

Is Mount Karkom the biblical Mount Sinai?

Exploring the truth about Mount Karkom and its connection to Mount Sinai.

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ABSTRACT

Mount Karkom was a holy mountain. It is located in the Central Negev Desert Israel and the archaeological evidence of religious activity is in abundance. This includes sanctuaries, altars, tombs' tumuli and rockart. All this indicates that it had been a sacred mountain in the Middle Bronze Age. The desert nomads worshipped it over 5000 years ago. Its holiness coincides with the time of biblical events. Prof Anati that excavated the mountain, since early 1990's, claims that it is also the biblical Mount Sinai (Anati 2001). It has taken him more than two decades of excavation to form this controversial idea that generated heated debate among archaeologists. They simply reject Mount Karkom theory vehemently. In an interview on Israeli TV Anati said "Twenty years ago, I had a hunch that Har Karkom was the real Mount Sinai. Three years ago I was convinced I was correct. Today I know I'm right." What is the truth behind this claim and the main question is still relevant; is Mount Karkom Mount Sinai?

Keywords: mount karkom, , negev desert, alignment, holy mountain, masseboth, rockart, tumuli, open sanctuary, petroglyphs, rockart, bible, mount sinai, exodus.

Introduction

The story of the Exodus is one of the great dramas of the ancient world. It became a universal dogma for all people and inspired freedom seekers throughout the generations. There are many memorable events in this desert journey and above all stands the event of Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai is the place of the Divine Revelation for all humanity. It is there that the children of Israel were given the Ten Commandments; the prime laws of humanity. It became guiding justice lines for all nations. Despite centuries of commentary and study the biblical Exodus remains a mystery that gave rise to many conflicting theories. The Bible describes Exodus journey in details but unfortunately none can be verified. Archaeology failed to produce factual evidence and not a single Israelite camp site in the Sinai, Negev or Arabah was found. Some modern scholar even doubt that Exodus, as it described in the Bible, ever happened. The traces of Exodus were erased and Mt. Sinai vanished as if by magic. The only written source that exists of these "historical" events is still the Bible.

Archeologists and adventurers with sophisticated instruments were searching for Mount Sinai eagerly. These pioneers began their search in the 19th century. They

used the Bible as their guide and the conflicting descriptions of Exodus events led the search throughout the entire desert that spans from Libya through the Negev Desert to Saudi Arabia. They were picking their clues from the bible and were especially looking for geographical identifications, such as those described in the first part of the journey: where did the Israelites cross the Sea of Reeds, and where, in which desert, was Mount Sinai. Many adventurers are still searching for Mount Sinai despite the fact that Mount Sinai location was "forgotten" the quest continues vigorously.

Assuming that Exodus was historical event we can only trace it from the biblical description since it is the only written source of this glorious story. The Bible points out in details the names of encampments along the desert journey but opinions differ as to where they are on modern maps.

Biblical Geography in respect to Mt. Sinai has become increasingly controversial and over the years 23 theories were formulated about the its location. To date there are many claims by different archeologists that insist that their particular discovery is the correct one. However, there are major flaws in each theory although each presents convincing arguments. Each theory, so far, failed the basic test of archeology since no single material evidence, or archeological dating of the site, could backup their claim. In all cases the evidence found was circumstantial and more of personal commentary of their findings without backing facts.

Although the location of Mount Sinai has been the focus of the search, an examination of the biblical account of the Exodus shows that the location of the Reed Sea crossed by the Hebrews is the most crucial piece of this geographical puzzle therefore each route had to take it into account. Over the years 3 main Exodus routes were suggested when the main question is where is this magic sea. Once found the journey can traced and accordingly find Mount Sinai since it had to be a mountain along this route.

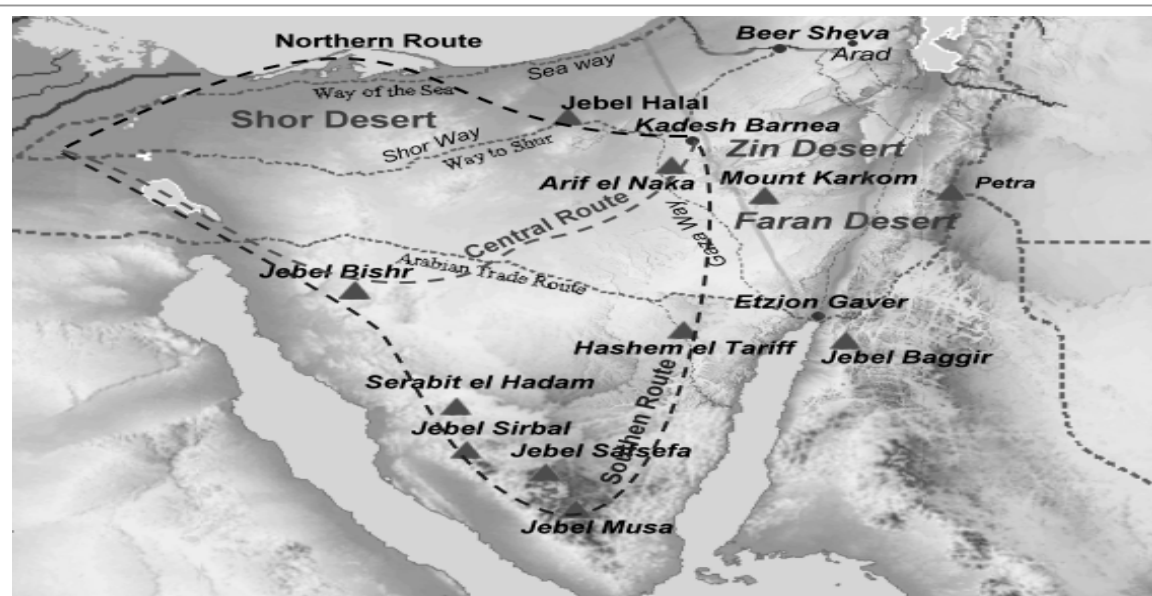


Figure 1: Exodus Routes with candidates mountains along the route

The Southern Route – locates Mount Sinai in the Southern Sinai and the candidates for Mount Sinai are the holy mountain along this route. This is the traditional route where the Sea of Reed crossing is the the large body of water called the Bitter Lakes in Egypt. On this route, Mount Sinai is identified with Jabel Musa in the South of the Peninsula. Other candidates along this route are Jabel Sirbal and Serabit el Hadam.

The Northern Route – Although it's written in the Bible we that this is the road not taken, "*God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near*" (Ex.13, 17). This main route was too risky and the fugitives made a turn (Ex.14, 1) just before entering the Philistines zone. This route is known as the Way of the Sea which extends along the coastal plain. The crossing occurred in Lake Bardwill and Mount Sinai according this route is Jabel Halal.

The Central Route – Israelites came from Goshen in the North East of Egypt. One suggestion is that they crossed near the Nile Delta towards the Bitter Lakes into the Sinai Peninsula. Another alternative is to reach the Red Sea and cross near into Midian, nowadays part of Saudi Arabia. The mountains along this route are Jabel sin Bishar, Jabel Baggir and Mount Karkom.

1.1. Mount Karkom Geography

Mount Karkom is located in the central Negev desert. It imposes itself on the horizon and makes an obvious point of reference for travellers crossing the desert even today, as it must have done for travellers in the past. It looks as a long table plateau with its rhinoceros like peak in the south. This point terminates the hilly central Negev plateau, bordering on the southern edge the Faran desert.



Figure 2 Mount Karkom view from east to west

Mt. Karkom can be seen from over 50 miles away, from the mountains of Edom in Jordan and from Sinai desert. It was a landmark for desert navigation especially during the Early Bronze time. The evidence, tumuli and sanctuaries, along the various routes that cross the flat Faran desert proves it. During this time copper was mined in Funon Jordan, south of the Dead Sea, which was the main supply of copper to the kingdom of Egypt. Archaeological findings prove that it was a holy site a pilgrims centre for the desert people that lived and worshipped the mountain some 5000 years ago.

There are significant and important archaeological remains around Mt. Karkom. Prof Anati excavated the site for over 25 years; the area of investigation includes the mountain and surrounding areas about 200 sq.km with over 1,200 archaeological

sites. The fieldwork in the area of Mt. Karkom has involved scholars and experts from various disciplines: anthropologists, archaeologists, art historians, biblical scholars, geologists, epigraphists, historians of religions, prehistorians and theologians. The identification of Mt. Karkom as Mount Sinai was proposed in 1983. When the book *The Mountain of God* came out in 1986, 500 archaeological sites had been recorded. This includes altars, sanctuaries, tombs, tumuli, stone circles and about 200 sites with over 40,000 rockart images. This concentration of religious remains is unique and it signifies the importance of the mountain as pilgrimage site.

2. Mount Karkom theory

Archaeologists agree that Mount Karkom had been an important cult site but they don't accept its identification as the biblical Mount Sinai. The main argument against is the dating of archaeological findings which date 1000 years before the time of Exodus according to the Bible. The biblical date, calculated from the building of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6:1) in Jerusalem, suggests that Exodus occurred in about 1400 B.C. Anati argues, assuming that the Bible account is historically accurate, that Exodus occurred between 2200 and 2000 BCE. On this account he received harsh criticism from all, biblical scholars and archaeologists.

2.1 Bible nations and the deserts of Exodus

Bible geography places Mount Sinai in the vicinity of Faran, Zin and Sinai deserts. The location of Mt. Karkom is Anati's main argument for its identification as Mount Sinai. It is its geography and the topography of its plateau which perfectly matches that of the biblical description. According to the Bible Mount Sinai is located between

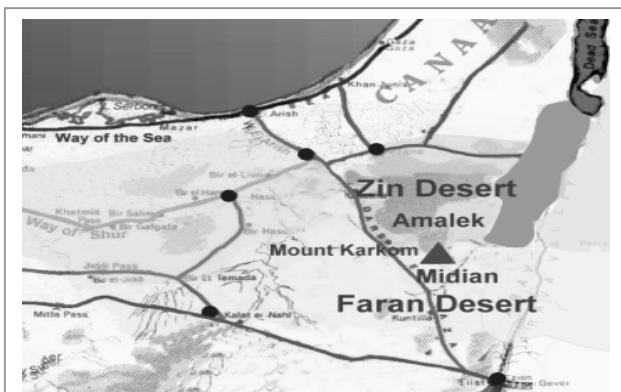


Figure 3 Biblical Negev Deserts and territorial boundaries

the desert of Zin and the desert Faran, between the land of Amalek and the land of Midian. In the story of Moses in Midian, Mount Sinai is described as being on the edge of the pasture land of Midian and on the way to Egypt Exodus (4:2), Exodus (18:5), Exodus (4:27). The Bible indicates that the Amalekites occupied the highlands of the Central Negev, and the Midianites were living on both sides of the Araba Valley. Mt. Sinai, accordingly is located between these two regions. And indeed Mount Karkom location, more than any theory, fits this requirement.

3. Topographic and archaeological evidence of Mount Karkom

Mount Karkom was site of worship and pilgrimage in the course of millennia even before Exodus. The Bible gives us an indication in this sense (Exodus 3:1) in the encounter of Moses and the burning bush. The text implies that the site was already holy and known as the "*Mountain of God*" before Moses arrived there. In addition to the geographic argument Anati supplements it with archaeological findings at Mount Karkom – including sanctuaries, altars, rockart that according to him are related to the biblical story. The immense wealth of cult sites at Har Karkom proves that it was a holy mountain in the Bronze Age. No such evidence has been found at any other Mount Sinai "candidate." The following is a summary of the main topographic and archaeological evidence that Mt. Karkom is Mount Sinai according to Anati.

3.1 Mount Karkom height

The image of Mount Sinai was derived from the greatness of Exodus story and people imagination made it into a very high mountain. Josephus Flavius the prolific historian of the 1st century AD wrote that it's "*the highest mountain there is*". The biblical Mt. Sinai is identified in Christian tradition with Jebel Musa in the south of the Sinai Peninsula fits this imaginary concept. It is a high steep mountain that reaches 2.2km. It is known and documented that this mountain was hand picked by Helena, the Roman emperor Constantius mother; in her holy land travels in the 4th century AD. Today this version is only accepted by the Greek Orthodox church. However biblical description of Mount Sinai implies that it was not a high mountain. According the bible Moses climbed it 8 times at age of 80. The Midrash tells us that many mountains sought the honour of being Mount Sinai. God chose the humble of and the lowest one. The height of Mount Karkom is 842m with a moderate climb of about 200 m from its western side it fits this requirement.

3.2 Mose's Cleft



Figure 4 Mose's Cleft

This is the cave which according to Anati Moses spent 40 days/nights until he received the 10 commandments from God. The cleft is on one of the two tops of Mt. Karkom. It is a small rock-shelter; an uncommon feature in the Sinai Peninsula. In the Book of Exodus (33:21-22), Mount Sinai is described as having such a characteristic: "*And the Lord said, behold, there is a place by me, and thou should stand upon a rock; and it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in the cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by*" This description and the rock-shelter on top of Mount Karkom found are a topographic feature which the Bible attributes to Mt. Sinai.

3.3 The 12 tombs

Sacred stones have a long tradition with desert nomads. They are known as masseboth and are very common in the Negev and the Sinai. They stand mostly in shrines, alone or in groups (Avner, 2001). Masseboth are also found on bamoth (platforms) and associated with tumuli. At the foot of the mountain, Anati and his team found a group of twelve pillars, or standing stones, facing a stone platform. Concerning these distinctive tombs arrangements, Anati wrote: "*It is reminiscent of a passage in Exodus (24:4): 'And Moses ... built an altar'*". That's the only appearance of such stone arrangement assembled together in a shrine that were found in the Negev desert. The bible mentions 3 events in which 12 stones were arrange to commemorate the events of Exodus. In Mount Sinai when Moses delivers the 10 commandments to children of Israel. When crossing the Jordan to the Promised Land. And when prophet Elijah is recreating Exodus when he runs away to Mount Horev/Sinai.



Figure 5 12 tombs sanctuary

3.4 The sanctuaries at the mountain foot

Many different man made structures are scattered at the feet of the mountain includes dwelling, altars, pillars, platforms, tombs. Along the mountain, at the bottom, there is a row of sanctuaries, it so long it reminds the view of a avenue, the 12 tombs sanctuary is one of them. They are at a safe distance from the mountain exactly the way it is written in the Book of Exodus (19:12-23). God forbade the common people to touch or to come near the holy mountain.

3.5 The Midianite Shrine

In the book of Exodus, there are several references to a temple on Mt. Sinai that is said to have been seen by Moses. *“And look that they make them after their pattern, which was showed thee in the mount”* (Exodus 25:40). And *“Hollow with boards shalt thou make it [the altar]; as it was showed thee in the mount, so shall they make it”* (Exodus 27:8). This description fits the Bronze Age temple found at the centre of the plateau of Mt. Karkom which is overlooking the mountain peak with Mose’s cleft. Around the shrine there are footprints carved on stones in direction to the mountain top. This temple is mentioned in the biblical story when Moses and the seventy elders climb the marvelous plateau paved of sapphire stone. They stay there while Moses continues to the mountain peak Exodus (24:9). God is revealing himself to them, as shiny foot prints, while they are eating.

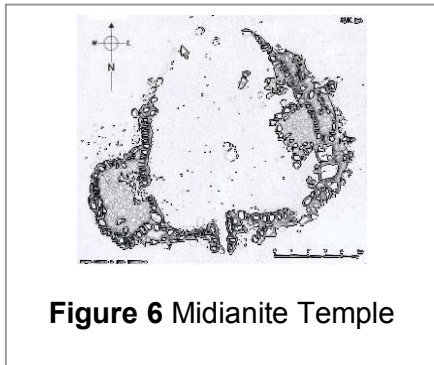


Figure 6 Midianite Temple

3.6 Mount Karkom Rockart and parallels to Biblical stories

At Mt. Karkom there are more than 40.000 rock engravings, spanning from the calcolithic to the Islamic age. Most engravings are from bronze time and they are mainly animals and hunting scenes. Many of these engravings contain occult signs that are incomprehensible now. According to Anati several engravings are related to known biblical stories. Anati says that in first sight it looks like coincidences, but, with the progress of research, there were too many of them and his conclusion was that they record biblical stories. Nothing similar has been found in other mountains in the peninsula or in other rock art sites.

3.7 Ten Commandments

Most of the rockart in Mount Karkom depict real scenes, subjects are taken from life. The rockart representing the table with ten partitions stands out in this respect it looks like ancient 2 tablets binded together. The division of the tablet into 10 spaces is not accidental. It was an engraver choice and he had a purpose. Is it amazing coincidence? If Moses received the 10 commandments at Mt. Karkom, this feature would have been where it happened.

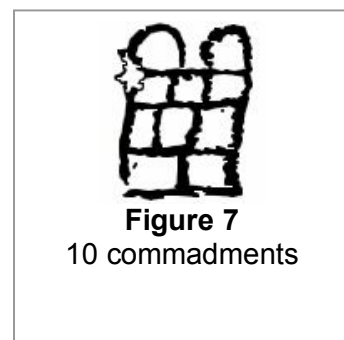


Figure 7

10 commadments

3.8 Serpent and the Staff

Along a rocky path, a large flint rock displays a twisting snake next to a staff. The scene may depict a staff turned into a snake. Anati wonders: Is this graffito related to Exodus (7:8–12), in which Moses proves God’s power to Pharaoh by turning a staff into a snake and back again.

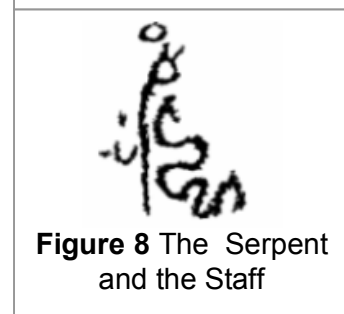


Figure 8 The Serpent and the Staff

Conclusion

Mount Karkom was a holy site, The peak of religious activity at the Mt. Karkom dates to 2350-2000 BC, and the area has been abandoned between 1950-1000 BC. Exodus is dated between 1600-1200 BC. Scholars have criticised its identification since no archaeological remains were found from this period. All material artefacts are almost 1000 years earlier. The early date also doesn't fit archaeological signs of new culture that were found in hills of Israel. The date from these excavations shows a surge of new settlements in about 1200 BC which is much closer to the biblical exodus date.

There is no clear evidence that Mount Karkom is Mount Sinai. The major flaw in this theory is that it does not possess any Late Bronze Age archaeological remains but instead Early Bronze Age of the 3rd millennium B.C. Anati has proposed that scholars erred in dating Exodus to (1560-1200 B.C.). He argues that cities mentioned in the Exodus narratives like Ai, Jericho, and Arad, were not in existence or were unoccupied during the 13th century B.C. but they were occupied in the 3rd millennium B.C. when Mt. Karkom was a sacred site.

The rockart from Mt. Karkom which according to Anati support the biblical connection seems at first sight valid but new interpretation by the author (Rotblum 2011) disproves this claim as well. The rockart have no relation to biblical stories.

Mt. Karkom was a holy mountain but its clearly not Mt. Sinai at least in light of the vocal reaction raised from scholars in the field. The archeological remains are impressive but there are inconclusive in their connection to biblical exodus. After 30 years of excavations the dispute among scholars remains open and this dilemma of Mt. Sinai looks unsolvable.

In lack of archaeological evidence for Mt. Sinai there comes a much bigger question and it has to do with the emergence of the nation of Israel and the arrival of new belief to the world, the belief in one god, or monotheism. Where this monumental events came from? They are historical facts but what happened just before Israel formed is not clear. It's still remains a mystery which brings us back to the initial quest for Mount Sinai and it also firms up the realization that Mt Sinai must exist! Where is it? Well, to answer this question we probably need a new theory!

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