



# SAMPLE B

Diploma Programme subject in which this extended essay is registered: \_\_\_\_\_

(For an extended essay in the area of languages, state the language and whether it is group 1 or group 2.)

Title of the extended essay: An Examination of the Fact and  
Meaning of the Miracle of the Parting of the  
Red Sea in the Book of Exodus from a  
Christian Perspective.

## Candidate's declaration

*If this declaration is not signed by the candidate the extended essay will not be assessed.*

The extended essay I am submitting is my own work (apart from guidance allowed by the International Baccalaureate).

I have acknowledged each use of the words, graphics or ideas of another person, whether written, oral or visual.

I am aware that the word limit for all extended essays is 4000 words and that examiners are not required to read beyond this limit.

This is the final version of my extended essay.

Candidate's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: March 1, 2009

IB Cardiff use only:

A: 44479 B: \_\_\_\_\_

## Supervisor's report

The supervisor must complete the report below and then give the final version of the extended essay, with this cover attached, to the Diploma Programme coordinator. The supervisor must sign this report; otherwise the extended essay will not be assessed and may be returned to the school.

Name of supervisor (CAPITAL letters) \_\_\_\_\_

## Comments

Please comment, as appropriate, on the candidate's performance, the context in which the candidate undertook the research for the extended essay, any difficulties encountered and how these were overcome (see page 13 of the extended essay guide). The concluding interview (viva voce) may provide useful information. These comments can help the examiner award a level for criterion K (holistic judgment). Do not comment on any adverse personal circumstances that may have affected the candidate. If the amount of time spent with the candidate was zero, you must explain this, in particular how it was then possible to authenticate the essay as the candidate's own work. You may attach an additional sheet if there is insufficient space here.

The candidate in this case had difficulties in narrowing down her topic. Through Email, due to time factor we revised the essay and narrowed the topic down putting more focus on one miracle than that of all miracles said to be performed in the Bible. If she would not have had to change her topic to be more narrow we would have had more time to review it.

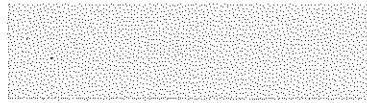
I have read the final version of the extended essay that will be submitted to the examiner.

To the best of my knowledge, the extended essay is the authentic work of the candidate.

I spent  hours with the candidate discussing the progress of the extended essay.

Supervisor's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: March 09/09



**Assessment form (for examiner use only)**

Candidate session number	0	0	
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Assessment criteria		Achievement level		
		First examiner	maximum	Second examiner
A	research question	2	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
B	introduction	0	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
C	investigation	2	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
D	knowledge and understanding	3	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
E	reasoned argument	1	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
F	analysis and evaluation	1	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
G	use of subject language	3	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
H	conclusion	0	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
I	formal presentation	3	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
J	abstract	2	2	<input type="checkbox"/>
K	holistic judgment	2	4	<input type="checkbox"/>
Total out of 36		19		<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of first examiner: \_\_\_\_\_  
(CAPITAL letters)

Examiner number: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of second examiner: \_\_\_\_\_  
(CAPITAL letters)

Examiner number: \_\_\_\_\_

## Abstract

The miracle of the parting of the sea is a very significant event in the Christian bible. It is, like most other miracles, open to a great deal of interpretation. A number of different views can be established on the fact of the event and what exactly happened. Some Christians accept the parting of the sea as happening exactly the way it is described in the book of Exodus, while others take a more logical or scientific approach. Rather than viewing the narrative of this event as a completely fictional story, however, the miracle can be seen as a historical event while still remaining scientifically possible. This is a result of the amount of research that has been done to formulate natural explanations for the parting of the sea. When examining possible explanations for the event, it is important to consider every aspect of the biblical story. These include looking at the sources or authors of the narrative, the translation of the Hebrew Bible, possible locations for the event, the route taken by the Israelites and the reason for crossing the sea.

When determining the Christian view on this event, it is also vital to study the meaning and significance of the miracle to the religion. It showed the great amount of faith that the Israelites had in God. The miracle also shows God's divine nature. Christians believe that miracles are manifestations of God's power.

The parting of the sea is a significant event to the Christian faith. That is probably the only concrete conclusion on the miracle that can be easily made. A close examination of the event is required to gain an understanding of the Christian view on the miracle of the parting of the sea.



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## Introduction

The 'parting of the sea' by Moses in the book of Exodus is among the most memorable miracles in the Hebrew bible. In fact, it is mentioned 120 times in the subsequent books of the bible.<sup>1</sup> It is a scene that is truly amazing, but there has been a great amount of debate regarding the event. Establishing a concrete view and understanding of the events described in Exodus is extremely difficult. Like many other events in the Bible, the historical accuracy of the parting of the sea has often been questioned. Many Christians believe that it is completely fictional. These individuals tend to reject the possibility of miracles occurring. In contrast, there is the fundamentalist view, which supports that the miracle was a direct act of God. It accepts the miracle exactly how it is told in the book of Exodus. This, however, is not entirely feasible from a scientific or logical perspective. As a result, experts have put forth a number of natural or scientific mechanisms to explain the miracle. Using these explanations, the parting of the sea can be seen as a historical event while still remaining scientifically possible. Many scholars and scientists agree that at least some aspects of the biblical story actually happened.

Determining what exactly occurred on the Israelite's journey to the promise requires a close examination of many aspects of the event. These could include sources of the event, the possible locations of the event and the many proposed on the miracle itself. It is also important to consider the meaning of the Parting of the Red Sea and its significance to Christianity. The miracle is related to faith and can be

<sup>1</sup> Woodward, Kenneth. The Book of Miracles. The Meaning of the Miracle Stories in Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam. New York: SIMON & SCHUSTER, 2000. Page 51.

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power over nature. It was also undoubtedly significant to the history of Israel, and its people.

### Summary of the Event

The 'parting of the sea' is one part of the Israelites' escape from Egypt led by Moses. This narrative is outlined in the book of Exodus of the Old Testament. The escape contains a series of miraculous events, beginning with Moses' first encounter with God in the form of a burning bush. At this point God reveals his name, Yahweh, and his mission to return to Egypt and lead the Israelites to Canaan, the promise land. Through Moses and his brother Aaron, Yahweh sends the Ten Plagues to the Egyptians to try to persuade the Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. The final plague, the death of every first born male Egyptian, resulted in Pharaoh's decision to free the Israelites from their position as slaves in Egypt. It is not surprising that Pharaoh changed his mind as he had previously done on some of the earlier plagues. He sent his army in pursuit of the Israelites who had departed the town of Rameses, heading southwest. "The Israelites were guided by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night."<sup>2</sup> It is believed that this showed that God was present in their journey.

The Egyptian army eventually caught up with the Israelites at the Sea. At this point, the miracle of the 'parting of the sea' takes place. As described in Exodus 14:21-29, Moses raises his staff and God sends a strong east wind. This drives back the sea, providing the Israelites with a dry path to cross. The army attempts to follow them but

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<sup>2</sup> Porter, J. R. The Newly Illustrated Companion to the Bible. San Diego, California: Thunder Bay Press, 2003. Page 52.



they their chariot wheels become clogged and they are thrown into panic by Yahweh. Moses raises his staff again and the sea flows back to drown the Egyptian army.

### Sources of the Narrative

When examining the narrative of the 'parting of the sea,' it is important to look at the sources from which it derives from. It is generally agreed upon that the books of the Pentateuch, which includes Exodus, are not the work of one single author, but a number of anonymous sources. These sources combine to form the narratives that make up the five books of the Pentateuch or the Books of Moses. They can be traced back to four major sources, which are usually known by the letters J, E, D and P.<sup>3</sup> It should be recognized that these authors were not the first to tell the stories of the Old Testament. These authors or sources have "compiled a series of oral recollections into a single narrative on different events."<sup>4</sup> This is one of the factors that may add uncertainty to the historical accuracy of events like the parting of the sea. The story could have been altered in major or minor ways as it was told multiple times before actually being recorded.

Exodus mainly contains only three of the four major sources, J, E and P. Of these authors or sources, the particular narrative of the Parting of the Sea is derived from only J

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<sup>3</sup> Clements, Ronald E. The Cambridge Bible Commentary. On the New English Bible. Exodus. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972. Page 2.

<sup>4</sup> Craigie, Peter C. The Old Testament. Its Background, Growth and Content. Burlington, Ontario, Canada: Welch Publishing Company Inc., 1986. Page 20.

and P.<sup>5</sup> J represents the oldest source. In this account, the miracle is the work of God alone. God has total power in performing the miracle according to this source. In the P account of the Parting of the Sea, Moses has more power or importance. He is given a more significant role in performing the miracle. It is not completely attributed to Yahweh as it is in the J account. These two accounts have been carefully combined to form the narrative that is contained in Exodus.

### Reason for the Crossing of the Sea

There have been different opinions on exactly why the Israelites crossed the sea, and how Pharaoh's army managed to trap them. Biblical scholars have struggled to understand this for a long time. There are scholars that believe that the Israelites did not need to cross the sea to reach their destination. For example, biblical scholar, Hyatt, in his commentary *Exodus* states, "the fact is that it was not absolutely necessary for the Israelites to cross a body of water in order to travel from Egypt into the Sinai Peninsula."<sup>6</sup> In this particular commentary on the event, it is believed by the author that the crossing of the sea ensued at a reedy inland lake somewhere between Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula. There is however, a route that would allow them to walk the entire journey on dry land. Many other opinions agree with the fact that the Israelite's route would have allowed them to avoid any body of water. Why is it, then, that the Moses led the Israelites to a body of water?

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<sup>5</sup> Porter, J. R. The Newly Illustrated Companion to the Bible. San Diego, California: Thunder Bay Press, 2003. Page 52.

<sup>6</sup> Humphreys, Colin J. The Miracles of Exodus. A Scientist's Discovery of the Extraordinary Natural Causes of the Biblical Stories. New York: HarperCollins, 2003. Page 225.


A number of reasons for this have been proposed. One opinion, again by Hyatt states that “Perhaps they did not know their way and found themselves accidentally trapped.”<sup>7</sup> There are some issues with this because the narrative of the event states that Israelites had the pillars of cloud and fire to lead them to their destination. Another point is that prior to this event, Moses had visited Mount Sinai, the place they were headed, from Egypt. He probably would have been familiar with the route. It is hard to believe that they could have lost their way.

Another reason proposed by Hyatt in his commentary *Exodus* is that “they may have pursued such a course intentionally in order to trap the Egyptians with their heavy chariots.”<sup>8</sup> This suggestion has been largely discredited by some scholars because the book of Exodus says that the Israelites were terrified of the Egyptian army following them. Most scholars believe that the Israelites most likely would not have intentionally lured the Egyptians who were heavily armed. On the other hand, many other opinions believe that Yahweh deliberately led the Israelites to a body of water. This was to ensure destruction of the Egyptian army as they were drowned following the Israelite’s safe crossing.

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<sup>7</sup> Humphreys, Colin J. *The Miracles of Exodus. A Scientist’s Discovery of the Extraordinary Natural Causes of the Biblical Stories.* New York: HarperCollins, 2003. Page 225.

<sup>8</sup> Humphreys, Colin J. *The Miracles of Exodus. A Scientist’s Discovery of the Extraordinary Natural Causes of the Biblical Stories.* New York: HarperCollins, 2003. Page 225.



A third possibility offered by Hyatt is that “they [the Israelites] may have been pushed into a trap by the Egyptian army.” This is entirely viable. Pharaoh’s army could very well have managed to trap the Israelites, leaving them with no option but to cross the Sea. As this is widely accepted among scholars as the reason for the Israelite’s crossing of the Sea, it is important to examine possible routes that were taken by the Israelites in their escape. An understanding of the route and location of the event will help with determining how the army possibly managed to trap the Egyptians.

### Location of the Event


There is not actually an agreement on the location of the miracle of the ‘parting of the sea.’ This is a result of the difficulties and the large amount of “dispute over the translation of the phrase *yam suph*”<sup>9</sup> that is used in the Hebrew Old Testament to describe the site of the event. In some cases it is translated as ‘Sea of Reeds’ whereas other times it is taken to mean ‘Red Sea.’

Throughout the bible, *yam suph* is frequently referred to as the ‘Red Sea.’ The New Testament only mentions the Red Sea. Most early Christians and Jews also believed that the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. Jewish scholars in the third century B.C. translated *yam suph* into ‘Red Sea’ rather than its literal meaning.<sup>10</sup> This is partly because of their tradition. Modern scholars, however, tend to agree on the literal translation of *yam suph* as there is evidence to support it.

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<sup>10</sup> Humphreys, Colin J. The Miracles of Exodus. A Scientist’s Discovery of the Extraordinary Natural Causes of the Biblical Stories. New York: HarperCollins, 2003. Page 183



When literally translated, *yam suph* means 'Reed Sea,' *yam* meaning 'sea' and *suph* meaning 'reed' or marsh. Most scholars believe that Israelites crossed a reedy or marshy inland lake or sea rather than the Red Sea. Different locations for the event have been proposed as many possible alternate routes taken by the Israelites have been explored by experts. When the Israelites departed from Rameses, they did not take the preferred route from Egypt to Asia through Palestine. This would have been a major highway, parallel to the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>11</sup> The drawback of taking this route was the fact that it was heavily guarded and patrolled. They were guided by Yahweh to take an alternate route, through the wilderness, rather than the "way of the land of the Philistines" (Exodus 13:17). This is an apparent reason for the "pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire" that led the Israelites on their journey. Proposed routes that the Israelites could have taken include a "northern route across Lake Sirbonis; two central routes across either the marshes of Lake Timsah or the Little Bitter Lake; and a southern route near the Gulf of Suez."<sup>12</sup> Though the building of the Suez Canal has changed the appearance of the area it occupies, it is believed by many scholars that the crossing of the sea took place in that area. This supports the translation of 'Sea of Reeds' because at one point in time there was a Sea of Reeds in this area. The miracle could have taken place in a number of lakes or seas in that area that contain reeds.

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<sup>11</sup> Porter, J. R. The Newly Illustrated Companion to the Bible. San Diego, California: Thunder Bay Press, 2003. Page 53.

<sup>12</sup> Porter, J. R. The Newly Illustrated Companion to the Bible. San Diego, California: Thunder Bay Press, 2003. Page 53.

### Views on the Fact of the Event

One extreme approach that many Christians tend to take on the subject of miracles is a fundamentalist view. These people accept the occurrence of miracles in a factual, literal sense. They tend to understand the Bible as being historically true, thus believing that the miracles in the Bible actually happened the way they were described. The miracle story of the parting of the sea can be understood in a very literal way, supporting that God directly caused the waters to recede and return. This interpretation highlights the absolute power that God holds over nature. Understanding the 'parting of the sea' as a direct act of God is difficult for most individuals today, because the amount scientific knowledge that exists would prove this occurrence to be impossible. For this reason, many Christians decide to take a different approach when examining this miracle.

On the other end of the spectrum is the extreme view that rejects the possibility of this miracle occurring at all. This view is driven mainly by scientific knowledge and logic and. Individuals with this view generally regard the miracle stories of the Bible as fictional. In today's world, with the advanced knowledge of science and medicine, it is understandable that people may find it hard to accept miracles as factual events. This is particularly true in the western world where people generally rely heavily on science, reason and medicine to explain everything. As a result, many modern definitions of miracles refer to them as events or occurrences that are not in accordance with nature or more accurately, above nature. "The dictionary defines a miracle as an event that appears inexplicable by the laws of nature and so is held to be supernatural in origin or an act of

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God.”<sup>13</sup> This emphasizes the fact that “contemporary worldviews tend to explain everything by logic, reason and nature, and require proof for everything.”<sup>14</sup> As a result, the miracle of the ‘parting of the sea’ is often seen as an exaggeration or a metaphor.

Despite these two extreme opinions on miracles, it is possible to hold a more moderate view. The miracle is often still seen as a historical event, but in a more natural way. There have been numerous attempts to scientifically explain the parting of the sea, without denying the miracle itself. In explaining it by a natural cause, it is often agreed that though the parting of the sea was not a direct act of God, the timing of the natural mechanism that caused it was miraculous. This view supports the fact that the miracles were an indirect act of God and it must be distinguished from the view that regards miracles as fictional events.

### Natural Explanations

The miracle of the ‘parting of the sea’ has often been attributed to a natural cause, thus being seen as an indirect act of God. Scientists and experts have developed a number of different scientific explanations for the event. Some scientists have considered that the receding of the water was caused by a tsunami. More specifically, they believe that it could have been the result of “a tsunami that was caused by the eruption of volcano Santorini, a Greek volcanic island in the Mediterranean.”<sup>15</sup> A tsunami would have

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<sup>13</sup> [www.dictionary.reference.com/](http://www.dictionary.reference.com/)

<sup>14</sup> Zanzig, Thomas. Jesus of History. Christ of Faith. Winona: Saint Mary’s Press, Christian Brothers Publications, 1999

<sup>15</sup> Humphreys, Colin J. The Miracles of Exodus. A Scientist’s Discovery of the Extraordinary Natural Causes of the Biblical Stories. New York: HarperCollins, 2003. Page 245.

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produced the walls of water that formed as described in the book of Exodus. This makes this theory relatively possible as it somewhat matches the events of the bible. There has been, however, a lot of disagreement on the date of the eruption and whether it corresponds with the date of the Exodus story.

Another theory that scientists have developed is that “the parting of the sea was caused by a tsunami caused by underwater volcanic eruption in the Red Sea.”<sup>16</sup> This would have caused huge tidal waves, again creating the walls of water that are described in the bible account. Other scientist, however, have contested this theory because they believe that this explanation would have first caused flooding, then recession of the water. The account of Exodus describes the water receding first, and then flooding as the Egyptian army is drowned following the Israelites’ crossing.

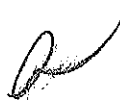
Yet again, there is another explanation. The theory that the parting of the sea was caused by “a very low tide followed by a very high tide”<sup>17</sup> has been explored by many scientists. An extremely low tide could have provided a path shallow enough for the Israelites to walk across. The very high tide that would have followed is what would have drowned the Egyptian army, as described in the book of Exodus. It could be argued, however, that this would not have produced the walls of water that are described in the account.

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<sup>16</sup> Humphreys, Colin J. The Miracles of Exodus. A Scientist’s Discovery of the Extraordinary Natural Causes of the Biblical Stories. New York: HarperCollins, 2003. Page 246.

<sup>17</sup> Humphreys, Colin J. The Miracles of Exodus. A Scientist’s Discovery of the Extraordinary Natural Causes of the Biblical Stories. New York: HarperCollins, 2003. Page 246.





Perhaps the most widely agreed upon natural explanation for the miraculous 'parting of the sea' is the natural mechanism that is actually described in the bible. This is the strong east winds that blew all night (Exodus 14:21). Wind is something that could have caused a dry route for the Israelites to cross in different ways. For example, "[a writer in The Interpreter's Bible] says: 'In flat marshy districts large areas are often intermittently covered by shallow water or laid dry by the action of the wind. . . ' (Buttrick, pp. 937-8)."<sup>18</sup> This suggests, that if *yam suph* is in fact taken to mean 'Reed Sea,' a strong enough wind could have eventually dried up the marshy body of water that the Israelites crossed. Another theory that some scientists believe to be possible is a phenomenon where strong enough winds cause water to 'set down.'<sup>19</sup> This natural mechanism also would have caused the 'walls' of water that are described in the Bible and exposed the floor of the sea that the Israelites walk across. A calming of the wind would have caused the phenomenon to stop, resulting in the drowning the Egyptians that is described in the narrative. Another fact to support this theory is that strong winds are characteristic of the area where it is believed to take place. At the northern end of the Red Sea, for example, strong northwest winds drive water back so that it is possible to wade across.<sup>20</sup> Also, strong east winds are typical of Palestine, which corresponds with the east wind described in the bible.

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<sup>18</sup> Jackson, Wayne "The Parting of the Red Sea: Miracle or Natural Event?" Christian Courier. February 19, 2003. < [www.christiancourier.com/articles/612-the-parting-of-the-red-sea-miracle-or-natural-event](http://www.christiancourier.com/articles/612-the-parting-of-the-red-sea-miracle-or-natural-event)>.

<sup>19</sup> Humphreys, Colin J. The Miracles of Exodus. A Scientist's Discovery of the Extraordinary Natural Causes of the Biblical Stories. New York: HarperCollins, 2003. Page 247.

<sup>20</sup> Keller, Werner. The Bible as History. Toronto: William Morrow and Company Publishers, 1956. Page 115.

## The Meaning of the Miracle

From a Christian perspective, the meaning of the miracle of the 'parting of the sea' is significant to consider along with the fact of it. It can be difficult to take a fundamentalist approach and accept all of the miracles as fact value, so a lot of Christians agree that physical miracles are symbolic of a spiritual meaning. In the book of Exodus, the event of the Parting of the Sea is followed by "the Song of the Sea" (Exod. 15:1-18). This is a poem about the miraculous event that was composed later to commemorate the Exodus. It is very important to consider when understanding the meaning of the miracle of the 'parting of the sea.' It begins by recapping the event and praising Yahweh's divine power. Nature miracles, like the 'parting of the sea' in Exodus, show God's power over nature.

The poem then goes on to express the theme of deliverance. It shows how "this event delivered Israel to become God's people, conquer the Canaanites, and establish divine sanctuary on Mount Zion, Jerusalem."<sup>21</sup> The miracle of the parting of the Sea is a significant example of how the Israelites put their faith in Yahweh. They followed as Yahweh guided them on an obscure path through the wilderness until they came to the sea. At this point in the narrative, it is agreed upon that something miraculous happened. In terms of Christianity, miracles are certainly related to faith as they "serve to symbolize part of God's teaching."<sup>22</sup> They may even form our own faith. Whether they serve to strengthen people's faith or even bring people into faith, it is undoubtedly true that the

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<sup>21</sup> Porter, J. R. The Newly Illustrated Companion to the Bible. San Diego, California: Thunder Bay Press, 2003. Page 53.

<sup>22</sup> Neiman, Carol. Miracles. The Extraordinary, the Impossible, and the Divine. London, England: Labyrinth Publishing (UK) Ltd, 1995. Page 13.

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acceptance of miracles requires some amount of faith. It has been said that this narrative is “history as seen through the eyes of faith.”<sup>23</sup>

### Conclusion

Miracles are one of the most confusing and debated aspects of Christianity and the parting of the sea by Moses is no exception. Most aspects of this event are open to a lot of interpretation. One issue is that the narrative of the event is not a historical record, but rather a compilation of accounts and oral recollections. Christians can take different views on the fact of the miracle ranging from a fundamentalist view to holding the narrative as a fictional story. It is extremely difficult, even for biblical scholars, to determine how much of the narrative is historically accurate. Problems with translation of the Hebrew Bible have also caused a lot of debate on aspects like the location of the event. Probably the biggest issue, however, is that a modern knowledge of science proves that the exact events described in the Bible are not plausible.

Whatever view Christians decide to take on the fact of this particular miracle, they tend to agree on its significance. The ‘parting of the sea’ was an extremely important event in the history of Israel as it confirmed the Israelites’ escape from Egypt. It is believed that this miracle showed God’s power over nature, thus creating a sense of faith among the Israelites. Miracles in the Christian religion are undoubtedly related to faith and the parting of the sea demonstrates this.

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<sup>23</sup> Propp, William. The Anchor Bible. Exodus 1-18. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. New York: Doubleday a division of Random House Inc., 1999

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It would be incredibly difficult to come to a conclusion on what actually happened on the Israelites' journey from Egypt, and whether the biblical account actually happened. There is generally a lot of disagreement on the extent of the historical truth of the narrative of the crossing of the sea in Exodus, but most scholars and experts agree that it was a historical event, rather than a fictional. This does not necessarily mean that God directly parted the waters of the sea. There is legitimate evidence to support that the Israelites did in fact cross a body of water on their journey by some means. Whether or not it was a result of divine intervention is left open to interpretation. It can be agreed on that this event is significant to Christianity.



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