

From Egypt to Canaan

Contributed by Stephen Langfur

The foundation of Biblical faith was the deliverance from slavery in Egypt, especially the rescue at Yam Suf, the Reed Sea. On this event is based the belief in a God who is active in history. That saving event, in turn, became the basis for God's claim to obedience at Mount Sinai (Exodus 20: 1-2):

God spoke all these words, saying, "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me…"

In sources other than the Bible, however, we hear nothing about the exodus. It left no trace in Egyptian accounts. Most places on the route, including Mount Sinai, remain unidentified. On the other hand, we do know several things that are consistent with the Biblical report:

1. It was regular practice, in times of famine during the second millennium BC, for Semitic shepherds to move to Egypt.
2. The Exodus stories involving the Midianites fit what we know about them on the basis of archaeology and Egyptian texts .
3. From surveys and digs, we know that hundreds of small, unfortified settlements appeared in the highlands on both sides of the Jordan during the 13th and 12th centuries BC. The people in the highlands on the west did not eat pork.
4. A stele of Pharaoh Merneptah, dated ca. 1205 BC, lists a number of cities in Canaan, and among these it also makes the first extant reference to a people called Israel. By that date, then, Israel was in the land.
5. There is also a more general consideration: If we hold the Exodus account to be pure fabrication, how then can we explain the enormous importance of the exodus and wilderness traditions in the First Testament?

The sojourn in Egypt

The Bible traces the presence of the Israelites in Egypt to a famine in Canaan. Jacob's sons went there for relief. The king of Egypt settled them in the land of Goshen.

Egyptian documents mention this type of thing. The so-called Vienna fragment from the Tomb of Harmhab (1322-1295) has a scene showing Egyptian officials bowing to their superior, Harmhab, who instructs them on what to do with a group of Asiatics whose town has been attacked and destroyed. According to James Breasted's [University of Chicago Press, 1906, Vol. III 10-12|Ancient Records of Egypt,](#) the description shows the Asiatics to be fugitives from the unstable conditions that were rife in Canaan at the time of the [In 1887 a peasant woman at el-Amarna in Egypt discovered 379 clay tablets in the ruins of the Pharaoh Ikhnaton's palace. These included letters in Akkadian from princes of city-states in the land of the Bible, such as Megiddo and Jerusalem, as well as some from Babylonia and Assyria. Written in the 14th century BC, they convey an impression of unstable conditions in the land at that time|Amarna letters.](#)

From the 13th century BC, we find a further example. It comes from a Papyrus Anastasi VI 51-61, printed in James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, Princeton University Press, 1955, 259|group of letters that served as models for Egyptian schoolboys:

"[We] have finished letting the Bedouin tribes of Edom pass the Fortress [of] Mer-ne-Ptah Hotep-hir-Maat – Life, prosperity, health! – which is (in) Tjeku, to the pools of Per-Atum … to keep them alive and to keep their cattle alive, through the great ka of Pharaoh…."

The attraction of Egypt in times of famine was due to the regular flooding of the Nile, which provided both water and fresh soil (silt), making the river's basin a breadbasket. The economic security was not absolute, as we know from the seven lean years in Genesis 41:25-32, "Joseph said to Pharaoh, 'The dream of Pharaoh is one. What God is about to do he has declared to Pharaoh. The seven good cattle are seven years; and the seven good heads of grain are seven years. The dream is one. The seven thin and ugly cattle that came up after them are seven years, and also the seven empty heads of grain blasted with the east wind; they will be seven years of famine. That is the thing which I spoke to Pharaoh. What God is about to do he has shown to Pharaoh. Behold, there come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. There will arise after them seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt. The famine will consume the land, and the plenty will not be known in the land by reason of that famine which follows; for it will be very grievous. The dream was doubled to Pharaoh, because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass.'"|Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream, but it was certainly firmer than in Canaan. The crucial fact here is that Lake Victoria, the Nile's main source, gets 50 inches of rain (ca. 1300 mm.) on average per year. In the Holy Land, by contrast, average annual rainfall varies from about 35 inches in the north to an inch in the southern Negev; much of this water is lost, moreover, because the hills are steep. The contrast, as the ancients saw it, appears in Deuteronomy 11: 10-12.

For the land you are entering to possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and watered it with your foot as in a vegetable garden. No, the land you are crossing to possess is a land of hills and valleys that drinks rain from the sky, a land that Yahweh your God cares for: the eyes of Yahweh your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the end.

We are told in Genesis that Jacob and his family settled in an area called Goshen, "the best of the land of Egypt" (Genesis 45:10, 47:6), "in the land of Ramesses" (Genesis 47:11), where one could eat the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic that the wandering Israelites later longed for (Numbers 11:5). Goshen could also sustain extensive herds (Genesis 45:10, 46:34, 47:3–4; Exodus 12:38). Even pharaoh's flocks were pastured there (Genesis 47:6). According to Baruch Halpern, "The Exodus from Egypt: Myth or Reality?" in Hershel Shanks, ed., *The Rise of Ancient Israel* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992)|Baruch Halpern, conditions in the Wadi Tumilat area (between Succoth and Pithom in the photo below) show all these traits.

This area can qualify as the "land of Ramesses," and we know where the city of Ramesses was. It was built in the 13th century BC on the site of the old Hyksos capital, Avaris, at a place today called "The Exodus…," cited above, Halpern refers us to Manfred Bietak, "Avaris and Piramesse," on the location of Ramses at Tell ed-Dab'a, and John van Seters, *The Hyksos: A New Investigation*, New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1966, pp 127–151.|Tel ed-Dab'a. Avaris/Ramesses stood. However, in the 11th or 10th century (that is, after the exodus), the capital was shifted 13 miles northward from Ramesses to Tanis. Halpern thinks that some of the Biblical writers mistook Tanis for the older Ramesses. 17 miles north of Wadi Tumilat. Goshen, on this view, would have been the area between Wadi Tumilat and Ramesses.

But if the Israelite slaves lived in the delta, what do we do about the fact that during much of the 2nd millennium BC, the pharaoh lived 350 miles south of the delta at Thebes? This doesn't seem to jibe with the Biblical account, which has Moses and Aaron shuttling between Pharaoh and the slaves. Or was there a time when the pharaoh did live in the delta?

Indeed, the pharaoh lived in the delta twice during the second millennium: once in the time of the Hyksos. In the 17th century BC, Asiatics, apparently from Canaan, settled massively in the eastern Nile delta, eventually seizing dominion over lower (northern) Egypt. The Egyptians, who called them "Hyksos" ("foreign rulers" or "shepherd kings"), managed to throw them out after a century. The ceramic remains, scarabs and weapons at the Hyksos capital of Avaris are very similar to those found in contemporary Canaanite sites. In the century before this Canaanite conquest of lower Egypt, the major cities in Canaan received massive systems of fortification, including huge earthen ramparts, which gave many of the tells the shape they hold to the present day. Hyksos, who had their capital at Avaris, and again when Ramesses II rebuilt Avaris as his capital, naming it after himself. The Israelites were likely the workers, for we read: "They built storage cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Ramesses (Exodus 1:11)" The location of Pithom is controversial, but, as said, we know where Ramesses was. Its construction under Ramesses II (1279-1213 BC) fits well with other factors that enable us to date the exodus in the late 13th century:

On these considerations, then, Ramesses II would have been the pharaoh of the oppression. We possess in fact an Egyptian document, known as Leiden Papyrus 348. In it an official of the pharaoh instructs a foreman to "distribute grain rations to the soldiers and to the 'Apiru who transport stones to the great pylon of Rames[s]es." The word 'Apiru ("Habiru" or "Hapiru" in cuneiform sources) is tantalizingly close in sound to the word "Hebrew." Nahum Sarna, "Israel in Egypt: The Egyptian Sojourn and the Exodus," in Hershel Shanks, ed., *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple*, Biblical Archaeology Society, 1999. Nahum Sarna comments:

These people are referred to in more than 200 West Semitic inscriptions. The 'Apiru or Habiru are generally regarded as a kind of renegade, foreign population; one scholar has called them "uprooted migrants," people who "lived for awhile as foreigners in another country." Sometimes they are identified as mercenaries. If the term "'Apiru" is indeed related to "Hebrew," then Hebrews—or, more accurately, proto-Hebrews—may well have been part of the Egyptian *corvée*, or forced labor crew, who built Ramesses' capital in the 13th century B.C.E., just as the Bible says. The term "Apiru" clearly referred to people of low social status; it is a derogatory term. In the Book of Exodus, "Hebrews" is not used by the Israelites in reference to themselves, but by foreigners speaking of the Israelites (see, for example, Exodus 1:16, 2:6), and by the narrator in the context of Egyptians vis-à-vis the Israelites (for example, Exodus 1:19, 2:7, 3:18, 5:3, etc.). We should not conclude that all 'Apiru became Hebrews; but, if the etymological equation is correct, it would seem likely that some 'Apiru were among the workers at Pithom and Raamses and perhaps through them the name 'Ibrîm (Hebrews) began to be applied to this people as an ethnic term.

The end of the reign of Ramesses II coincides with a decline of Egyptian power in Canaan, leading to a total withdrawal by 1150 BC. This was a period of famine and upheaval throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, when hungry peoples were on the move, bringing down city after city, from Mycenae in Greece through Asia Minor to the very borders of Egypt. The Israelite exodus may be seen in the context of the general chaos enveloping the region from 1250 in Greece until 1150 in Canaan.

The role of the Midianites

The exodus account shows a friendly relationship between Moses and the Midianites. This 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 their leader as Moses' mentor.

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: {jtips}According to documentary critics, the different names reflect different sources.|Reuel and Jethro.{/jtips} 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.

Midianite pottery appears on both sides of the {jtips}The long dry north-south valley between the Dead and Red Seas|Arava,{/jtips} mostly on the east but also at Timna on the west. They were apparently the first people to worship Yahweh. 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 ({jtips2}Moses said to Hobab, the son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses's 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's journey. The ark of the covenant of Yahweh went before them three days's journey, to seek out a resting place for them.|Numbers 10:29-33{/jtips2}).

What is more, from the Midianite period at Timna (so attested by the pottery) we find the remains of a tent shrine, converted from an Egyptian temple. Just inside the walls of the structure, archaeologists discovered much linen and wool, dyed red and yellow and interwoven with pearls. (The dry climate had preserved it.) The Midianites had broken the images of the goddess Hathor, setting up instead a series of standing stones (matzevot) along the western wall. This brings to mind the Tent of Meeting where Yahweh regularly encountered Moses. Only one graven image was found in the Midianite shrine: in its holy of holies, a copper snake not five inches long. One thinks of the bronze snake made by Moses at Punon (Faynan in today's Jordan), an area of ancient copper mines where Midianite pottery was also found. (We shall say more about the bronze snake below.)

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 – SL], the Arabah [Arava], and beyond, fits rather nicely the locale and routes of a people [the Midianites – SL] known for their metalsmithing and caravaneering. The floruit 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, as well as the Edomites, were also lumped with the shasu. (The root of the word, in Egyptian, may mean to wander or plunder.) These shasu were Beduin-like shepherds and raiders. 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." Perhaps these Yahweh-nomads were the Midianites. Nearby in the same document, the land of Seir is mentioned. With Seir we associate another shasu group, the Edomites.

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.)

Where was Seir? Bible maps often put it east of the Arava, meaning "desert," the term is used geographically for the hot, dry valley stretching a hundred miles from the Dead Sea to the Red Sea because it is associated with Edom, which settled on the east, south of Wadi Hasa (the Biblical Zered). But the Edomites did not become sedentary until the 9th century BC at the earliest. Not a single Iron Age (1200-586 BC) settlement from before that date has been found in Jordan south of Wadi Hasa. Piotr Bienkowski and Eveline van der Steen, "Tribes, Trade, and Towns: A New Framework for the Late Iron Age in Southern Jordan and the Negev," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 323 (Aug., 2001), p. 23. Deuteronomy, we shall see in the next section, locates Seir to the west of the Arava.

The Journey

The 12th century BC was a time of famine and upheaval throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, when hungry peoples were on the move, bringing down city after city. The catastrophe seems to have unfolded from north to south. The Dorians invaded Greece, and Mycenaean civilization fell. Next was the turn of the Hittite Empire in Asia Minor. Despite emergency shipments of grain from Egypt, it collapsed. Egypt too was hard pressed by the Libyans and the Peoples of the Sea (including the Philistines): by 1150, it would have to withdraw from Canaan entirely. The Israelite escape from

Egypt occurred amid this chaos. We can imagine a group of slaves who saw the opportunity and seized it.

The account of the departure "contains several geographical points," writes The Sacred Bridge, Jerusalem: Carta, 2006, p. 119 "that square with the recent study of the northeastern Delta from an archaeological point of view." He draws especially on the work of "Comments on the 'Exodus,'" in A. F. Rainey, ed. Egypt, Israel, Sinai, Archaeological and Historical Relationships in the Biblical Period, Tel Aviv, 1987. M. Bietak.

The escape begins with a journey from Succoth, which lay within reach of the desert (see the satellite photo below). It would be too risky to take the Great Trunk Road, anachronistically called "the way of the land of the Philistines" (Exodus 13:17). The Egyptians had bases there at 15-mile intervals, and, given the chaos of the time, they would be on alert. The decision is to flee the other way, into the wilderness. The Hebrew for "wilderness" is midbar, from the root davar, meaning "to graze." The various wildernesses we read about - of Shur, of Zin, of Paran, of Sinai - were not sheer desert; they were grazing lands for goats - and in particular, This goat can go two weeks without water (compared with one week for northern goats) and then drink almost half its body weight in water within two minutes. See A. Shkolnik, A. Borut and J. Chorniak in Zoological Society of London Symposia 31, New York: Academic, 1972 pp. 229-40. the black dwarf desert goat that inhabits Sinai today. The mountains of south central Sinai, we should add, get an average of 2.4 inches of rain per year, and the climate has undergone Itzhaq Beit-Arieh, "Two Cultures in Southern Sinai in the Third Millennium B. C." Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, No. 263 (Aug., 1986), pp. 27-54 no essential change since the third millennium BC.

The Israelites leave Succoth and camp "in Etam [unidentified] on the edge of the wilderness (Exodus 13:20)." They seem now to be on the threshold of freedom, but then, for some reason, Yahweh tells them to turn back. They are commanded to head north and to camp "before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea; before Baal-zephon, make a camp on the sea." A Cited by Rainey, Sacred Bridge, op. cit., p. 119 Phoenician inscription supports an identification of Baal-zephon with Tell Defeneh, the classical Daphne, which is known. Migdol is identified at Tell el-Heir or in its vicinity. Both places are shown in the satellite photo above. And the sea beside which the Israelites camped? Between Migdol and Baal-zephon was a marsh of which today a mere trace remains. Here papyrus grew; it would have been the Reed Sea.

If you trace the itinerary on the photo above, starting at Succoth, moving toward the wilderness, then turning back to Baal-zephon, you will see the basis for Exodus 14:3, where Yahweh says to Moses: "Pharaoh will think, 'The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.' And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them."

Pharaoh "overtook them encamping by the sea, beside Pihahiroth, before Baal Zephon." Here are excerpts from the story in Exodus 14: 10-31 -

When Pharaoh drew near, the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them; and they were very afraid. The children of Israel cried out to Yahweh. They said to Moses, "Because there were no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness?"

Yahweh said to Moses, "Why do you cry to me? Speak to the children of Israel, that they go forward. Lift up your rod, and stretch out your hand over the sea, and divide it: and the children of Israel shall go into the midst of the sea on dry ground. Behold, I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians, and they shall go in after them...."

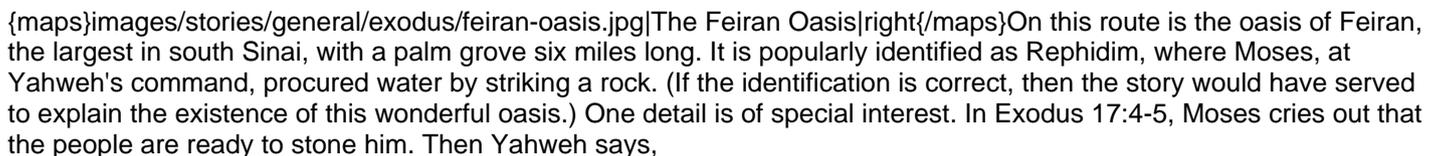
Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and Yahweh caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all the night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. The children of Israel went into the midst of the sea on the dry ground, and the waters were a wall to them on their right hand, and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went in after them into the midst of the sea: all of Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen.

Yahweh said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the waters may come again on the Egyptians, on their chariots, and on their horsemen." Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its strength when the morning appeared; and the Egyptians fled against it. Yahweh overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. The waters returned, and covered the chariots and the horsemen, even all Pharaoh's army that went in after them into the sea. There remained not so much as one of them. ...Thus Yahweh saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work which Yahweh did to the Egyptians, and the people feared Yahweh; and they believed in Yahweh, and in his servant Moses.

Moses then led them into the Wilderness of Shur for three days. There follow a number of sites that cannot be identified, and then they arrive at a mountain in the Wilderness of Sinai. There are reasons (we shall develop them gradually) to think that mountain was in south central Sinai, among those that include the traditional "Mount Moses" (Jebel Musa). In that case, the most logical route from the west would have followed the meandering Wadi Feiran, as the asphalt road does today.

Here is a close up of the Wadi Feiran route:

Where was Mount Sinai?

The Feiran Oasis
On this route is the oasis of Feiran, the largest in south Sinai, with a palm grove six miles long. It is popularly identified as Rephidim, where Moses, at Yahweh's command, procured water by striking a rock. (If the identification is correct, then the story would have served to explain the existence of this wonderful oasis.) One detail is of special interest. In Exodus 17:4-5, Moses cries out that the people are ready to stone him. Then Yahweh says,

Pass before the people, and take the elders of Israel with you. And the rod that you smote the Nile with, take it with you and go. Behold, I shall stand before you there on the rock, in Horeb, and you shall strike the rock and water will come out.

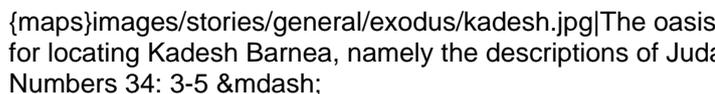
Now, Horeb is a frequent alternative name for Mt. Sinai. It seems from this passage that Moses and the elders depart from the people, from Rephidim, but not very far, to Horeb. Suppose that the Feinan oasis is Rephidim. There is a grand mountain whose north edge is two miles from Feinan, and various scholars have identified it as Horeb-Sinai. This is Mount Serbal. Here is the relationship:

A problem with this location for Mt. Sinai is that the nearest broad plain where the Israelites might gather is the Feiran oasis itself. To some this seems rather far for shuttling between Yahweh and the people, as Moses did. At the traditional location, Mount Moses, there is a broad plain. So if we are picturing 600,000 men plus women and children gathered below (Exodus 12:37), we should prefer Mount Moses:

Exodus has the Israelites staying for an extended time in Rephidim: here the battle with Amalek occurs, and the visit of Jethro is placed at this point in the narrative. Then they set out, enter the Wilderness of Sinai, and encamp before "the mountain" (Exodus 19:1).

Do we have any other hints as to the location of Mt. Sinai? Deut. 1:2 is helpful:

It is eleven days from Horeb, by the way of Mount Seir, to Kadesh Barnea.

The Bible gives us indicators for locating Kadesh Barnea, namely the descriptions of Judah's southern border in Numbers 34 and Joshua 15:3. Here is Numbers 34: 3-5 —

And your south side will be from the Wilderness of Zin beside Edom, and your southern border will be, on the east, from the edge of the Dead Sea, and the border will make a turn south of the Scorpion Ascent, heading toward Zin, and come out south of Kadesh Barnea, and then it will go out to Hatzar-Adar, thence to Atzmon, and the border will turn from Atzmon to the River of Egypt and issue to the sea.

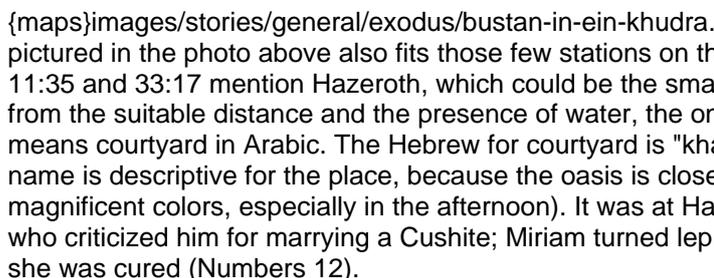
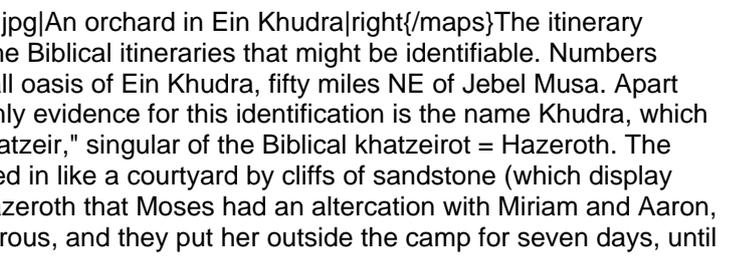
Joshua 15:3 is similar. Both passages place Kadesh between the estuary of the "brook of Egypt" (Wadi al-Arish) and the southern tip of the Dead Sea. Such a place between the two is the area of 'Ain el-Qudeirat, a spring that produces about 40 ^{tips}A cubic meter is a thousand liters, roughly a thousand quarts^{tips} per hour, creating the largest oasis in northern Sinai. There is nothing at all like it between Wadi al-Arish and the Dead Sea. The site was almost certainly Kadesh Barnea.

We cannot locate all the places in Numbers 34: 3-5, but we do know Wadi al-Arish and Kadesh. The Scorpion Ascent, as the first point mentioned west of the Dead Sea's southern tip, was probably close to the place of the same name in the Roman period. With that much, we can draw the border like this (we shall later discuss the location of Edom west of the Arava):

Returning to Deut. 1:2, note the inclusion of Mount Seir: "It is eleven days from Horeb, by the way of Mount Seir, to Kadesh Barnea." As said in the previous section, Bible maps often put Seir east of the Arava, because it is associated with Edom, which settled on the east, south of Wadi Hasa (the Biblical Zered). But the Edomites did not become sedentary until the 9th century BC at the earliest.

We have ²Yet certain proposals may be ruled out. Mount Karkom, in the Negev, is a fifty-mile journey from Kadesh, much less than eleven days, and the rich finds there date from long before the time in question. As for a site east of the Arava, how would the Israelites have reached it without going through the region of Ezion Geber? In the itineraries of Numbers 33:35 and Deuteronomy 2:8, however, Ezion Geber is first mentioned as a station well after Mt. Sinai. (Admittedly, though, there is no sign of a settlement at Ezion Geber before the 10th century.) In addition, sites in the Hejaz were not within eleven days' journey of Kadesh. ²no way to pinpoint Horeb-Sinai. ² Both alternatives given above - Mt. Moses and Mt. Serbal - fit the measurement of eleven days to Kadesh. Using the course of the modern roads to the north shore of the Red Sea (which follow a topography that has probably not changed much in 4200 years), and then taking the road from there to Kadesh, which skirts the southern edge of Seir, we measure a total of about 200 miles. In eleven days, that would work out to eighteen miles a day, which is conceivable.

To Kadesh

An orchard in Ein Khudra The itinerary pictured in the photo above also fits those few stations on the Biblical itineraries that might be identifiable. Numbers 11:35 and 33:17 mention Hazeroth, which could be the small oasis of Ein Khudra, fifty miles NE of Jebel Musa. Apart from the suitable distance and the presence of water, the only evidence for this identification is the name Khudra, which means courtyard in Arabic. The Hebrew for courtyard is "khatzeir," singular of the Biblical khatzeirot = Hazeroth. The name is descriptive for the place, because the oasis is closed in like a courtyard by cliffs of sandstone (which display magnificent colors, especially in the afternoon). It was at Hazeroth that Moses had an altercation with Miriam and Aaron, who criticized him for marrying a Cushite; Miriam turned leprous, and they put her outside the camp for seven days, until she was cured (Numbers 12).

The narrative has them move from Hazeroth to the Wilderness of Paran, which is not identified. From there, according to Numbers 13-14, the ¹I use this term as the equivalent of "the children of Israel," but many scholars today would prefer to say (correctly I think) "proto-Israelites." ¹Israelites ¹ sent men to spy out the land they had been promised. The spies returned with glowing reports, but they also described gigantic warriors. Only Caleb and Joshua urged Israel to go up and attack. The people shrank back, complaining that Moses had led them out of Egypt to die. Condemning them for their lack of faith, Yahweh announced that they would indeed die in the wilderness. Except for Caleb and Joshua, only the next generation would enter the land—after forty years.

From Paran, Israel journeys to Kadesh (Numbers 20:1). The itinerary in Numbers 33 does not mention Paran. Instead, on leaving Hazeroth, the wanderers go through a long list of places which cannot be identified (perhaps they could be lumped together as being in Paran) until they reach Ezion Geber (Numbers 33:35). 1 Kings 9:26 says that Solomon built ships there and locates it "near Elot, on the shore of the Reed Sea, in the land of Edom." This would probably be the north shore, closest to Judah, where a structure has been found that dates back at least to the 8th century BC. With this verse in Kings, the name "Reed Sea" is shifted from the famous sea in Egypt to the one that we today call the Red Sea, in the Gulf of Aqaba.

Numbers 33:36 then has them head NNW from Ezion Geber to "Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin." There has long been a road from the northern edge of the Red Sea to Kadesh, and thence to the place where Wadi al-Arish (the River of Egypt) meets the Mediterranean. (This road linked the [Exodus 13:17](#). It was the southern leg of what we've designated in this website as the Great Trunk Road, often mis-called the Via Maris|["Way of the land of the Philistines"](#) with the Red Sea.) Choosing the easiest path, it may have followed the age-old route from the Red Sea to Kadesh shown in the photo above. Here is a detail:

According to Numbers 20: 14-21, while at Kadesh the Israelites asked the King of Edom to let them march through his territory.

"We are in Kadesh, a city on your border [!]. Please let us pass through your land: we will not pass through field or through vineyard, neither will we drink of the water of the wells: we will go along the king's highway; we will not turn aside to the right hand nor to the left, until we have passed your border."

But Edom refused, so Israel "turned away from him."

This episode has engendered much commentary. The account in Deuteronomy 2, we shall see below, gives the contrary impression that Edom helped the wanderers. And in [An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of Yahweh; even to the tenth generation shall none belonging to them enter into the assembly of Yahweh forever: because they didn't meet you with bread and with water in the way, when you came forth out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. ... You shall not abhor an Edomite; for he is your brother: you shall not abhor an Egyptian, because you lived as a foreigner in his land. The children of the third generation who are born to them shall enter into the assembly of Yahweh.](#) [Deuteronomy 23: 3-8](#), we are told that Moab and Ammon must not be admitted to the assembly of Yahweh, because they did not help the Israelites with bread and water on the journey to Canaan. No such charge is made against the Edomites, and they can be admitted to the assembly after the third generation. [Wolfgang Oswald](#) ["Die Revision des Edombildes in Numeri XX 14-21," Vetus Testamentum, Vol. 50, Fasc. 2 \(Apr., 2000\), pp. 218-232](#) interprets the passage in Numbers 20 about the Edomite refusal as the massive revision of an earlier, positive account, reflecting a change for the worse in relations with Edom. Oswald does not go into the matter, but there is reason to think that in the 6th century BC, while Babylonia was attacking from the north, the Edomites took advantage of Judah's weakness in the south to grab a swathe of the Negev; they even progressed to Hebron and the Shephelah. (For more on this conquest, see [here](#), and on Judah's reaction, [here](#).) The story of Edom's refusal during the wilderness wandering would have added to the anti-Edomite fire in Judahite hearts.

Returning to the account in Numbers, we next find the Israelites at Mount Hor, which is still "near the border of Edom" (20:23, 33:37). Here Aaron dies and is buried. We do not have a location for the mountain, but the travelers are west of the Arava, for we read, at the start of Numbers 21 about a conflict with the king of Arad, "who lived in the Negev." He heard that the Israelites were coming along the Way of Atharim (unidentified) and he attacked them, but the Israelites prevailed and destroyed his towns. We know no city of Arad at this period—the place that the Israelites later called by that name had been a mere ruin for more than a millennium. Clearly, however, the "king of Arad" lived in the Negev, and the battles occurred there.

The account continues (Numbers 21:4): "And they journeyed from Mount Hor, by way of the Reed [Red] Sea, to circumvent the land of Edom." In the next verse we find them at a place where they make their usual complaints about lack of water, etc., and Yahweh sends venomous snakes to bite them. After Moses intercedes, Yahweh tells him to make a snake and put it on a pole: anyone who sees it will live. He makes a bronze snake. They then journey to a place called

Oboth (unidentified).

Where was the place of the snakes? Let us compare the itinerary in Numbers 33: 37-43. From Mount Hor they journey to Tzalmonah, thence to Punon, and thence to Oboth. We don't know where Tzalmona was. (The Sacred Bridge, Jerusalem: Carta, 2006, p. 121. Anson Rainey points out a Roman fort called Calamona in the Arava, 20 miles south of the Dead Sea.) But we do know Punon—today's Faynan (preserving the basic sounds of the name) in Wadi Faynan (Wadi Punon).

Punon (1000 feet up from the Arava toward the Transjordanian plateau, which is higher than 3000 feet) is rich in copper. The copper of Punon was once of a piece with the copper of Timna, 60 miles to the south on the Arava's west side. Because of the shifting tectonic plates of Africa and Asia, the east side of the rift valley has moved that far north, relative to the west. Indeed, the first Iron Age: 1200 - 586 BC settlements in Transjordan were built for mining copper in Wadi Faynan. "It has been estimated that the most important Iron Age copper-production centers in the Faynan area produced between 6,500 and 13,000 tons of copper, considerably more than in any other period" Piotr Bienkowski and Eveline van der Steen, "Tribes, Trade, and Towns: A New Framework for the Late Iron Age in Southern Jordan and the Negev," Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, No. 323 (Aug., 2001), p. 23. The organizational work required for mining may have sparked the formation of the Edomite kingdom in the 9th or 8th century: its main city, Bozrah, was located nearby.

In Numbers 21 we have the sequence: (1) Mt. Hor, (2) the place of the snake incident, (3) Oboth, and in Numbers 33 we have the sequence (1) Mt. Hor, (2) Tzalmonah, (3) Punon, (4) Oboth. It seems reasonable to locate the snake incident at Punon. A major mining area at Punon, by the way, bears the name Khirbet en-Nahas, which can be translated "ruins of the snake" or "ruins of copper. In Hebrew, the word for "copper," nakhoshet, is related to the Hebrew for "snake," nakhsh. The story at Punon may be an etiological one, explaining the custom of offering incense to a bronze serpent in the Jerusalem Temple, called nekhushan. Hezekiah put a stop to this practice and tore the serpent down (2 Kings 18: 3-5).

Putting all this together, we get the following picture. From Kadesh, the Israelites wanted to connect with a road that would take them east to Punon and Transjordan. There were several, as you can see:

The desired road is called the king's way in Numbers 20: the term may be taken from the story of Sihon's refusal (Numbers 21:22 - this is its only other appearance in the Bible) or perhaps it is used generically for a main road under the protection of a king or chieftain. The author of Numbers 20 sees "the way through the wilderness of Edom" in 2 Kings 3:8; the allied kings of Judah, Israel and Edom decide to take the road eastward in order to attack Moab in Transjordan. When he refuses, the Israelites have no choice but to backtrack SSE, 85 miles on the Kadesh-Red Sea road, circumventing the part of the Negev controlled by Edom; they then head 80 miles north through the hot and waterless Arava to (Tzalmona and) Punon. No wonder they complain.

Both Numbers 21 and Numbers 33 give the next stop as Oboth (unknown), followed by "Iye Abarim" (unknown, but according to Numbers 21:11 "in the desert facing Moab toward the sunrise"). Numbers 21:12 next has them at the Zered River (see photo above), which would later form Moab's border with Edom. Numbers 33:45 also has them camp in "Moab," but north of the Arnon Riverbed at Dibon-Gad (where the 9th-century BC Mesha stele was found).

The account in Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy describes the same route. Here too we have the story of the spies, though sent from Kadesh instead of Paran. When the people shrink back at the report, God condemns that generation and then commands them to turn around and journey toward the desert on the Reed Sea Road (1:40). As in Numbers, after hearing this, they have second thoughts, and they make an attempt to conquer the Canaanite highlands from Kadesh. The highlanders defeat them "in Seir, as far as Hormah." Other passages place Hormah in the Negev, so Seir is in the Negev. According to Deuteronomy, then, it is because of the highlanders that the Israelites have to backtrack 85 miles.

And we turned and traveled toward the wilderness, on the Reed Sea road, as Yahweh had said to me. And we went around Mount Seir for many days. And Yahweh spoke to me, saying, "Enough of going around this mountain. Turn north! (Deut. 2: 1 passim)

They go around Mount Seir and turn north.

And as for the people, command them and say, you are passing at the border of your brothers, the children of Esau, who live in Seir."

The Israelites do not require permission, because here the Edomites are afraid of them! The passage continues:

And they will fear you. Take special care and do not provoke them, because I won't give you a foot of their land, for it is Esau's inheritance—to him I gave Mount Seir. Food you shall buy from them with silver, and you shall eat. Water too you shall purchase from them with silver, and you shall drink.

In order to locate Seir more precisely, remember that the border description from [{tips2}](#) And your south side will be from the Wilderness of Zin beside Edom, and your southern border will be, on the east, from the edge of the Dead Sea, and the border will make a turn south of the Scorpion Ascent, heading toward Zin, and come out south of Kadesh Barnea, and then it will go out to Hatzar-Adar, thence to Atzmon, and the border will turn from Atzmon to the River of Egypt and issue to the sea. [Numbers 34: 3-5](#) [{tips2}](#) leaves much of what we today call the Negev outside Judah, namely the highlands that constitute the southeastern Negev. This, it would seem, would be the region called Seir in Deuteronomy. (See the photo below.)

We cannot know the route of the wilderness wandering, but the following makes historical-geographical sense: The Negev, as wilderness, could not support a lengthy campaign against the Hebron area. The Israelites were stymied, therefore, not only in the west by the Egyptians, but also in the south, where they had suffered a defeat. They had no choice but to make their attempt from Transjordan, where they could have access to pasturage and farmland. To reach it, however, they could not risk taking one of the east-west Negev roads, because that would expose them again to the highlanders (who were now on the alert). Instead, they backtracked to the Red Sea, circumvented Seir, and marched north eighty miles through the waterless Arava.

So we passed our brothers the children of Esau, who dwell in Seir, from the way of the Arava, from Elath and from Ezion Geber. We turned and went through the wilderness of Moab (Deut. 2:8).

Here are the Negev roads again, with arrows for the route they would have had to take:

A few verses later (Deut. 2:13) Yahweh tells them to cross the River Zered.

And we crossed the River Zered. And the days that we journeyed from Kadesh Barnea until we crossed the River Zered were 38 years, until the last of the generation of the warriors had perished from the camp, as Yahweh had sworn to them.

Settlement in Canaan

Archaeology {tips}Israel Finkelstein, "Ethnicity and Origin of the Iron I Settlers in the Highlands of Canaan: Can the Real Israel Stand Up?" The Biblical Archaeologist, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Dec., 1996), p. 209{indicates{/tips} that after the Egyptians expelled the Hyksos (around 1550 BC), the number of cities and villages in the Cisjordanian highlands dwindled from 248 to 29, in Transjordan from 96 to 32. However, beginning in the late 13th century BCE (on the threshold of a period that scholars call Iron Age I), there was a wave of new settlement on both sides of the Jordan. In the highlands of Canaan the number jumped from 29 to 254, in Transjordan from 32 to 218. Most of these settlements were small, crude and unfortified. At first they were located in places uncongenial to farming. A distinguishing feature of Israelite ethnicity - indeed, so far the only distinguishing feature - is that the new settlers in the highlands of Canaan did not eat pork. Among those of their settlements that have been studied so far, hardly any pig bones were found, whereas many appear at this time in the lowlands, as well as in the Transjordanian highland city of Heshbon. For the Cisjordanian highlands, {tips}"Save Us from Postmodern Malarkey," Biblical Archaeology Review 26:02, March/April 2000.|William Dever{/tips} writes:

Population estimates, based on site size and well-developed ethnographic parallels, indicate a central hill-country population of only about 12,000 at the end of the Late Bronze Age (13th century B.C.E.), which then grew rapidly to about 55,000 by the 12th century B.C.E. and then to about 75,000 by the 11th century B.C.E. Such a dramatic population explosion simply cannot be accounted for by natural increase alone, much less by positing small groups of pastoral nomads settling down. Large numbers of people must have migrated here from somewhere else, strongly motivated to colonize an underpopulated fringe area of urban Canaan, now in decline at the end of the Late Bronze Age.

Here is the view of {tips}"Israel in Merneptah's Inscription and Reliefs," Israel Exploration Journal, 51: 68 (2001)|A. F. Rainey:{/tips}

The Egyptian records reveal that the Shasu pastoralists were becoming more numerous and troublesome during the thirteenth century BCE. The archaeological surveys in the central hill country indicate that the Iron I settlements initially sprang up in marginal areas where pastoralists could graze their flocks and engage in dry farming. Later they spread westward, cleared the forests and began building agricultural terraces. Nowadays there is no compelling reason to doubt the general trend of the Biblical tradition that those pastoralists were mainly immigrants from Transjordan.

Yet some of these new settlers may have come from within Canaan itself. In the 13th century BCE, the Egyptians strengthened their hold on the lowlands. They took power from local notables and put it in the hands of Egyptian officials, imposing new laws on everyone, including the nomadic, freedom-loving Shasu. To escape the central authority, some of the Shasu probably shrank back into the hill country where they could be free.

The change in Egyptian administration was accompanied by economic exploitation, which consisted mainly in the transfer of grain to Egyptian hands. Archaeologists find that the Canaanite towns at this time were unfortified: apparently, Egypt forbade them to build walls, in order to prevent rebellion. Nevertheless, when famine struck in the late 13th century, revolts took place.

The son and successor of Ramesses II, Merneptah, recorded sending grain by ship to rescue the land of Hatti (namely, the Hittite Empire in Asia Minor). The effort failed and Hatti fell before hordes of roving, hungry peoples. On his western border, Merneptah fought off attacks by an alliance of Libyans and Sea Peoples, who had left their Aegean homelands in quest of food. A poem on a victory stele, dated to about 1205 BC, celebrates his victory over a number of Canaanite city-states as well as a people called Israel:

The princes, prostrated, say 'Shalom';

None raises his head among the Nine Bows.

Now that Tehenu (Libya) has come to ruin, Hatti (the Hittite realm) is pacified;

Canaan has been plundered into every sort of woe.

Ashkelon has been overcome, Gezer has been captured,

Yeno'am was made non-existent;

Israel was laid waste, his seed is not.

Hurru has become a widow because of Egypt.

All lands have united themselves in peace,

anyone who was restless, he has been subdued.

Here is the first mention of Israel outside the Bible (proclaiming its annihilation!). An Egyptian sign placed beside the name indicates a people or tribe, not a city like Ashkelon, Gezer or Yeno'am.

By 1205, then, the exodus and wilderness wandering had taken place. Israel was in the land.