

Raiders of the Lost Mountain

How a pair of real-life Indiana Joneses used the Bible as a super-accurate treasure map in their search for the real Mount Sinai.

Cresting the final stair-step pitch of crumbling granite, Bob Cornuke and Larry Williams stomped their boots simultaneously on the snub-nosed summit of Jabal al Lawz. With a victorious “Whoop!” Williams turned to Cornuke, “Do you think we’re the first Westerners to reach this summit since Moses?” he asked.

Cornuke shrugged. All he knew was that they’d reached the top of an 8,000-foot peak that had tantalized their imaginations halfway across the planet and sent them chasing like bloodhounds into the suffocating deserts of northwest Saudi Arabia. Local bedouins call the peak Jebel Musa—or Mountain of Moses. If the duo’s theory was correct, they’d finally reached the real Mount Sinai.

Gazing into the plain below Cornuke marveled to think Moses might have once admired the same, wind-sculpted dunes and flaxen valleys stretching west to the Red Sea. He could almost imagine the flickering fires of Israelite campsites below. He marked the date in his rumpled Bible, “June 12, 1988: The day I was transported back in time to stand face to face with the most amazing story ever told; the day Jesus captured my heart.”

On Top of the World

Bathed in mysterious black under a clear, cloudless sky, the crest of Jabal al Lawz is visible from a distance. Statuesque on its broad desert plateau, it’s girdled by a barbed wire

fence and posted with ominous warnings by the Saudi minister of antiquities: "Trespassers will be put to death."

Cornuke and Williams knew it meant them, but they'd battled one of the hottest deserts on earth—losing their way in a maze of prickly gulches, getting stuck in quicksandlike wadis—to get here. A fence wasn't about to stop them now.

They waited for morning, snuck past the armed guards, skirted the fence and climbed the mountain in the pale light of dawn. Reaching the top, their eyes locked on the granite crown—it was indeed stained inky black, the rocks glistening like polished obsidian.

Cornuke cracked one open; its ebony surface masked a core of plain brown granite. What kind of heat could cause that? Taking out his Bible, Cornuke turned to Exodus 19:18, reading how Mount Sinai had been: "covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently" (NIV).

The pair stared nervously at the ground. Underfoot was evidence of an otherworldly fire—a fire hot enough to melt granite to a slick black glaze yet leave the underlying stone intact. "It was," Cornuke recalls, "as if God had signed His signature in heavenly flames, leaving an indelible handprint for the ages."

Wonder instantly turned to dread. Who am I to be slugging down Gatorade and munching M&M's where Moses once fasted for 40 days preparing to meet the Lord (see Ex. 34:28)? A verse leapt to mind: "Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death" (Ex. 19:12).

Exposed, ashamed, gripped with vertigo, Cornuke could think of only one thing: I've got to get off this mountain.

Retracing the Exodus

Cornuke wasn't one to balk at danger. An ex-Costa Mesa SWAT cop, he'd lived life on the dangling edge of disaster. But this was different; this was a heart-stopping, hair-whitening, deathly foreign fear of God—scary territory for a self-described “cultural Christian.” He hadn't expected to be confronted with biblical truth. “I went to Saudi Arabia seeking adventure,” he confides, “not God.”

Bob Cornuke met Larry Williams in the winter of 1987, docked on a yacht in the Red Sea. They were members of an expedition to find Pharaoh's chariots, working to prove that the Exodus account of the Bible was accurate: that Egyptian troops perished chasing the Israelites into the sea (see Ex. 14:27). Sadly, the waters were too deep, its sand bottom too loose for effective excavation, and the expedition failed.

In all other aspects, however, the trip was a smashing success; it confirmed the team's suspicions that modern theories of the Exodus account were fundamentally flawed. Those theories had the Israelites wandering aimlessly for 40 years inside the severely constricted bounds of the Sinai Peninsula, a thesis debunked by a 1984 article in *Biblical Archaeology Review*.

That report chronicled the findings of a team of Israeli archeologists who spent 15 years scouring the peninsula for some sign of the Exodus, but turned up no evidence whatsoever to suggest a million-plus Jews once blanketed the Egyptian countryside. It was a shattering rebuff, as well, of the popular tourist site near St. Catherine's Monastery: the “traditional” Mount at the peninsula's southern tip.

On Egyptian soil, team members were shocked to see how clearly Scripture mapped out the Exodus route, south, from the ancient land of Goshen, then east around the peninsula's southern horn

to an isolated strip of beach on the Straits of Tiran. There they found something straight from Ripley's Believe It Or Not: an immense underwater land bridge snaking out into the straits, linking the east Sinai coast to the west coast of Saudi Arabia.

The coral reef was located precisely where Scripture indicated the Hebrews had crossed over, the physical embodiment of the "the road in the depths of the sea" made by the Lord "so the redeemed might cross over" (Is. 51:10).

For Cornuke and Williams, it meant Mount Sinai was somewhere in Saudi Arabia. Six months later, they stole discreetly into the ancient land of Midian, and made a clandestine dash into the Saudi desert.

Bouncing over washboard terrain in a rented Datsun pickup, the pair used the Bible as a step-by-step map and began immediately bumping into prominent Exodus stop-off points. Thirty kilometers east (or a "three-day walk") from the Red Sea, they came to an immense salt flat whose brackish springs jutted from the cracked soil like giant anthills. Were these the bitter springs of Marah, where

the parched Israelites nearly foundered for lack of fresh water (see Ex. 15:23)?

Back on the trail, the duo encountered a remote, palm-shaded oasis, whose 12 cement-lined springs bore a striking resemblance to Elim's grove, where the weary Israelites found cooling rest from their desert sojourn (see Ex. 15:27). Most amazingly, at each stop local bedouins assured them they were indeed tracking the "ancient trail of the Hebrews." Hoping to trace the steps of Moses, the duo moved purposefully toward Jabal al Lawz, whose ebony crown pierced the platinum sky.

**Mountaintop
Experience**

Still shaken from his mountaintop epiphany, Cornuke eased down Jabal al Lawz's slippery face. Was it God's sense of humor, he wondered, or simply a divine plan of preservation, to hide Mount Sinai deep in the land of Mecca?

Tucked away in a closed Muslim culture, where all things sacred are zealously guarded, it was certainly spared the harsh glare of public scrutiny inflicted upon its Egyptian counterpart. Still, he mused, how might Israel greet claims that their holy mountain sat incarcerated in Muhammed's backyard?

On a spacious ledge overlooking the valley, Cornuke and Williams trained their binoculars on the front side of the mountain. What appeared was a sand and granite memorial to the great Exodus. A quarter mile into the plain, piled high with huge boulders, sat a massive stone altar, flat on top, whose sides were etched with Egyptian-style drawings of ancient Egyptian bull gods. Egyptian cow deities in a land with no history of cattle? To Cornuke's eyes, "it was an exact likeness of the altar of the golden calf built by Aaron" (see Ex. 32:4).

Further up the slope, snaking into the valley, was an ancient riverbed of water-polished boulders. Deuteronomy 9:21 tells of a brook, or river, on the mountain, where Moses threw the crushed remains of the golden calf. When Moses struck the rock at Horeb, water flowed "down like rivers" (Ps. 78:16, emphasis added), and this dusty channel had once been large enough to serve a multitude.

Then, just above it, a sight almost too incredible to fathom: at the uppermost mouth of the riverbed sat a towering pillar of granite, split laser-fine down the middle. Its implausible berth at the ancient headwater made it seem as if waters once surged from the rock itself. "He split the rocks in the desert and gave them water as abundant as the seas" (Ps. 78:15). In Cornuke's mind, nothing in nature could've more perfectly

evoked the rock Moses struck on Mount Sinai.

Williams aimed his camera at the foot of the mountain, where, in the fold of the ridge, sat a giant, V-shaped altar stretching 60 feet in both directions. Its crumbling center support wall affected an ancient corral, or ceremonial trough for burnt offerings. In Exodus 24:4-5, Cornuke read aloud how “[Moses] got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel” (emphasis added).

Scattered next to the altar, like clockwork, sat hewn stumps pillars; Cornuke counted them—exactly 12. Whispering breathlessly now to a speechless Williams, Cornuke said, “It’s the altar and pillars where the Hebrews offered burnt sacrifices to God!”

In one sudden flash, Cornuke decided they were standing on the real Mount Sinai. His trepidation suddenly vanished. Fear changed to hope. Questing after adventure, Cornuke found himself bowled over by a tidal wave of calming truth. In its wake fled all doubt.

Through the hard clay of his lukewarm heart surged a radiant, white-water swell of faith—first in a trickle, then as if a dam had burst. And Cornuke knew. In a moment, quiet and simple, he finally knew: , sweet You. It’s all true! NM

David Halbrook is the co-author of *In Search of the Mountain of God: The Discovery of the Real Mount Sinai*, with Bob Cornuke (Broadman & Holman). Visit Bob’s Web site at .

The Mystery of Mount Sinai

How is it that one of history’s most distinctive mountains got lost? Or was it merely misplaced? Controversy over the true location of Mount Sinai has persisted for centuries. But since

the fourth century when Emperor Constantine's mother, Queen Helena, said she saw Mount Sinai in a vision, the peak at St. Catherine's Monastery, in the southern Sinai Peninsula, has made the loudest (if not well-founded) claims to the crown. Distressingly, for the thousands of tourists, who flock there each year, the mountain is devoid of archaeological evidence.

Even so, Bob Cornuke's and Larry Williams' stirring testimony (and photographic evidence) surrounding Jabal al Lawz in Saudi Arabia hasn't

convinced everyone of its authenticity. Hershel Shanks, editor of *Biblical Archaeological Review*, while agreeing their story is compelling, insists an extensive "professional" excavation of the peak is required to prove their claims.

According to *World of the Bible News & Views*, a more probable site than either Jebel Musa or Jabal al Lawz is a mountain found on the west side of the Sinai Peninsula known as Jebel Sin Bishar. This view has been adopted by many scholars and is, in fact, the position of the Zondervan NIV Atlas of the Bible.

Still, the duo's findings have been bolstered by a recent spate of scholarly studies.

According to Jewish scholar Allen Kerkeslager, contributor to the book *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, ancient Jewish traditions placed Mount Sinai in northwestern Saudi Arabia long before theories linking the peak to the southern Sinai Peninsula developed.

In identifying the real Mount Sinai, Kerkeslager says three criteria must be taken into account: (1) It must be located in northwest Saudi Arabia; (2) It must be near ancient Madyan (or the modern day town of Al-Bad in northwest Saudi Arabia), where Moses' father-in-law Jethro once lived; and (3) It must be the highest mountain in the surrounding region. Jabal al Lawz, clearly the tallest mountain in northwest Saudi Arabia,

fits all three criteria.

Most prominently, renowned Old Testament expert Frank Moore Cross of Harvard University has recently lent his support. In his new book, *From Epic to Canon*, Cross says he began to suspect Mount Sinai lay in Saudi Arabia after archaeological surveys of the Sinai Peninsula turned up nothing.

"A great many scholars are now coming around to the notion that [Mount] Sinai is most likely located in present-day Saudi Arabia," he said.