



Bible-study: 2020/09/27 (St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – Exodus 17:1-7

[Ask for a volunteer to read the passage.]

If you recall last week's session, you can guess what I'm about to say: We've no idea where these things described in today's text took place. Not *exactly*: the location names in the biblical itineraries – (the Book of) *Numbers* has a summary of the journey in addition to that in *Exodus* – 'remain ambiguous or undiscovered.'¹ And may never be found: '...many areas of archaeological and historical interest have been altered or covered in recent years by agricultural projects, urbanization, and other human modifications of the land.'² But what I *can* tell you is that the overwhelming consensus among biblical commentators, conservative or liberal, is that the Israelites were somewhere in the Sinai Peninsula. This would be true whether the body of the 'waters' that God 'divided' [Ex. 14:21], translated in the N.R.S.V. – and most other Bibles – as the "Red Sea" were either the reedy lakes immediately east of the Delta – that is, east of 'the land of Goshen' [Gen. 45:10; 46:28,34], or, as I think more likely, belonged to the Gulf of Suez.

Now, as mentioned previously, we know from chapter thirteen, verse seventeen, that the LORD prohibited the Israelites from using the most *direct* way home: "The Way of Horus."

As an aside, I do want to briefly acknowledge that "The Way of Horus" is called in (the Book of) *Exodus*, '[The] way of the land of the Philistines': [Ex. 14:21], which is the final reason – so far unmentioned – for the Late Date "Exodus" argument, that the events we've been discussing occurred during the Ramesside era: the "Philistines," you see, were one of the constituent groups of the "Sea Peoples" – pirates from 'small communities in the islands and on the Ionian coast' – *we think(!)*, though '[w]e are not certain', who '[were] distinguishable from each other [in Egyptian wall-reliefs] primarily in terms of their headdresses'. One "group" had pairs of horns on their helmets (almost like Vikings), another had feathers, etc. And they violently contended with Ramesses (the) IInd and his successors *in the early 1200s B.C.* Remember, I've made the case for 1446 as the year of the Israelites' escape. *But*, I believe the phrase 'the land of the Philistines' can be easily attributed to the anonymous editor who is widely assumed to have "re-worked" Moses' memoirs at a much later date, sometime after the colonization.

(For the quotations see, respectively: Redford, Donald B. (1992), *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*, Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 242; Cline, Eric H. (2014), *1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed*, Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1; and, O'Connor, David (2000), 'The Sea Peoples and the Egyptian Sources', in Oren, Eliezer, D. (Ed.), *The Sea Peoples and Their World: A Reassessment*, Philadelphia, P. A.: The University Museum, pp. 85-102, 85.

¹ Moshier, Stephen O. and Hoffmeier, James K. (2015), 'Which Way Out of Egypt? Physical Geography Related to the Exodus Itinerary', in Levy, Thomas E.; Schneider, Thomas & Propp, William H. C. (Eds.), *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience*, New York: Springer, pp. 101-108, 101.

² *Ibid.*, 103.

But there were at least two other possibilities for east-west traffic, that initially, at least, headed in the *general* direction of Canaan, and I think we can be certain that the Israelites followed their leader, Moses, along one of these as much as was possible. For, Sinai was ‘almost an alien land’³ – a place of ‘monotony’⁴ – ‘wild, barren and arid’.⁵ [R]ugged and harsh.⁶ Like the surface of Mars. And visitors to the area complain on Tripadvisor.com about how ‘easy [it is] to turn an ankle’ during their excursions.⁷

The roads that they travelled would have hardly been worthy of the name: they were ‘rough, circuitous saw cuts through desert mountains’.⁸ One (modern) visitor, Donald Katz, who attempted to trace a path in Sinai described his experience, hiking between ‘hills [that] lie at broken angles to everything around them, sedimentary lines all turned sideways and pointing down toward the specific fault that twisted them. Shining black doleritic stripes called dykes, some an inch wide and others spanning 50 feet, streak the granite where shafts of molten magma shouldered their way into cracks and rose toward the sky. The whole landscape is still ringing in the afterglow of a geological trauma some six million years old that folded it until it snapped... [Rock and sand and that’s about it.] (“There must be something,” I said to a soldier who had spent a lot of time roaming it. “No,” he said rather coldly, “there is nothing.”) ...

The [intense] heat makes you numb to appetite and other metabolic imperatives. You drink water [though]...a dryness seems to tighten your lips across your teeth so you can’t even talk. ...[and] the sun can melt the water out of your head in minutes.⁹ Which is problematic given there’s no shade in which to take refuge:

‘Nowhere’, adds another contributor, ‘is the vegetative cover really luxuriant. Even the oases tend to be mere strips of life seemingly meant to emphasize the barrenness of surrounding deserts. ...[and t]hese [can] appear lifeless through much of the year, responding briefly to late winter rains and runoff. Then the shrubs take on a lighter color, but most do not show a vivid green, rather a lighter hue of olive drab. ...

Land wildlife provides less contrast than [even] vegetation, largely because it is seldom seen. Reptiles are not as common as in comparable desert areas of North America. Larger animals like the ibex and jackal are almost never seen.’¹⁰ To convey ‘six hundred thousand’ Israelites [Ex. 12:37], then, through

³ el-Din, Morsi Saad (1998), ‘Introduction: The Splendor of Sinai’, in Steen, Gareth L. & de Nigro, Anthony J. (Eds.), *Sinai: The Site & the History*, Second Edition, London; New York, N. Y.: New York University Press, pp. 9-24, 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵ Gabra, Gawdat (1998), ‘The Religious Heritage of Sinai’, in Steen, Gareth L. & de Nigro, Anthony J. (Eds.), *Sinai: The Site & the History*, Second Edition, London; New York, N. Y.: New York University Press, pp. 73-116, 88.

⁶ Taher, Ayman (1998), ‘Sinai’s Underwater World’, in Steen, Gareth L. & de Nigro, Anthony J. (Eds.), *Sinai: The Site & the History*, Second Edition, London; New York, N. Y.: New York University Press, pp. 137-141, 137.

⁷ See: <https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g297554-d554874-r50984114-MountSinai-SaintCatherineRedSeaandSinai.html>.

⁸ *The Valley of the Fallen and Other Places* (2001), New York, N. Y.: Random House. (Kindle)

⁹ *Supra*.

¹⁰ Greenwood, Ned (1997), *The Sinai: A Physical Geography*, Austin, T. X.: University of Texas Press, 4.

such a region as this, keeping them fed and fit to walk long distances day after day was a logistical *nightmare*. Hence the frequent, almost incessant complaining of the wilderness passages such as today's: yes, Sinai was the *perfect* testing-ground for one's faith in the goodness and generosity of God. And only He might summon the necessary, *miraculous* resources – such as from a rock at Horeb – to ensure that this escape from Egypt wouldn't end in disaster.

And *as if* to make this abundantly clear; as if to emphasize their dependency on Him – on the LORD, Moses seems to have gone “the scenic route,” maximizing the duration spent in Sinai beyond what was necessary: thus, according to the itinerary of the “exodus” in (the Book of) *Numbers*, we find that about five days after having crossed where ‘the waters’ were ‘divided’ [Ex. 14:31], the Israelites were camping ‘by the Red Sea’: [33:10]. This is, by the way, further evidence against the “reedy marsh” theory, unless its proponents accept too that the Israelites had made an extremely nonsensical tight circle back on themselves, straight toward the very Kingdom that had enslaved and chased them.

No, in other words, they – God's people – had obviously gone *south*, following the Red Sea's coastline toward Sinai's tip, (where the gulfs meet). [Show on map.] And so, doing such, they were probably making use of, specifically, if only in part, Egyptian “roads” that led to ancient copper and turquoise mines in and around what today is called, the “el-Markha Plain,” on the western coast of the peninsula. This was the nearest – and ‘chief’¹¹ – source for both of these terribly important commodities. And expeditions here to acquire them ‘is attested through inscriptions, structures, and artefacts at various sites’ from ‘the Third Dynasty’ and throughout the Pharaonic age.¹² ← “Structures” such as circular stone forts –which was very unusual in Egyptian architecture,¹³ and temples – like the ‘giant’ sanctuary built for the cattle-goddess “Hathor,”¹⁴ worshipped as the protectress of the mines:

It dated to the 12th Dynasty,¹⁵ but was enlarged – to 80 meters in length(!)¹⁶ – by a number of rulers, including Thutmose (the) IIIrd,¹⁷ the pharaoh who I've been arguing is one of the two likeliest candidates to be that with the “hardened heart” mentioned in *Exodus* as opposing Moses; and what this means is there was an active road to a place with which he might have been

¹¹ Lucas, A. and Harris, J. R. (1999), *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries*, Mineola, N. Y.: Dover Publications, Inc., 404.

¹² Mumford, Gregory D. and Parcak, Sarah (2003), ‘Pharaonic Ventures into South Sinai: el-Markha Plain Site 346’, *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Volume 89, pp. 83-116, 85.

¹³ See: Mumford, Gregory (May, 2006), ‘Tell Ras Budran (Site 345): Defining Egypt's Eastern Frontier and Mining Operations in South Sinai during the Late Old Kingdom (Early EB IV/MB I)’, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 342, pp. 13-67.

¹⁴ See: <https://www.haaretz.com/archaeology/MAGAZINE-was-egypt-s-hathor-originally-a-canaanite-goddess-1.5461918>, (accessed September 24, 2020).

¹⁵ See: Bunson, Margaret R. (2002), *Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt (Revised Edition)*, New York N. Y.: Facts On File, Inc., 365.

¹⁶ See: ‘Temple Description’ – <https://www.sharm-club.com/egypt/temples/serabit-elkhadim-temple-excursion>, (accessed September 24, 2020). **In comparison, St. M's is not even 30m long.**

¹⁷ See: Ventura, Raphael (1988), ‘Bent Axis or Wrong Direction? Studies on the Temple of Serabit el-Khadim’, *Israel Exploration Journal*, Volume 38, No. 3, pp. 128-138.

already very familiar.

Turquoise – a blue-green mineral – had been used in Egypt ‘as early as the Neolithic’.¹⁸ – that’s the “Stone Age.” And ‘[it] was fashioned into small objects, such as amulets and beads, and inlays that were mostly used on gold jewelry.’¹⁹ [sic.] However: ‘the [large] scale of imperial turquoise exploitation in Sinai in the New Kingdom contrasts with the sparse surviving examples of its use in Egyptian jewellery[making it] difficult to believe that [that] was its primary employment.’²⁰ However it was used: ‘Turquoise was highly prized in ancient Egypt’.²¹ It was thought to have ‘protective powers’,²² especially regarding fertility.²³

Copper, of course, had ‘a myriad of uses’.²⁴ Indeed, for a long period, it was the ‘principal’ metal in use in Egypt:²⁵ At first it was merely hammered into ‘pins, beads, and simple objects’ from its native state.²⁶ But: ‘A further important discovery indicated that metallic copper, reduced from its ores, would become molten and could be poured into molds.’²⁷

This ‘discovery’ wasn’t made in Egypt: up to the 1960s or thereabouts, the most renowned scholars supposed ‘that the beginnings of Old World metallurgy must have occurred in the ore-rich Taurus-Zagros highlands...in Turkey, Transcaucasia, and in Iran.’²⁸ And ‘radiated’ outwards to the rest of the world.²⁹ This was the ‘diffusionist view’,³⁰ which imagined one, lone “genius” or pioneer



¹⁸ Lucas & Harris (1999), 404.

¹⁹ See: Schorsch, Deborah (April, 2018), ‘Turquoise in Ancient Egypt’, available at https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/turqe/hd_turqe.htm, (accessed September 22, 2020).

²⁰ Ogden, Jack (2000), ‘Metals’, in Nicholson, Paul T. & Shaw, Ian (Eds.), *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 148-176, 149.

²¹ Oakes, Lorna and Gahlin, Lucia (2005), *The Mysteries of Ancient Egypt: An Illustrated Reference to the Myths, Religions, Pyramids and Temples of the Land of the Pharaohs*, Leicester: Hermes House, 178. See also: Bunson (2002), 135.

²² Tyldesley, Joyce (1995), *Daughters of Isis: Women in Ancient Egypt*, London: Penguin Books 173.

²³ Schorsch (April, 2018).

²⁴ *Supra*.

²⁵ David, Rosalie (1998), *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 303.

²⁶ *Supra*.

²⁷ *Supra*.

²⁸ Thornton, Christopher Peter (September, 2009), ‘The Emergence of Complex Metallurgy on the Iranian Plateau: Escaping the Levantine Paradigm’, *Journal of World Prehistory*, Volume 22, No. 3, pp. 301-327, 302. See, for example: Forbes, R. J. (1971), *Studies in Ancient Technology: Volume VIII*, Second Edition, Leiden, the Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 20.

²⁹ Amzallag, Nissim (October, 2009), ‘From Metallurgy to Bronze Age Civilizations: The Synthetic Theory’, *American Journal of Archaeology*, Volume 113, No. 4, pp. 497-519, 497.

having, basically, a “Eureka!” moment, and then willingly demonstrating some new technology or technique to incredulous neighbors or being plagiarised by jealous rivals. But, in recent decades, ‘numerous important discoveries...dramatically altered our understanding’:³¹ ‘[T]he diffusionist theory was replaced by a localizationist theory postulating a *polyphyletic origin of metallurgy*.’³² (More-or-less concurrent experimentation in widely dispersed geographic areas.) And, in particular, by the end of the fifth millennium B.C., the southern Levant had emerged as the ‘homeland’ for furnace production of copper.³³ This expertise gradually “trickled” down to conservative Egypt, where it was ‘transformed into a plethora of implements, weapons and ornaments for a temple, royal, secular, or dead clientele.’³⁴

Now, “as the crow flies” the el-Markha Plain wasn’t far from the traditional capital of Egypt, Memphis, or, later, Thebes. [\[Draw line on map.\]](#) But the Red Sea was always something of a problem: Yes, as we’ve heard, ‘the Egyptians of the day were not devoid of nautical tastes’³⁵ – I’m thinking of Thutmose (the) IIIrd’s 1445 campaign against the Mitanni, for example; but in every ancient era they unequivocally preferred to stick to freshwater: ‘Thus,’ as de Lacy O’Leary, says, ‘throughout the whole period of ancient Egyptian history we find abundant evidence of river navigation. ...[only w]ith Dynasty XVIII [– that’s Thutmose’s family – does] a regular navy comes on the scene, first in the Mediterranean, then in the Red Sea, but about the same time the Phoenicians appear[ed] and most of the commercial navigation of the Mediterranean passe[d] into their hands.’³⁶

Which is why despite no *hard*, archaeological evidence of an *actual* road to the east *in addition to* the “Way of Horus,” running parallel to it for some distance before turning deep into Sinai, we *know* that there *must* have been one.³⁷ And this route *to an extent* may be synonymous with an inland “highway” running between the Fertile Crescent-area and Egypt implied in the Old Testament: in *Genesis*, Abraham was making his way from one to the other when he ‘settled between Kadesh and Shur’ in ‘the region of the Negeb’: [\[20:1\]](#), which is down here: [\[Show on map\]](#).

The Israelites, of course, may have, then, started out on the “Way of Shur,” but if so they deviated almost immediately. Had they continued on it, it would have, perhaps, carried them straight into Arabia, in fact: there are undeniable signs of Egyptian presence not just in the Valley of Timna, above the

³⁰ Fowler, Brenda (2001), *Ice Man: Uncovering the Life and Times of a Prehistoric Man Found in an Alpine Glacier*, Chicago, I. L.: University of Chicago Press / New York, N. Y.: Random House, Inc., 155.

³¹ Rowan, Yorke M. and Golden, Jonathan (March 2009), ‘The Chalcolithic Period of the Southern Levant: A Synthetic Review’, *Journal of World Prehistory*, Volume 22, No. 1, pp. 1-92, 2.

³² Amzallag (2009), 497.

³³ *Ibid.*, 506.

³⁴ Ogden (2000), 155.

³⁵ *Arabia before Muhammad* (1927), London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd, 30.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁷ Stewart, Christopher; Lemmens, Kris; and Sala, Maura (2015), ‘Satellite Radar in Support to Archaeological Research in Egypt: Tracing Ancient Tracks Between Egypt and Southern Levant Across North Sinai’, in Vittozzi, Giuseppina Capriotti (Ed.), *Egyptian Curses 2: A Research on Ancient Catastrophes (Archaeological Heritage & Multidisciplinary Egyptological Studies Volume 2)*, Rome: Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, pp.197-221, 200-201.

Gulf of Aqaba (near Eilat (in modern Israel)),³⁸ *but*, even further east – 250 miles, that is, ‘near the oasis of Tayma’.³⁹ We heard this morning, of course, that the Israelites were in ‘Rephidim’ [Ex.17:1] – the last stop before the excitement of Mount Sinai, but how this specified location – ‘Rephidim’ – relates, spatially, to el-Markha we can’t say. But if scholars are right that evidence of Egyptians at Timna and Tayma indicate a trade network reaching through into what is now Saudi Arabia,⁴⁰ it would be remiss of me not to highlight what I said last week about self-published “potboilers” arguing for the holy mountain in *that* country. That the mountain appears in the text to have been a volcano is also interesting [see Ex. 19:18], because the region immediately below and west of the oasis of Tayma is volcanic *unlike Sinai*.⁴¹ Did the Israelites, then, “deviate” only to loop around and up? [Show on map.]

The fact that we can’t be confident where the Ten Commandments were given is, you might feel, unfortunate. Tourists, of course, visit St. Catherine’s monastery in the central highlands, which claims to mark spot, but it was built by the pious Roman Emperor Justinian in the Byzantine period, which is to say A.D. (not B.C.). And there are ‘many more proposals’ for its location.⁴² Yet, to be blunt: ‘no theological point depends on the exact identification’.⁴³ Indeed, Carol Meyers wonders if ‘this indeterminacy is the result of...a deliberate strategy. ...[because] the effect in practical terms is to preclude focus on an extraterritorial site for God’s original “home” that might compete with the central and politically important earthly residence situated in the temple in Jerusalem.’⁴⁴ It also ‘reinforces the notion of divine omnipresence’,⁴⁵ which is reassuring for those of us all the way over here in North America.

³⁸ See: Avner, Uri (2014), ‘Egyptian Timna – Reconsidered’, in Tebes, Juan Manuel (Ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Studies: Supplement 45 - Unearthing the Wilderness: Studies on the History and Archaeology of the Negev and Edom in the Iron Age*, Leuven; Paris; Walpole, M. A.: Peeters, pp. 103-162.

³⁹ See: Somaglino, Claire and Tallet, Pierre (2013), ‘A Road to the Arabian Peninsula in the Reign of Ramesses III’, in Förster, F. & Reimer, Heiko (Eds.), *Desert Road Archaeology in Ancient Egypt and Beyond*, Köln, Germany: Heinrich-Barth-Institut, pp. 511-520.

⁴⁰ See: Mumford, Gregory (2017), ‘Pathways to Distant Kingdoms: Land Connections’, in Creasman, Pearce Paul & Wilkinson, Richard H. (Eds.), *Pharaoh’s Land and Beyond: Ancient Egypt and Its Neighbors*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 35-60..

⁴¹ See: Dunn, Jacob E. (2014), ‘A God of Volcanoes: Did Yahwism Take Root in Volcanic Ashes?’, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Volume 38, No. 4, pp. 387-424.

⁴² Meyers, Carol (2005), *Exodus (The New Cambridge Bible Commentary)*, Cambridge, U. K.; New York, N. Y.: Cambridge University Press, 144.

⁴³ Cole, R. Alan (2008), *Exodus (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Volume 1 – Original Series)*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 150.

⁴⁴ Meyers (2005), 144.

⁴⁵ *Supra*.