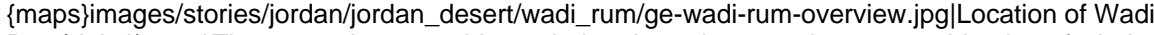


# Wadi Rum

Contributed by Micah Key and Stephen Langfur

Location of Wadi Rum  
There are places on this earth that through some virtuous combination of wind and sky, earth and rock, have a numinous quality all their own. Wadi Rum is one of those places. It is a natural *temenos*. The word is from the Greek *temnein*, meaning "to cut off." It is an area set apart for religious rites. Often it is enclosed by a wall and open to the heavens. Examples are the Temple area in Jerusalem and the Herodian structure at Hebron. *temenos*, which bids every visitor to fall silent and just be.

In *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, British lieutenant colonel T.E. Lawrence (later known as Lawrence of Arabia) set down his first impressions of the place as he and his Arab raiders rode into it:

"The crags were capped in nests of domes, less hotly red than the body of the hill; rather grey and shallow. They gave the finishing semblance of Byzantine architecture to this irresistible place: this processional way greater than imagination. The Arab armies would have been lost in the length and breadth of it, and within the walls a squadron of aeroplanes could have wheeled in formation. Our little caravan grew self-conscious, and fell dead quiet, afraid and ashamed to flaunt its smallness in the presence of the stupendous hills." (Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, chapter LXII)

The largest wadi in Jordan, Wadi Rum is simply a series of parallel faults forming wide valleys in the granite and sandstone hills south of the Shara Mountains, about 250 km (150 mi) south of Amman and 70 km (40 mi) from Petra. These valleys, oriented almost perfectly north to south, are flanked by silent twisted giants—800-meter or higher mountains which rise sheer from the flat desert floor: unassailable massive islands in the midst of a gently undulating ocean of sand. Threaded throughout these rugged mountains are half-hidden paths leading to secret pools, mysterious canyons and even, in the far southern end of the area, a magnificent rock bridge.

Surprisingly, there is abundant water in this arid landscape, though well hidden either through the prudence of the men who lived here or the vagaries of nature itself. Drawn perhaps by the many natural springs dotted throughout the hills, as well as the relative protection afforded by Wadi Rum's isolation, a few have made this place their home.

Biblically speaking...

We are in the land of the Midianites, who were apparently the first people to worship Yahweh. In the account of Exodus 2:11 - 3:1, Moses fled to Midian after killing an Egyptian. Here he married Zipporah, the daughter of a Midianite priest who appears in the Bible under two names: *Reuel* and *Jethro*. According to documentary critics, the different names reflect different sources. While tending his father-in-law's flock, he was called by Yahweh (Exodus 3: 1-4):

Now Moses was keeping the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the back of the wilderness, and came to God's mountain, to Horeb. The angel of Yahweh appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. Moses said, "I will turn aside now, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt."

When Yahweh saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the midst of the bush, and said, "Moses! Moses!"

He said, "Here I am."

This event is located "at the back of the wilderness" (akhar hamidbar), near God's mountain, identified as Horeb. (In other passages it is called Sinai.) To this mountain, during the exodus, Moses was to lead the Israelites, and here Yahweh would make his covenant with them, including the Ten Commandments. Since Byzantine times, the mountain has been located west of the Red Sea, but it could have been on the east in Midian's heartland. (We find Midianite pottery mainly east of the Arava and the Red Sea, although it also appears at Timna on the Arava's western side). In Exodus 18, Jethro initiates sacrifice to Yahweh, and Aaron joins him. Jethro then teaches Moses how to organize the polity. His son Hobab guides the people through the wilderness. Moses said to Hobab, the son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, "We are journeying to the place of which Yahweh said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us, and we will treat you well; for Yahweh has spoken good concerning Israel." He said to him, "I will not go; but I will depart to my own land, and to my relatives." He said, "Don't leave us, please; because you know how we are to encamp in the wilderness, and you can be our eyes. It shall be, if you go with us, yes, it shall be, that whatever good Yahweh does to us, we will do the same to you." They set forward from the Mount of Yahweh three days' journey. The ark of the covenant of Yahweh went before them three days' journey, to seek out a resting place for them. (Numbers 10:29-33).

What is more, from the Midianite period at Timna we find the remains of a tent shrine. This brings to mind the Tent of Meeting where Yahweh regularly encountered Moses. No graven images were found in the Midianite shrine, except one: in its holy of holies was a copper snake not five inches long. It brings to mind the bronze snake made by Moses at Punon (Feinan in today's Jordan), an area of ancient copper mines where Midianite pottery was also found. Worshipers brought offerings to Moses' bronze snake at the temple in Jerusalem until the 8th century B.C., when Hezekiah finally tore the thing down. He removed the high places, and broke the pillars, and cut down the Asherah: and he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for in those days the children of Israel burned incense to it; and he called it Nehushtan. (2 Kings 18:4).

These Midianite connections point to an intimate relationship at the time of Israel's origins. They could not be a late invention, because Midian is Israel's enemy by the time we get to Numbers 22, when the wandering Israelites arrive in the steppes of Moab. (See, for example, "Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, 'Harass the Midianites, and strike them.'" (Numbers 25: 16-17).) In the next period, that of the Judges 6:1. The children of Israel did that which was evil in the sight of Yahweh: and Yahweh delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years. (Judges,) we hear that the Midianites raided Israelite harvests for seven years, until Yahweh empowered Gideon. No scribe after Gideon's time would have invented stories favorable to the Midianites, presenting Jethro as Moses' mentor.

"Thus the distribution of Midianite painted pottery, from its production center(s) in northern Arabia (Midian) to a wide range of settlements in the Negev [Negev &dash; SL], the Arabah [Arava], and beyond, fits rather nicely the locale and routes of a people [the Midianites &dash; SL] known for their metalsmithing and caravaning. The flourish of this distinctive pottery is precisely the era in which most biblical historians (quite independently of this ceramic evidence, which has only recently come to light) would date the Israelite Exodus from Egypt, their sojourn through Midian and Transjordan, and their settlement in Canaan in the late thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE." (L.E. Stager, "Forging an Identity", in M.D. Coogan (ed.), The Oxford History of the Biblical World, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. (Stager 1998))

The Midianites were a nomadic group within a socio-economic class known as shasu in Egyptian documents. The proto-

Israelites, no doubt, were also lumped with the shasu. (The root of the word, in Egyptian, may mean to wander to plunder.) These shasu were Beduin-like shepherds and raiders, first mentioned as living in what is today southern Jordan, though they later spread. The Egyptians considered them a threat and a nuisance. A document of Pharaoh Amenhotep III (14th century BC), and another of Ramesses II (13th century), refer to something that can be variously translated as "the land of the Yahweh-nomads" or "the shashu land of Yahweh." Nearby in the same document the land of Seir is mentioned. This was the mountain range in today's southern Jordan, prime sashu territory, which in the 13th century BC became organized as the Kingdom of Edom. Some archaic poems in the Bible refer to Yahweh as coming from Seir/Edom:

When you, Yahweh, went forth from Seir,  
 When you marched forth from the plateaus of Edom,  
 Earth shook,  
 Heaven poured,  
 Clouds poured water;  
 Mountains quaked;  
 Before Yahweh, Lord of Sinai,  
 Before Yahweh, God of Israel.

(Judges 5.4-5; see also Deuteronomy 33:2.)

The "land of Yahweh nomads" or "sashu land of Yahweh" - in the vicinity of Seir - must have been Midian or a part thereof. We can't be sure, of course, that the name Yahweh in 14th and 13th century documents refers to a deity; it could have meant a place or a human being. But the location in Midian, where we know (from the Bible) that Yahweh was worshiped before Moses, supports the connection with Yahweh the God.

In Wadi Rum, then, we have the kind of landscape, and perhaps the actual landscape, where (as far as we can tell) the worship of Yahweh originated. The awe expressed by T.E. Lawrence, in the passage quoted above, was felt as well by the ancients here. The feeling of smallness that he attests (felt by anyone who attempts this desert without the hubris of four-wheel drive) is related to the humility learned by Moses while tending Jethro's flock.

Numbers 12:1-7:

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married; for he had married a Cushite woman. They said, "Has Yahweh indeed spoken only with Moses? Hasn't he spoken also with us?" And Yahweh heard it.

Now the man Moses was very humble, above all the men who were on the surface of the earth. Yahweh spoke suddenly to Moses, to Aaron, and to Miriam, "You three come out to the Tent of Meeting";

The three of them came out. Yahweh came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the door of the Tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forward. He said, "Hear now my words. If there is a prophet among you, I Yahweh will make myself known to him in a vision. I will speak with him in a dream. My servant Moses is not so. He is faithful in all my house. With him I will speak mouth to mouth, even plainly, and not in riddles; and he shall see

Yahweh's form."

## Nabataeans and others in Wadi Rum

The Nabataeans were the only people to build any lasting monuments in Wadi Rum. The <sup>{tips}</sup>The Thamud, an early semi-nomadic Arabian people who were cousin to the Nabataeans, are mentioned in Assyrian annals as early as 716 BC, when they lived in the region that today is Saudi Arabia. During the first centuries of our era, they moved northward, leaving the etchings and inscriptions that we see in Wadi Rum. <sup>{tips}</sup>Thamud also made their mark here—literally. Scattered throughout the Wadi Rum area are rock etchings of camels, two-meter high human figures with stumpy arms and legs, as well as graffiti written in their South Semitic script.

[images/stories/jordan/jordan\\_desert/wadi\\_rum/ge-wadi-rum-close.jpg](images/stories/jordan/jordan_desert/wadi_rum/ge-wadi-rum-close.jpg) Wadi Rum: Close-up [right](#)

Wadi Rum and the area around it have played host to human dwellers for ages, yet history has never found a strong foothold here. In the end, it is the shifting sands and the towers of rock which predominate when the last whisper of mostly-forgotten civilizations have faded away.

Upon entering Wadi Rum from the Desert Highway, the building one comes to first is the Visitor's Center. From here, most excursions into Wadi Rum itself are launched. Just beyond the Visitor's Center complex, facing it to the southeast, is the set of cliffs dubbed "The Seven Pillars of Wisdom." They are named after T.E. Lawrence's famous book and not the reverse, as is sometimes claimed.

From the Visitor's Center, the way leads south, directly into Wadi Rum itself, the central riverbed for which the whole area has been named. Wadi Rum passes between two large mountains, Jebel (Mount) Rum and Jebel Umm Ashreen. The road winds next to Jebel Rum, reaching the Resthouse, which contains guest accommodations. Just past the Resthouse on the right, is a Nabataean temple. This half-ruined structure, attributed to the 1st or 2nd centuries AD, is the major evidence of Nabataean occupation in the area. On its walls are a combination of inscriptions, done in their proto-Arabic script, and Thamudic graffiti as well.

Just past the Nabataean temple on the right is a small path leading up into a little valley that is cut into Jebel Rum. The path leads into a cool, shady hidden spring that wells up from natural reservoirs in the rock. The place, called Ain Shalala in Arabic, is known more popularly as "Lawrence's Spring," largely because of the way he described it during the Great Arab Revolt of 1917-1918, when he reached it exhausted from his battles with the Ottoman Turks and his desert journeys:

I went straight up the gully into the face of the hill, along the ruined wall of the conduit by which a spout of water had once run down the ledges to a Nabathaeen well-house on the valley floor. It was a climb of fifteen minutes to a tired person, and not difficult. At the top, the waterfall, el Shellala as the Arabs named it, was only a few yards away.

Its rushing noise came from my left, by a jutting bastion of cliff over whose crimson face trailed long falling runners of green leaves. The path skirted it in an undercut ledge. On the rock-bulge above were clear-cut Nabathaeen inscriptions, and a sunk panel incised with a monogram or symbol. Around and about were Arab scratches, including tribe-marks, some of which were witnesses of forgotten migrations: but my attention was only for the splashing of water in a crevice under the shadow of the overhanging rock.

From this rock a silver runlet issued into the sunlight. I looked in to see the spout, a little thinner than my wrist, jetting out firmly from a fissure in the roof, and falling with that clean sound into a shallow, frothing pool, behind the step which served as entrance. The walls and roof of the crevice dripped with moisture. Thick ferns and grasses of the finest green made it a paradise just five feet square. (Lawrence, Seven Pillars, Chapter LXIII)

Today, Ain Shalala looks much as Lawrence saw it, and it is a tranquil place in which to sit and rest. From here, one can contemplate Lawrence's "echoing and godlike" vistas: the tortured sandstone, smooth granite and the rippled sand of Wadi Rum. They extend into the enigmatic desert beyond, inviting adventurers to come and behold; perhaps to touch something that is larger than themselves.