

The Quran and its Message

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سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

MOUNT SINAI - BEHIND THE TRANSLATIONS

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BACKGROUND - IS SINAI IN EGYPT?

It is common knowledge amongst Muslims (and non-Muslims) that Prophet Moses ^(pbuh) was summoned at a mountain called Sinai which is located in the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt.

What is unknown to many Muslims and popular understanding is that the actual site of Sinai has long been debated by not only Judaic and New Testament Biblical scholars of the past, but also modern day scholars.

The location of Mount Sinai at its popular location in the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt is based on **late Christian traditions many centuries after the death of Prophet Jesus**. ^(pbuh) A full analysis is outside the scope and purpose of this article but a thorough examination is highly recommended for the reader. The present day Mount Sinai seems unsupportable from both the Biblical and the Quranic text for many reasons. Many academics and scholars also cite the location of the true Sinai at Jabal al-Lawz (in the area of ancient Madyan) in Saudi Arabia as a possible candidate based on Biblical evidence.

"Josephus provides the most explicit testimony to a precise location associated with Mt. Sinai in all of ancient Jewish literature. The witness of Josephus offers direct confirmation of the Alexandrian tradition of locating Mt. Sinai near the city of Madyan in northwestern Arabia. As in the case of Paul, Josephus' perspective on the location of Mt. Sinai may have been derived from Alexandrian traditions, indigenous traditions from Palestine, traditions from some other region, or a variety of different traditions."

"Josephus himself clearly located Mt. Sinai in northwestern Arabia where he indicates that Mt. Sinai was 'the highest of the mountains' in the region of 'the city of Madiane'. 'Madiane' is probably the city of Madyan located by Ptolemy and other sources in northwestern Arabia east of the Gulf of 'Aqaba.'" [1]

It is to be remembered that Prophet Moses ^(pbuh) was summoned after he settled with his family in Madyan (modern day Saudi Arabia). This is confirmed both by the Bible and the Quran.

028.022

"And when he turned his face towards (the land of) **Madyan**, he said: "Perhaps that my Lord will guide me (to the) the right path."

028.023

"And when he arrived at the watering (place) in **Madyan**, he found there a group of men watering (their flocks), and besides them he found two women who were keeping back (their flocks)..."

Exodus Chapter 2

15 Now when Pharaoh heard this thing, he sought to slay Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh, and dwelt in the land of Midian: and he sat down by a well.

16 Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters: and they came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. [2]

According to the Quran, he was travelling with his family when he was summoned (28:29). This does not indicate a place in the Sinai desert in Egypt.

028.029

"Now when Moses had fulfilled the term and was travelling with his family, he perceived a fire in the direction of '**Tur**'..."

A QURANIC PERSPECTIVE

A Quranic study on the matter is even more interesting. The Arabic word used in the Quran for mountain is 'Jabal'. This term has been used in numerous verses:

2:260, 7:74, 7:143, 7:143, 7:171, 11:42, 11:43, 13:31, 14:46, 15:82, 16:68, 16:81, 17:37, 18:47, 19:90, 20:105, 21:79, 22:18, 24:43, 26:149, 27:88, 33:72, 34:10, 35:27, 38:18, 52:10, 56:5, 59:21, 69:14, 70:9, 73:14, 73:14, 77:10, 78:7, 78:20, 79:32, 81:3, 88:19, 101:5

The Quran never uses the Arabic description 'Jabal' to describe the location where Prophet Moses ^(pbuh) was summoned. The word used by the Quran is 'Tur' (2:63; 2:93; 4:154; 19:52; 20:80; 23:20; 28:29; 28:46; 52:1; 95:2).

Many English translators '**insert**' words such as 'mount, mountain, Sinai' into their translations when it is clearly **absent** from the Arabic text.

There could be many reasons why 'Tur' is not described as a mountain. Some reasons are offered below:

- (1) The purpose of the place and what it entailed for both Prophet Moses ^(pbuh) and the Children of Israel was far more important than a description of the place.
- (2) The readers of the previous scriptures were familiar with the concept of 'Tur' and what it referred to. Hence, no further elucidation was deemed necessary.
- (3) To avoid overt fascination with a particular location / mountain.

(4) 'Tur' is not a mountain at all, but a particular location. This understanding would put it at much odds with the understanding of those followers of the previous scriptures.

No doubt, there are many other possibilities that can be surmised.

Classical authorities have also used the word 'Tur' to describe a mountain that produces trees. It appears that the Quran seems to go out of its way **not to describe** the nature of the location where Prophet Moses^(pbuh) was summoned. An analysis seems to suggest that the word 'Tur' denotes a particular place where one hovers around it, or a particular location which one draws near to it and does so repeatedly. This certainly seems to be the classical definitions that are advanced.

طور

1. طَارَ حَوْلَهُ, aor. يَطُورُ, (TA,) inf. n. طُورٌ and طُورَانُ, (K,) *He went, or hovered, (حَامَرٌ,) round about it. (K,* TA.)* — Hence, لَا يَطُورُنِي *He will not approach my immediate vicinage. (TA.)* And لَا تَطُرْ حَرَانَا *Approach thou not our environs. (S, O, TA.)* And لَا أُطُورُ بِهِ *I will not approach him, or it: (S, O, TA:) occurring in a trad. (TA.)* And فَلَانٌ يَطُورُ بِفُلَانٍ *Such a one as it were hovers round about such a one, and draws near to him. (TA.)*

طُورٌ *A time; one time; like the French “fois;”* syn. تَارَةً: (S, A, O, Mṣb, K:) pl. أُطُورٌ. (S, K, A.) You say, طُورًا بَعْدَ طُورٍ *I came to him time after time. (A.)* فَعَلَ ذَلِكَ طُورًا بَعْدَ طُورٍ *He did that time after time. (Mṣb.)* And جِئْتُهُ أُطُورًا *I came to him several times. (A.)*

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [3]

This primary definition of 'Tur' attested by classical lexicons also seems to resonate with the Quran and Prophet Moses's^(pbuh) experience at a particular location.

028.029

"Now when Moses had fulfilled the term and was travelling with his family, he perceived a fire in the direction of 'Tur'. He said to his family, "Wait here, indeed, I have perceived a fire, perhaps I will bring to you from it some news or a brand of fire, so that you may warm yourselves""



Illustration - Joseph Islam

In the above verse, a direction is given towards 'Tur'. However, no description is imparted. In the following verse, a little more detail is made apparent.

028.030

"But when he came (to) it, he was called from the **right side of the valley** from a tree in hallowed ground: "O Moses! Verily I am God, the Lord of the Worlds"

The only description here is a right bank of a valley which doesn't seem to indicate a mountain. However, admittedly this does not rule it out either.

In another verse, the valley is referred to as the 'Holy valley of Tuwa'.

079.016

"When his Lord called upon in the Holy valley of Tuwa (**Arabic: bil-wadil-muqadasi tuwa**)"

We also note:

028:046

"And you were not at the side of the 'Tur' when We did call; but (the knowledge of it is) a mercy from thy Lord that you may warn a folk to whom no warner came before you, that haply they may give heed"

Once again, the Quran appears intentionally not to describe the location where Prophet Moses ^(pbuh) was summoned.

007.143

"And when Moses came to the **place appointed by Us (Arabic: limiqatina)** and his Lord spoke to him, He said: "O my Lord! show (Thyself) to me, that I may look upon You." God said: "By no means can you see Me; But look upon the **mount (Arabic: Jabali)**; if it remains in its place, then shall you see Me." But when his Lord manifested His glory on the **Mount (Arabic: Jabali)**, He made it crumble to dust. And Moses fell down in a swoon / unconscious. When he recovered his senses he said: "Glory be to You! to You I turn in repentance and I am the first to believe."

In the above verse it is clear that the word 'Jabal' is a well known term used by the Quran to describe a mountain. However, the meeting place of Prophet Moses ^(pbuh) has never been described as a 'jabal' (mountain).

THE LAW (TORAH) ALSO SEEMS TO BE GIVEN AT 'TUR'

The law (Torah) was given to Prophet Moses, ^(pbuh) once he had left Egypt with the Israelites and during the Exodus with his people. The Quran does not distinguish between the location of the first time Prophet Moses ^(pbuh) was summoned and the location at where he received the Law. Both locations are referred to by the Quran as 'Tur' and seem to indicate the same place. If the first location where Prophet Moses ^(pbuh) was summoned is assumed to be somewhere in Madyan, then the law was also most likely to have been received in Madyan. This would imply that the Exodus led them back to the land of Madyan from Egypt as a part of the Exodus route.

002.063

"And when We took your covenant and We raised over you 'Tur' (Saying): "Hold firmly to what We have given you and bring (ever) to remembrance what is in it: Perhaps you may fear God / guard against evil."

020.080

"O Children of Israel! Verily, We delivered you from your enemy, and We made a Covenant with you on the right side of 'Tur' and We sent down to you Manna and quails"

028:044

"And you were not present on the western side when We gave Moses the Law, nor did you witness that event"

There is no mention of mountain in the above verses. This is usually inserted by commentators in popular translations.

IS 'TUR' LOCATED ON OR NEAR A MOUNTAIN CALLED SINAI?

This is quite possible. The Quran neither categorically confirms this nor denies this. However, in one verse (95:2), there seems to be a strong suggestion that there is a close relationship between 'Tur' and Sinai (Arabic: Sineen). Despite the possible synonymy, it is also quite possible that they are two separate locations and not necessarily synonymous. The latter view is somewhat strengthened when one considers two relevant verses in context (95:1 and 95:2). In verse 95:1, an oath is taken on two separate subjects (The Fig and the Olive). In verse 95:2, two separate nouns are mentioned; 'Tur' and 'Sineen' (Sinai).

095:001

"By the Fig and the olive"

095:002

"and 'Tur' 'Sineen'

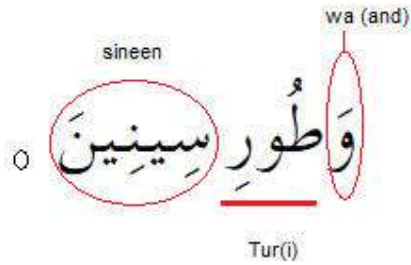


Illustration - Joseph Islam

FINAL THOUGHTS

'Tur' is never described by the Quran as a mountain. Some possible reasons for this were cited in the article. The Quranic word for mountain in the Quran is 'Jabal'. The primary meaning of 'Tur' is to hover about a location, possibly repeatedly. The Quran appears to deliberately not describe the location where Prophet Moses ^(pbuh) was summoned to any great detail.

Furthermore, it seems **unlikely** that the modern day location of Mount Sinai in Egypt is synonymous with the Quranic 'Tur' or the Biblical location where the Law (Torah) was received. It is useful to remember that both scriptures indicate a possible location near or in Madyan (Midian) where Prophet Moses ^(pbuh) resided with his family. This ancient location is not in modern day Egypt in the Sinai Peninsula, but rather in modern day Saudi Arabia. There is much scholarship material in this area which is highly recommended study.

Please see below a short video which gives some of the arguments in support of a site other than that in the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt. Please also note that some of the political inferences in the video are not relevant to the theme of this article.

Search for Mount Sinai at Jabal al-Lawz

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sliuvVxkl8k&feature=player_embedded

Related Article:

(1) [Exodus of Prophet Moses's ^{\(pbuh\)} People](#)

REFERENCES

[1] KERKESLAGER. A, *Jewish Pilgrimage and Jewish Identity*, Brill, Leiden, Boston, Koln; 1998. Cited [online] at <http://www.explorationfilms.com/sinai-experts-scholars-review.html> [Accessed 31st October 2011]

[2] The Bible. King James Version.

[3] LANE. E.W, *Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 5, Page 1890*

Highlights marked in red on the lexicon excerpt are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

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