



The Geographical Challenges of the

SINAI

by Claude F. Mariottini



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SINAI IS THE NAME of the mountain where God appeared to Moses while he was shepherding the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law. It is also the place where the Israelites stopped to worship God three months after they left the oppression in Egypt. At the foot of Mount Sinai, God established His covenant with Israel. The covenant made Israel God's special people, a people set apart for the Lord's service in the world.

After Moses told Israel's leaders the conditions of the covenant, he ascended to the top of Mount Sinai where, in the midst of thunder and lightning on the cloud-shrouded mountain, God gave the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments became the basic principles by which the legal system of Israel developed.

The Sinai Peninsula

When Israel left Egypt, their first destination was Mount Sinai. The location of Mount Sinai has been debated. The traditional view identifies Mount Sinai with Jebel Musa, or "the Mountain of

Moses." (*Jebel* is an Arabic word that means "mountain.") Jebel Musa is on the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. Three other peaks in the area have also been identified as Mount Sinai: Jebel Katerin (Mount Catherine), Ras es-Safsafah, and Jebel Serbal.¹

When looking at a map, the Sinai Peninsula resembles an upside-down triangle. The Sinai Peninsula serves as a land bridge between Asia and Africa. In the west its boundary is the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Suez; in the east, the Negeb and the Gulf of Aqaba. In the north the boundary of the Sinai Peninsula is the Mediterranean Sea and in the south, the Red Sea. The Sinai Peninsula is 250 miles from the Mediterranean to its southern tip at the Red Sea. To the Egyptians, the Sinai Peninsula was important because turquoise and copper they used in trade and commerce came from there.²

Although the Old Testament does not directly mention the Sinai Peninsula, it does mention five wilderness areas in large territory:

the wildernesses of Shur, Sin, Paran, Zin, and Sinai (see map, p. 20). The Wilderness of Shur was the place on the northern border of Egypt where the Israelites went after they crossed the Red Sea. In Israel's journeys through the desert, this place was between the Red Sea and Marah, where the people complained because there was no water (Ex. 15:22-24). The Wilderness of Sin was the region between Elim and Sinai (16:1). At this place God provided food for His people. The Wilderness of Paran was where the Israelites camped after they left Mount Sinai (Num. 10:12). From the Wilderness of Paran, Moses sent the spies to explore the land (13:3). The Wilderness of Zin was a region through which the Israelites passed on their way to Canaan (v. 21; 20:1). It was an area on the southern border of Palestine and probably included Kadesh-barnea.

The Wilderness of Sinai takes its name from the name of the mountain and is a general description of the desert region in the neighborhood of Mount Sinai. This was the

Left: The Feiran Oasis, which is on the Gulf of Suez, in western Sinai.

Right: Area northeast of the Jebel Musa area, possibly the Wilderness of Paran. During the exodus, Israel camped in this region after leaving Mount Sinai.

Below: From El Arish in the northern Sinai, a palette for grinding pigment bearing a cartouche design; Middle Kingdom (2100-1550 B.C.)



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place where the people of Israel set their camp in preparation to receive the law of God. The Book of Exodus locates Mount Sinai in the Wilderness of Sinai, a place located between the Wilderness of Sin and the Wilderness of Paran. Mount Sinai appears in the Old Testament with many names: “the mountain” (Ex. 19:2), “the mountain of God” (3:1), “the mountain of the Lord” (Num. 10:33), and “Horeb” (Ex. 3:1, HCSB).

Sinai became one of the most significant sites for important events in the history of Israel. At Sinai, the people received the law that would set them apart as God’s special people

(19:1-6); were numbered (Num. 1:19; 3:14-15; 26:64); and celebrated the Passover (9:4-5). Elijah, running from the fury of Jezebel, made a pilgrimage to Sinai (1 Kings 19:8).

When Israel left Egypt, God did not lead them by the Mediterranean, through Philistine country, although that was a closer way to the land of Canaan (Ex. 13:17). The Israelites avoided the route known as the Way of the Sea because they did not want to face the fortifications that Egyptian soldiers guarded. Egypt’s soldiers were protecting the commercial and military routes that brought the caravans into Egypt. Instead, the Israelites traveled south along the eastern shores of the Gulf of Suez.

The Challenges of Sinai

After the Israelites left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea, they traveled through a huge and frightening wilderness. In the Sinai Peninsula, most of the land was devoid of water and vegetation, except in oases and wadis, dry river beds that were filled with water only during a winter flood. The wilderness was a harsh and inhospitable area. Because of the nature of the terrain, the Israelites faced many problems posed by life in the

wilderness. They experienced lack of food and water, plus disease, snakes, scorpions, and attacks from enemy tribes. The Bible indicates that the situation in the Wilderness of Sinai was inhospitable: “[God] led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions” (Deut. 8:15 NIV).

To the Hebrews, the wilderness was a desolate place devoid of civilization. In Hebrew, the word for “desert” reflects that which is beyond, that is, beyond the limits of settlement. Most people perceived the wilderness to be a dangerous place, the place of wild animals and wandering tribes.

The psalmist portrayed the wilderness as “wastelands” (Ps. 107:4, NIV). For 40 years the Israelites wandered in the desert, without finding a good place to live, without much food and water, hungry and thirsty, staggering and stumbling, on the brink of exhaustion.

To many Israelites, the challenges of living in the wilderness was beyond

LESSON REFERENCE

FBS: Exodus 19:1–20:21



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their capacity to adapt. The Scriptures reflect how the Israelites hated their wandering in the wilderness and many even desired to return to Egypt: “Oh, that we were back in Egypt,’ they moaned. ‘It would have been better if the LORD had killed us there! At least there we had plenty to eat. But now you have brought us into this desert to starve us to death’” (Ex. 16:3, NLT).³

Thus because of their desire to live in freedom in Canaan, the Lord caused Israel to experience the barrenness and bitterness of the wilderness. But the Israelites were poorly prepared for what they encountered on their journey through the Sinai wilderness. Instead of joy and freedom, they only experienced hunger, thirst, and bitterness. This brought disappointment and disheartenment. The Israelites’ misconception of what they would find in the desert caused their failings in the wilderness.

God’s Provisions and Israel’s Failure

The wilderness through which the Israelites traveled on their way to the promised land was a hard place. To many who came out of Egypt, the promise of deliverance had proven false. Instead of a land flowing with milk and honey, they got a desert that was ready to devour them. The people believed they had escaped death in Egypt only to be delivered to death in the wilderness. The faith of the people

had eroded with the cruel reality of life in the desert.

But the Lord was constantly providing for Israel’s needs in the most dramatic ways. Throughout their journey in the wilderness, the Lord guided them by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire by night (13:21-22). When the people marched in the wilderness, after leaving Mount Sinai, the ark of the covenant moved ahead of them to show them where to stop and rest (Num. 10:33). The Lord also provided them with water and food during their journey.

Constantly complaining, the Israelites received these divine gifts—food, water, protection, and guidance—with disdain. This embittered attitude reached its climax as the people refused to go into the promised land a few months after their exile from Egypt (14:1-10).

The complaints of Israel reflected internal dissent among the people as well as the hardship of the desert life, such as the lack of food and water and the danger of attacks from enemies and wild animals. The people’s murmuring reflected a lack of trust in Yahweh. God had been responsive to the needs of His people and had provided for them through Moses, His mediator. Israel failed to realize that the gift of food was provided where provisions were almost nonexistent; that the gift of water became available in an arid and rocky land; that the

gift of healing was manifested where only pain was present. But Israel never appreciated those gifts.

The wilderness experience proved to be too much for the generation of Israelites that left Egypt with Moses. Those who murmured against God and those who refused to trust in Him were excluded from the blessing of entering the promised land, the good land that He had promised to give to Abraham and his descendants (Deut. 1:35).

When Moses addressed the new generation of Israelites in the plains of Moab, on the eve of the conquest of the land of Canaan, he told the people that the hardships of the wilderness journey served as a test for Israel. Moses said:

Yes, he humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people need more than bread for their life; real life comes by feeding on every word of the LORD. For all these forty years your clothes didn’t wear out, and your feet didn’t blister or swell. So you should realize that just as a parent disciplines a child, the LORD your God disciplines you to help you (Deut. 8:3-5, NLT).

The journey had been long, the route foreboding. In the end, however, the challenges of the Sinai prepared the people of Israel for the challenges yet ahead—those they would face in the Land of Promise. **B**

1. R. K. Harrison and J. K. Hoffmeier, “Sinai” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, gen. ed., vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 525-528.

2. Kathleen M. Kenyon, *Archaeology in the Holy Land* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), 33, 85.

3. Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the *Holy Bible, New Living Translation*, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, IL 60189 USA. All rights reserved.

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