

Mount Sinai?

Mount Sinai, as we know, was the place of the Divine Revelation in the Torah and it is there that the Israelites stood and were given the Ten Commandments. We also know that this was in the desert. But, like the burial place of Moses, we do not, to-day, know which mountain is Mount Sinai, nor in which desert it is located. The Torah gives us the names of the Israelites' encampments, but opinions differ as to where we can find these on modern maps. Biblical Geography has become increasingly controversial.

Midrash

The Midrash does not concern itself with Geography, although it comments on the places named in the Torah narrative of the Exodus. "And they took their journey from Sukkot..." (Ex.13, 20). Sukkot, the Midrash Mechilta tells us, is the place of the Clouds of Glory. The Lord told Moses to tell the Israelites "to turn and encamp before Pi-Hachiroth..." (Ex.14,1). Pi-Hachiroth, we are told, is the city of freedom (*cheirut*).

In his book, The Shavuot Anthology, Philip Goodman lists five names for Mt. Sinai, The Mountain of G-d, The Mountain of Bashan, The Mountain of Peaks, The Mountain of Horeb, The Mountain of Sinai. We are familiar with the link between Horeb and Sinai from the phrase "the day you stood before the Lord your G-d at Horeb" (Deut.4, 10) referring to the Revelation at Sinai. Its name was indeed Horeb, the Midrash says, but because G-d revealed Himself in the thorn bush (*seneh*), it was called Sinai (Pirke de R.Eliezer, 40, 41). Exodus Rabba (2.4) explains the name Sinai as related to *sinah*, hatred, because hatred came from there to the idol worshipers, who envied the Israelites for having received the Torah. Horeb, it explains, is related to *cherev*, the sword; idol worshipers shall be destroyed is thus indicated and, further, the Sanhedrin was given the power of the sword there.

Many mountains sought the honour of being the location of the Revelation. The Almighty chose Sinai as the Mountain of G-d because it made no arrogant claim. The Midrash on Psalm 68,9, "even Sinai was moved in the presence of G-d" suggests that it came from Mount Moriah, the place made fit by the Sacrifice of Isaac.

The Gemara (Shabbat 89, a-b) echoes some of these speculations. It, too, links the Wilderness of Sin to the hostility of idolaters, adding that R.Abbahu suggested that Sinai was called Horeb because desolation, *churvah*, to idolaters descended from there.

The Midrash, in all these suggestions, is concerned with the message conveyed by the names used in the Torah.

Biblical Geography

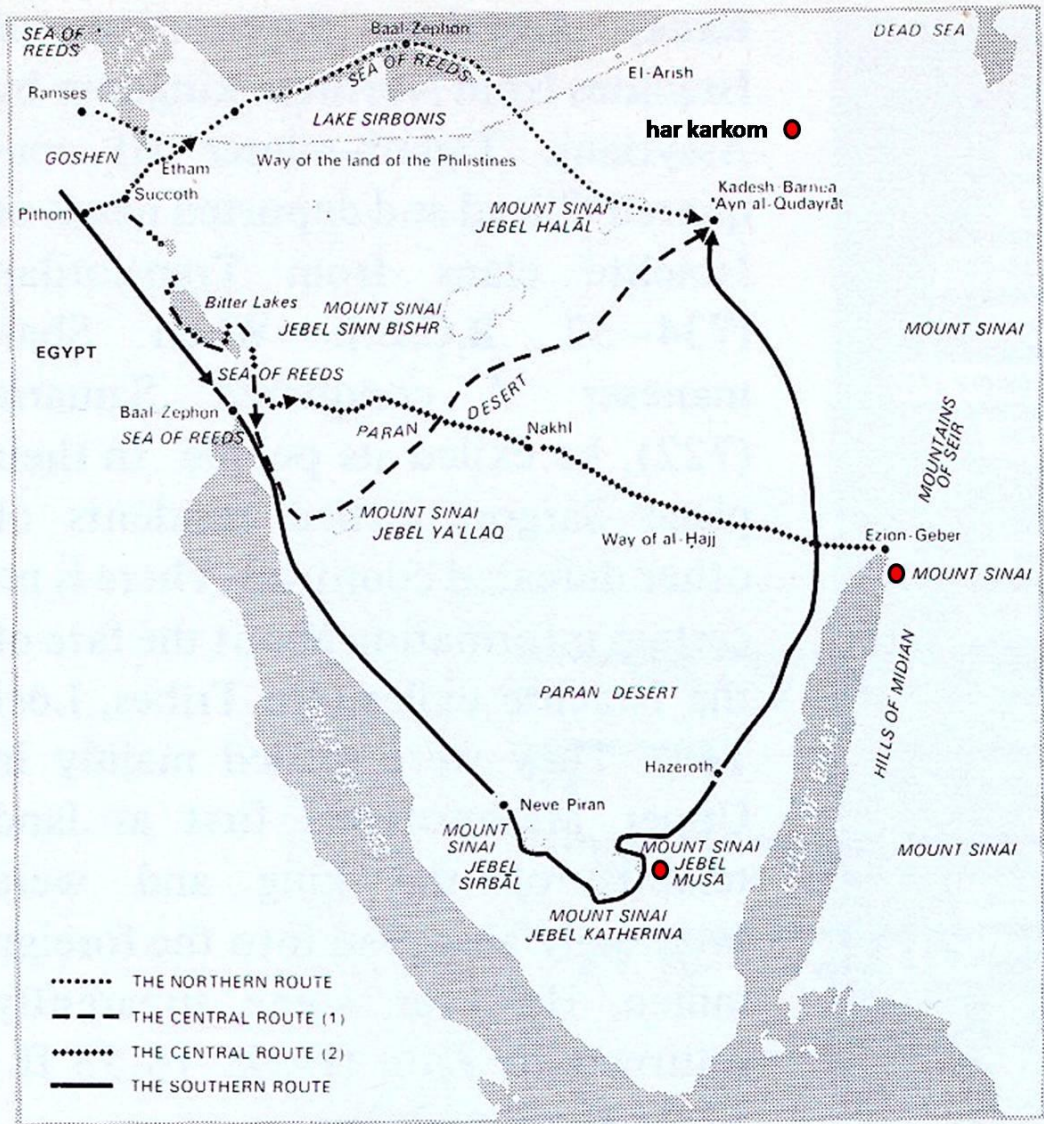
Scholars in this field were indeed looking for locations: where did the Israelites cross the Red Sea (Yam Suph) and where, in which desert, was Mount Sinai/Horeb. Their speculations in the last thirty years or so range far; over a dozen different sites have been suggested for Mount Sinai. We know only about the road not taken, "G-d led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near" (Ex.13,17). The Philistines had land along the coastal plain of what is now Israel. The

Israelites came from Goshen in the North East of Egypt. One suggestion is that they crossed near the Nile Delta. When they “turned” (Ex.14,1), did they go towards the Bitter Lakes to cross into the Sinai Peninsula or did they reach the Red Sea (one suggestion is that Yam Suph really was the Red – not the Reed – Sea because *suph* can also refer to seaweed) and cross near the Straits of Tiran into Midian, nowadays part of Saudi Arabia?

The traditional route (M.Gilbert, Jewish History Atlas) has the Israelites travelling down the West side of the Sinai; the crossing suggestions vary, perhaps through the Bitter Lakes, perhaps through the Northern end of the Gulf of Suez. On this route, Mount Sinai is identified with Jabel Musa in the South of the Peninsula. Scholars who argue against this route point out that it would have been highly dangerous, since it would pass by the turquoise mines worked and protected by the Egyptians.

Another suggestion identifies Mount Sinai/Horeb as Jabel el-Lawz in Midian, on the far side of the Gulf of Aqaba. The basis for this claim is the passage in the Torah (Ex.3,1) that tells how Moses led the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro, in Midian, to the Mountain of G-d and there sees the burning thorn bush. While this seems to place Sinai/Horeb in Midian, did Moses perhaps wander much further with his sheep, it is argued, as shepherds do. We learn that Moses was to be helped in his mission by his brother Aaron and “behold, he is coming to meet you” (Ex.4,14). It is not likely, scholars argue, that Aaron would be in Midian, ‘coming to meet’ Moses. Aaron is in Egypt, as far as we know.

Yet another theory sets Mount Sinai/Horeb as Har Karkom, in the Negev desert in Israel. This claim uses a statement in Deuteronomy (1,2) that it takes “eleven days’ journey from Horeb by the way of Mount Seir, to Kadesh Barnea”. Kadesh Barnea is placed near Ain Kadis and Mt Seir is here identified as Jabel Arif el Naqa. The claim is that the distance from Har Karkom to Kadesh Barnea as defined here would indeed take eleven days on foot. If the Central Negev highland was the land of the Amalekites, then Har Karkom would be between Northern Midian and the Amalekites, in keeping with the Biblical narrative. However, while petroglyphs, rock art depicting cows or oxen or calves were found here, scholars have dated this and other archaeological cultic evidence as being at least from the third millennium BCE, which does not tally with the accepted dating of the Exodus from Egypt in the second millennium.



Map illustrating major theories on Israelites' Exodus route; major sites are given according to various theories.