

The Wilderness Years

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Passage: “It is eleven days’ journey from Horeb by the way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-barnea” (Deuteronomy 1:2, ESV).

Introduction: Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula¹ is a triangular formation at the northeastern end of Egypt and the southwestern end of Israel. Its northern shore lies on the southern Mediterranean Sea, and its southwest and southeast shores are on the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Aqaba of the Red Sea.² It forms a land bridge between Asia and Africa.

The Sinai Peninsula is divided among the two governorates (states) of Egypt³—South Sinai and North Sinai. Together, they comprise around 23,000 square miles and have a population of about 600,000.⁴ The peninsula’s bedouin population, once the majority, is now a minority.⁵ Its greatest dimensions are about 130 miles (210 km) from east to west and about 240 miles (385 km) from north to south.⁶

The hot, arid, desert-dominated peninsula with harsh climactic extremes is comparable to southern Arizona. The region gets little rain in the months of October to May. Average high temperatures are in the low 100s from June to August. Vegetation is scarce except for the occasional oasis that lends a splash of green to an otherwise barren landscape. Sinai is also one of the coldest provinces in Egypt because of its high altitudes and mountainous regions. Winter temperatures in some of Sinai’s cities and towns can dip to 3 degrees Fahrenheit.

In Scripture, the Sinai Peninsula is referred to as the “wilderness of Sinai” (Ex 19:1). The Israelites⁷ made their way southeastward near the shore of the Sinai Peninsula and then turned

¹ Tristram, Pierre. "The Sinai Peninsula From Ancient Times to Today." ThoughtCo, Aug. 26, 2020, [thoughtco.com/sinai-peninsula-in-egypt-2353528](https://www.thoughtco.com/sinai-peninsula-in-egypt-2353528).

² Western and northern shores are practically isolated, but the eastern coasts are bustling with several tourist attractions as well as Bedouin settlements.

³ Administratively, Egypt is divided into **27** governorates (states). The four Urban Governorates (Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said, and Suez) have no rural population. Each of the other 23 governorates is subdivided into urban and rural areas.

⁴ This figure rises to 1,400,000 by including Western Sinai, the parts of the Port Said, Ismailia and Suez Governorates lying east of the Suez Canal. In 1960, the Egyptian census of Sinai listed a population of about 50,000.

⁵ The harsh living conditions on the Sinai Peninsula have prevented all but bedouin tribesmen and a few hardy monks in search of solitude from discovering its secrets. Only recently it has begun to yield its treasures to explorers and archaeologists alike.

⁶ The distance from Government Camp to Seaside is 130 miles. The distance from Portland to Medford is 240 miles.

⁷ The exact number of Israelites who left Egypt depends on the translation of Exodus 12:37. Most translations say that “about six hundred thousand men on foot” were led by Moses, implying a total population of two and a half million. However, an alternative way of translating the Hebrew term *‘elep* is “clan” or “family,” rather than “thousand.” This would reduce the total to a reasonable and manageable number.

inland to a mount later called “Mount Sinai” (also called Horeb),⁸ where the Israelites camped the third month after their departure from Egypt (Ex 19:1, 16, 18, 20). God revealed himself to Moses and communicated the Ten Commandments, plans for the tabernacle and other legislation at this location. Several of God’s miraculous provisions for Israel recorded in Exodus and Numbers (food, water, etc.) are related to actual conditions in the Sinai Peninsula.

After a year’s stay at Mount Sinai (Num 10:11), the Israelites commenced their journey again, traveling northeastward toward Kadesh-Barnea (on the border between Sinai and Canaan) about 150 miles away from Sinai. This became Israel’s center for thirty-eight years during their wilderness wandering. Near Kadesh are three springs. From Kadesh, spies were sent north into Canaan. At Kadesh, Moses and Aaron dealt with various revolts. After most of the generation that left Egypt had died, the second generation of Israelites set out from Kadesh toward the land of Moab, which lies southeast of Canaan, east of the Jordan.

Body:

- I. Prior to leading Israel out of Egypt, Moses spent forty years just east of the Sinai Peninsula in the land of Midian.⁹
 - a. The first forty years of Moses’ life were spent in Egypt, where he “was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action” (Acts 7:22, NIV)
 - b. Though raised by his Egyptian mother (Acts 7:21), “when he was grown up, [Moses] refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin” (Heb 11:24-25).
 - c. Moses fled Egypt and “became an exile in the land of Midian” because he prematurely assumed the role of deliverer (Acts 7:23-29).
- II. It was not God’s plan for Israel to spend forty years wandering in the wilderness, but his plans were delayed because of Israel’s rebellion.
 - a. Israel arrived at Sinai three months after leaving Egypt (Ex 19:1).
 - b. Israel left Sinai one year later (Num 10:11).
 - c. In Numbers, there are seven narratives about Israel’s rebellion as they journey through the wilderness (Num 11-21).

⁸ The exact location of Mount Sinai is uncertain. Over a dozen mountains have been identified by different scholars as suitable candidates for Mount Sinai. Since the 4th century, the more or less continuous Christian tradition has been that Mount Sinai is located in the high mountains of the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula. Also the time recorded for the journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai and from Mount Sinai to Kadesh agrees with this location of the mount.

⁹ Moses was born nearly 300 years after the death of Joseph.

- i. “And the people complained about their hardships.” (11:1) “And the rabble among them had greedy desires... and said ‘Who will give us meat?!’” (11:4)
 - ii. “And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses” (12:1)
 - iii. “And all the community raised their voice... and grumbled against Moses and Aaron” (14:1-2).
 - iv. “And Korah... with Nathan and Abiram... with two hundred and fifty leaders of the community... rose up against Moses” (16:1-3).
 - v. “And the entire community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.” (16:41).
 - vi. “And the people quarreled with Moses” (20:3).
 - vii. “And the people spoke against God and Moses” (21:5).
 - d. Things get even worse in the story of Balaam, the pagan sorcerer, and Israel’s worship of Baal at Peor (Num 22-25).
 - e. The cause of Israel’s rebellion is that they “have no faith” (Num 14:11; 20:12).
 - f. These stories portray how humans relate to God in difficult situations.
- III. Moses was not allowed to lead Israel to the promised land.
- a. Moses disobeys God and suggests that he and Aaron are responsible for producing the water (Num 20:10).
 - b. God’s response to Moses indicates that Moses’ choice was intentional rebellion, and he thus forbids Moses from entering the promised land (Num 20:12).
 - c. Moses is a key leader and chosen representative among God’s people, which means the stakes of responsibility were higher.
 - d. Moses accepted the sentence that he would not lead the people into Canaan (Num 27:12–17).
 - e. Three times in his first address (Deut. 1:37; 3:23–27; 4:21–24), he expressed his poignant grief that he was deprived of this fulfillment of his heart’s desire.
 - f. In all three passages, he lays the blame for this disappointment on the people: the Lord was angry for their sakes; he twice drew a lesson on obedience for Israel from this tragic disappointment.

Conclusion: It should have taken Israel days, not years, to journey from Mount Sinai to the land of Canaan. Following their escape from Egypt, the Israelites faced numerous challenges and hardships in the wilderness. Incidents like questioning God's promises, complaining about food and water, and worshipping idols (golden calf) were symptomatic of their lack of trust in God.

The generation that left Egypt proved unfit to fulfill God's purposes in the land promised to Abraham. God allowed them to pass and entrusted their children with the task of carrying forward his plan to be a light to the nations.