A HISTORY OF SINAI

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

SINAI is the peninsula, triangular in form, which projects into the Red Sea between Egypt and Arabia. The name used to be applied to the mountainous region of the south, now it is made to comprise the land as far north as the Mediterranean.

Sinai is famous for the part which it has played in the religious history of mankind. It was at one time a centre of moon-cult, before it became the seat of the promulgation of the Law to the Jews at the time of Moses. In Christian times it was one of the chief homes of the hermits, and the possession of the relics of St. Katherine in the great convent of the south, caused Sinai to be included in the Long Pilgrimage throughout the Middle Ages.

A history of Sinai deals with the people who visited the peninsula at different times, rather than with its permanent inhabitants, who, in the course of the centuries, seem to have undergone little change. They still live the life of the huntsman and the herdsman as in the days of Ishmael, sleeping in the open, and adding to their meagre resources by carrying dates and charcoal to the nearest centres of intercourse, in return for which they receive corn.

The country geographically belongs to Egypt, ethnologically to Arabia. It naturally falls into three regions.

In the north, following the coast line of the Mediterranean, lies a zone of drift sand, narrowest near Rafa on the borders of Palestine, widening as it is prolonged in a westerly direction

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towards Egypt, where it is conterminous with the present Suez Canal. This desert was known in Biblical days as Shur (the wall) of Egypt. "And Saul smote the Amalekites from Havilah (north Arabia), until thou comest to Shur that is over against Egypt" (1 Sam. xv. 7). The military highway from Egypt to Syria from ancient times followed the coast line of the Mediterranean, the settlements along which were modified on one side by the encroachment of the sea, on the other by the invasion of sand.

Adjoining this zone of drift sand, the land extends south with increased elevation to the centre of the peninsula, where it reaches a height of about 4000 ft., and abruptly breaks off in a series of lofty and inaccessible cliffs, the upper white limestone of which contrasts brilliantly in some places with the lower red sandstone. This region is, for the most part, waterless and bare. It is known in modern parlance as the Badiet Tih (the plain of wandering). Its notable heights include the Gebel el Ejneh and the Gebel Emreikah. This plain is drained in the direction of the Mediterranean by the great Wadi el Arish and its numerous feeders, which, like most rivers of Sinai, are mountain torrents, dry during the greater part of the year, and on occasion like the fiumare of Italy, flowing in a spate. The Wadi el Arish is the River of Egypt of the Bible (Gen. xv. 18; Num. xxxiv. 5), the Nahal Muzur of the annals of King Esarhaddon.

The Badiet Tih is crossed from east to west by the road from Akaba to Suez, along which the Holy Carpet, which is made at Cairo, was annually conveyed to Mecca. Halfway between Suez and Akaba, at Kalaat el Nakhl, the road is crossed by one coming from Gaza, which is prolonged south in several directions down precipitous passes. Kalaat en Nakhl is an important watering place, and was for a time a military station. It was known in the Middle Ages as a puteus Soldani (well of the Sultan).

The roads coming from Nakhl lead down the escarpment of Tih to a belt of sand and gravel, varying in width, which, with the arid stretches adjoining it, covers an area of some thirty square miles. This is the Gebbeter Ramleh (belt of sand). Its western parts including the Wadi Jarf is the wilderness of Sin of the Bible (Exod. xvi. 1).

South of this great belt of sand, red sandstone reappears
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in shelving masses leading up to the great mountainous district which forms Sinai proper, the third region of the peninsula. These mountains are traversed by many river-beds or wadis. Some of them, according to the ways of the country, do not bear the same name throughout their course, but the main stream frequently takes another name when it is joined by a tributary. Thus the Wadi Nasb after its junction with the Wadi Beda becomes the Wadi Baba, and so forth.

This sandstone district is cut into by deep gorges and canyons, that have sheer falls of several hundred feet in places. It comprises the mountains which yielded turquoise and copper, products that brought the neighbouring people into Sinai. Beads of turquoise were found in the pre-dynastic tombs of Egypt which probably came from Sinai, while there was an increasing demand for copper in the surrounding countries from the close of the Neolithic Age. If the name Milukkhka of the Babylonian records refers to Sinai, these people also came there several thousand years before our era.

Turquoise appears in a ferruginous layer in the sandstone at the height of about 2650 ft. at Serabit, and at the height of about 1770 ft. at Maghara above sea-level. The copper ore occurs in the Wadi Nasb, and in the Wadi Khalig, somewhat extensively in the latter, together with iron and manganese. Enormous slag heaps lie at the head of the Wadi Nasb and near the outlet of the Wadi Baba, which bear evidence to former smelting activity. Again, in the Wadi Sened, a dyke rich in copper traverses syenite for a distance of nearly two miles.

The district which was worked by the ancient Egyptians was comprised between the valley system of the Wadi Baba on the north, and that of the Wadi Sidreh on the south, both of which have their outlet in the direction of the coastal plain of El Markha. It was from this side that the ancient Egyptians approached Sinai. The chief height of the district is the Tartir ed Dharni (black cap), so called from the dark basalt that forms its summit, which rises to a height of 3531 ft. There is also the double-peaked Umm RiqiÅ£ (mother of two feet) which rises to the south of the Wadi Umm Agraf and dominates the height of Serabit.

To the south of the ancient mining district the sandstone is connected in a manner highly interesting to the geologist with the plutonic rock which gives its imposing character to
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the mountains of the south. Here lies the Wadi Feiran, one of the best watered and fruitful valleys of the peninsula, to the south of which Mount Serbal rises abruptly from a comparatively low elevation to the height of 6734 ft. This mountain has been described as one great lump of diorite, and its majestic appearance led some recent travellers, including Lepsius \(^1\) and Bartlett,\(^2\) to identify it as the Mountain of the Law. Further south lies the great group of mountains which include the Gebel Musa, 7359 ft. high, and the Gebel Katrîn with its three peaks, the highest of which rises to 8527 ft. The Gebel Musa from early Christian times was generally looked upon as the Mountain of the Law. At its foot lies the great convent of Sinai, at one time known as the Bush, which has carried on to the present day the traditions of the early Christian hermits, who settled in the peninsula. The Gebel Katrîn lying further south, was looked upon during the later Middle Ages, as the height on which the angels deposited the body of St. Katherine. Another imposing height of the group is the Ras Safaf, 6540 ft. high, which has been put forward in recent times as a possible Mountain of the Law.

These mountains of the south contain many natural springs and fruitful valleys, which were formerly the home of Christian ascetics. They are divided from the Gulf of Suez on the west by the desert of El Kaa, which drains a large amphitheatre of hills, and becomes a coastal plain that extends as far as Ras Mohammad, the southernmost point of the peninsula. The desert of El Kaa has a harder subsoil which is so tilled that the accumulated moisture is thrown up at the coast near Tur, the chief harbour of the peninsula, and possibly an ancient Phoenician colony. Near it lay Raithou, a place of many oases and large date-palm plantations which were carefully tended by the monks during the Middle Ages.

The south-eastern parts of the peninsula are rarely visited by Europeans. There are some high mountains, including the Gebel Thebt (7883 ft.), the Gebel Umm Shomer (8449 ft.), and the Gebel Umm Iswed (8236 ft.), in districts that were recently explored by Dr. Hume.\(^3\) The eastern coast-line

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\(^1\) Lepsius: *Reise nach Sinai*, 1846, p. 19 ff.
\(^3\) Hume, W. F.: *Topography and Geology of the South-eastern Portion of Sinai*, 1906.
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of the peninsula is relatively inaccessible. There are some
creek ports at Sherm, some ten miles north of Ras Mohammad,
and some palm trees with a good supply of water at Nakhrb.
From here it is less than eight miles across the sea to Ras
Fartak, the nearest point of Arabia. Further north, opposite
the coastland of what is now reckoned the land of Midian,
lies Dahab and, beyond it, Ain en Nuëbeh, where the road
that leads from the convent to Akaba at the head of the Gulf
of Akaba, reaches the coast. From Akaba the mountains are
prolonged in the direction of Palestine on both sides of the
Wadi el Arabah, the great depression that extends north-
wards to the Dead Sea. This is "the land of Seir, the country
of Edom" of the Bible (Gen. xxxii. 3). Edom signifies
red in Hebrew, and the land may have been so called owing
to the red sandstone of the district.

Sinai, generally speaking, is a country of stern desolation.
Its mountains are bare, its plains are swept by the wind, its
river beds are to all appearance waterless. But clusters of
bushes that follow the valley floors or rise from the plains,
show that moisture percolates the soil beneath the surface,
and is procurable by digging down to the harder subsoil,
(i.e. "striking the rock") as was done at the time of the passage
of the Israelites. Such digging is done by the Bedawyn at
the present day, the holes for water being called kusrak in
Arabic. In some places, however, the water along the valleys
is thrown up and forms natural cases as in the Wadi Gharandel,
the Wadi Feiran, and at Tur. In others, it is raised by means
of the mechanical device of a water-wheel and by a shaduf.

Rain falls in the peninsula in sudden downpours, often in
connection with a thunderstorm. When we camped in the
Wadi Umm Agraf in January of 1906, it rained without
ceasing for two days and a night, creating rivulets and a
waterfall down the mountain slope. A week later the valley
floor was carpeted with verdure and flowers, and the thorny
bushes were masses of bloom. Rainstorms may result in a
spate, the dreaded seil of the Bedawyn, which often appears
several miles below where the rain has actually fallen. In the
winter of 1914-15 the Wadi el Arish was twice in spate,
and left extensive pools of water behind. The effect of a
spate, seen on Dec. 3, 1867, in the Wadi Feiran by the
Rev. F. W. Holland, was described by him. In little more
than an hour, the Wadi Feiran, at this point about 300 yards wide, was filled with a raging torrent from eight to ten feet deep. Men, animals, and trees were swept past upon the flood, and huge boulders ground along the wady bed with a noise of a hundred mills at work. In this spate perished thirty persons, scores of sheep and goats, camels, and donkeys, and it swept away an entire encampment that had been pitched at the mouth of a small valley on the north side of Mount Serbal.¹

Disasters of this kind are in part attributable to the reckless deforestation of the country which has gone on unchecked for thousands of years, and continues at the present day. To this is attributable also the calamitous invasion of sand along the shores of the Mediterranean recorded by Arabic writers. In ancient times wood was extensively used for smelting purposes in different parts of the peninsula, as is shown by enormous slag-heaps in the Wadi Baba and in the Wadi Nasb. A great bed of wood ashes beneath the temple-floor at Serabit showed that wood was freely used in offering the holocaust in a district that is now entirely denuded of trees. According to the Mosaic Law, charcoal was used in early times at the Temple service as we gather from “a censer full of burning coals” (Lev. xv. 22).² For domestic use it was exported during the Middle Ages, and was regularly delivered by the Bedawyn as tribute to the Pasha in the nineteenth century. Its export continues to this day.

The heathen past tried to stem the ravages of deforestation by marking off certain valley floors, the use of which was reserved to the sanctuaries. Inside this holy ground, the hima, no animal might be hunted and no tree might be cut down. Many valleys of Sinai to this day contain one tree of great age and often of prodigious size, which is accounted holy and is therefore left untouched.³ But the mass of the trees and with them the hope of a copious undergrowth, has gone. At the time of the passage of the Israelites, there must have been extensive tamarisk groves, since it is the tamarisk which yields manna, a product well-known in ancient Egypt.

¹ Ordnance Survey, i. 226.
² In this and other passages of the Bible, the word that stands as coal should be understood as charcoal.
³ Palmer, H. S.: Sinai from the Fourth Dynasty, revised by Prof. Sayce, 1892, p. 47.
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Its abundance must have made an appreciable difference in their food-supply. Only a few tamarisk groves remain in the more southern mountains at the present day, chief among them the groves of Tarfat el Gidaran. Again neglect has destroyed the palm groves of which enormous plantations existed in the Middle Ages. We read of a plantation of over 10,000 date-palms at Tur, and the date since the earliest times was a staple article of diet. According to Arab tradition the land along the shores of the Mediterranean was of great fruitfulness before it was invaded by sand drifts. It was the same with the numerous fruit and vegetable gardens which were once cultivated by the monks and the hermits. With the exception of the garden belonging to the convent, they have passed away. Journeying across the wide stretches of the country which were formerly a wilderness and are now a desert, one wonders if a wise government could not impose restrictions which would stop the destruction of the undergrowth and regulate the water-supply. This would extend the cultivation of the date-palm, the tamarisk and of other food products, for the Bedawyn, the present inhabitants of the peninsula, live in a state of semi-starvation. Their various means of subsistence have steadily grown less with the centuries. Deforestation has influenced the fauna to the detriment of the huntsmen. The herds of gazelles which were numerous as late as the Middle Ages, are few and far between. Pasture lands which formerly fed sheep and goats were encroached upon by the introduction of the camel. The transport of goods and of pilgrims which gave occupation to the owners of camels during the Middle Ages has practically ceased. The convent formerly helped to tide over difficult times by means of its resources, but the advent in the east of the Turk reduced these resources to a minimum, and the convent is nowadays hardly able to satisfy its own needs. In the face of this state of things, it seems worth recalling the different periods in the past when Sinai held the attention of the outside world and helped in the making of history. For the recognition of her solitary ruins, and of her literary wealth still enshrined in the convent, taken with the needs of her people, may stimulate effort to inaugurate a new era to the profit of Christian and of Moslem alike.
CHAPTER II

SINAI A CENTRE OF MOON-CULT

The name Sinai is first mentioned in the Song of Deborah (Judges v. 5), which is dated to about B.C. 1000, and in the story of Exodus. It perpetuates the early form of belief of the inhabitants of the peninsula. For the word Sinai together with Sin (Exod. xvi. 1) and Zin (Num. xiii. 21), all date back to Sin, a name of the moon-god in ancient Babylonia.

The word Sin appears as part of the name of Naram-Sin, king of Accad in Babylonia (c. B.C. 3700), whose great stele of victory, now in the Louvre, represents his conquest of Elam (Persia). The acts of Naram-Sin were considered in the light of lunar influence, for his Annals state that “the moon was favourable for Naram-Sin who at this season marched into Maganna.”¹ Maganna, otherwise Magan, was frequently named in early annals and inscriptions, notably on the great statues of King Gudea (B.C. 2500). It was the place where the diorite came from out of which the statues were made. The same inscriptions mention Milukkhaha.² An ancient fragment of Assyrian geography which was engraved about the year B.C. 680, but the original of which is considered much older, names side by side: “The country of Milukkhaha as the country of blue stone, and the country of Maganna as the country of copper.”³ Of these names Maganna may refer to Sinai while the word Milukkhaha recalls the Amalekites who dwelt in the peninsula. In any case the name Sin goes back to Babylonian influence, probably to the Semites who were powerful in the land of Arabia in the days of Khamurabbi.

² Ibid., II, 75, 83.
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Fig. 1.—Situation of Sanctuaries.

(Map: Researches in Sinai.)
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The constant recurring changes of the moon caused this to be accepted as the ruler of times and seasons by the huntsman and the herdsman generally. The Hebrews came from a stock of moon-worshippers. It was from Ur of the Chaldees, a centre of moon-cult, that Terah and Abraham migrated to Haran on the way to Canaan about B.C. 2100.\(^1\) The Arab writer Al Biruni (c. A.D. 1000) in his Chronology of the Ancient Nations, noted the connection of Haran with the moon-cult, and stated that near it was another place called Selem-sin, its ancient name being Saram-sin, \textit{i.e.} Imago lunae, and another village called Tera-uz, \textit{i.e.} Porta Veneris.\(^2\)

The acceptance of moon-worship among the ancient Hebrews is confirmed by Aratapanus, some of whose statements were preserved by Alexander Polyhistor (B.C. 140). Aratapanus described the Syrians who came to Egypt with Abraham as “Hermiouthian” \(\text{i.e.} \) worshippers of Hermes, and stated that Joseph’s brethren built Hermiouthian sanctuaries at Athos and Heliopolis.\(^3\) Heliopolis, the city On of the Bible (Gen. xii. 45), was near the present Cairo; followers of Abraham were held to have settled there. Athos has been identified as Pithom. More probably it was Pa-kesem, the chief city of Goshen. The word Hermiouthian indicates moon-worshippers, as Hermes, the Greek god, was reckoned by the classic writers the equivalent of the Egyptian moon-god Thoth, as is shown by the place-name Hermopolis, \(\text{i.e.} \) the city of Thoth, in Lower Egypt.

Another name for the moon-god was Ea or Yah, who was accounted the oldest Semitic god in Babylonia, to which his devotees were held to have brought the cultivation of the date-palm, an event that marked a notable step in civilisation.\(^4\) The emblem of Sin was the crescent moon, the emblem of Ea was the full moon, who, in the Assyrian Creation story is described as “Ea the god of the illustrious \(\text{i.e.} \) lustrous face.”\(^5\) On Babylonian seal cylinders Ea is shown standing up as a bull, seen front face, with his devotee Eabani \(\text{i.e.} \) sprung

\(^1\) Jastrow, M.: \textit{The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria}, 1898, p. 76.
\(^3\) Cited Eusebius, \textit{Evang. Præp.}, bk. ix. c. 18, c. 23.