

A New Suggestion for the Identification of Mount Sinai and its Implications for Understanding the Archaeology of the Negev: A Non-Peer Reviewed, Unreferenced, and Unpublished Parody

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In two midrashes (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, *Mekhilta de-Rashbi*) dated roughly to the 1st through early 3rd centuries CE, God uprooted Mount Sinai from the earth, and the Israelites, standing beneath it, were threatened with burial should they choose not to accept the Decalogue/Torah. Based on the interpretation of Deuteronomy 4:11, and the meaning of the word *תְּחִתָּה* (*tachtit*, at the base of) and its root, *תְּחִתָּה* (*tachat*, under), this account of the events at Mount Sinai has been ignored by historians and archaeologists, and even biblical commentators have tended to view it as allegorical. However, in the spirit of recent readings of the scripture by archaeologists, the midrash perhaps preserves that kernel of truth that is so often the focus of understanding the relationship between the physical remains recovered by archaeologists and the Torah and other biblical texts.

Following the logic of the narrative, the Israelites DID accept the Torah, and hence were not buried beneath the mountain. However, there is no indication in the text, or the midrash, that the Israelites shifted their location so that the mountain could be returned to its original position. From this, one must assume that, in fact, Mount Sinai was never

returned to its place. Thus, archaeologists and historians seeking to identify Mount Sinai have been looking in the wrong places; they ought to be searching for a large hole where a mountain once stood, and not a mountain in itself.

Given this, the Negev offers three suitable candidates for the identification of Mount Sinai in the three *Makhteshim* (Craters), the *Makhtesh Hakatan* (the Small Crater, or the Hatzera Crater), the *Makhtesh Hagadol* (the Large Crater, or the Hatira Crater), and the *Makhtesh Ramon* (Fig. 1). Incipient *makhteshim* (plural of *makhtesh*) are also known, but are less suitable for identifying as Mount Sinai since they are much smaller. All the *makhteshim* are located in the central Negev Highlands. *Makhteshim* are also known in northern Sinai, and they too may be candidates for identification as Mount Sinai, but are beyond the scope of this discussion. Of course, the modern Negev of Israel is not the biblical Negev, which consisted only of the steppe regions of the Northern Negev. The borders of ancient Sinai are not clear and given other suggestions of the identification of Mount Sinai in the Negev, as at Har Karkom, some areas of today's Negev may have been generically in Sinai in the ancient past.

The *makhteshim* are not actually impact craters, as the translation might imply, but erosional cirques. They represent the erosion, and disappearance, of synclines in the folded mountains of the Negev Highlands. In short, the *makhteshim* are large holes where mountains once stood.

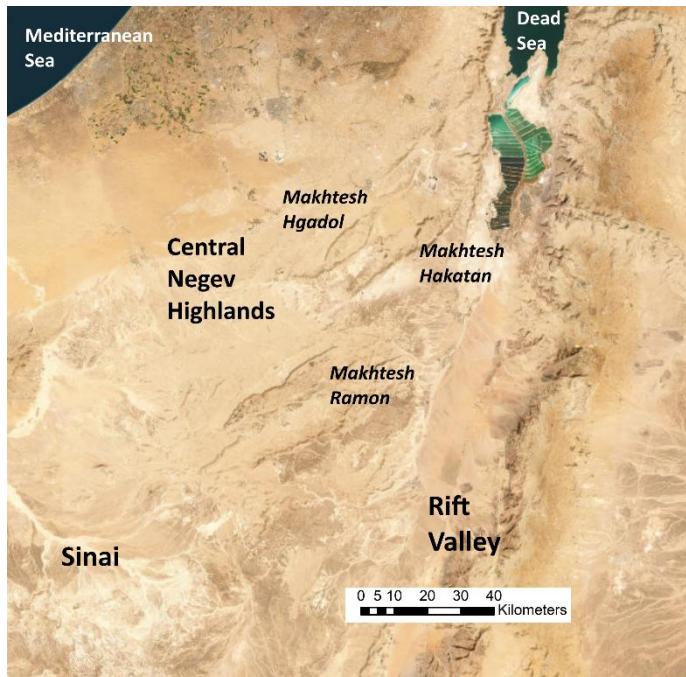


Fig. 1. The location of the *makhteshim* in the Negev.

As the largest of the craters, ca. 230 km², The *Makhtesh* Ramon is the most likely candidate for the site of Mount Sinai, given the purportedly large numbers of Israelites who fled Egypt and were present at the Giving of the Law. The presence of a prehistoric shrine complex in the eastern *Makhtesh* Ramon, at Ramat Saharonim (Fig. 2), strengthens the association with a general sacred landscape, and the complex shows long term continuities of use and re-use. Other smaller scale cult sites are found throughout the *Makhtesh*, again strengthening the idea of long-term sanctity.



Fig. 2. Shrine 1 (of 4, along with 30 large burial cairns) at Ramat Saharonim.

Of course, it is hard to reconcile the geology of the *Makhtesh* Ramon, going back millions of years, with the idea that the mountain was uprooted and moved sometime toward the end of the 2nd millennium BCE. Explanation necessitates returning to the idea of a 'kernel of truth'. One may assume that the midrashes reflect some comprehension that the *Makhtesh* Ramon was, at some time in the deep past, a folded mountain (and tilted strata indicating this are well-evident in both the northern and southern walls of the *Makhtesh* Ramon [Fig. 3]). There are numerous examples of such teleology in the biblical narrative, for example, in the association between Joshua and Tel es-Sultan (Jericho).



Fig. 3. The southern wall of *Makhtesh* Ramon showing tilted strata.

If the geological chronology can be reconciled to the biblical account with relative ease, the total absence of any archaeological evidence for the Israelites in the *Makhtesh* Ramon in the Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age, the putative dates of the Exodus and the events at Mount Sinai, would seem to pose an insurmountable problem to the identification of the *Makhtesh* as

the Holy Mountain (although not one which has unduly disturbed previously suggested identifications elsewhere). However, recent (and not-so-recent) insights concerning the nature of the archaeological record in the desert offer potential solutions to the dilemma.

Given the peripatetic nature of the Israelites in the desert, the wanderings, it has been suggested that the identification of remains would be archaeologically difficult, if not impossible. Although the remains of nomadic societies have been found in the Negev dating from early prehistory and up through recent Bedouin societies (e.g., Fig. 4), positing some kind of hyper-nomadism, and a society so poverty stricken that it had little in the way of inorganic material culture (organic material culture does not pose a problem since it would decay), is one possible solution to the absence of remains. Of course, such an assumption would contradict the textual accounts of Israelite wealth when fleeing Egypt (Exodus 11.2); however, this text presents internal contradictions and can be properly rejected.

A second, more recent explanation for the absence of archaeological remains of ephemeral societies in the desert has to do with natural processes of destruction, viz. mega-flash floods, as have been proposed for the site of Timna, in the southern Arava. Such megafloods, say the 1-in-500 or 1-in-1000-year flood, can certainly be assumed to have occurred along Nahal Ramon, the primary wadi draining the *Makhtesh* Ramon, in the past 3000 years, more or less. As anyone who has witnessed a flashflood in the desert will intuitively understand, destruction would have been great. Admittedly, this suggestion implies that flashfloods operated selectively on specific components of archaeological remains, destroying the remains from some periods, but leaving other periods more or less intact. The

solution might lie in the nature of the remains; remains of hyper-nomadic groups, as above, might be more subject to destruction than more substantial remains of somewhat less mobile peoples, mere nomads. In this context, differential site location may also play a role. Campsites built specifically in wadi channels would clearly be more subject to destruction than those built at locations more removed from floodplains and channels. Of course, ethnographically recent nomads well understand the dangers of placing their camps in wadi channels. Perhaps ancient peoples needed to learn the lesson the hard way?

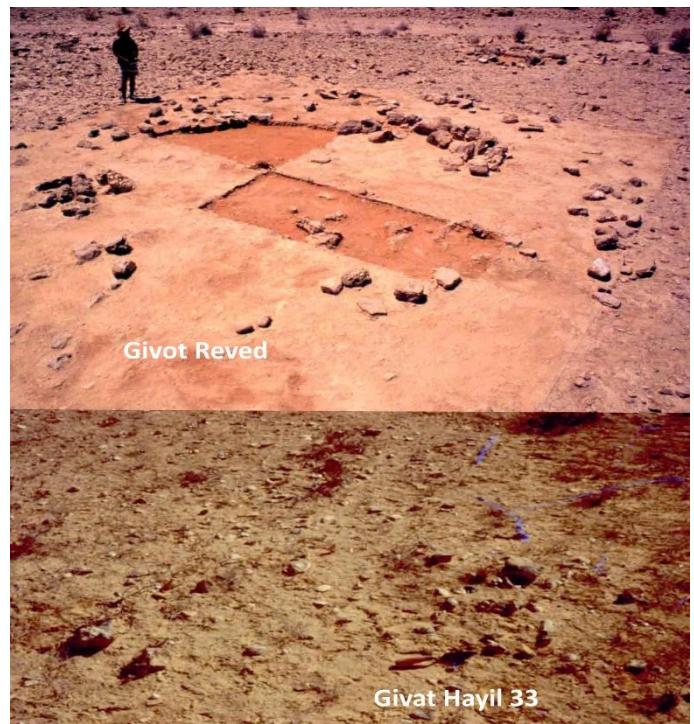


Fig. 4. Upper, the Nabataean pastoral “tent camps, ephemeral sites” of Givot Reved, showing a round tent base; Lower, the Epipaleolithic hunter-gatherer campsite of Givat Hayil 33, preserving only an *in situ* lithic scatter and discolored sediments.

The identification of Mount Sinai with the *Makhtesh* Ramon has implications well beyond the biblical narrative of the Giving of the Law. Employed elsewhere, the methods presented here may offer insights into other archaeological questions and historical conundrums. Two of these methods are of especial importance:

1. Uncritical and selective use of texts, especially those taken out of their historical contexts, allows researchers to pick and choose those materials which most closely align with any preconceived notion desired. This method is most notably useful when dealing with biblical texts whose origins rarely lie directly in the historical events or the geographical regions on which they report.
2. In the Levantine deserts, the absence of sites reflecting nomadic habitation in certain periods, that is, campsites, camps, basecamps, tent camps ephemeral sites, etc., is no reason to assume the absence of nomads. Any number of reasons can be offered to explain the absence of nomad sites from specific periods, even in the presence of such sites from the immediately preceding and/or succeeding periods.

These two basic methodological principles can be combined allowing the researcher to effectively demonstrate any historical

hypothesis needed to fit into any desired agenda, academic, religious, or political. In establishing these principles, archaeology has indeed entered into the post-modern era, where rigor and evidence are no longer necessary, and all narratives are equal.

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