

# Exodus 13:17-22

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/exod/exod-13/exodus-1317-22/>

*This section (verses 17 – 22) describes the beginning of the journey from Egypt to the Red Sea. It stresses that the LORD led them with a pillar of cloud or fire. He chose a route to the Red Sea for a specific purpose. The point is also made that Moses made sure that Joseph’s bones were carried with them.*

Verse 17 begins a new section of Exodus that continues until the crossing of the Red Sea (15:21). It describes the journey from Egypt to the far side of the Red Sea. Some think that this section extends to when the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai in chapter 18. In either case, the exit from Egypt started *when Pharaoh had let the people go*. Their route to the Promised Land was not direct, because *God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near*. The word for “led” (Heb. *nahah*) is used in [Psalm 23:3](#), where the psalmist says that the LORD “leads” him in the paths of righteousness. This implies leading that is aimed straight toward the goal. The “the way of the land of the Philistines” was a very direct route northeast along the Mediterranean Sea from Egypt to Canaan through the “land of the Philistines.” Traveling this road would have taken only weeks to complete at the most because “it was near.”

But there was another thing to consider. The northeast route through the land of the Philistines would certainly trigger armed resistance, so *God said, “The people might change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.”* The word translated “change their minds” (Heb. *naham*) is used in [Genesis 6:6](#) where it says that God “was sorry” that He created man. The word is used there in other contexts to express regret or emotional pain ([Judges 2:18](#)). God was concerned that, when threatened with life-threatening warfare, the Israelites might regret leaving the less seemingly dangerous lifestyle they had in Egypt.

To avoid this, *God led the people around by the way of the wilderness to the Red Sea*. To get to the Red Sea, the Israelites had to travel to the southeast of where they were (which was Goshen ([Exodus 8:22](#)), which was located in the Nile delta). The word for “led” here (Heb. *sabab*) is different from the one in verse 17. This word implies leading to the goal in a roundabout way. The LORD knows His people, and He knew that the more

direct route was not the best one for His people. Yes, it would take longer to fulfill the promise, but it was for their best.

God led them into the wilderness to allow them to see more demonstrations of His provision and protection and as a result to allow their faith to grow. God knows they are not yet prepared to fight. God does not change. He does not give His children trials they are not capable of enduring and will always ensure there is a way of escape for any temptation ([1 Corinthians 10:13](#)).

In spite of this, when this generation reaches the Promised Land, and are able to fight, they are still unwilling. Even though they have seen God's provision many times, they still grumble against rather than trust Him ([Numbers 14](#)). So they will wander in the wilderness until a new generation is raised who has the faith and courage to fight in order to possess the land God has granted. We will see that God's primary instruction to Moses' successor Joshua is to be courageous ([Joshua 1:6-9](#)). Faith, courage and willingness to stand in the face of opposition are close partners in a walk of obedience.

Finally, *the sons of Israel went up in martial array from the land of Egypt*. It was important for the Israelites to leave not as a frantic, disorganized mob. The LORD wanted them to leave in an orderly, sensible fashion. To leave in "martial array" means that they were arranged in a military formation, presumably to convey to potential enemies they were positioned to fend off threats that might occur. God's provision is often quite practical.

Verse 19 contains the note of a fulfilled promise. Here, *Moses took the bones of Joseph with him*. The reason for this was *for he had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, "God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones from here with you."* This was the fulfillment of [Genesis 50:25](#), where, as it says, Joseph made his generation of Israelites promise to take his bones with them when they go to Canaan. The Bible is consistent in holding forth the importance of keeping promises, covenants and oaths, regardless of the passage of time. An example is God sending a famine to Israel because Saul had violated a pledge Joshua had made to the Gibeonites, hundreds of years earlier ([2 Samuel 21:1-2](#)).

The next part of this passage (verses 20 – 22) describe the means by which God would lead the Israelites. In the first leg of the journey, *they set out from Succoth and camped in Etham on the edge of the wilderness*. The exact location of Succoth and Etham is not known. It might have been that they were southeast of the Nile Delta region, and the direction from Succoth to

Etham was probably southeast. So, instead of leading His people northeast, God sovereignly led them to the southeast.

How were the Israelites guided out of Egypt? *The Lord was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light.* The one pillar changed from smoke during the day to fire during the night. Not only did it lead Israel on its journey, it enabled them to *travel by day and by night.* It also might have been large enough to provide shade in the daytime and light when it was dark. It was also a constant presence, because *He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.* This became a symbol of the LORD's abiding presence with His people. They could rely on His leadership, and it was in their best interest to obey and follow Him. The pillar was a visible confirmation of the constant presence of the LORD. The presence of the LORD meant that the Israelites were always led in the right direction and unceasingly protected as they travelled.

It is interesting that the word "God" (Heb. *Elohim*) is used instead of "the LORD" (Heb. *Yahweh*). "God" stresses His relationship to His creation and "the LORD" stresses His relationship with humans. "God" reflects His creatorship ([Genesis 1](#)), and "the LORD" is the name used of His covenant relationship with His people. The names God and LORD are both used in this chapter to stress both aspects of his relationship with his people.

### **Biblical Text:**

**<sup>17</sup> Now when Pharaoh had let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near; for God said, "The people might change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt." <sup>18</sup> Hence God led the people around by the way of the wilderness to the Red Sea; and the sons of Israel went up in martial array from the land of Egypt. <sup>19</sup> Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, "God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones from here with you." <sup>20</sup> Then they set out from Succoth and camped in Etham on the edge of the wilderness. <sup>21</sup> The Lord was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. <sup>22</sup> He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.**