

## The Location of Mount Sinai

Where is Mount Sinai? Interpreters have differed on this question throughout the centuries, but this study examines two major locations—in the southern Sinai and northwestern Saudi Arabia.<sup>1</sup>

### I. Southern Sinai Peninsula (Traditional View)

#### A. Support

##### 1. Historical

- a) Nearly all Bible atlases place Mt. Sinai at the traditional location known as Jebel al-Musa ("Mountain of Moses") in the southern Sinai Peninsula.<sup>2</sup>
- b) This site has been known since the fourth century AD by Saint Helena, the Emperor Constantine's mother, who built a chapel and tower at the foot of the altar to commemorate the place. Later, Catholics built St. Catherine's monastery to mark it more permanently. Thus, "the major strand of Christian tradition has been woven around J. Musa..."<sup>3</sup>

##### 2. Biblical

- a) Assuming the Egyptians pursued the Israelites the next morning after the exodus, there would not have been enough time for Israel to cross the entire Sinai Peninsula in a single day (Exod. 13:17-22). The alternate view assumes more time for them to travel farther across the Sinai to enter Arabia by crossing the Gulf of Aqaba.
- b) Biblical atlases note that the Desert of Sin lies in the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula on the way to Mount Sinai (Exod. 16:1).

#### B. Problems

1. No archaeologists have found the ancient sites Israel visited between Egypt and the southern Sinai (e.g., the bitter springs of Marah and the springs at Elim).
2. Egyptians could have easily gone around the Great Bitter Lake or Small Bitter Lake if Israel had been trapped between them and the sea.
3. Exodus 12 does not say that Pharaoh chased Israel the day after the Exodus. Perhaps it occurred days after his grieving for the dead firstborn sons of Egypt. If this is true, enough time could have elapsed for the people to reach the Gulf of Aqaba.

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<sup>1</sup> Barry J. Beitzel, *Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody, 1985), 90-93 has an extensive treatment of the issue, including interaction with a third location in the northern Sinai. He holds to the southern Sinai view. It would not have taken Elijah 40 days to travel from Beersheba to a northern location (1 Kings 19:8) but the 250 miles to southern Sinai fits well. Also, other texts indicate a large distance from Kadesh Barnea to Sinai (Num. 33:16-36; Deut. 1:2).

<sup>2</sup> Atlases arguing for the traditional site include R. K. Harrison, "The Exodus and Conquest of Canaan," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Atlas*, E. M. Blaiklock, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969, 1972), 65; Joseph L. Gardner, ed., *Reader's Digest Atlas of the Bible* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest, 1987), 66-68; Beitzel, 92.

<sup>3</sup> Beitzel, 92.

## II. Saudi Arabia (Alternate View)

### A. Support

#### 1. Scripture

- a) Paul notes the mountain location in his mention of "Mount Sinai in Arabia" (Gal. 4:25). Jebel al-Lawz is the tallest peak in Arabia and thus the likely spot, though others have been proposed.
- b) The path from Mt. Sinai to Kadesh Barnea follows the Mount Seir road (Deut. 1:2). Given Mount Seir's eastern location, if the road ran on the eastern side of the Jordan rift, it would lead south into Arabia rather than into Sinai.
- c) That the Israelites "fled" rather than simply "left" (Exod. 5:14) may show that Pharaoh granted permission to worship the Lord for only three days. Their fleeing may show that they continued beyond what Pharaoh had granted.

#### 2. Logic

- a) It is likely that Moses brought Israel back to the area of Midian, where he had lived for 40 years. Midian lies on the eastern side of the Gulf of Aqaba.<sup>4</sup> Since Moses lived in Midian (Exod. 2:15) and the burning bush incident took place on Mount Sinai (Exod. 3:1), Mount Sinai must have been in Midian, since the text does not say he left Midian to go to Mount Sinai. (The assumption is that the "far side of the desert" is still in Midian unless the text says it is not.)
- b) The Saudi government has outlawed visits to this alternate site known as Jebel al-Lawz. They also outlaw visits to the Caves of Moses en route to Jebel al-Lawz.
- c) Mount Sinai had much volcanic or earthquake activity (Exod. 19:18; 24:17), and Saudi Arabia has more volcanoes than the Sinai. This was noted as far back as the third century BC by the Jewish historian Demetrius, who lived in Egypt.<sup>5</sup>

#### 3. Archaeology may support the Saudi Arabian viewpoint.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Harvard professor Frank Moore Cross does not specifically identify Jebel al-Lawz as the Mount Sinai site but he does note that Midian is the land of Mount Sinai and that Midian is in northwestern Saudi Arabia (*BAR* July/August 1999, p. 54).

<sup>5</sup> See Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, translated by John McHugh (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 435; cited by Beitzel, 90, n. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Most of these archaeological arguments come from a 1988 visit to Saudi Arabia chronicled in Bob Carnuke and Larry Williams, "The Search for the Real Mount Sinai," 46 minute video tape (Monument, CO: Reel Productions, 1998 and P.O. Box 1798, Colorado Springs, CO 80901-1798: Biblical Archaeology, Search and Exploration Institute, 1998; Tel. 1-800-680-3300), \$24.95). See also Larry Williams, *The Mountain of Moses* (140 Marine View, Office 204, Solana Beach, CA 92075: CTI Publishing, 1999; Tel. 1-800-748-5843) or Larry Williams, *The Mountain of Moses: The Discovery of Mount Sinai* (Wynwood Press, New York, 1990); Howard Blum, *The Gold of Exodus: The Discovery of the True Mount Sinai* (NY: Simon & Shuster, 1998), \$25.00 hb, 364 pp.; Ron Wyatt also has a sensationalistic video ("Presentation of Discoveries" \$30.00) as well as a webpage (including many pictures) claiming a Saudi location (<http://www.ronwyatt.org/exodus/index.html>); Even Hershel Shanks, editor of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, says, "...all identifications of Mount Sinai are highly speculative. A good case has been made that it is somewhere in northwest Saudi Arabia, and Jebel al-Lawz is the highest point

- a) A submerged land bridge extends from the SE Sinai to the Arabian side. By miraculously pushing away the water on either side, it would have allowed the Israelites to travel across the sea with no need to descend hundreds of feet downward to the bottom of the sea. Such a steep climb would have made it impossible to climb up the other (eastern) side with their carts, women, children, and animals.
- b) Columns claiming Solomonic origin stand on both sides of the land bridge, marking where the Israelites began and ended their crossing.
- c) Bitter springs exist 33 kilometers from the crossing point (a three-day journey), which is where one would expect the bitter springs of Marah (Exod. 15:22-26).
- d) Other springs follow the route to Jebel al-Lawz, which could be the 12 springs and 70 palms of Elim (Exod. 15:27). At this location are the "Caves of Moses." Bedouin attribute the petroglyphs (rock carvings) within the caves to Moses, and their tradition names this site as the home of Jethro.
- e) The Jebel al-Lawz mountain shows evidence of a major encampment.
  - (1) The Split Rock of Horeb is nearby. It is a large rock 47 feet tall with a 19-inch crack down the middle that has evidence of a large flow of water over the granite stone that empties into a lake area large enough to enable the two million Israelites to drink for a year (Exod. 17:1-7).
  - (2) The mountain shows two areas of burning.
    - (a) The blackening of the entire top of Jebel al-Lawz may be due to fire from God (Exod. 19:18).
    - (b) One small burn mark is nearby, potentially where God appeared next to the Split Rock of Horeb. It has melted stone!
  - (3) A two-mile semicircle of boundary stones encircles the mountain at 400-foot intervals (Exod. 19:12).
  - (4) The mountain has a cave which could be the one Elijah visited (1 Kings 19:8-9). No one has discovered such a cave on Jebel al-Musa.
  - (5) The mountain base features a 60 x 60-foot altar of uncut stone with ashes.
  - (6) Another altar with petroglyphs lies in front of the mountain, with huge cut stones rising 30 feet, as one would expect at the golden calf incident (Exod. 32). This is unlike any altar in the area, especially since the animals depicted are Egyptian cows.
  - (7) An area near Mount Sinai is large enough for the battle between Israel and the Amalekites at Rephidim (Exod. 17:8-16).

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in this area" (*BAR*, Nov/Dec '99, p. 67). Brad Sparks documents the many errors in Williams' book at <http://www.ldolphin.org/sinai.html>.

## B. Problems

### 1. Scripture

- a) The reference to "Mount Sinai in Arabia" in Galatians 4:25 is unconvincing. It must first be proven that "Arabia" in Paul's day referred *only* to the *east* side of the Gulf of Aqaba.
  - (1) In Paul's time, "Arabia" covered a wide area that "included the Sinai Peninsula" as well as what we now call Saudi Arabia, according to Cambridge scholar Graham Davies.<sup>7</sup>
  - (2) Midian and Mount Sinai were in separate places since Moses sent his Midianite father-in-law "back to his own country," referring to Midian (Exod. 18:27; cf. Num. 10:29-31).
- b) The Mount Seir road may derive its name only from the road *ending* up at Mount Seir rather than the entire road extending only on the eastern Jordan Rift. It may have extended into the Sinai Peninsula as well.
- c) The "fleeing" of the Israelites (Exod. 5:14) more naturally refers to their first flight from Egypt rather than to a hastened pace after the third day. While earlier in the account they requested a three-day trip from Pharaoh, it argues from silence to say the king granted them only a three-day journey after the tenth plague.

### 2. Logic

- a) While Moses lived in Midian for 40 years, Mount Sinai was on the "far side of the desert" (Exod. 3:1). Let us assume that the Midianites lived on the east side of the Gulf of Aqaba. If so, the natural reading of the "far side of the desert" would be the opposite side of the Gulf of Aqaba, or the western side (southern Sinai Peninsula), especially since Jethro's traditional home and Jebel al-Lawz would be in close proximity. Also, Midianites were a nomadic people who resided in many places: Moab (Gen. 36:35; 1 Chron. 1:46), the Mishor region of the Transjordan (Num. 25:6-7; Josh. 23:21), the wilderness east of Moab and Ammon (Jud. 7:25; 8:18-19), the northern Sinai (1 Kings 11:18), and even within Canaan itself (Jud.

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<sup>7</sup> Brad Sparks provides a convincing case against a Saudi location (<http://www.ldolphin.org/sinai.html>). Sparks cites evidence for "Arabia" including the Sinai Peninsula on his note 27 quoting Graham I. Davies, *The Way of the Wilderness* (Cambridge Univ. Press, London, 1979): "Davies, *Wilderness* (1979) pp. 30, 99 n. 1, emphasis added. In Herodotus ca. 450 BC, not only was the Sinai Peninsula considered PART OF ARABIA but, surprisingly, so was all of the eastern desert half of what WE now call EGYPT on the continent of AFRICA. In Greek and Roman Empire days, the bulk of the Sinai Peninsula was left to the Nabateans as 'Arabia Petrea,' until their conquest by the Romans in 106 AD. The southern and central Sinai were then merged into the new Province of Arabia. Even in modern times, Wilhelm Gesenius listed both MT. SINAI and the Sinai Peninsula as PART OF 'ARABIA,' in his famous 1834 Hebrew Lexicon (Herodotus II:8, 11, 158; Michael Avi-Yonah, 'Sinai,' *Encycl. Judaica*, 14:1595; Eckenstein, *Hist. Sinai*, p. 91; Davies, *Wilderness*, p. 30; Avraham Negev (ed.), *The Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land* [AEHL] (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, Tenn., 1986 rev.) pp. 65, 221-223, 276, 292, 351; Samuel P. Tregelles (trans.), Gesenius...Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon (Baker, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1979 reprint [London, 1847, 1857]), p. 584 (Strong's no. 5514)."

6:1-6; 7:1). Thus, the location of Midian cannot help to decide the location of Mount Sinai with any certainty.

- b) The Saudi government's prohibitions on people visiting Jebel al-Lawz could be due to its military presence there as much as to preventing archaeological exploration. Saudi Arabia has other sites off-limits to visitors, so Jebel al-Lawz is not at all unusual.
- c) The higher volcanic activity in the Saudi Peninsula than in the Sinai Peninsula is not convincing in the case of the Exodus generation. The Bible does not speak in terms of the land's typical characteristics but rather of a single instance. Besides, the Sinai Peninsula experienced a quake exceeding 6.0 on the Richter scale in 1982, centered in Nuweiba and felt in J. Musa.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Archaeology

- a) Since no one knows where Israel crossed the Yam Suf (Red Sea or Sea of Reeds), no one knows whether a submerged land bridge would be necessary, as the sea's depth would also be unknown. Since God could miraculously part the waters, we should assume that He could also help them across—no matter the incline!
- b) Columns erected by Solomon at two crossing spots show, at best, their opinion five centuries after Moses. The long-time lag between the crossing and the commemorative columns leaves ample room for doubt about whether these are the correct locations.
- c) It is unlikely that Israel crossed the saltwater Gulf of Aqaba since "Yam Suf" means Sea of Reeds, and reeds grow only in fresh water.
- d) Signs of an encampment need not refer only to the encampment by Israel.
  - (1) The water from the rock incident occurred at Rephidim (Exod. 17) rather than in front of Mount Horeb. Also, one need not find the water source, since this was a miraculous, though probably temporary, water supply for Israel. The rock need not be an imposing stone either.
  - (2) The blackened top of Jebel al-Lawz is due to manganese rock. Actually, many mountains in this region are dark for this reason. Besides, Scripture does not say that God blackened Mount Sinai. Also, the claim to have melted stone does not sound convincing. Jebel al-Lawz is in a volcanic zone, so melted stone here is not unusual.
  - (3) One must prove that rock piles at 400-foot intervals are indeed boundary stones before claiming that they are such markers.
  - (4) The lack of a cave at Jebel al-Musa now does not mean it did not have a cave during Elijah's time. An earthquake or shifting rocks could easily cover it after nearly 30 centuries.

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<sup>8</sup> Noted by Beitzel, 91. This is not as convincing as it may sound, however, since Nuweiba lies on the Gulf of Aqaba closer to J. Lawz than to J. Musa.

- (5) The altar at the base of Jebel al-Lawz is not of Israelite origin. God told Moses to make an altar of earth—not stone—on Mount Sinai (Exod. 20:24; 24:4), for burnt offerings and fellowship offerings.
  - (6) The discovery of petroglyphs (rock carvings) at Jebel al-Lawz only proves that someone wrote there, not that it was Moses.<sup>9</sup> The surrounding area has other rock carvings from other ages. (And does an Egyptian cow drawing look significantly different from a non-Egyptian cow?)
  - (7) The existence of an area large enough to fight the Amalekites does not prove that such a battle took place near Jebel al-Lawz. The area near Jebel al-Musa also includes large enough spaces for battles.
4. Perhaps the clearest argument favoring the traditional view is that the Desert of Sin (which included Mount Sinai) is located on all Bible atlases in the southern Sinai Peninsula. Since this desert is not in Arabia, the Mount Sinai within the desert would not be in Arabia either (cf. Gal. 4:25).

## Conclusion

The debate continues over whether Mount Sinai lies in the traditional southern Sinai Peninsula (Jebel al-Musa) or east of it, in northwestern Saudi Arabia (Jebel al-Lawz). While both views have supporting arguments and problems, the alternate view deserves a closer look. At present, I have no explanation for the two springs in Saudi Arabia, which lend support to the eastern view. At least tentative support from Frank Moore Cross and Hershel Shanks also adds support to the view.

On the other hand, until someone proves the Desert of Sin lies in Saudi Arabia, the traditional view marshals the best evidence. The location of the Desert of Sin has been a long-standing problem for the eastern location of Sinai until more evidence comes to light.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Ronald S. Hendel's review of Blum's book noted above and particularly of the video by Carnuke and Williams (*BAR* July/August 1999, p. 56).

<sup>10</sup> For further support of the traditional view, see Gordon Franz's newsletter for members of Associates for Biblical Research entitled "The Bible and Spade" (<http://www.ChristianAnswers.net/abr/abrhome.html>).