

Mt. Sinai—in Arabia?

By Allen Kerkeslager

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"We set off ... to climb each of the mountains," wrote the fourth-century C.E. Christian pilgrim Egeria of her visit to Mt. Sinai. "They are hard to climb. You do not go round and round them, spiraling up gently, but straight at each one as if you were going up a wall, and then straight down to the foot, till you reach the foot of the central mountain, Sinai itself. Here then, impelled by Christ our God and assisted by the prayers of the holy men who accompanied us, we made the great effort of the climb ... I was not conscious of the effort—in fact I hardly noticed it because, by God's will, I was seeing my hopes coming true."

In the centuries since Egeria toured the Holy Land, many pilgrims have retraced her difficult walk: They travel to St. Catherine's Monastery, which was built by the emperor Justinian as a fortress in the sixth century C.E. at the foot of Jebel Musa, a 7,500-foot peak in the southern Sinai peninsula, and trek before dawn up the jagged granite mountainside. Near the top, they must traverse thousands of steps before they reach the summit. But most find the exertion well worth the effort, for they believe they have reached one of the places on earth where the Lord revealed himself to humankind: where the Bible says Moses spent 40 days encountering God and receiving the Ten Commandments, where the Israelites, encamped below, demanded of Aaron the high priest that he fashion for them a golden calf, and where an enraged Moses shattered the first Tablets of the Law in response to the Israelites' sin (Exodus 19-20, 32). Later, the prophet Elijah would return to this sacred landscape, hide in a cave and discover God not in the storm, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but in the still, small voice (1 Kings 19).

But could Egeria and all the pious pilgrims after her have gone to the wrong place? The tradition identifying Jebel Musa as biblical Mt. Sinai goes back only to the middle of the fourth century C.E. That's a fairly old tradition but still far removed from the eighth to sixth centuries B.C.E., the period in which many scholars believe the biblical texts describing the revelation at Sinai first coalesced.

The Jebel Musa location for Mt. Sinai is by no means universally accepted. In these very pages, Harvard University professor emeritus Frank Moore Cross, championing a strand of earlier scholarship, suggested that the real Mt. Sinai is not the mountain that overlooks St. Catherine's.* According to Cross and others, it's not even in the Sinai peninsula—they believe Mt. Sinai was in ancient Midian, modern northwestern Saudi Arabia and southern Jordan.

Cross and these other scholars note that Midian played a crucial role in the formation of early Israelite religion. The Bible records that Moses married Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, a Midianite priest; Jethro advised Moses on setting up courts of law (Exodus 18:13-27). Some scholars have even suggested that Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, was originally a patron deity of the Midianites. Cross finds it telling that the Moses-Midianite connection was retained in tradition despite the fact that the Midianites later became the Israelites' bitter enemies. This makes it quite likely that the Israelite memory of this early Midianite connection is an authentic one. Moreover, intense archaeological surveys in the Sinai peninsula have revealed little from the 13th and 12th centuries B.C.E., the time of the Israelite emergence in Canaan, while Midian boasted a thriving culture during the same period. A reasonable guess, according to Cross, for the identity of Mt. Sinai is Jebel al-Lawz, the highest peak in northwest Arabia.

Jebel al-Lawz also has the support of two less scholarly, but adventurous, figures, Larry Williams and Bob Cornuke, who managed to sneak onto the mountain in 1988. Williams and Cornuke do not have the archaeological expertise to evaluate properly the materials on the mount, but much of what they found is intriguing and perhaps should not be dismissed out of hand.

With the Saudi government not likely to allow excavation on Jebel al-Lawz any time soon, we cannot learn whether there was an Israelite (or even proto-Israelite) presence in the area in the 13th and 12th centuries B.C.E. But I believe we can learn where some Jews, living during the centuries immediately after the biblical Mt. Sinai traditions took form, thought the holy mountain was located. The earliest postbiblical evidence for the location of Mt. Sinai comes from Jewish traditions dating to at least as early as the middle of the third century B.C.E.—about six centuries earlier than the Jebel Musa identification. And the various writings that express this tradition all seem to agree: Mt. Sinai was in Arabia. The earliest Jewish source, other than the Hebrew Bible, that discusses the location of Mt. Sinai is the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible begun in about 250 B.C.E. by the Jewish community in Alexandria, Egypt.* The Septuagint transliterates the Hebrew name for Midian into Greek letters as either Madian or Madiam. The translators at times describe the site in a way that suggests they thought of it as a specific city: In Exodus 18:5, where the Hebrew text says that Jethro "came to Moses at the place in the desert where he was camping," the Septuagint states that Jethro, "priest of Madiam," went "out" and then went "into the desert" to meet Moses. Apparently, the Septuagint translators believed that Jethro lived in a city named Madian (Madiam) and that he had to leave the city and go out to enter the desert to meet Moses, who was staying at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

The Septuagint translators also seem to have thought of Madian as a city complete with a city council such as one might find in any Hellenistic city. For example, the Septuagint speaks of the "city (polis) of Madiam" as if it had a "council of elders" (gerousia) (see its translation of Numbers 22:4,7 and 3 Kingdoms 11:17-18 [1 Kings 11:17-18 in the Hebrew Bible]). The Septuagint's occasional use of Madiam for Madian is itself interesting. It can best be explained as the result of the common linguistic phenomenon of euphonic assimilation; in this case, the result of placing the term polis (Greek for city) after the name Madiam, in which case the n shifts to an m, yielding the term Madiam polis (a phrase in fact used by Demetrius the Chronographer, a contemporary of the Septuagint translators).

The location of ancient Madian can be determined from a map produced by Ptolemy, a second-century C.E. geographer in Alexandria, and from descriptions of northwestern Arabia in early Islamic literature, which makes frequent references to a city named Madyan.⁽¹⁾ Thanks to these sources, we can confidently identify ancient Madian with a partially excavated site in northwestern Arabia near the modern town of Al-Bad' (also called Mugha'ir Shu'ayb). Qurayyah ware, a pottery style usually associated with the Midianites, indicates that the large oasis at Al-Bad' was probably a Midianite settlement in the Late Bronze and early Iron Ages (13th and 12th centuries B.C.E.). The persistence of the name Madian into the Hellenistic period (332-31 B.C.E.) can be seen as a local remembrance of the earlier Midianite inhabitants.

In the Hellenistic period, Madian sat along the major coastal trade route from Leuke Kome (modern 'Aynunah) to Petra. This route was often traveled by Jewish traders and Jewish mercenaries serving in the Ptolemaic armies in the late fourth and early third centuries B.C.E. Many of these Jews must have made their way beyond this trade route to Alexandria, which was a major cultural center and home to a sizable Jewish community—and where the Septuagint was translated.

Because the Septuagint translators had a specific city in mind when they identified Madian as the hometown of Jethro, and because the account in Exodus of the meeting between Moses and Jethro places Mt. Sinai close to Jethro's home, the Septuagint translators likely believed that Mt. Sinai was a particular mountain not far from the city of Madian.

They were not alone in this belief. Demetrius the Chronographer, an Alexandrian Jew writing in the late third century B.C.E., claimed that after Moses married Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, they made their home in the "city of Madiam" (Greek Madiam polis).(2) In fixing the location of the young Moses in the same city mentioned by the Septuagint, Demetrius implicitly agrees with the Septuagint's identification of Mt. Sinai as a mountain near Madian.

Philo, a Jewish philosopher and exegete living in Alexandria in the first half of the first century C.E., gives us another hint as to where Jews in the postbiblical era thought Mt. Sinai was located. Philo describes Zipporah as an "Arab" who lived in "Arabia."(3) This clearly suggests that, at least in the Alexandrian view of Philo's day, Mt. Sinai was not thought to have been in the Sinai peninsula. The southern Sinai peninsula, which was only beginning to attract the economic interests of the Romans at this time, mattered little to Alexandrians. But the Arabian peninsula mattered greatly: The merchants, dock workers and shopkeepers of Alexandria profited nicely from the massive trade that passed through their city to and from southern Arabia and India. For them, "Arabia" meant the Arabian peninsula. Precisely the same usage is found in the works of Alexandrian intellectuals such as the geographers Eratosthenes and Agatharcides.

In addition to his use of the terms "Arab" and "Arabia," Philo gives us an even more direct indication of where he believed Mt. Sinai was. He describes the Israelites wandering eastward all the way across the Sinai peninsula to the southern edge of Palestine just before the revelation at Sinai.(4) Philo thus places Mt. Sinai somewhere east of the Sinai peninsula and south of Palestine—in other words, in northwestern Arabia.

Philo adds one more detail to our collection of traditions about Mt. Sinai; he says that Moses "went up the highest and most sacred of the mountains in its region."(5) Philo's description of the visit of the Israelites at Mt. Sinai has not survived, but given his heavy reliance on the Septuagint in all of his writings, Philo probably agreed with the Septuagint in locating Mt. Sinai near the city of Madian.(6) Since Philo believed that Mt. Sinai was the highest mountain in the region, he must have believed that it was the highest mountain near Madian.

The earliest postbiblical Jewish sources from Palestine indicate that Jews there shared the view of those in Alexandria regarding the location of Mt. Sinai. The mid-second-century B.C.E. Book of Jubilees, fragments of which were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, gives a long and idealized description of world geography that might suggest its author believed Mt. Sinai was in the Arabian peninsula (Jubilees 8:19).(7)

The apostle Paul also seems to have located Mt. Sinai in Arabia. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor and others have argued that Galatians 1:16-17 describes Paul's missionary activity among the Nabateans.** But this is based largely on inferences from Paul's later missionary activity. Since this visit to Arabia was followed by three years in Damascus (Galatians 1:18), no time is left in the chronology of Paul's life (as known from other sources) for a long period of missionary activity in Arabia. The grammatical structure of Galatians 1:15-18 demands a rather different interpretation, such as the following paraphrase: "When God ... was pleased to reveal his son in me ... I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, and I did not go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me (to consult with them),

but I went away into Arabia (to consult with God) and again returned to Damascus." Paul, like many other Jews in this period, may have briefly gone into the desert to acquire revelation in conscious imitation of Moses and Elijah. The odd choice of Arabia for this quest is best explained if Paul actually went so far as to go to Mt. Sinai itself. This might be confirmed by **Galatians 4:25**, where either Paul or a later copyist in the Pauline tradition added a parenthesis that reads (in the best manuscripts) "**Sinai is a mountain in Arabia.**"

The clearest description in early Jewish literature of the location of Mt. Sinai comes from the first-century C.E. historian Josephus. He places Rephidim, the station of the Exodus where the Israelites encamped just before their arrival at Sinai, in the region of the Nabatean city of Petra.(8) This would have put the Israelites directly west of Mt. Seir, which is in modern southwestern Jordan. With Mt. Seir to the east, and not wanting to head west back towards Egypt, the Israelites would have had to choose between going north or south. But going north would have brought them to Palestine, so they turned south—towards northwest Arabia. With no other stops between Rephidim and Mt. Sinai, the sacred mountain could not have been far south into the Arabian peninsula.

Indeed, Josephus writes that Mt. Sinai was "the highest of the mountains" in the region of "the city of Madiane."(9) So Josephus, too, seconds the testimony of the Septuagint and other Jewish writers from the Hellenistic and Roman periods regarding the location of Mt. Sinai.

Given the early Christian use of the Septuagint and the works of Jewish authors writing in Greek, it is not surprising that the Jewish tradition of locating Mt. Sinai near the city of Madian in northwest Arabia was picked up by such early church fathers (mid-third to early fifth century C.E.) as Origen,(10) Eusebius(11) and Jerome.(12) The tradition also seems to have survived in monastic circles in ancient Madian until the Arab conquest in the seventh century C.E., after which it makes its first appearance in Islamic literature. By about 900 C.E., Madian had become identified in Islamic tradition with the home of Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses.(13) At about the same time, Jethro became identified with the pre-Islamic prophet Shu'ayb, whose name is preserved in the local name given to Al-Bad' (ancient Madian), Mugh'a'ir Shu'ayb.

So where does this leave Jebel al-Lawz?

The peak was easily visible to ancient Jewish travelers passing along the route from Leuke Kome to Petra. In the oddly blackened top of the mountain, some Jews may have found testimony to the burning fire and cloud of smoke that Exodus 19:18 says rested on Mt. Sinai when the Law was given. Jebel al-Lawz is only 20 miles from ancient Madian, so it is certainly a good candidate for a northwest Arabian Mt. Sinai. Even more in its favor is the fact that at 8,500 feet it is the highest peak in the area.

But we must caution against relying too heavily on these postbiblical Jewish traditions in identifying Mt. Sinai. We do not know the sources of these traditions or how accurate they are. Some Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman eras, including Paul, may well have made pilgrimages to what they believed was Mt. Sinai in hopes of gaining revelation, just as Moses and Elijah had (see Galatians 1:17).(14) But the mountain they chose may not have been the same one that the early editors of the Hebrew Bible had in mind. Like many other conjectures made by early interpreters of the Hebrew Bible, speculation about the site of Mt. Sinai may simply have been wrong.

Even if this Jewish tradition is right and Mt. Sinai is indeed in northwest Arabia, Jebel al-Lawz may not be the right mountain. The tradition that Mt. Sinai was the highest mountain near Madian may point to Jebel al-Lawz because it is clearly the peak that dominates the entire region, but if a mountain closer to Madian was meant, it would indicate that some Jews believed that Mt. Sinai was the highest peak just outside the city.

Madian is located in a large oasis in the heart of ancient Midian. Jebel al-Lawz looms nearby. A modern archaeological expedition to the mountain would no doubt uncover much valuable information, though current research suggests that a large segment of the early Israelites were indigenous Canaanites, so we should not expect to find a lot of evidence for the events described in Exodus. Even more valuable, to my mind, would be an excavation of Madian itself. This ancient site, long thought by Jews, Christians and Muslims to have been the setting for some of the Bible's most dramatic events, might well yield important insights into the cultural context of Israelite origins.

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1 See Allen Kerkeslager, "Jewish Pilgrimage and Jewish Identity in Hellenistic and Early Roman Egypt," in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, ed. David Frankfurter, *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World* 134 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 156-158, 199-200.

2 Cited in Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.29.1-3.

3 Philo, *On the Life of Moses* 1.47, 51-52; cf. *On the Virtues* 34; *On the Life of Joseph* 15.

4 Philo, *Moses* 1.163-220; cf. Exodus 17:8-16, 19:1-2.

5 Philo, *Moses* 2.70.

6 Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation* 12-13; *Agriculture* 43; *On the Confusion of Tongues* 55-57; *On the Change of Names* 106-120.

7 See Kerkeslager, "Jewish Pilgrimage," pp. 169-175.

8 Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 3.33,39-40,62.

9 Josephus, *Antiquities* 2.257,264-265; 3.76.

10 Origen, *Selecta in Genesim* 39; *Patrologia Graeca* 12.120.

11 Eusebius, *Onomasticon* 124, 172.

12 See Jerome's Latin translation of Eusebius, *Onomasticon* 125, 143, 167 and 172-173.

13 F. Buhl and C.E. Bosworth, "Madyan Shu'ayb," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. C. Bosworth et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1986), vol. 5, pp. 1155-1156; Alois Musil, *The Northern Hegaz: A Topographical Itinerary* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1926), pp. 109-118, 278-282.

14 This might also have been true of the Jewish author of the *Apocalypse of Abraham* (see 12:1-3).