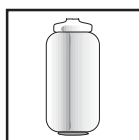


3:2. This vast host overflows the land like a river, going down into Egypt (Dan. 11:40-42), until "tidings out of the east and out of the north" will cause it to return to the land and meet its end (vv. 44,45), being destroyed by earthquake and

other judgements (Ezek. 38:18-20), after which "the LORD shall be king over all the earth" (Zech. 14:9).

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## Prophecy, History and Archaeology

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# The Sinai Peninsula

## 2. Physical features

David Green

**I**N THIS SECOND article we look at the following physical features of the Sinai Peninsula:

- the wildernesses
- the mountains
- minerals
- water supply.

### The wildernesses of Sinai

The Hebrew word *midbar*, usually translated 'wilderness' but sometimes 'desert', is used to describe a number of different types of country: pasture land suitable for grazing livestock; barren and uninhabited wastes of rock, sand and gravel; and places where there are few towns and villages. After crossing the Red Sea the Israelites journeyed through a number of wildernesses in the Sinai Peninsula. These are set out below in the order in which they were visited by the children of Israel.

**The Wilderness of Etham** (Num. 33:8), also called **The Wilderness of Shur** (Ex. 15:22). This lay directly east of the Nile Delta (Gen. 25:18; 1 Sam. 15:7). It has been suggested that the wilderness of Shur is so called because Hagar saw an angel of God here (Gen. 16:7-13), the name being derived from *shuwr*, 'to look round'.<sup>1</sup> However, it is more likely that the name derives from *shuwr*, 'a wall', implying a fortified place. If this is the case, Shur could have been one of the fortresses that guarded the border of Egypt, and gave its name to the adjacent wilderness (see

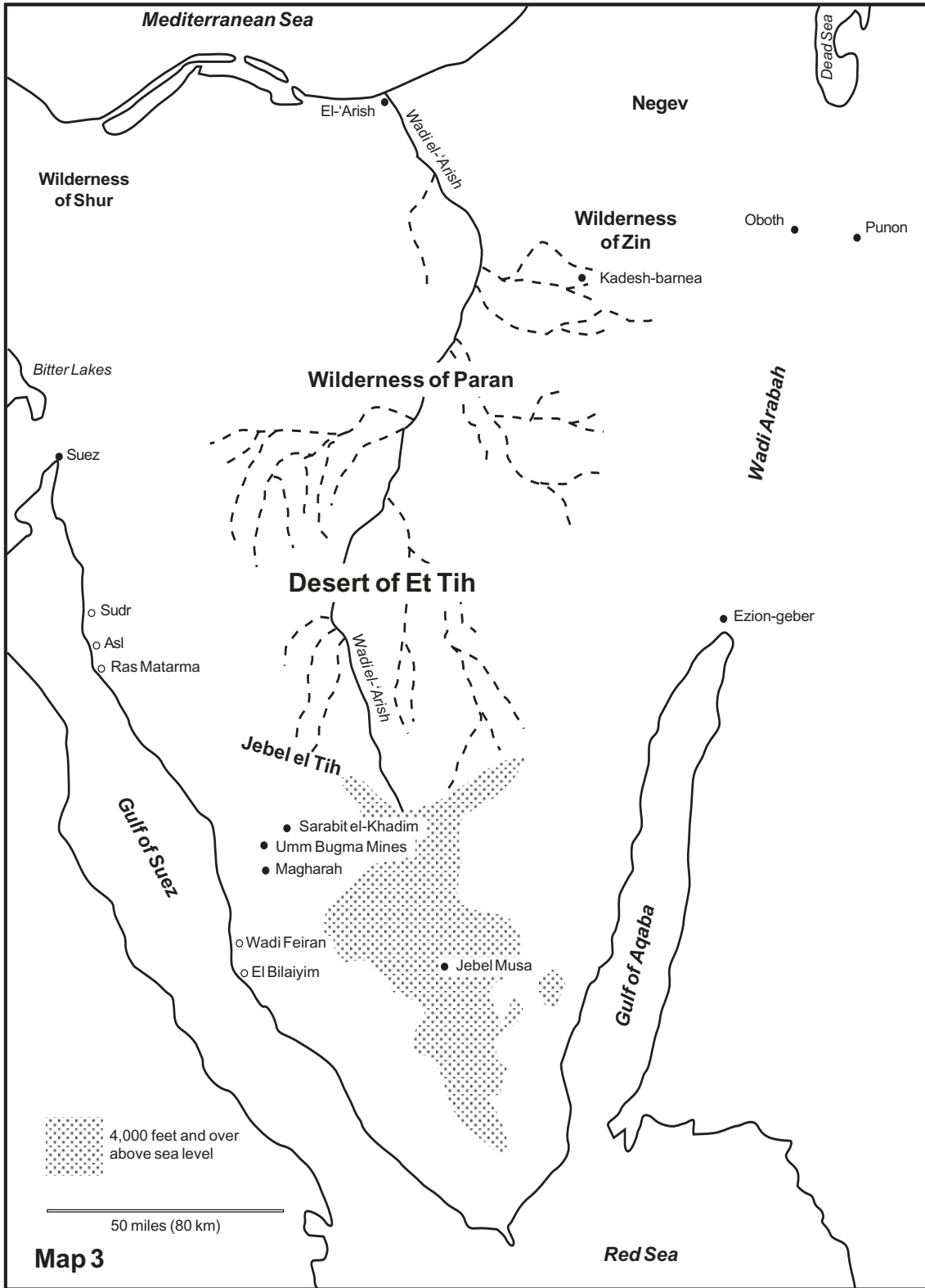
1 Samuel 27:8). A slightly different suggestion is that the name 'Shur' refers to the great wall (line) of fortresses and walls that separated Egypt from Sinai to hold back the invading nomads.<sup>2</sup> The most northerly fortresses were shown on Map 1 in [Part 1](#). This interpretation of the name 'Shur' also fits in with one of the suggestions regarding the meaning of the name 'Etham', which has been connected by some with the Old Egyptian word for fort.<sup>3</sup>

**The Wilderness of Sin** (Num. 33:11) was situated between Elim and Sinai (Ex. 16:1). It was there that the Israelites experienced a shortage of food, and the manna was first provided (vv. 3,4).

**The Wilderness of Sinai** (Num. 33:15) was the desert in the vicinity of Mount Sinai where the Israelites remained for about eleven-and-a-half months (Ex. 19:1,2; Num. 10:11). There they received the law, built the tabernacle and were first numbered.

**The Wilderness of Paran** (Num. 10:12; 12:16) was south and southeast of Kadesh Barnea, and had the southern part of the Arabah and northern part of the gulf of 'Aqaba for its eastern border. Originally Ishmael dwelt in this wilderness, entering it from the Wilderness of Beer-

1. p. 340, *The Proper Names of the Old Testament Expounded*, Alfred Jones, Bagster, 1856.
2. Map 5, p. 30, *Atlas of the Bible*, L. H. Grollenburg, Nelson, 1963.
3. p. 342, *The New Bible Dictionary*, IVP, third edition.



sheba (Gen. 21:14,21). Also, from here Moses sent out the spies into the land of Canaan (Num. 13:3,26). From this last reference it is clear that Kadesh was situated within the northern part of the Wilderness of Paran. The land of the Edomites also lay to the north of Paran, and so Hadad the Edomite prince, in the days of David, fled south to Egypt through this wilderness (1 Kgs. 11:18).

**The Wilderness of Zin** (Num. 33:36) lay to the north of Kadesh in the extreme south of the land of Canaan, and consequently Bible maps usually place it in the Negev to the west of the land of the Edomites. As such it was the most southern area of the land spied out by the twelve spies sent out from Kadesh (13:21), and it represented the southern limit of the territory of Judah (34:3; Josh. 15:1). Since Kadesh was considered to be located in this wilderness as well as in the Wilderness of Paran (Num. 27:14; Deut. 32:51, cf. Num. 13:26), perhaps the Wilderness of Zin was the name for the northern part of the Wilderness of Paran.

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### The mountains of Sinai

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The mountainous region of Sinai is in the south, where a considerable area of the peninsula is over 2,000 feet above sea level. Seven mountain summits over 5,000 feet are marked on the map consulted,<sup>4</sup> with the highest (Mount Katrinah) being 8,537 feet above sea level. Jebel Musa is the traditional and most favoured site for Mount Sinai (Mount Horeb), with a height of 7,467 feet. However, some scholars prefer Ras es-safsafah (6,541 feet), which has a more spacious plain at its foot suitable for the large encampment of Israelites, who were able to stand "afar off" (Ex. 20:18).

These mountains are composed of granite, but surrounding the areas of granite the surface strata are of sandstone. Arthur Stanley speaks of the mountains as being in three clusters, each with a central summit, and flanked with sandstone formations, so that they are the "granitic kernel of the whole region".<sup>5</sup>

North of these granite mountains is a sandstone range (Jebel El Tih), which extends as a belt right across the peninsula, fringing the granite mountains. Still further north is a vast grey limestone plateau called Et Tih ('the wanderings'), corresponding with the Wilderness of Paran (see above) and overlying the sandstone. This plateau lies mainly between 1,000 and 2,500

feet above sea level, with its elevation decreasing towards the north.

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### The minerals of Sinai

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From very early times the Egyptians mined copper ore and turquoise (a semiprecious copper mineral) in west Sinai, from turquoise mines at Serabit (Sarabit) el-Khadim and copper mines at Magharah. The Umm Bugma copper mines were also in the same area, about eighty miles southwest of Suez and about ten miles inland from the Gulf of Suez. From onsite inscriptions it has been established that the latest date for the working of these mines was during the twentieth dynasty period (about 1100 B.C.). In the Ramesside period (thirteenth century B.C.) copper was mined at Timna near the south end of the Arabah, about thirteen miles north of the Gulf of 'Aqaba.

The copper mines that Solomon worked (Bronze Age) were well north of Sinai on the eastern edge of the Arabah at Punon (modern Feinan), Khirbet en-Nehhas and el-Meqte, about twenty-seven miles south of the Dead Sea. Solomon also built a copper foundry in an exposed position at Ezion-geber at the tip of the Gulf of 'Aqaba, where the wind needed for the smelting process is particularly intense. It is interesting to note that it was at Punon that the brazen serpent was made by Moses, as can be seen by comparing Numbers 21:10 and 33:42,43. It has been suggested that the Kenite branch of the Midianites lived in this area, as the name 'Kenite' is said to mean 'smith'.<sup>6</sup>

Later, during the Iron Age, copper mines at the extreme south west of the Arabah, in Wadi Meneiaieh, equalled those in the area of Punon for importance. In addition, iron was abundant in the Arabah. Prisoners and slaves were frequently used to work these mines, and the Romans crippled their prisoners to reduce the likelihood of revolt or escape. In times of persecution the prisoners used by the Romans would have included many Christians.

Petroleum, the most important mineral of the area today, was first discovered at Mount Tanaka in west Sinai in 1920. Five oilfields had been developed along the west coast of Sinai by 1956; three of these, Sudr, Asl and Ras Matarma, are

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4 Grollenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

5 *Sinai and Palestine*, p. 11, fifth edition, 1858.

6 *The New Bible Dictionary*, *op. cit.*, p. 643.



**Ancient copper-mining shafts at Timna**

about twenty to thirty miles south of Suez, and the other two, Wadi Feiran and El Bilaiyim, are about 100 miles south of Suez. There are also coal deposits near El-'Arish. In addition, sufficient deposits of manganese and uranium ores have been found to make their exploitation feasible. Petroleum and manganese industries have been developed along the northern fringe of Sinai.

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### **Water supply**

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The climates of the northern and southern parts of the peninsula are different. In the north, where the land is of low relief, the winter rainfall amounts to about five inches, supplemented by occasional torrential rains in spring and autumn. (By way of comparison, the average annual rainfall at Jericho is four inches, and at the Dead Sea two inches, whereas Gaza has a seventy-per-cent chance of receiving as much as twelve inches.) In southern Sinai there is some rainfall in winter, when the rainy season can last up to twenty days with mists, fogs and dews. There is also the occasional heavy rainfall in summer, brought by rare southeast winds.

It has been estimated that the Sinai desert receives two thousand million cubic metres of water annually from local precipitation. About one quarter of this flows on the surface as runoff water, and about the same amount percolates through to underground reservoirs, the remainder being lost by evaporation.

There are many seasonal watercourses or wadis that collect the runoff when it rains. The most notable of these is the 155-mile long Wadi el-'Arish, which starts in southern Sinai and has its outfall into the Mediterranean Sea close to the town of El-'Arish, a distance as the crow flies of about 147 miles. This wadi has many tributary wadis and so collects water from a considerable area of the peninsula. In ancient times the Mediterranean end of the Wadi el-'Arish marked the southern limit of the cultivatable area, the remainder of the coastal plain from El-'Arish to the border of Egypt being uncultivated desert. Towards the east the southern limit to cultivation runs roughly southwest from about ten miles west of the southern end of the Dead Sea to just below Kadesh Barnea.

Wells and springs are found at fairly regular intervals down the west coast of the peninsula,



**The Wadi Zin, winding its way through the Wilderness of Zin. The line of vegetation marks the wadi bed.**

along the generally accepted route travelled by the Israelites. Here, in places, the water table lies so close to the surface that some water can be obtained by digging small pits in the gravelly ground.

There was at least one occasion in the wilderness when God blessed His people with a “plentiful rain”: “When You went out before Your people, O God, when You marched through the wasteland [AV, wilderness], the earth shook, the heavens poured down rain . . . You gave abundant showers [AV, plentiful rain], O God; You refreshed Your weary inheritance” (Ps. 68:7-9, NIV). The parallel passage in Deborah’s song of triumph suggests that this provision of rain was after the Israelites left the borders of Edom and were passing through the wilderness of the Arabah on their way to take possession of the land

of Canaan: “LORD, when Thou wentest out of Seir, when Thou marchest out of the field of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens dropped, the clouds also dropped water” (Judg. 5:4).

For cultivation, the inhabitants of northern Sinai make use of the surface drainage of winter rains, together with numerous wells and springs that tap the large aquifer of ground water underlying this area. Today, land reclamation and irrigation efforts on the northern coastal plain, using ground water or water pumped from the Nile, mean that several hundred thousand acres of formerly unproductive land now produce barley, fruits, market vegetables, dates, olives and wood trees.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

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