseph A Islam www.quransmessage.com

سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

EXODUS OF PROPHET MOSES'S ^(pbuh) PEOPLE

Joseph A. Islam

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My intention to share this piece with the reader, is to highlight how popular understandings are at times accepted, without much consideration or thought to determine their veracity.

This article also highlights how dependant Quranic interpretations can be at times on classical interpretations which indiscriminately rely on Biblical narratives. This is despite the fact, that there may exist an irreconcilable variance between the Quranic and Biblical record of the same event. In this case, the Quran, in the voice of God, would be correcting a Biblical depiction whilst still guarding the overall integrity of the Biblical narrative.

Rather than being harmonised, they should be accepted as being different in what they attempt to narrate.

Popular words are often mistranslated to support these 'harmonisations', which can render Quranic passages incomprehensible and often to 'appear' as contradictory.

The Biblical narrative is not the focal concern in this article, though, it will be discussed briefly with a view to set a context to highlight the Quranic differences. It is also not the intention to 'criticise' the Biblical narratives in any way (I completely oppose this approach). Rather, it is to highlight areas where I feel **in my mind**, there are difficulties of reconciliation within the Biblical narratives and in specific contexts only.

The Biblical narrative supports the understanding, that approximately 1.5 million people including men, women, young, old, sick and handicapped (as a cross section of any society), with their possessions including flocks and herds, were allowed to leave Egypt by Pharaoh. This was after the last sign by God came into effect.

The last sign (10th portent) was the death of every first born Egyptian son, which included Pharaoh's own son. However, once allowing the Israelites to leave, Pharaoh then had a change of heart (Exodus 14:5 Hebrew: 'haphak' (overturn / change) 'lawbab' (heart / mind / inner man / understanding) and gave pursuit with his army.

Such a mass Exodus in the way it has been described in the Biblical record does raise a few concerns.

Difficulties include reconciling the mass Exodus with logistics, extant archaeological proof, (which fails to show conclusive signs of settlements anywhere of such a kind during mass migration, especially when the Israelites remained in the desert for over 40 years) and also the internal rationalisation of certain of the Biblical narratives.

However I also appreciate, that absence of proof in terms of extant convincing archaeological evidence, is not tantamount to proof of absence of the Exodus.

THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

According to the Bible, in particular Exodus 12:37, we read the following:

Exodus 12:37

“And the children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand on foot that were **MEN (Hebrew: 'gheh-ber')**, besides children” [1]

Note that the Hebrew word 'gheh-ber' is used, which implies a man of strength, or a warrior (emphasising strength or an ability to fight). The first question arises. Are these regular men, or fighting men which excludes non-warriors? (in which case the total number of men would be much higher).

(1) According to this passage, 600,000 men who were descendants of Jacob left Egypt. In addition to the 600,000 men, there must have been women and many children that went with them. This is not including the mixed multitude of people that also left with them (Exodus 12:38), or the flocks and herds that they brought with them.

Exodus 12:38

“And a mixed multitude (**Hebrew: 'Ereb' - mixture / mixed people or company 'rab' - many**) went up also with them; and flocks, and herds, even very much cattle (**Hebrew: 'meh-ode' 'kabed' - exceeding, heavy great, in abundance**)” [2]

The above passages make it clear that a very large number of Israelites gathered to leave. Another problem that is quite puzzling, (and has been for many modern scholars) is the number of men conscripted into Israel's army. Numbers 1:44 relates this as 603,550 and Numbers 26:51 relates this as 601,730. Quite apart from the discrepancy, these large numbers of men mustered for warfare, would demand of a total population in excess of 2 million. This seems exceedingly large for wanderings in the desert and in comparison to the inhabitants of Canaan which Numbers 3:43 states as 22,273.

Also In Exodus 12:41, we read the following:

“And it came to pass at the end of the four hundred and thirty years, even the self same day it came to pass, that all the **hosts (Hebrew: 'Tsebah' one that goes forth / warfare / army / war / hosts)** of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt” [3]

In contrast, the size of Pharaoh's army was relatively small, only amounting to 600 chariots (Exodus 14:7). However, the Hebrew word 'baw-khar' (chosen / elected) in Exodus 14:7 does indicate that the 600 chariots were chosen or elected chariots. Furthermore, we are told these were possibly excluded from the other chariots which were gathered with them (Hebrew: kol rekeb - whole / all chariots of Egypt (Hebrew: Mits-rah'-yim). The threat posed by 600 chariots plus all other chariots (number being unknown from Exodus 14:7), in relation to an excess of 600,000 warriors of the Israelites is worth considering.

(2) One must also consider the simple logistics to supply food, water and to move such a huge Exodus across the harsh plains of the Sinai desert. This would require tonnes of food, wood for fuel and millions of gallons of water each day to supply such a group.

(3) Another problem is the location of lavatory facilities. Deuteronomy 23:12,13 states:

Deuteronomy 23:12-13

“You shall have a place outside the camp (Hebrew: 'Chuts' (outside) 'Makh-an-eh' (encampment / camp) and you shall go out to it; and you shall have a trowel with your tools; and when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it, and turn back and cover up your excrement (Hebrew: 'Tsa-ah' filth / excrement / faeces) [4]

If this directive was applicable and the large number of Israelites during the Exodus is to be accepted, then the size of the camp would no doubt be possibly many miles wide. One located in the centre of the camp, would potentially need to walk many miles to exit the camp.

If 1.5 million people (very conservative estimate) inhabited the desert plains for 40 years, one would expect to find some traces of settlement in the archaeological record. Nothing which indicates such a mass migration has ever been found to my knowledge. (Again, absence of proof does not amount to proof of absence which I fully accept).

THE QURAN'S PERSPECTIVE

The Quran's perspective is quite different. Firstly, the Quran does not indicate such a mass migration. It also does not agree with the position that Pharaoh ever gave leave for the Children of Israel to exit Egypt. The Quran is clear that Prophet Moses^(pbuh) was informed by God to leave in the night and was told that he would be pursued and not to fear (20:77; 26:52). The context of the narrative does not suggest a mass gathering and movement in the daytime. This will be discussed below.

(1) PHARAOH'S PEOPLE AND COUNCIL FEARED EXPULSION OF THEIR OWN PEOPLE FROM EGYPT

The Quran narrative makes it clear on many occasions that the people of Pharaoh feared that they would be expelled from their own lands by the Israelites. In the Quranic narratives dealing with this context, the word 'ard' (land) has been used to signify the land of Misr (Egypt).

007:110 - The Chiefs of Pharaoh claim that Prophet Moses's^(pbuh) plans are to get them out of their land (i.e. Egypt).

007:123 - Pharaoh claims that Prophet Moses's^(pbuh) plan is to drive his people out of the land.

020:057 - "He said: "Have you come to drive us out of our land with your magic, O Moses?"

020:063 - "They said: "These two are certainly (expert) magicians: their object is to drive you out from your land with their magic, and to do away with your most cherished institutions".

The above verses clearly state that Pharaoh and his people feared expulsion from their lands. These lands are clearly a reference to Egypt.

(2) NOT ALL OF THE ISRAELITES LEFT EGYPT

The Quran clearly stipulates that the band that left with Prophet Moses^(pbuh) were a few (in relation to the remainder of the Israelite population).

026.052-56

By inspiration we told Moses: "Travel by night with my servants; for surely ye shall be pursued." Then Pharaoh sent heralds to (all) the cities, (saying): "These (Israelites) are but a **small band (Arabic - lashir-dhimatun qaliluna)**, "And they are raging furiously against us; "But we are a multitude amply fore-warned."

It is a far stretch of the imagination given the above context that Prophet Moses^(pbuh) had the capacity to suddenly muster over 1.5 million people so quickly in the night including men, women, children and the elderly. It is more likely, that a group of the Israelites left with Moses^(pbuh) (could be 100's, possibly 1000's) as they were quickly summoned to in the depths of the night.

Also the reference to the '**small band**' that Pharaoh's army intended to pursue cannot be a reference to the whole Israelite population.

(3) GOD'S PLAN CLEARLY STATED

God's plan was clearly to cause the oppressed Children of Israel to inherit the dwellings of Pharaoh and some of his displaced people. For others that travelled with Prophet Moses,^(pbuh) the decree was to inherit part of the 'Holy Lands' (Promised Land) towards Canaan.

026.057

"So We expelled them from gardens, springs"

026.058

"Treasures, and every kind of honourable position"

026.059

"Thus it was, but We made the Children of Israel inheritors of such things"

Commentators create all sorts of confusion attempting to reconcile 26:59 with the Promised / Holy Land which the Children of Israel did not acquire until nearly half a century later. The context clearly refers to the dwellings, gardens and springs, left behind by Pharaoh and his people in **Egypt** when they gave chase to the particular group (band) that left with Prophet Moses.^(pbuh)

Any other interpretation to support this to be a reference to the Holy Lands in the future, is not warranted by context and is an extremely untenable interpretation. It is clear from the Quranic narrative that those of the Israelites that were left behind (the remainder) inherited these vacant estates.

This is also proved by the following verses:

044.023-28

“Then (his Lord commanded): Take away My slaves by night. Lo! ye will be followed, And leave the sea behind at rest, for lo! they are a drowned host. How many were the gardens and the water springs that they left behind, And the corn lands and the goodly sites And wealth (and conveniences of life), wherein they had taken such delight! Even so (it was), and We made it an inheritance for **other folk (Arabic: Kawman Akhireen)**”

The ‘other’ folk (Arabic: Kawman Akhireen) cannot be a reference to the ones that were pursued given the context of the narrative, but rather, a reference to those that were left behind and inherited what the Egyptians had left. This is clearly a reference to the inheritors mentioned in 26:59.

Again we see this confirmed in the following passage:

028.005-6

“And We wished to be Gracious to those who were being depressed in the land, to make them leaders (in Faith) and make them heirs, To establish a firm place for them in the land, and to show Pharaoh, Haman, and their hosts, at their hands, the very things against which they were taking precautions”

(4) THE PERSECUTED ISRAELITES INHERITED THE EASTERN AND WESTERN LANDS

The persecuted Israelites inherited some of the Eastern lands of Egypt and those that left with Prophet Moses, ^(pbuh) inherited the Western parts of the land, which God informs were blessed (allati barakna fiha).

007:137

And We made the people who were deemed weak to inherit the Eastern lands **(Arabic: ardi)** and the Western of it **(Arabic: wamagharibaha)** which We had blessed **(Arabic – Barakna Fiha)**; and the good word of your Lord was fulfilled in the children of Israel because they bore up (sufferings) patiently; and We destroyed what Pharaoh and his people used to make and what they built”

Please note again, the use of the Arabic word 'ardi' which has been used in this context to denote 'Egypt'. Therefore, the Eastern parts of Egypt are the locales which are referred to as being inherited. The Arabic word 'wamagharibaha' is a reference to the 'Western parts of it', the 'it' referring to the locales which were blessed. i.e. the Holy Lands (barakna fiha)

The word ‘barakna’ along with ‘fiha’ or ‘hawlahu’ in the Quran has always been used as a reference reserved for localities of the Holy Lands.

Terms used in the Quran.

(i) Barakna hawlahu

017.001 - Masjid Aqsa

(ii) Barakna fiha

007.137 - Blessed lands for the Children of Israel

021.071 - Prophets Abraham and Lot^(pbuh) delivered to the blessed lands

021.081 - Wind flowed for Prophet Solomon^(pbuh) on the blessed lands

034.018 - Saba and cities in-between

(5) PROPHET MOSES^(pbuh) AND HIS PEOPLE CAME TO THE HOLY LAND NOT EGYPT

The flight of those people that left with Prophet Moses^(pbuh) saw them to a land described as 'Holy'. The word 'Holy' has never been used to describe the land of Egypt (Misr). Rather, the term 'land' (ard) is used to describe it. Therefore, the 'Holy land' can only be a reference to the blessed plains of the localities of the promised lands in Canaan.

005:021

“O my people! Enter the Holy (Arabic: Muqadasata) Land (Arabic: Ard) which God has assigned to you, and turn not back, for then will ye be overthrown, to your own ruin.”

يَلْقَوْمٍ أَذْخُلُوا الْأَرْضَ الْمُقَدَّسَةَ الَّتِي كَتَبَ

Muqadasata Ard

Illustration - Joseph Islam

The root of the word 'Holy' is QAF-DAL-SIN as also seen in the word 'Holy Spirit' (Arabic: Ruh-e-Qudus - 16:102)

(6) A REBUKE TO RETURN BACK TO EGYPT

002:061

“And remember ye said: "O Moses! we cannot endure one kind of food (always); so beseech thy Lord for us to produce for us of what the earth grows, -its pot-herbs, and cucumbers, Its garlic, lentils, and onions." He said: "Will ye exchange the better for the worse? Go ye down to Misran (Egypt) and ye shall find what ye want!" They were covered with humiliation and misery; they drew on themselves the wrath of God. This because they went on rejecting the Signs of God and slaying His Messengers without just cause. This because they rebelled and went on transgressing”

أَهْبِطُوا مِصْرًا فَإِنَّ لَكُمْ مَّا سَأَلْتُمْ

Misran

Illustration - Joseph Islam

Very few Muslim English commentators translate 'Misr' in this verse as Egypt, even though, 'Misr' has **only** been used to signify Egypt in the Quran.

010:087

We inspired Moses and his brother with this Message: "Provide dwellings for your people in **Egypt (Arabic: Misr)**, make your dwellings into places of worship, and establish regular prayers: and give glad tidings to those who believe!"

012:021

The man in **Egypt (Arabic: Misr)** who bought him, said to his wife: "Make his stay (among us) honourable: maybe he will bring us much good, or we shall adopt him as a son." Thus did We establish Joseph in the land, that We might teach him the interpretation of stories (and events). And God hath full power and control over His affairs; but most among mankind know it not.

012:099

Then when they entered the presence of Joseph, he provided a home for his parents with himself, and said: "Enter ye **Egypt (Arabic: Misr)** (all) in safety if it please God."

043:051

And Pharaoh proclaimed among his people, saying: "O my people! Does not the dominion of **Egypt (Arabic: Misr)** belong to me, (witness) these streams flowing underneath my (palace)? What! see ye not then?"

It is clear that given the requests of cucumbers, lentils and onions that they were not going to find this in the middle of the desert. This was something the Children of Israel were familiar with, hence demanded it as a reference to what they once had.

Prophet Moses's ^(pbuh) response was apt in enquiring as to why they would want to exchange what is better for them, with something meaner. This response of Prophet Moses ^(pbuh) does not only have literal significance - The Manna and the Quails from heaven were arguably better food for them, but also spiritual significance. The Promised Land where they would get all these items (and possibly more) was far better given their perseverance in the sight of their Lord. So the rebuke was for them to go back to Egypt if they did not want to continue with Prophet Moses. ^(pbuh)

Egypt is clearly Misr according to the Quran and not a random town, or city, as is commonly mistranslated by English commentators.

FINAL THOUGHTS

From the above discussions, it seems fairly evident that God wanted those that were oppressed, to inherit some of the dwellings left by Pharaoh in the Eastern parts of Egypt, by those that did not take flight with Prophet Moses. ^(pbuh) Those that did, were to inherit the Western parts of the lands that were blessed.

Further points to note:

- Manna and Quails - Did they really have access to all their flocks and herds which would provide them with meat, milk, eggs and other types of foods if there was a requirement for them to receive Manna and the Quails from heaven? Clearly, the Israelites mention in 2:61, that they were tired of eating one type of food. This indicates that they did not have access to their flocks and herds.
- Did they ever leave with such flocks as the Biblical narrative suggest en masse, or was this a migration of a small group from the Children of Israel who left in the night with Prophet MOSES (pbuh) as confirmed above?
- Finally, the Quran only mentions 9 signs and does not support the tenth Biblical sign, which resulted in the death of the first born.

THE PLAGUES

017.101

"To Moses We did give nine clear signs: As the Children of Israel: when he came to them, Pharaoh said to him: "O Moses! I consider thee, indeed, to have been worked upon by sorcery!"

They are all narrated in Surah Araf (Chapter 7)

- (1) Staff / Rod (7.107)
- (2) Radiant Hand (7.108)
- (3) Years of Drought (Arabic - bil sinina)
- (4) Shortage of fruit (Arabic - Wanaqsina mina l-thamarati) (7.130)
- (5) Flood / Deluge (Arabic: Tufana) (7.133)
- (6) Locust (Arabic: Jarada) (7.133)
- (7) Lice (Arabic: Qumala) (7.133)
- (8) Frogs (Arabic: Dafadia) (7.133)
- (9) Water turning to Blood (Arabic: Dama) (7.133)

Related Article:

- (1) [Mount Sinai - Behind the Translations](#)

REFERENCES

[1] The Bible - King James Version.

Highlights marked in black text and in bold are my own insertions. This also includes the Hebrew elucidation text. These insertions have no bearing on the original text of the King James Version, other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] The Bible - English Standard Version (c 2001)

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[Joseph Islam](#)

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