

The Exodus Mysteries

of Midian, Sinai & Jabal al-Lawz

Glen A. Fritz, PhD

Did the biblical Exodus from Egypt really happen?

Did its events unfold some 3400 years ago as supposedly recorded by a man named Moses?

If so, why the longstanding obscurity about Mount Sinai, where the Ten Commandments were given and the Hebrews encamped for eleven months?

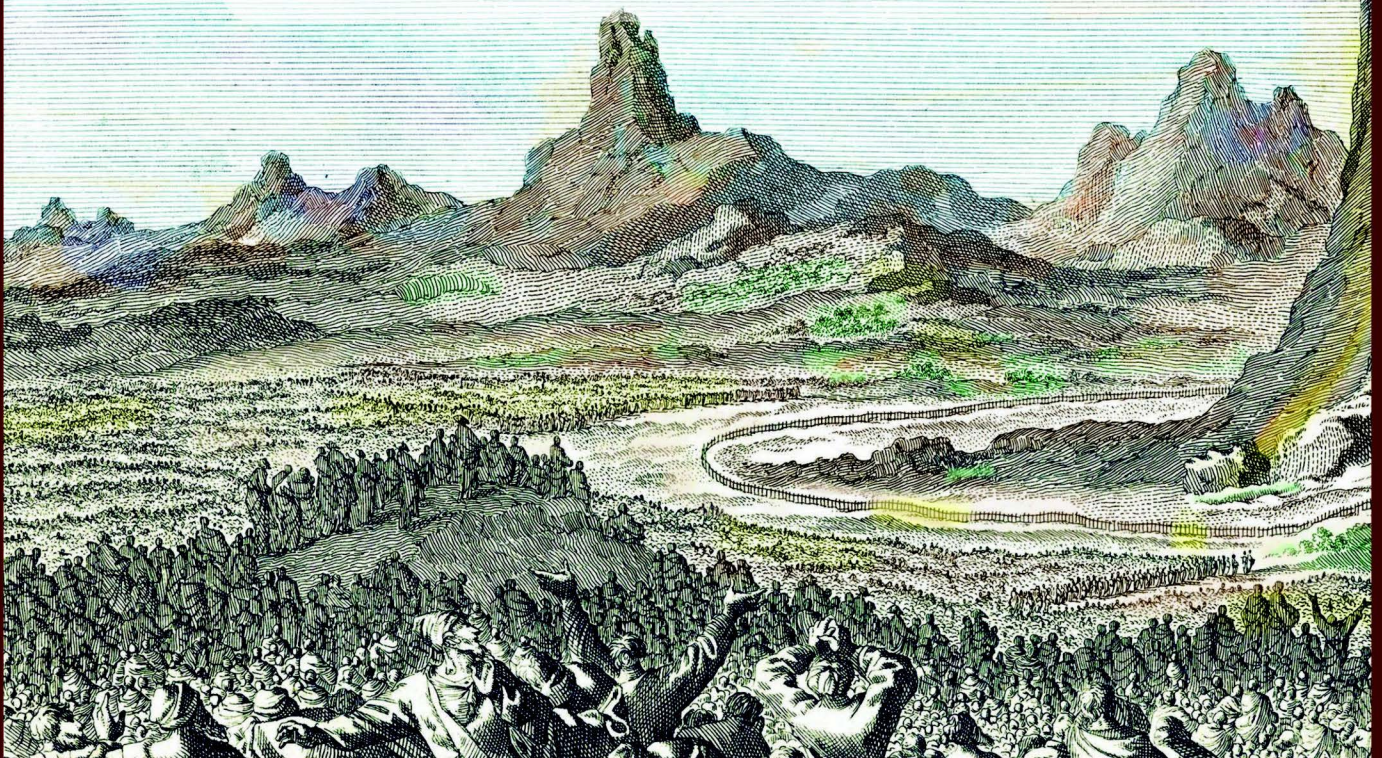
Many Exodus enigmas trace back to disagreement about the reality or the location of the miraculous "Red Sea" crossing on the way to the mountain.

Some Mount Sinai confusion stems from faulty traditions about the Land of Midian, where Moses was exiled for 40 years and traveled to the "Mountain of God." Ancient history puts Midian far from Egypt in northwest Arabia.

Egyptologists, theologians, archaeologists, and historians have tried to explain the Exodus, relying mainly on traditions, linguistics, and archaeology. But disappointing results have led many to conclude that the Exodus was a myth.

What if these scholars have erred by looking in the wrong places, or by using the wrong tools? Although the Exodus is clearly a geographical problem, few investigators have approached it using rigorous geographical methods.

This book attempts to break from the fold-by-apply-and-passionate, evidence-based geographical analysis to the location of Mount Sinai and the Exodus route required to reach it.



The Exodus Mysteries:
of Midian, Sinai & *Jabal al-Lawz*



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Summary:

This work presents an in-depth geographical analysis and exposé of the route of the biblical Exodus between the “Red Sea” crossing and Mount Sinai. Based on the author’s previous research, the Hebrew Bible places *Yam Suph*, the Red Sea of the Exodus, at the Gulf of Aqaba. This finding negates the underpinnings for a Mount Sinai in the Sinai Peninsula and pushes its likely locale into northwest Arabia.

In order to reconstruct the route to an Arabian Mount Sinai, the mountain’s position must be ascertained. This process requires an estimation of the domain of ancient *Midian* due to its historical geography links with the mountain, starting with Moses’ Exodus 3:1 excursion to it. The topography neighboring this *Midian* region can then be used as a framework for plotting pertinent historical and geographical data, including the proposed meanings of the *Horeb* and *Sinai* terms.

This systematic analysis does point to the *Jabal al-Lawz* range, which has been suspected as a potential Mount Sinai site for several decades. The proposition that *Jabal al-Maqla* within the *Lawz* range hosted the Exodus activity is evaluated relative to geography, historical travel patterns, topography, hydrology, and archaeology. The claim that the *Jabal al-Maqla* peak was blackened by supernatural heating during the Exodus is also assessed geologically and biblically.

This array of historical and geographical data is applied to the biblical Exodus itinerary to reconstruct the most feasible route between the sea and the projected Mount Sinai. The work concludes with an epilogue summarizing the travels beyond Mount Sinai, with an emphasis on the location of *Kadesh Barnea* at the southern border of Canaan.

Cover illustration: adapted from Marten Schagen, *De Wetgeving op den Berg Sinai*, 1732 (after Jan Luyken), Amsterdam (author’s collection)

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FOREWORD

There is an unhappy tendency in the present day to consider science and modern discovery as antagonistic to Scripture truth; and against this pernicious notion I would now protest, for truth was never known to suffer from honest inquiry. Something there must always be that requires more than material proof, that can be grasped by faith alone; but he who investigates fearlessly and reverently will be thankful for the light which science sheds, and not despair if she leaves something unrevealed.

--Orientalist E. H. Palmer, *The Desert of the Exodus* (1871, 530)

The enigmas of the Exodus unexpectedly overtook my thoughts during my first visit to the Near East in 1996, when fellow travelers expressed dismay about the confusion surrounding the location of Mount Sinai. It seemed to me that there had to be an explanation and, by the year 2000, I had begun serious study of the Exodus. I soon discovered that cartographic and satellite imagery analysis skills would be helpful in my quest to retrace the route, which propelled me into graduate-level geography studies at Texas State University. Although I had not set out to earn a degree, I did receive a PhD in 2006.

Over the last two decades, some passionate rhetoric has been launched by pundits who favor a Sinai Peninsula location for Mount Sinai over an Arabian Peninsula location such as the *Jabal al-Lawz* mountain range. However, this polemic really boils down to a disagreement about the location of the sea of the Exodus, the Hebrew *Yam Suph* that was miraculously parted. Was it near Egypt, or was it on the eastern side of the Sinai Peninsula at the Gulf of Aqaba? Unfortunately, the “Red Sea” term used in Bible translations is too generic to differentiate between its two gulfs and, by itself, cannot answer this question.

My 2006 PhD dissertation, *The Lost Sea of the Exodus*, demonstrated that *Yam Suph* coincides with the Gulf of Aqaba. But that determination is controversial because it negates the traditional rationale for a Mount Sinai within the Sinai Peninsula, and predicts a location farther east in Arabia--perhaps in the vicinity of ancient *Midian*.

Having studied the history and geography of this region, and also having visited *Jabal al-Lawz* and the area ascribed to *Midian*, I am sensitive to the various Exodus claims made about this district. It does not require much internet searching to find



Figure 0.1 At *Jabal al-Maqla*.

FOREWORD

problematic notions and arguments, both pro and con, concerning Exodus activity in this part of northwest Arabia.

In reality, much of the confusion is due to incomplete or second-hand knowledge of the area, which has been infrequently visited and poorly studied, leaving many questions unanswered. The obvious solution is to provide more factual information about the *Midian* region and *Jabal al-Lawz*. Given my training and experiences, I feel a certain duty to utilize the available data to advance reasoned discourse about the potential Exodus activity in northwest Arabia.

The case for a *Mount Sinai* in Arabia cannot be effectively argued without first ascertaining the realm of ancient *Midian* and its relationship with the regional mountains. Laying that foundation paves the way to address the geographical, archaeological, and geological data that may favor a Mount Sinai site within the *Jabal al-Lawz* range. Having a logical Mount Sinai candidate is the prerequisite for estimating the Exodus route beyond the sea crossing, which is the ultimate goal of this work.

This book deliberately provides many detailed arguments with the hope of assisting other investigators. I do not consider myself to be the final authority on these topics—my desire is to share what I have discovered to add depth to the biblical account, and to give others a chance to question and build upon these ideas.

Glen A. Fritz
Vero Beach, Florida
August 2019



Figure 0.2 Overlooking *Mada'in Saleh* in Northwest Saudi Arabia.

PREFACE

Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.

Albert Einstein

“Genius” has been defined as having the ability to make the complex simple. Unfortunately, this book is not simple—mainly because the Exodus was a complex event covering a wide area, and much of its biblical information is arcane and obscure. What can now be said about the event is also greatly expanded and enriched by the plethora of available historical and geographical data.

To do justice to this story requires the definition of numerous terms involving people, places, and things. The key geographical definitions include *Yam Suph* and the biblical land of *Midian*, which has historical associations with the Mount Sinai region. Some understanding of the history, topography, geology, and geography of northwest



Figure 0.3 The Surmised *Yam Suph* of the Exodus. The northern Gulf of Aqaba viewed from the International Space Station. The beachhead in the lower left is suspected as the sea crossing point. (adapted from NASA ISS006-E-41915)

PREFACE

Arabia is also needed to appreciate the rationale for the Mount Sinai location and the associated Exodus route.

This investigation begins in Arabia on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Aqaba (**Figure 0.3**), building a case for a Mount Sinai location and the Exodus route needed to reach it. A detailed map showing the position of this mountain and the route could be given now, but without explanation, it would raise many more questions than it would answer. But for those who may be impatient, the overview map can be found in **Chapter 25**.

Two preceding works laid the groundwork for this investigation. *The Lost Sea of the Exodus: A Modern Geographical Analysis, Second Edition* (Fritz 2016a) and *Fire on the Mountain: Geography, Geology & Theophany at Jabal al-Lawz* (Fritz 2016b).

The *Lost Sea* research sought to identify the location of *Yam Suph*, the so-called “Red Sea” that miraculously parted in the Exodus. For most of history, this sea was relegated to the Gulf of Suez near Egypt, as shown in **Figure 0.4**. However, the ancient Hebrew descriptions place it at the Gulf of Aqaba near the biblical “Promised Land.” This realization necessitated an examination of the reasons for the “lost” identity of *Yam Suph*.

The *Fire on the Mountain* book gave an overview of the theory that Mount Sinai was *Jabal al-Maqla* in northwest Saudi Arabia, and reviewed the associated geography, archaeology, and geology. Addressing these topics was warranted because some critics have seized upon various ill-advised archaeological and geological arguments made about *Jabal al-Maqla* to rebut the whole premise of a Mount Sinai in Arabia. In essence, throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Fire on the Mountain also went to great lengths to analyze the geology of *Jabal al-Maqla* because some investigators have claimed that the black rock on its peak was “scorched” by the supernatural heat of God’s presence during the Exodus.



Figure 0.4 The Exodus Red Sea Crossing ca. 1816. The event is pictured at the head of the Gulf of Suez near Egypt. (from Arrowsmith, London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge)

PREFACE

Due to the importance of the *Fire on the Mountain* content, much of its material has been melded into this current work. The advantage for the reader is that it will eliminate the need to refer between two books.

The various Exodus routes that have been postulated over the last 500 years exhibit a pattern of flawed assumptions leading to faulty conclusions. The works preceding the 19th century were clearly hampered by the lack of accurate mapping and ignorance of the physical and historical geography of the region. Works written since the mid-19th century cannot blame the lack of mapping; however, they frequently exhibit other shortcomings including:

1. dismissal of the supernatural component described in the Bible
2. selective use of the biblical geographical data
3. reliance on scholarly and historical traditions over the biblical record
4. inappropriately applying non-geographical tools to geographical problems
5. underestimation of the size and scope of the event

The dominance of such shortcomings, combined with the emergence of more definitive geographical and historical data, have largely relegated the corpus of Exodus route commentaries and atlases to the dustbin of history. My humble aspiration is that this work will avoid a similar fate by relying on sound assumptions, relevant and accurate data, and by avoiding hasty and sensational conclusions.

Explaining the “Hebrew” Term

For the sake of consistency, this work generally uses “Hebrews” to refer to the Israelites, the descendants of *Israel*, the name divinely given to the patriarch *Jacob* (Gen. 32:28). Jacob was the grandson of Abraham, the first person in the Bible to be called a “Hebrew,” which occurred when he dwelt in Hebron in Canaan (Gen. 14:13).

“Hebrew,” pronounced *ivray* in the Hebrew language, means “one from beyond” (Strong 1990, H5680). A modern equivalent might be *alien*. More specifically, the word referred to one from beyond the Euphrates river, “a stranger come from the other side of the Euphrates” (Gesenius 1979, 5680). Such was Abraham’s history before he relocated to the land of Canaan.

The Egyptians uniformly called the Israelites “Hebrews” (e.g., Gen. 39:14, 17; 41:12; Exo. 1:15, 16, 19; 2:7, 11). Summarizing the biblical usage of the term--

The writers of the Old Testament only call the Israelites *Hebrews* when foreigners are introduced as speaking...or when the Israelites speak of themselves to foreigners...or when used in opposition to other nations... (Gesenius 1979, 5680).



Figure 0.5 U.S.-Saudi Arabia Size Comparison. The area of interest in this book is the tiny marked portion of northwest Saudi Arabia. This area includes the *Jabal al-Lawz* mountain range and the domain of ancient *Midian*. The western edge of this area abuts the Gulf of Aqaba. (attribution CIA: *The World Factbook* 2015)

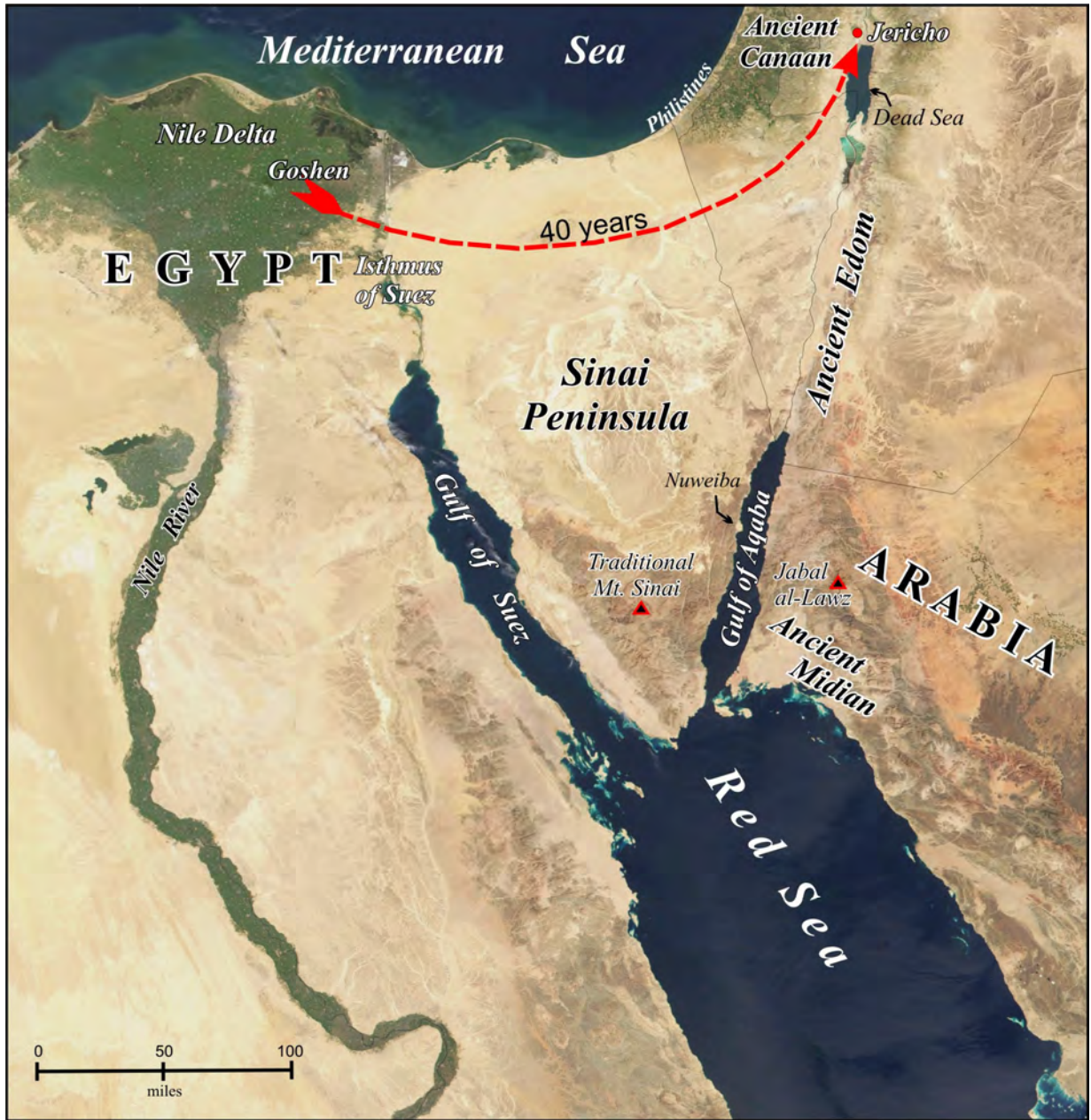


Figure 1.1 The Region of the Exodus.

The triangular Sinai Peninsula is outlined by the Gulf of Suez on the west and the Gulf of Aqaba on the east. The Exodus began in Egypt in *Goshen* and ended 40 years later in *Jericho*. Key Exodus events include the passage through a sea, the encampment at Mount Sinai, and the failed attempt to invade southern *Canaan* from *Kadesh*.

The text explains that *Yam Suph*, the Hebrew name for the Exodus sea, referred to the Gulf of Aqaba. The likely crossing route began at the *Nuweiba* delta. This circumstance suggests a Mount Sinai location farther east in Arabia, such as the *Jabal al-Lawz* range near *Midian*.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE MYSTERIES

If during the course of eighteen centuries, the interpreters have misunderstood and mistranslated the geographical notions contained in Holy Scripture, the error is certainly not due to the sacred history, but to those who, without the knowledge of the history and geography of ancient times, have attempted the task of reconstructing the Exodus of the Hebrews, at any cost, on the level of their own imperfect comprehension.

--Alexander Wheelock Thayer (1883, 46)

The biblical Exodus stands as a premier epic among literature from all ages: a whole people, called Hebrews, rescued from slavery and steered to a new land by Moses, a reluctant leader appointed by God. The Exodus began in *Goshen* in northeast Egypt (Exo. 47:27) ca. 1446 BC (based on the biblical dating). It ended 40 years later when the Promised Land was entered near *Jericho* at the north end of the Dead Sea (**Figure 1.1**). Although there were many intriguing events in this journey, two that have garnered great attention are the miraculous passage through a sea and the 11-month stay at Mount Sinai, where God met with Moses and made His covenant with the Hebrew people.

The ultimate goal of this book is to reconstruct the Exodus journey between the Hebrews' emergence from the sea and their arrival at Mount Sinai. However, in order to do so, a logical location for Mount Sinai must be ascertained, which will require much geographical and historical groundwork. In the process, this investigation will evaluate the more recent claim that Mount Sinai is to be found in the *Jabal al-Lawz* range (**Figure 1.1**) in the northwestern part of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The suspected site is a peak called *Jabal al-Maqla*, situated 7.25 km (4.5 mi.) southeast of the main *Jabal al-Lawz* peak.

One difficulty facing this idea is that proponents have yet to publish a credible Exodus route between the suspected Gulf of Aqaba sea crossing and this mountain. The “published” routes have been problematic, traversing impassible terrain, ignoring historical travel patterns, and/or failing to include all of the biblical details. Acceptable routes must account for the conditions and encampments described by Moses, as well as the natural barriers and corridors in the region. Without a definitive, passable route that correlates with the journey's itinerary and chronology, the hypothesis for a Mount Sinai at *Jabal al-Maqla* becomes more difficult to sustain.

Many Exodus route maps have been published over the centuries, but they are all similar in that they are based on tradition, and lack explanation and geographical reality. The picturesque map in **Figure 1.2** is a 16th-century example. But, to do justice to the biblical account and to offer a defensible rationale, reconstruction of the route between the sea and the mountain will require more than just lines connecting points on a map.

Hence, what will unfold in the coming pages is a meticulous investigation involving historical and physical geography, dealing with real places and real things, latitudes, elevations, and landmarks. There are also some longstanding mysteries to explain, some controversies to settle and, likely, some adventure-minded readers to satisfy.