Was the God of Israel Worshipped on the Sinai Peninsula?

In the Footsteps of the Israelites and Related Peoples at the time of the Exodus from Egypt

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Where was the original Mount Sinai/Horeb – the Mountain where Moses and Israel met Yahweh in the desert – located? This question has recently been the subject of renewed controversy.[1] The central question has been if the mountain should be sought further east on the north Arabian Peninsula instead of in the southern Sinai desert, as the traditional position has it. As the present author has argued in Part 1 of this two-part article on ancient Sinai (Damqatum 2023)*, the sites visited by the Israelites on their way out of Egypt, mentioned in the narrative of the Book of Exodus, support the traditional view. Despite extensive research on where to locate Mount Sinai or Horeb, no consensus has been reached to date. This is why we have decided to align our focus a little differently, by asking the question if we find archaeological evidence that the Israelites and related kin groups once lived and worked there and if so, if clues to their worship of Yahweh/El can be found.*

During their Exodus from Egypt, the people of Israel did not cross the Gulf of Aqaba to the east of the Sinai Desert (as some have argued during recent decades) but the lake and canal district directly on the eastern border of the Egyptian Nile delta. And indeed (as we have argued in Part 1), the toponyms of the Exodus route in the Book of Exodus are well documented in Egyptian sources in that region (i.e., Ba^{c}al-Zaphon = *b^{c}l,* Pi[ha]chiroth = *p3-ḥr,* the Yam Suph = *p3-t̲wfi*). In Part 1 the author also argued that biblical Mount Sinai/Horeb is not to be found in Arabia but on the Sinai Peninsula.[2] However, he did not address the question where the biblical mountain is to be located and if evidence has been found in Sinai for the Israelites during their desert wanderings and for other related groups, including the Midianites and Qenites. This article will focus on these questions and study if these people worshipped *Yahweh* and *El* in Sinai, as is implied by the biblical redactors.[3]

Mount Sinai and Traces of an Ancient Cult

However, it should be emphasized right at the beginning that the question where Mount Sinai is to be found cannot be answered easily, as there are several candidates that would qualify (fig. 1). We have for example Gebel Serbal, Gebel Musa, and Ras es-Safsafeh in the southern part of Sinai. However, a critical examination of all these mountains would go beyond the scope of this article. In addition, a great deal of research has already been undertaken and several good publications exist on this topic. A detailed summary may be found, for example, in Hoffmeier (2005, 112–148), Rohl (2015, 221–235) and already in Ebers (1881, 189–232). All three mountains are

located near the Wadi Feiran (which still retains the ancient name “Paran”, see Avner 2015, 406) and Wadi Refayid, which reflects the biblical name Rephidim. This is where the Israelites allegedly fought against the Amalekites (Exodus 17:8–16).

According to Israeli archaeologist Uzi Avner, “Paran” is mentioned *c.* 46 times in Nabataean inscriptions from the Roman period in the Feiran basin, so that it can be assumed with relative certainty that “this was the geographical location of the biblical Paran Desert and Mount Paran” (Avner 2015, 406).

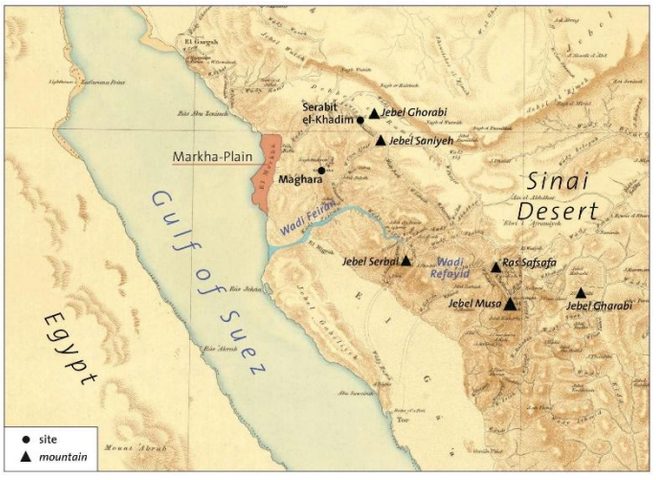

Fig. 1. The map shows a section of the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula with sites and mountains mentioned in this article. (© after 1869 UK Government Ordnance Survey, Wikipedia Public domian, by J. Weiss)

Was there sufficient water to survive in the desert?

The Wadi Feiran/Wadi Mukkatab area (including the Aynan Feiran spring) provides ample water for a large population such as the Israelites.[4] However, this may also be true of some other regions on the peninsula, regardless of whether the climate in Sinai (as was the case at the end of the Middle Bronze Age) may have been wetter when the Israelites lived in the desert.[5] Although the Egyptians called the peninsula *bj3* (“land of ore”), the Middle Egyptian word may have originated from West Semitic *bir*, “well”, instead (Morenz 2011, 67; Knauf 1984, 36). The Egyptian pharaohs repeatedly boasted that they had dug wells in Sinai to enable their expeditions to the turquoise and copper mines. Amenemhat III (1842–1795 BC), for example, wrote in a rock inscription at Serabit el-Khadim: “I found water”, whereupon he sent gardeners to cultivate the area (Morenz 2011, 69). The king also sent some 500 donkeys, which could carry some 30,000 liters of water, to supply the local miners.[6] Around half a millennium later, Ramesses II is addressed on a stela from nearby Wadi Maghareh (1279–1213 BC) where we read: “If you command the water to flow over the rock, an ocean will quickly flow forth as a result of your command” (Ebers 1881, 169).

Cultic traces of an ancient religion?

According to a tradition found in Diodorus Siculus (III, 42–43), which seems to go back to Agatharchides of Knidos around 130 BC, the Nabataeans (from Idumea) encountered an ancient sacred site in southern Sinai before BC 150 (Greßmann 1917, 153–156), which confirms that the area was still visited by religious pilgrims at that time. There is also a reference to a “palm grove rich in springs”, where an unknown (non-Egyptian) inscription was found, and where priests were still on duty in a local shrine (Maiberger 1984, 101).[7] Although it is often assumed that this palm grove is identical with the Feiran oasis in the south of the peninsula, we can no longer be certain of this (ibid., 102). It cannot be excluded that the site was located somewhat further to the north, perhaps at Serabit el-Khadim. Although no traces of a palm grove have yet been discovered at Serabit, there are several ancient “Proto-Sinaitic” inscriptions there that would no longer have been understood later by the Nabataeans.[8] Water was however present

in the area as the Egyptians had constructed wells near the copper and turquoise mines of Serabit (as was mentioned before). These had also served as a steady water supply to the miners.

Ancient Inscriptions at Serabit el-Khadim

Besides the Egyptian inscriptions at Serabit el-Khadim, there exist also numerous proto-alphabetic inscriptions there[9], including religious ones, which were predominantly carved onto the rock face near the mines and on stone tablets by the Western Asiatic miners, who served the Egyptian government during the late Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period (between *c.* 1850 to 1550 BC).[10] This temporal delimitation of the inscriptions[11] is of particular importance because (as was argued in Part 1) the Israelites likely lived in Egypt at this time, while they may have settled in Canaan as early as the end of the Middle Bronze Age III, in *c.* 1550 BC.[12] There would therefore be a temporal connection to the Israelites in Egypt and the potential time of the Exodus.

Israelite and related Midianite-Qenite names

The Egyptian and Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions at Serabit el-Khadim mention several West Semitic names[13], some of which are also attested in the biblical stories concerning early Israel. For example, we find two Western Asiatics with almost the same name, namely one Leva (with the epithet "Westeren Asiatic", Middle Egyptian: *ᶜ3m r-w-3*) and one Levi (Middle Egyptian: *r3wi*[14]). Leva is also referred to as "Lord of reverence" (S81). In another inscription we find a certain Shakarum (Middle Egyptian: *Šk3m*, S40[15]), whose name is linguistically related to biblical Issachar (Hebrew *yš śkr*, "day laborer"). Other names include Ben-Zur (proto-alphabetic *bnṣr*, S356[16]), Abimelek (*3b-ml*[*k*], S359[17]) and Nama (proto-alphabetic *nm3*, S365).[18] The name Abimelech appears in both the books of Genesis (where two princes of Gerar are mentioned, Genesis 20-21 and 26) and Judges (chapter 9), where the like named son of Gideon governed the city of Shechem for three years. The name Zur occurs among the princes of Midian at the time of Moses (Numbers 25:15; 31:8; Joshua 13:21). The name *nm3* is likely a shortened version of the name Nam'el (including the theophoric name El).[19] A man from the tribe of Reuben with that name is mentioned in Numbers 26:9 as an opponent of Moses. Two sons of the Canaanite prince Irshi of Reṯenu (Egyptian *y3šy*) are mentioned on a small obelisk from Serabit el-Khadim (S112),[20] namely his sons Cain or Qeny (*ḳyn* or *ḳny*) and Yanam (*yhnm*).[21] While the name of the first son is associated with the tribal name of the "Qenites" in the Pentateuch (Numbers 24:21),[22] the second name may contain evidence of early Yahwistic worship, as it could contain the theophoric element Yah.[23]

Serabit el-Khadim as a sacred place where El was worshipped

In addition to the Egyptian cow goddess Hathor/Baᶜalat ("Mistress of Turquoise"), the warrior deities Thoth (moon god and inventor of writing) and Sopdu[24] ("Lord of Foreigners", Egyptian *nb ḫswt*[25], and "Lord of the Eastland", *nb j3btt*), dressed as a Western Asiatic, were also worshipped in the sanctuary of Serabit el-Khadim.[26] However, Sopdu's main temple stood in the Egyptian eastern delta, in the Wadi Tumilat, which is identified with a part of the biblical Land of Goshen (which still extended in a northerly direction as far as Qantir and Phacus; Giveon 1978, 118; van der Veen & Zerbst 2022, 150, 169–170).[27] Although Sopdu as an *Egyptian* deity is not directly identified with the Levantine god El in the Serabit el-

Khadim inscriptions[28], the equation is nevertheless justifiable.

A depiction in Serabit el-Khadim from the reign of Amenemhat III shows Sopdu specifically as a Levantine semi-nomad (Morenz 2019, 210) – with a short skirt and headband– holding a shepherd's crook in his hands (fig. 3b). The image is reminiscent of depictions of El of the Amorites (Il Amurru, also known as Bel-Shade) from the Harran-Balich region (the home of the biblical patriarchs), where he is likewise depicted wearing a knee-length kilt as a semi-nomad and holding a shepherd's crook (figs. 3b). At Serabit el-Khadim El is given epithets that closely resemble those of El in the book of Genesis (such as "El the Most-High", "El, the Eternal is King"; Morenz 2019, 170–171).[29]

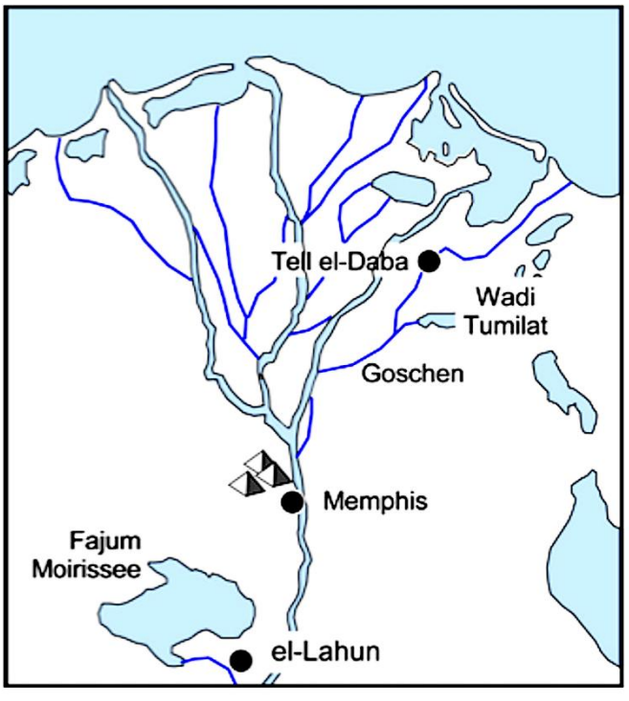

Fig. 2. The map of the Egyptian Nile Delta with Goshen and the Wadi Tumilat. (© van der Veen & Zerbst 2022, 147)

Still during Roman times, we find evidence that Yahweh and El were worshipped in the Sinai region. For example, Uzi Avner (2015, 405–406, n. 41) lists Nabataean personal names with the theophoric elements Yahweh (as in ᶜ*Abd**ahyw***) and El/Elohim (as in *Tim**alahi*** and *Saᶜd**alahi***) indicating that both deities were worshipped there.

Was Serabit el-Khadim located near Horeb?

Already Lina Eckenstein (who had excavated there with Sir Flinders Petrie) suggested a close association between Serabit el-Khadim as a cult site, Israel's faith in El/Yahweh, and the religion of the Midianite priest Jethro (Moses' father-in-law) in 1921.[30]

Fig. 3a and b: Left (a) the god Il Amurru (El of the Amorites) as he is depicted on cylinder seals from the Old Babylonian period (*c.* 1800–1600 BC). Right (b) the god Sopdu dressed as a Western Asiatic herdsman at Serabit el-Khadim (S124) (photo left courtesy of ABA; drawing to the right after left after Morenz 2011, 73).

> "Here he [Moses] found himself on holy ground. The presence of a priest, of a mountain of God, and of a reserved tract of land, point to an ancient sanctuary, and our thoughts naturally turn to Serabit, for many centuries a High Place, ... a shrine of the Semitic god Sopd[u]." (Eckenstein 1921, 67)

The French Old Testament scholar Henri Cazelles also suspected a connection here:

> "One can well imagine that Moses and his fugitive companions remained in Serabit,

without being able to prove it. The cult of Yahweh, the god El of the ancestors, whom he had found again at Horeb, could have begun here." (Cazelles 1979, 97–98, translation from the French)

Pros and cons of Mount Horeb near Serabit el-Khadim

As suggested by Michael Bar-Ron, the mountains Gebel Saniyah and Gebel Ghorabi directly east of Serabit el-Khadim (fig. 4; see also: Bar-Ron 2021, 84–86; Bar-Ron & van der Veen 2022), also suggest a proximity of the latter to the biblical sites Sinai and/or Horeb. But while the name *Saniyeh* could be identical with *Sinai*, the connection of *Ghorabi* with *Horeb* is linguistically difficult. *Ghorabi* is either connected to the Arabic word *gharaba* (written with *ghayin*), which means "setting [of the sun in the west]" (i.e., in the sense of a west-facing mountain), or to *ghurabi* in the sense of "being strange".[31] Hebrew *Horeb*, on the other hand is related to the verb "to be dry, barren".

Fig. 4. The two mountains Gebel Saniyah and Gebel Ghorabi east of Serabit el-Khadim. (© Patterns of Evidence, *Journey to Mount Sinai* Part I)

It could perhaps be argued that the Arabic name had been derived from an older, similar-sounding name and was subsequently transformed via folk etiology (i.e., etiological legends interpret names of unknown origin) and took on a different meaning over time under Arabic influence. However, this can only remain an assumption. The objection that Serabit el-Khadim comes *before* Rephidim (Wadi Refayid) and not after is perhaps more difficult to explain, as it contradicts the description of the journey in the Hebrew Bible, where the mountain of God is located *after* Rephidim (Exodus 19:2). Although it is theoretically possible that Rephidim is located north of Serabit and is therefore *not* identical to Wadi Refayid, this hardly fits the estimated distance that the Israelites covered during their daily marches.[32] Accordingly, Rephidim would seem to be further away from Egypt and hence could hardly be located north of Serabit, which was closer to Egypt. In addition, some scholars equate the area around Serabit el-Khadim (and that of Wadi Maghareh some 10 km south of it[33]) with the biblical resting place Dophkah, where the Israelites camped after having left Marah and Elim. Only after Dophkah did they reach Alush and Rephidim (Numbers 33:13–14). While Marah[34] could be identical with Bir el-Mura ("Bitter Well", Rohl 2015, 195), the description of Elim (with twelve springs and seventy palm trees[35]) best fits Ayun Musa, where "twelve artesian wells rising from an underground aquifer" were identified and where "scores of date palm trees" can be found (Rohl 2015, 195).[36] These resting places are located north of the Markha Plain, from where the ancient Egyptians set out after landing by boat on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Suez in Abu Rodeis for the expedition to the peninsula and from where they reached the mines of Maghareh and Serabit el-Khadim.[37] As the Israelites also camped by the sea *after* Marah and Elim, the "Desert of Sin" (Numbers 33:11) could refer to the Markha Plain,[38] from where they next reached the resting place of Dophkah (Numbers 33:12). The Egyptians called the entire area *ḏw n mfkt* (meaning "Mount of Turquoise", see Hannig 1995, 332) and *ḫtyw mfkt* ("Terrace of Turquoise"), as they mined the precious gemstone turquoise there. It is also assumed that the biblical place name

Dophkah was derived from the Egyptian ***ḏw n mfk3t*** (Hoffmeier 2005, 166; Rohl 2015, 211–215).[39] Only after the Israelites had left Dophkah and had reached Rephidim via Alush after three more days, did they reach "the Desert of Sinai", where the mountain of God was situated (Exodus 19:2; Numbers 33:15). If, however we were to accept the equation of Sinai with Saniyeh and Ghorabi with Horeb (i.e., locating the mountain of God to the east of Serabit el-Khadim), why then did the Israelites make this huge detour to go south first and then go up north again via the Wadi Refayid? At least three options seem to present themselves:

a) The similarity in names between Sinai and Saniyeh and Horeb and Ghorabi may well be purely coincidental. As already noted above, the similarity probably only refers to Sinai and Saniyeh, since Horeb and Ghorabi were derived from different (Hebrew and Arabic) words. Even if the Hebrew name had been reinterpreted in terms of folk etiology (which is a mere guess), it is noteworthy that the Arabic name occurs frequently throughout the region, as its meaning of "westward" or "being strange" applies to many mountains.[40] This may also apply to the name Sinai, however, which as a landscape name could be translated with "broom bush" (from Hebrew *s^{e}neh*) or "rocky cliff" (from Hebrew *senneh*).[41]

b) If El and Yahweh were worshipped in several places throughout Sinai, including the southern peninsula and at Serabit el-Khadim, we may envisage a situation where the names of ancient cult sites had been transferred to other cult sites during a long history of tradition.[42] This could easily have happened when pasture-changing semi-nomads visited new pasture lands.[43]

c) Yet, Moses could have led the Israelites back in a northerly direction *after* leaving Rephidim, this time past Gebel Serbal and likely through the Wadi Feiran (Paran) to reach the sandy plain of the Desert of Sinai (?), east of Gebel Saniyah and Gebel Ghorabi (Exodus 19:2–3). This would have been an understandable move, as a direct ascent across the Markha Plain via Rod el-Air in the southwest (Hikade 2007, 12) would have been too steep for the large crowd, including children, elderly people, and cattle.[44]

It is difficult to say which explanation fits best (if any), which is why we prefer to refrain from drawing a conclusion on the matter. As was emphasized at the beginning of the article, our focus is not primarily on the precise location of the mountain but on the probability that El/Yahweh was worshipped in Sinai, and that the area was frequented by people with Israelite and related names. That this is indeed the case can be stated with certainty, wherever Mount Horeb may have been located. However, it must be emphasized that the place of worship could not have been so far away from Egypt. After all, Moses and Aaron promised to Pharaoh that they would *only* need to travel three days to offer sacrifices to their god in the desert.[45] Be that as it may, the shortness of the journey's distance speaks in favour of Sinai and against Saudi Arabia as the original location of the mountain of God (Exodus 5:3; also 3:8–12 as well as 3:18–21 and 8:23).

Conclusion and prospect

Unlike in Saudi Arabia, inscriptions in Sinai from the Middle Bronze to Roman periods (Nabataean) clearly demonstrate a proximity to the Proto-Israelite and Midianite-Qenite onomasticon. Thus, we came across Israelite or Hebrew-related names such as Levi, Abimelek,

Namu[’el] and Shakarum, a name that appears to be linguistically related to Issachar. We also discovered the names Ben-Zur and Cain or Qeni, which are associated with Midianites and Qenites in the Hebrew Bible. This is quite remarkable, as proponents of the “Arabian Horeb theory” have repeatedly claimed that Sinai was too far away from the land of Midian (which they assume was in northern Arabia[46]) for Moses to have gone there with Jethro’s cattle to meet God at Sinai. Also, the journey to Rephidim would have been too far for his father-in-law Jethro (the priest of Midian) to accompany Moses’ wife Zipporah and their sons to meet Moses. As the present author has discussed in Part 1, the descriptions “Desert of Paran” (this also applies to “Midian” as a tribal region), “Edom” and “Seir” would have been used rather loosely. This is because the entire region comprised extensively of pastureland, where nomads and semi-nomads dwelt, who regularly changed pastureland.[47] The Desert of Sinai was by no means inaccessible to these people due to trade with Egypt, the smelting of copper and the mining of precious turquoise. In other words, Egyptians, Israelites, and related kin groups such as the Midianites and Qenites, would have met here mainly for economic reasons.

The worship of Yahweh and especially of El is attested in Sinai. The name of the Canaanite prince Ya[h]na’am (the brother of Qeni) may well contain the theophoric element Yah. Later Nabataean names still show that Yahweh continued to be worshipped in Sinai. The proximity of the Western Asiatics at Serabit el-Khadim to El is particularly clear. Serabit was home to the shrine of the Egyptian deity Sopdu (“Lord of Foreign Lands”), whose depictions resemble those of El in the land of the Amorites near Harran, the very home of the biblical patriarchs.[48] According to the proto-alphabetic inscriptions at Serabit el-Khadim, the Asiatics worshipped El as the most prominent deity and ascribed to him epithets such as “El, the Most High” (biblical “El-Elyon”, see Genesis 14:20–22) and “El, the Eternal One” (biblical “El-Olam”, see Genesis 21:33). These are epithets also borne by God during the long history of Israel’s protogenesis. Also the later Nabatean inscriptions still mention El in Sinai. It is this cultic affiliation that is associated in the Hebrew Bible with the Israelites and their relatives in the highlands of Sinai – the Qenites and Midianites – as is also assumed in Exodus 18:1–2 (and v. 27) where Jethro visits Moses.[49]

It is quite conceivable that the Israelites continued their work in the mines at Serabit el-Khadim after they left Egypt (including their forty-year wanderings in the desert) and that they inscribed proto-alphabetic inscriptions on rock cliffs and stone tablets, as some scholars have recently suggested.[50] Continued work at the mines would have served as an important source of income as well as for manufacturing bronze implements for the Tabernacle (Exodus 25:1–30).

Notes

[1] Patterns of Evidence films 2022 and 2023.

[2] It remains uncertain, if Horeb is another name for Mt. Sinai or if Sinai and Horeb are twin mounts found in proximity. It is beyond the scope of this article to settle the issue here.

[3] The author would like to take this opportunity to thank the following scholars for suggestions, criticisms, images and for reading older versions of this article: Michael Bar-Ron, Johannes Dams, Prof. Ludwig Morenz, Huub Pragt, David Rohl and David Sabel. He would also like to thank Prof. Lawson Stone of Asbury Theological Seminary for providing the impetus for this article.

[4] For example, Rohl mentions that there exist about twenty wells near the er-Raha plain (near Gebel Musa and Ras es-Safsafeh; pers. comm. June 2023). He explored the region during several expeditions.

[5] On the wetter climate towards the end of the Middle Bronze Age, see Langgut et al. (2015). Ebers (1881, 168) already pointed out the possibility of a more humid climate in the desert at the time of the Israelite

wanderings.

[6] This estimate of water capacity is based on information from Egyptian donkey caravans in the Libyan desert, see Förster (2007, 6). For the logistics of such a caravan and the wells required for it in southwestern Sinai, see Morenz (2011, 68–69).

[7] Diodorus refers to an ancient inscription written in an unknown language. A detailed discussion of the Nabataeans on the southern peninsula and their cult sites at Gebel Serbal and Gebel Moneyah can be found in Avner (2015, 397–429). See also below, n. 42.

[8] Even if in principle it is possible that Diodorus is referring to inscription(s) in the Wadi Mukkatab ("Plain of Writing") north of St. Catherine's Monastery, this is unlikely, as he refers to an "unknown" script. The inscriptions in the Wadi Mukkatab are of Nabataean, Greek and early Arabic origin.

[9] The site was already visited by the 18th century explorers Carsten Niebuhr and Ulrich von Seetzen. The name Serabit el-Khadim may be translated from the Arabic language as "height of the slave" (Eckenstein 1921, 17) or as "pillars of the slaves" (as suggested by Rohl, pers. comm. June 2023).

[10] Contrary to the earlier view that the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions should be dated to the 18th Dynasty (c. 1540–1290 BC) or later (Hikade 2007, 11), there are good reasons to attribute them to the late Middle Kingdom (c. 1850–1650 BC). For the earliest inscriptions appear to date from the 12th Dynasty under Amenemhat III and IV (Morenz 2019, 54–64, 140–141). It seems that the site was still visited during the 13th Dynasty and even during the Hyksos period (c. 1775–1550 BC), as specific pottery finds (including Tell el-Yahudiyeh ware) and Second Intermediate Period scarabs (cf. UC 35447–8) confirm. Cf.: Bourriau (1996, 30–32), Caelen (2012–2013), Mourad (2015, 146) and Wilson-Wright (2016, 248).

[11] The chronological attribution is supported by the association between the Egyptian rock stelae of Amenemhat III and IV and the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions in their near vicinity (Morenz 2011, 2015 and 2019). Moreover, in a Proto-Sinaitic and a Canaanite hieroglyphic inscription, a large Ma^{c}at-sign (sickle sword) is placed in a royal serech with Horus falcons, likely representing the prenomen of Amenemhat III (S345 and S350), confirming the contemporaneity of local inscriptions with this pharaoh (Morenz 2019, 140–141). Lisa Saladino Haney also argues that the glyptic features of local statues at Serabit resemble those from the reigns of Senwosret III and Amenemhat III (including features of stone carving; Saladino Haney 2020, 471–472, nos. 47–48, pl. XII). The depictions of Western Asiatics at the site match those of other Western Asiatics during the Middle Bronze Age (e.g., Goldwasser 2013, 353–374).

[12] For the chronology of the Israelite sojourn in Egypt, see van der Veen & Zerbst (2022, 147–181). It is estimated that around 30,000 Western Asiatics lived in Egypt during the late Middle Kingdom period (Priglinger 2019, 339). This figure is consistent with the explanation of the Hebrew word *'eleph* (used to represent a fighting unit) and the approximate population figures of the Israelites in Egypt estimated by Zerbst (2018, 101–145).

[13] A convenient overview can be found in Mourad (2015, 305–308).

[14] See Giveon (1978, 134). Schneider's derivation of *dwr*, "to be round, to go around" (cf. Hebrew *dôr*, "generation"), seems far-fetched (2003, 150). However, Egyptian r can represent d during the Middle Kingdom period. See Theis (2012, 2).

[15] See also Wilson-Wright (2016, 249). Schneider proposes the alternative reading *Šaglum*, "gift" (2003, 162; Mourad 2015). The Middle Egyptian *3* was used during the Middle Kingdom period to represent both r and l. For example, Ascalon and Jerusalem are rendered in the execration texts at the end of the 12th Dynasty as *'sḳ3nw* (Askalunu) and *3wš3mm* (Rushalimum; Sethe 1926, 54–55; Aḥituv 1984, 69, 122). This use of *3* was still occasionally used during the New Kingdom, for example in Egyptian place name lists, where the spellings *'lk3ṯy* for Ugarit, B3ḏ3n3 for Busruna and *y3š3yr* presumably for Israel, occur. See van der Veen, Theis & Görg (2010, 15–25) and most recently van der Veen (2020, 25–27).

[16] Morenz (2019, 142 and 146).

[17] Morenz (2019, 139).

[18] Morenz (2019, 121).

[19] See also Morenz (2019, 121, n. 436). The secondary theophoric form Yamu'el found in Genesis 46:10, is borne by one of the sons of Simeon.

[20] The father's name, Irshi, likely means "[DN] is my desire" or "[DN] is Irshi" (Schneider 2003, p. 124, for a further explanation, see p. 130). However, it could possibly also be read as Ilshay ("El is my gift"). The meaning would then be comparable with the content of inscription S363 from Serabit, where Morenz suggests the reading [*m*]*tn ntn* [*l*] *3l*, "has given the gift [for] El" (Morenz 2019, 157).

[21] Van der Veen & Zerbst (2022, 211); Wilson-Wright (2016, 249).

[22] Similarly, the names Qayno and Ibn al-Qayni in Nabataean inscriptions from the same region have been compared with this tribal name. See Petrantoni (2021, 118, n. 73) and Avner (2015, 406). The basic meaning of the name could have been "smith" (as found in Genesis 4:22 for Tubal-Cain). The tribal name (Hebrew *qyny*) could also be based on this connotation, insofar as

members of the tribe specialized primarily in metalworking (Köhler & Baumgartner 1958, 837; Schneider 2003, 163). A relationship to the smelting of copper into bronze from the Sinai and Negev mines appears obvious.

[23] Thomas Schneider has translated the name Yanam with some caution as "Yahweh has spoken" (Hebrew *yhn'm*, see Schneider 2003, 132; also van der Veen & Zerbst 2022, 211). A possible connection between the miners of Serabit el-Khadim and the cult of Yahweh was already suggested by orientalist Hubert Grimme (1937, 130–131).

[24] The hieroglyphic sign for Sopdu is a pointed triangle, which is also used as a determinative in *srt* "thorn". During the late Middle Kingdom, it was written in hieratic papyri from el-Lahun (in Middle Egypt) as a vertical line with a thorn, while in inscriptions on the Sinai Peninsula it is found as a triangle with two thorns (Schumacher 1988, 10). The possible connection of the deity to a thorny bush (as with Yahweh in the story of the burning bush, Exodus 3, 1–12) or a sont acacia has been discussed among Egyptologists and goes back to the Old Kingdom period around 2500 BC (e.g., in the Pyramid Texts). Unfortunately, little more can be said about this (Schumacher 1988, 9–10).

[25] The term *nb ḫswt* appears as a title for Sopdu for the last time during the Egyptian 17th Dynasty, c. 1600–1550 BC (Schumacher 1988, 320–321).

[26] See Schumacher (1988, 70–71, 128) and Morenz (2011, 72–73, 81).

[27] See Schumacher (1988, 135, 295–303). The seat of Sopdu was in the 22nd (Lower Egyptian) nome. It is interesting that the el-Lahun papyri (of the late 12th to early 13th Dynasty, between c. 1850–1700 BC) speak of a city that was in the eastern part (*gs j3bj*) of the northern district (*wᶜrt mḥtj*). Schumacher argues that Sopdu was worshipped there as the "Lord of the East" (Schumacher 1988, 120). Although she considers the element *gs* to be a meaningless addition to the term "eastern part", the present author wonders if perhaps the element is related to the biblical name Goshen/Gesem, in the sense of *gs* of the east (i.e., "that side" or "other shore"), "lying on the east bank" (Hannig 1995, 24, 905–906). In the Late Pharaonic period, the name likely occurs as *qs* and *p3-qs*, i.e., as a place name in Per-Sopdu/Saft el-Henneh (Rohl 2015, 119–121; van der Veen & Zerbst 2022, 171, n. 184). In the el-Lahun papyri, however, we would have a reference from the approximate timeframe during which according to this author the Israelites sojourned in Egypt.

[28] It appears that in his capacity as a creator god, El was also equated with the god Ptah of Memphis. This appears to be confirmed by a depiction of Ptah at Serabit el-Khadim with a fragmentarily preserved (proto-Sinaitic) inscription naming *'l*[?] as suggested by Morenz (S351, Morenz 2019, 129–131).

[29] During the Middle Kingdom, Sopdu was also termed as *smsw nṯrw*, "eldest of the gods" (Schumacher 1988, 318). This is reminiscent of El's role at Ugarit as creator god and as "father of the gods" (Ugaritic *'b ilm*).

[30] She had excavated there with Flinders Petrie during the 1905–1906 season.

[31] Pers. comm. with Johannes Dams, June 2023.

[32] Hoffmeier (2005, 118–120). On the distance that caravans could cover daily, see Priskin (2004, 57–71), Riemer & Förster (2013, 52–53, "Box 10") and Riemer (2013, 77–106, especially fig. 31).

[33] Hikade (2007, 6).

[34] Whose water was undrinkable according to the biblical description, as it was probably salty or because it contained magnesium sulphate.

[35] See Exodus 15:27; Numbers 33:9. In fact, several springs between the northern shore of the Gulf of Suez lead salt water (Mumford & Parcak 2003, 93, plate 1).

[36] The explanation in Rohl (2015) is based on the work of Mumford & Parcak (2003, fig. 1). Hoffmeier, on the other hand, equates Marah with Ain Hawarah and Elim with Wadi Garandal (2005, 161–163 with fig. 1).

[37] See Hoffmeier (2005, 161–162, 165). On these sites, see also Mumford (2015b: 92, fig. 1). For various sources attested in Egyptian inscriptions (including the possible resting places of the Israelites), see Mumford & Parcak (2003, 93, plate 1).

[38] Rohl assumes an alternative route, whereby the Israelites, after having camped at the Gulf of Suez (Yam Suph) near Gebel Hammam Pharaon, moved away from the coast (south of Wadi Garandal) about 53 km inland, passing the Wadi el-Tayibah through the sandstone desert (his Desert of Sin) and past the Wadi el-Nasb (where the Egyptians mined copper) to arrive at Dophkah/Serabit el-Khadim (Rohl 2015, 203–210).

[39] The final fem. t was no longer pronounced during the Ramesside period (13th to 11th century BC; Noonan 2016, 63). The form *ḏw n mfk3t* is attested in the Luxor temple. Hoffmeier convincingly answered the criticism why the Israelites did not avoid the area where the Egyptians worked and patrolled, as the Egyptians normally worked there only during the winter months while the Israelites came here in May/June (Hoffmeier 2005, 167). A further suggestion is found in the conclusion of this article.

[40] See: https://peakery.com/jabal-gharabi-egypt/map/ Thus, immediately to the north of Gebel Saniyah there is another Gebel Gharabi, just as there are mountains of this name to the east of Gebel Serbal and a little further east of Gebel Musa (east of Gebel Umm Alawi).

[41] E.g., Koehler & Baumgartner (1958, 330, 661–662).

Hebrew Horeb (*ḥoreb*), on the other hand, was likely related to the verb "to be dry" (*ḥareb*) and hence could simply mean "dryness", a term which should not surprise us in this barren land. Unlike Ghorabi, however, the name Saniyeh only seems to occur once in the region as far as we can tell.

[42] In his article on his excavations in southern Sinai, Uzi Avner (2015) shows that the Nabataeans worshipped their deities (including Dushara) in mountaintop sanctuaries, such as at Gebel Serbal and Gebel Moneyah. According to local Bedouin tradition, Gebel Moneyah is called Gebel Moneyat Musa, i.e., the "mountain of Moses, where Moses conversed with God". The relationship of these summit shrines to the biblical story of Moses thus suggests such local color. Avner also writes: "The sacred tradition of this site is obviously pre-Christian while the current Bedouin tradition actually echoes the Nabataean cult, or even older" (2015, 404). The Nabataean inscriptions also prove that the priests at Gebel Moneyah called their deities *al-Baᶜli*, *Walat* and *Ahyu*. An equation of these deities with Baᶜal, Yahu and Al-Lat (Asherah) seems obvious (2015, 405, n. 32).

[43] As there were several places where El and Yahweh were worshipped, the exact location of the mountain of God was probably no longer known, at least in later times, so that even during the Israelite and Judahite monarchy period the home of Yahweh was simply remembered as Teman ("Southland") as in Habakkuk 3:3 and at Kuntillet Adjrud (see also Jericke 2020). The distance to Horeb in the story of the prophet Elijah is described as "forty days and forty nights" (i.e., from Elijah's first resting place south of Beersheba; 1 Kings 19:3–4, 8). The biblical redactor likely wished to employ a figure of style to describe the distance as an arduous journey, while at the same time recalling the forty troublesome years that the Israelites spent in the desert. The New Testament evangelist Matthew seems to do something similar, when he relates that Jesus was in the desert for forty days and forty nights (Matthew 4:1-2). He too seems to remind his readers of Israel's wanderings in the desert, and that Jesus too (like Elijah) encountered similar trials.

[44] This suggestion contradicts the route to Dophkah as favored by Rohl, which leads inland via the Wadi el-Tayibah (see n. 38). In this case, the Israelites would have already been at Serabit before returning there again later (i.e., after leaving Dophkah) via the south.

[45] Nevertheless, the period of three days seems to be extraordinarily short. This would perhaps only have been feasible if they had taken the fastest route by far with an experienced caravan (i.e., directly from the Wadi Tumilat across the Bitter Lakes in a south-easterly direction) and by the direct narrow pass up to Serabit. Whether they would have managed this in three days, remains highly debatable. However, there is also the question of whether the place of sacrifice in the desert mentioned by Moses must be the same as Mt. Horeb (cf. Exodus 3:8–12 and 18–21).

[46] E.g., Möller (2008, 131–137).

[47] Van der Veen (2018, 175–177). Also, the explanation by Jericke (2020) is worth noting. The toponym "Arabia" in classical sources also included terrains west of Arabah, i.e., including the rocky terrain to the south-east of modern Israel, the Negev, and the Sinai Peninsula, as far west as the Arab nome in the Eastern Nile delta (i.e., the 20th nome south of Avaris/Pi-Ramesse).

[48] As already noted in n. 20 above, the name of the Canaanite prince on the small sandstone obelisk found at Serabit el-Khadim, can perhaps be translated as "El is my gift". In this case, the name of the god El would also appear as a theophoric element in a West Semitic personal name.

[49] On the cultural association between Sinai and North Arabia during the Bronze and Iron Ages, see also Mumford (2015a).

[50] See, for example, Bar-Ron (2021, 2022), Petrovich (2017) and Krahmalkov (2017). But also see Wilson-Wright's criticial review (2017) of Krahmalkov's controversial theory.

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