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Where Is Mount Sinai?

The holy mountain is shrouded in mystery, its location seemingly unknowable. Perhaps that is what makes it holy.

By Ronald S. Hendel



The Case for Arabia

The Song of Deborah

“O Yahweh, when you set out from Seir,
When you marched from the valley of Edom,
The earth trembled, the heavens shook,
The clouds poured water, the mountains shuddered,
Before Yahweh, the One of Sinai,
Before Yahweh, God of Israel.”

Judges 5:4–5

The Blessing of Moses

“Yahweh came from Sinai,
And dawned from Seir upon us,
And shone from Mt. Paran.”

Deuteronomy 33:2

The location of Mount Sinai has been receiving a lot of press lately. The Pope just made a visit to the famous mountain in the Sinai peninsula, prompting some journalists to ask if he was traveling to the right place. A few years ago a couple of adventurers visited a mountain in Saudi Arabia, claiming that it was the true Mt. Sinai.¹ And in these pages, Allen Kerkeslager has shown that much early Jewish tradition preferred the Arabian location.² Biblical scholars are divided on the question of the location of Mt. Sinai, some favoring the location in the Sinai peninsula and others, including Frank Moore Cross of Harvard University, favoring the location in Saudi Arabia.³ What’s going on? Mountains don’t move, do they?

The problem is that the Bible itself is confused on this question. Some sources, particularly the prose accounts in the Pentateuch, seem to favor the location in the Sinai peninsula. Other sources, notably some old poetic texts, seem to locate Mt. Sinai in the region of Edom, that is, in modern geographical terms, in southern Jordan and northwestern Saudi Arabia. The prose and the poetry are at odds, and it’s not clear what to make of this difference.

That’s not all. To add to the confusion, the prose sources differ on the name of Mt. Sinai. A number of texts refer to this mountain as Mt. Horeb. This is the preferred nomenclature of the sources known to scholars as E (the Elohist) and D (the Deuteronomist). The other two major Pentateuchal sources, J (the Yahwist) and P (the Priestly source), prefer the name Sinai.⁴ Why are there two names for this place? We don’t know. Horeb means “dry,” which doesn’t help much; the etymology of Sinai is obscure.

So where is Sinai/Horeb? The poems that associate Mt. Sinai with Arabia are among the oldest texts in the Bible (see poems, above). The Song of Deborah in Judges 5 seems to locate Sinai in the region of Seir and Edom, which lies to the south and east of Israel. The Blessing of Moses in Deuteronomy 33 agrees with this setting, listing Sinai in parallel with Seir and Mt. Paran. This is the land of Esau, the ancestor of the Edomites of the land of Seir. This may also be the place of our earliest attestation of the name Yahweh—the place-name “Yahweh” in the region of Seir is mentioned twice in Egyptian sources from the 14th and 13th centuries B.C.E.⁵

But the prose accounts disagree. The story of Moses at the burning bush seems to indicate that Sinai/Horeb is only a three-day journey from Egypt (“three days into the wilderness,” Exodus 3:18), which would place the mountain in the Sinai peninsula. The same location is indicated by the opening of Deuteronomy, which says that it is an 11-day journey from Mt. Horeb to the Israelites’ last major campsite in the wilderness, Kadesh-Barnea, “by the route to Mt. Seir” (Deuteronomy 1:2). (Note that here God’s mountain seems a long distance from Mt. Seir, in contrast to the old poetic sources.) And when Elijah visits Mt. Horeb in 1 Kings 19, he journeys 40 days from the region of Beersheba. This too may be a pilgrimage to a mountain in the Sinai peninsula.⁶

Later Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions followed the clues in the prose accounts and identified Mt. Sinai with Jebel Musa (“the Mountain of Moses”), one of the tallest mountains in the southern Sinai peninsula. The name of the peninsula followed from this identification of the holy mountain. The beautiful monastery of Saint Catherine was built at the foot of this mountain in 530 C.E. And if you visit there, the tour guide will point out to you the very tree that once was the burning bush.

But it’s not clear that this was the original Mt. Sinai. It seems that the Bible contradicts itself and stutters when it comes to the location of the holy mountain. The Bible is no Michelin Guide, and it seems designed to confuse us at certain points. Perhaps Mt. Sinai is not supposed to be a tourist site. The location of the holy mountain is shrouded in mystery, perhaps purposefully obscure, contradictory, plural and unknowable. Perhaps that is what makes it a holy mountain.

Endnotes:

1. See Ronald S. Hendel’s review of Harold Blum, *The Gold of Exodus*, in ReViews, *BAR* 25:04.
2. See Allen Kerkeslager, “Mt. Sinai—In Arabia?” *BR* 16:02.
3. See “Frank Moore Cross, An Interview, Part I: Israelite Origins,” *BR* 08:04.
4. According to the documentary hypothesis, these various sources were woven together to create the Pentateuch.
5. See “Frank Moore Cross, An Interview, Part I: Israelite Origins,” *BR* 08:04.
6. On the geographical indications in these prose texts, see Graham I. Davies, *The Way of the Wilderness: A Geographical Study of the Wilderness Itineraries in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 63–69.

Reference for this article:

Hendel, Ronald S.. “Where Is Mount Sinai?.” *Bible Review*, Jun 2000. <http://www.basarchive.org/bswbBrowse.asp?PubID=BSBR&Volume=16&Issue=3&ArticleID=5&UserID=0>(accessed 7/23/2007)