



GOD'S SELF-REVELATION AT SINAI

Burning bush at St. Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai. The monks living at St. Catherine's hold to the tradition that this is the literal bush that Moses saw as he talked to God.



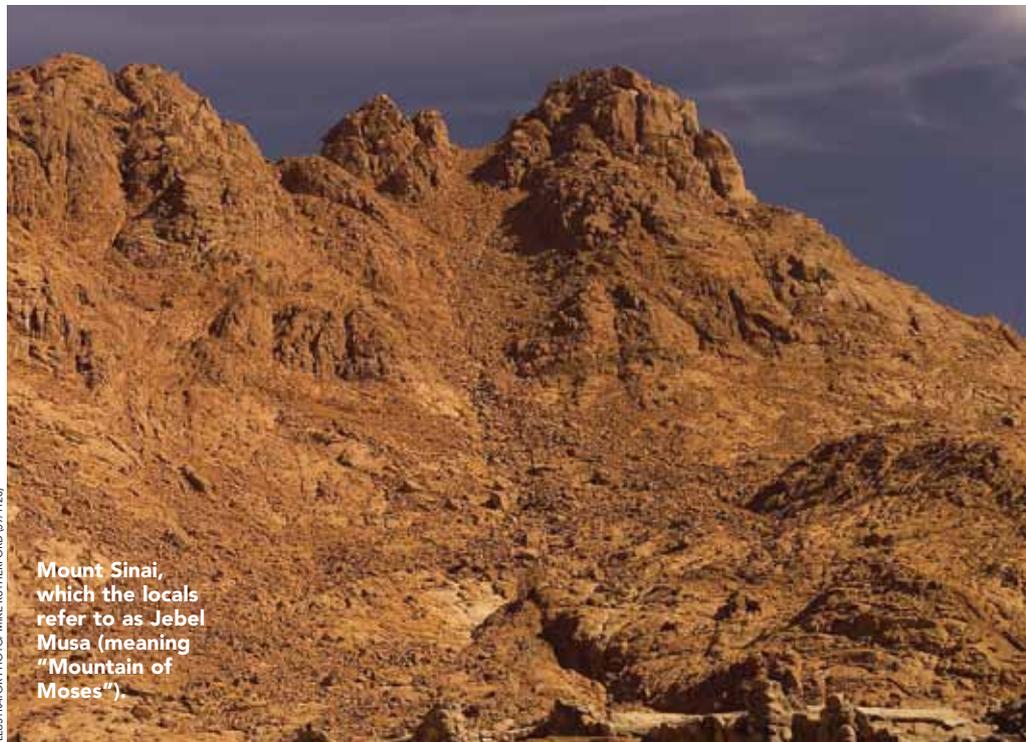
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BRENT BRUCE

By Eric A. Mitchell

MUCH OF WHAT WE know about God from the Books of the Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus He revealed to Moses (as writer of these books) either on or in the shadow of Mount Sinai.¹ Moses met with God daily at Sinai, first in the tent of meeting and later in the tabernacle within the holy of holies.² Of the books Moses wrote, the Book of Exodus was likely his first, recounting the deliverance from Egypt and the covenant with God at Mount Sinai. Some of what God revealed about Himself had occurred elsewhere (Eden, Ur, Haran, Egypt, and Canaan) and prior to the exodus. Here, however, we will focus on what God revealed about Himself at Mount Sinai. If the story of God's interaction with mankind ended at Sinai, what would we know about Him?

God first appeared to Moses at Sinai in the burning bush (Ex. 3). The angel of Yahweh appeared there

to Moses while he pastured the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro. There, God gained Moses' attention with the burning bush; when Moses turned to look, God called him personally by name. Through these actions God revealed Himself as being patient and kind and desiring a relationship with His people. He also revealed Himself as holy, for the ground in His presence was holy. God next told Moses He was the God of Moses' living ancestors and of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Thus God revealed Himself as Moses' and Israel's God. He revealed that He is all-knowing, recognizing the people's sufferings and afflictions, and that He had come to deliver them from bondage. In selecting Moses as the deliverer through whom He would accomplish this deliverance, God showed He will not share His glory. He was more interested in using a humble shepherd than the mighty prince of Egypt that Moses once was. At this time, Moses asked God His name. The fact that God



Mount Sinai, which the locals refer to as Jebel Musa (meaning "Mountain of Moses")

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revealed to Moses His name shows that God is personal and desires to relate to us individually. God revealed His name as “I am,” but the people were to call Him *Yahweh* (“He will cause to be”), which is the same Hebrew verb in third person.³ God is the One who self-exists and causes all things to exist. God here gave the authority of His name, *Yahweh*, to Moses.⁴

After they left Egypt, God led His people to Rephidim near the base of Mount Sinai, a place without water (ch. 17). God was testing their faithfulness. Despite their failure and grumbling, God was patient with Israel and stood (in the pillar of cloud) next to Moses when Moses struck the rock and

the life-giving water flowed. God showed His faithfulness and provision despite the people’s complaints.

When Israel arrived at Mount Sinai proper, God gave Moses a message that described how He had delivered them mightily from Egypt to Himself at Sinai (ch. 19). God offered His people a unique relationship in the form of a suzerain covenant. God stated, “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (vv. 5-6, NASB). A suzerainty covenant was one that a strong king (or “suzerain”) imposed upon a weaker neighboring king or kingdom, who agreed to serve and give tribute to the suzerain.⁵ The Lord revealed Himself as Israel’s Deliverer, Sustainer, Leader, Shepherd, Suzerain, Owner, and God. While God had permanent claim on Israel before, now they had formally agreed to serve Him.

Next, God revealed His holiness by having the people sanctify themselves over three days and by setting a boundary around His holy mountain (vv. 10-17). God established the threat of capital punishment to give weight to the sanctity of His holiness as something Israel could not breach. God revealed Himself as real and mighty and imminent when He descended upon Sinai in fearsome

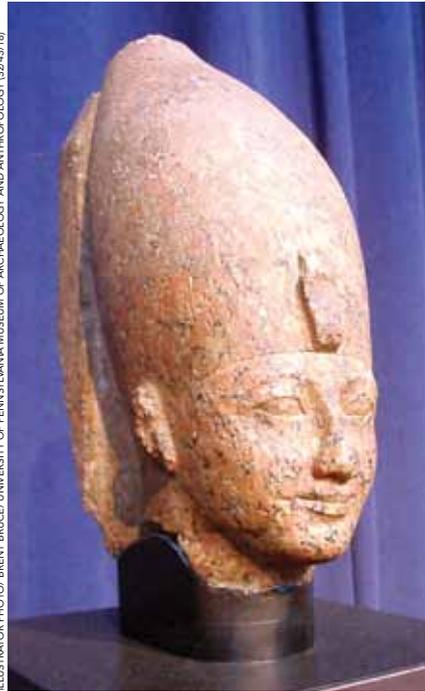
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YAHWEH	PHARAOH (earthly representative of the Egyptian god Amun-Re) ⁶
• Patient	• Impatient
• Kind	• Harsh
• Is holy—even the ground around Him	• Few restrictions upon those entering his presence
• God of Israel’s ancestors	• So-called god of Egypt
• Knows Israel’s sufferings and plans deliverance and to enrich His people with Egypt’s gold for Israel	• Does not know God and does not care about Israel’s sufferings – planned genocide
• Will not share His glory	• Pharaoh and Egypt stripped of their glory and forced to do God’s will
• Personal	• Impersonal
• Desires relationship	• Desires service
• Eternally existent	• A created being
• Causes all things to exist	• Tries to control what exists in Egypt
• Faithful Sustainer	• Unfaithful and breaks his word; Israel has to fend for itself
• Provider	• Reduces provisions for Israel
• Deliverer	• Enslaves Israel
• Shepherds His people to Sinai for a relationship	• Chases Israel to destroy and enslave the people
• Rightful Owner—as Creator	• Posing as owner
• Mighty	• Shown powerless through the plagues
• Imminent	• Distant—lived away from God’s people
• Suzerain King	• Deceitful enslaver
• Frightening to all	• Lacked the fear of God and was judged for it
• The eternal God	• A mortal man



Below: Bust depicting Thutmose III (reigned 1479-1425 B.C.), who many believe to be the pharaoh of the exodus.

Right: Near Petra, the spring of Moses is the traditional Arabic site where Moses struck the rock, from which water came (Num. 20:10-13).



Left: Located in southern Israel at Timna, a replica of the tabernacle

that Moses and the children of Israel set up in the wilderness.

glory in a thick cloud with thunder and lightning, fire and smoke, earthquake and trumpet sound (vv. 18-25). This revealed God's power and majesty and instilled the fear of God in the people's hearts. God had told Moses He would reveal Himself in a cloud and allow Israel to hear His voice so they would believe Moses forever. God was concerned that His people would believe His messenger when he spoke God's words. God further honored Moses, His covenant mediator, and Aaron, His high priest, and the whole occasion in the eyes of Israel. He had Moses return up the mountain and then back down to the people with further instruction and then brought



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (8/20/2)

Aaron up Sinai into His presence as well.

In Egypt with its thousands of stone, metal, and wooden idols, the people had only heard the stories passed down for generations of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They had never seen or known a personal God with power to perform great miracles. The only living "god" they had encountered was Pharaoh—who was no god at all. The self-revealed attributes of God at Sinai were thus essential in establishing Yahweh as the only living God. The contrast between Yahweh and Pharaoh was stark.

At Sinai, God revealed Himself more powerful than Egypt's so-called gods (including Pharaoh) and more powerful than all creation. Even though He owned Israel in multiple ways (as Creator, ancestral God, Deliverer, Provider, and Sustainer), at Sinai He politely asked them to accept Him formally as their suzerain King. Israel later built Yahweh a tabernacle where they would meet and worship Him. The tabernacle was similar in structure (outer court,

holy place, holy of holies) to the war tent that Pharaoh used when traveling with his army.⁷ This contextual imagery would not have been lost on Israel. God would live in the midst of His people as their suzerain king. God sealed the people's acceptance of His covenant by a fellowship meal with the elders of Israel on Mount Sinai (Ex. 24). Here the elders saw God, in what was likely a Christophany. **B**

1. Some passages refer to Mount Sinai as Mount Horeb. Mount Horeb may have been a lower peak nearby and connected to Mount Sinai (see Ex. 17).

2. This writer views most of these theophanies as the pre-incarnate Christ. See James A. Borland, *Christ In The Old Testament* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 1999).

3. J. Barton Payne, "484 הָוָה," (*hawa*; be, become) in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:210.

4. See Exodus 3:14-15. Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 122.

5. Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 13-26.

6. As presented in Exodus 1-14.

7. Richard A. Gabriel, *Soldiers' Lives Through History: The Ancient World* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 51.

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