**The Location of Mount Sinai**

Where is Mount Sinai? Interpreters have differed on this question through the centuries, but this study discusses two major locations—in the southern Sinai and in northwestern Saudi Arabia.[[1]](#footnote-1)

# Southern Sinai Peninsula (Traditional View)

## Support

### Historical

#### Nearly all Bible atlases place Mt. Sinai at the traditional location known as Jebel al-Musa ("Mountain of Moses") in the southern Sinai Peninsula*.*[[2]](#footnote-2)

#### 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 St. Catherine's monastery was built to identify it in an even more permanent manner. Thus "the major strand of Christian tradition has been woven around J. Musa…"[[3]](#footnote-3)

### Biblical

#### Assuming that the Egyptians chased the Israelites the next morning after the exodus, there would not have been enough time for Israel to cross the entire Sinai Peninsula within a day (Exod. 13:17-22). The alternate view must assume they traveled this far in a day unless more time is allowed to travel farther across the Sinai to be poised for entrance into Arabia by crossing the Gulf of Aqaba.

#### Biblical atlases note that the Desert of Sin lies in the southern portion of the Sinai Peninsula on the way to Mount Sinai (Exod. 16:1).

## Problems

### No archaeologists have found the ancient sites that Israel visited between Egypt and the southern Sinai (e.g., the bitter springs of Marah, the springs at Elim).

### Egyptians could have easily gone around the Great Bitter Lake or Small Bitter Lake if Israel was hemmed between them and the sea.

### 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.

# Saudi Arabia (Alternate View)

## Support

### Scripture

#### Paul locates the mountain 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.

#### The path from Mt. Sinai to Kadesh Barnea follows the Mount Seir road (Deut. 1:2). Given the eastern location of Mount Seir, if the road was on the eastern side of the Jordan rift, then it would lead south into Arabia rather than into the Sinai.

#### That the Israelites "fled" rather than simply "left" (Exod. 5:14) may indicate that their initial permission was only to worship the Lord for three days. Their fleeing may indicate that they continued on past what Pharaoh had granted.

### Logic

#### 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.[[4]](#footnote-4) Since Moses lived in Midian (Exod. 2:15) and the burning bush incident took place on Mount Sinai (Exod. 3:1), then Mount Sinai must have been in Midian since the text does not say that 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.)

#### 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.

#### Mount Sinai had much volcanic or earthquake activity (Exod. 19:18; 24:17; etc.), 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.[[5]](#footnote-5)

### Archaeology has been used to support the Saudi Arabia viewpoint.[[6]](#footnote-6)

#### 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 nearly impossible to climb up the other (eastern) side with their carts, women, children, and animals.

#### Columns claiming to have been erected by Solomon exist on both sides of the land bridge to identify where the Israelites began and ended their crossing.

#### Bitter springs exist 33 kilometers from the crossing point (a three day journey) that are where one would expect the bitter springs of Marah (Exod. 15:22-26).

#### Other springs follow on the route to Jebel al-Lawz that 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 identifies this site as the home of Jethro.

#### The mountain of Jebel al-Lawz shows evidence of a major encampment.

##### 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).

##### The area of the mountain has two evidences of burning on it.

###### The entire top of Jebel al-Lawz is blackened (Exod. 19:18).

###### One small burn mark is close by which is potentially where God appeared next to the Split Rock of Horeb. It has melted stone!

##### A two mile semicircle of boundary stones encircle the mountain at 400 foot intervals (Exod. 19:12).

##### The mountain has a cave which could be the one Elijah visited (1 Kings 19:8-9). No such cave has ever been found on Jebel al-Musa.

##### The base of the mountain has a 60 x 60 foot altar of uncut stone with ashes.

##### Another altar with petroglyphs lays in front of the mountain with huge cut stones rising 30 feet, which is like 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.

##### An area near Mount Sinai is large enough for the battle between Israel and the Amalekites at Rephidim (Exod. 17:8-16).

## Problems

### Scripture

#### The reference to "Mount Sinai in Arabia" in Galatians 4:25 is unconvincing. It must first be established that "Arabia" in Paul's day referred *only* to the *east* side of the Gulf of Aqaba.

##### 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.[[7]](#footnote-7)

##### 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).

#### 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.

#### The "fleeing" of the Israelites (Exod. 5:14) more naturally refers to their initial 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.

### Logic

#### While Moses did live in Midian 40 years, Mount Sinai was on the "far side of the desert" (Exod. 3:1). Let's 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. 6:1-6; 7:1). Thus, the location of Midian cannot help to determine the location of Mount Sinai with any certainty.

#### The prohibitions of the Saudi government from people visiting Jebel al-Lawz could be due to their military establishment there as much as preventing archaeological exploration. Numerous sites in Saudi Arabia are off-limits to visitors, so Jebel al-Lawz is not at all unusual.

#### The higher volcanic activity of the Saudi Peninsula over the Sinai Peninsula is not convincing in the case of the Exodus generation. The Bible does not speak in terms of general characteristics of the land but rather of a single instance. Besides, the Sinai Peninsula experienced a quake exceeding 6.0 on the Richter scale in 1982 that was centered in Nuweiba and felt on J. Musa.[[8]](#footnote-8)

### Archaeology

#### Since no one knows where Israel crossed Yam Suf (Red Sea or Sea of Reeds), no one also knows that a submerged land bridge would be necessary as the depth of the sea 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!

#### Columns claiming to have been erected by Solomon only show at best that nearly five centuries after Moses that this was the spot. Such a long time period between the crossing and the commemorative columns leaves much room for doubt as to whether these are the correct locations.

#### It is unlikely that Israel crossed the salt-water Gulf of Aqaba since Yam Suf can mean Sea of Reeds and reeds grow only in fresh water.

#### Signs of an encampment need not refer only to the encampment by Israel.

##### The water from the rock incident was at the town of Rephidim (Exod. 17) rather than in front of Mount Horeb. Also, one need not find the water source since this was a miraculous yet probably temporary water supply that was only for Israel. The rock need not be an imposing stone either.

##### 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.

##### One must prove that rock piles at 400-foot intervals are indeed boundary stones before claiming that they are such markers.

##### 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.

##### 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.

##### The discovery of petroglyphs (rock carvings) at Jebel al-Lawz only proves that someone wrote there—not that it was Moses.[[9]](#footnote-9) The surrounding area is filled with numerous rock carvings over the ages. (And does an Egyptian cow drawing look significantly different from a non-Egyptian cow?)

##### 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 has areas large enough for battles.

### 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 whether Mount Sinai is located in the traditional location in the southern Sinai Peninsula (Jebel al-Musa) or east of this 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 the Desert of Sin can be proven to be in [Saudi] Arabia, the traditional view should not be abandoned. The location of the Desert of Sin has been a long-standing problem that seemingly will not be answered decisively until more evidence is forthcoming.[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. 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). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Beitzel, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 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). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 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 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 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).)." [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 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). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 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). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)