

# DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Seventeenth Week - Tuesday

## MOUNT SINAI

*"Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because Yahweh descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly" (Exodus 19:16-18).*

We must now conduct our readers to Sinai itself, to which sacred mount the next move brought the Israelites. We will accept the guidance of a very intelligent traveler in taking the first view of this renowned mountain. It is only necessary first to premise that it belongs to the high central group of the Sinai mountains; and seeing that the name of Horeb seems also to be given to the mount on which the law was delivered, we agree with those who take Horeb to be the *general name for the entire group of mountains* and Sinai for the *particular summit* on which the law was delivered.

The traveler we accept for our guide is Dr. Durbin. (We must point out that the Israelites probably approached the plain in front of the mountain by a somewhat more circuitous route than that of Dr. Durbin, but the results are the same.)

For two hours we ascended the wild, narrow pass enclosed between stupendous granite cliffs, whose debris encumbered the defile, often rendering the passage difficult and dangerous. Escaping from the pass we crossed the head of a basin-like plain which sloped downward to the southwest; and ascending gradually, gloomy precipitous mountain masses rose to view on either hand with detached beds of snow lying in their clefts. The caravan moved slowly, and apparently with a more solemn, measured tread, and the Bedouins became more serious and silent and looked steadily before them as if to catch the first glimpse of some revered object. The space before us gradually expanded when suddenly our guide Tualeb, pointing to a black perpendicular cliff whose two riven and rugged summits rose some 1,200 or 1,500 feet directly in front of us, exclaimed *Jebel Musa!* (that is, Mount of Moses).

How shall I describe the effect of that announcement? Not a word was spoken by Moslem or Christian. But slowly and silently we advanced into the still expanding plain, our eyes immovably fixed on the frowning precipices of the stern and desolate mountain. We were doubtless on the plain where Israel encamped at the giving of the law, and that grand and gloomy height before us was Sinai upon which God descended in fire, when the whole mountain was enveloped in smoke and shook under the tread of the Almighty while his presence was proclaimed by the long loud peals of repeated thunder, above which the blast of the trumpet was heard waxing louder and louder and reverberating amid the stern and gloomy heights around. And then God spoke with Moses. "And all the people removed and stood afar off, and trembled when they saw the thunderings and lightnings, and thick darkness where God was; and said to Moses, Speak thou unto us; but let not God speak with us, lest we die" (Exodus 20:18,19). We all seemed to ourselves to be present at this terrible scene, and would have marched directly up to the mount of God had not Tualeb recalled us to ourselves by pointing to the convent far up in the deep ravine between Horeb and Jebel Deir.

It is easily conceivable, and the history seems to require it, that the Israelites approached this place by a more convenient route. It is therefore usually understood that instead of going through the narrow and difficult mountain passes and ravines, they swept round to Mount Horeb by the comparatively broad valley of Wady esh-Sheikh. The author of *Forty Days in the Desert* is the most recent traveler who has passed *that way*, and we must not refuse the reader the pleasure of his company.

From the descriptions of the pass which I had read, I expected unusual grandeur in the scenery as well as great difficulty in the ascent. But after our clamber up the terrific precipices of the Serbal (another of the Sinaic mountains), those which were in this desolate ravine appeared very insignificant, while the zigzag pathway built up with stones seemed comparatively like a broad and easy turnpike road, which we surmounted with little effort. Not so, however, did the camels. Their piteous cries filled the air and echoed wildly in the recesses of the shattered cliffs. Catching, as we mounted higher and higher, the still freshening breeze from the cool regions above, we felt equal to anything. . . .

The narrow valley widened gradually into a high, dreary, undulating plain, hemmed in by still drearier mountains, which upreared their dark, shattered, thunder-stricken peaks higher and higher on each side as we advanced; while right before us, closing up the plain and shutting it in, towered sheer from its level an awful range of precipices which seemed to bar our further progress through this region of desolate sublimity. As we still advanced, a narrow glen opened up between them, running deeper into the heart of the solitude, and at some distance up this, half lost between walls and naked rock, peeped out the high wall of the convent and the dark verdure of its garden, looking, as someone

has well described it, like the end of the world.

The plain of er-Rahah, into which both routes thus lead, is regarded by Dr. Robinson and most other travelers as the camping ground of the Israelites. Its extent is still further increased by lateral valleys receding from the plain itself between the foot of the first range of mountains and that of the grand central mass of crags--the left one being the Wady esh-Sheikh of very considerable extent, and the right a smaller recess--altogether making a very extensive open space which until lately was supposed to be the only one existing in this high central region that could at all meet the necessities of the case.

It so happens, however, that the identification of this plain as the site of the Hebrew encampment required a change of opinion as to the summit upon which the law was delivered; for the mountain which had hitherto been regarded as the scene of that solemn event is not visible from this plain, being blocked by a nearer mountain, and therefore could not be seen by the host of Israelites assembled there.

The reader must clearly understand that Horeb, in its largest sense, is an oblong mountain about three miles in length. All around its base sweeps a deep, irregular, and narrow defile, as if the Almighty himself had set bounds around it as holy ground. Even the mountains round about it, which seem thrown together in wild confusion, are cut off from any communication with the Mount of God. At the southern extremity of this oblong edge rises a summit in lofty and stern grandeur to the height of about 7,500 feet above sea level. And this summit is the Jebel Musa (the Mount of Moses) which tradition regards as the Sinai of Scripture--the mount where the law was delivered. The only ground on which the claim to this distinction has been questioned is that it is not visible from the plain which has been fixed upon as the camping ground of the Israelites.

Most of those who have thus questioned Jebel Musa's claim have done so with declared reluctance, seeing how fully it corresponds in all other respects to the ideas previously formed of the Mount of God; and thus they return to the other end of the oblong mount. And there they discover another pinnacle which, although lower than Jebel Musa, boldly confronts the plain of the encampment and is visible from all parts of it. It bears the name of Suksafeh and is the "Horeb" of the traditions which gave to the two grand summits the distinctive names of Horeb and Sinai. Though inferior to the southern summit of Jebel Musa, it is not lacking in grandeur and magnificence, and it is of very difficult access (though some have taken the risk to reach its summit). Dr Durbin, who went to it directly from the summit of Jebel Musa, says:

No one who has not seen them can conceive the ruggedness of these vast piles of granite rocks--rent into chasms, rounded into small summits, splintered into countless peaks--all in the wildest confusion as they appear to the eye of an observer from any of the heights. But when we did arrive at the summit of es-Suksafeh and cast our eyes over the wide plain, we were more than repaid for all our toil. One glance was enough. We were satisfied that here, and here only,

could the wondrous displays of Sinai have been visible to the assembled host of Israel; that here the Lord spoke with Moses; that here was the mount that trembled and smoked in the presence of its manifested Creator! We gazed for some time in silence, and when we spoke it was with a reverence that even the most thoughtless of our company could not shake off. I read on the very spot, with what feelings I need not say, the passage in Exodus which relates the wonders of which this mountain was the theater. We *felt* its truth, and could almost see the lightnings and hear the thunders and the "trumpet waxing loud.