

The Spiritual Inheritance of Sinai - 1

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

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Sinai is the meeting point of two continents and the dividing line between two seas. The peninsula, which is often described as “24,000 square metres of useless land”, is the gateway between Africa and Asia and the bridge between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, i.e. the shortest route from Europe to the Indian Ocean and the Far East. At first sight, Sinai seems inaccessible, being full of barren, rocky mountains. The earth is unsuitable for cultivation and there’s not much rain; it’s very hot during the day and cold at night. And yet, Sinai isn’t monotonous and all of a piece. The northern part, from Al Arish to the Suez Canal consists of large expanses of sand, which, in the past, were repeatedly crossed by large armies. The El Tikh region, in the centre of the peninsula is a broad limestone plateau.



The most southern part in the triangular tip of the peninsula is made up of steep granitic mountains, the most important of which are Sinai, Saint Katherine’s, Saint Epistimi’s, Serbal and Umm Shomar. The people of Israel passed through this region 35 centuries ago. The desert grandeur of Sinai has an alluring beauty which

has remained unimpaired by the modern world. Not many people live in this desert. Apart from the coastal towns, the peninsula is inhabited by a few Bedouin, who manage to live off their small flocks, small vegetable plots and dates, and by the monks of the Holy Monastery of Sinai. But underneath the surface of this arid desert there lie rich deposits of oil and other minerals which have attracted people from the time of the ancient Egyptians.

The Spiritual Inheritance of Sinai

There are some scholars who claim that Sinai took its name from the Semitic word *šen*, meaning “tooth”, from the shape of the mountain. Others, however, derive it from the Sumerian deity of the moon who may have been worshiped there in pre-historic times. [According to Rabbinic tradition, the name *Sinai* derives from *sin-ah* (שִׁנְאָה), meaning *hatred*, in reference to the other nations hating the Jews out envy, since the Jews were the ones to receive the word of God.

Regarding the Sumerian *Sin* deity assumption, William F. Albright, an American Biblical scholar, stated: “...there is nothing that requires us to explain Him as a modified moon-god. It is improbable that the name *Sinai* is derived from that of the Sumerian *Zen* (older *Zu-en*), Akkadian *Sin*, the moon-god worshiped at Ur (in his form Namnar) and at Harran, since there is no indication that the name *Sin* was ever employed by the Canaanites or the Semitic nomads of Palestine. It is much more likely that the name *Sinai* is connected with the place-name *Sin*, which belongs to a desert plain in Sinai as well as to a Canaanite city in Syria and perhaps to a city in the northeast Delta of Egypt.

It has also been recognized that it may somehow be connected with *seneh* (Aram. *sanya*), the name of a kind of bush where Moses is said to have first witnessed the theophany of Yahweh”]. Many other gods were worshipped in Sinai, among whom was *Ēl Elyōn*, God the Most High, whose priest in Madiam was Jethro (*Ex. 2, 16*). According to Scripture, Moses, at the age of forty, left Egypt and came to Mount Horeb, where he found the seven daughters of Jethro watering their flocks at the spring which still exists to the north of the main church of the monastery. Moses married one of Jethro’s daughters and lived another forty years with his father-in-law, herding his flocks and cleansing his soul in the quietude and isolation of Sinai.

It was here that God revealed Himself to Moses in the miracle of the Bush and ordered him to return to Egypt and bring out the people of Israel to Mount Horeb so that they could worship Him. The people of Israel crossed through Sinai in the 13th century B.C., on their way from slavery in Egypt to Canaan, the promised land. After a fifty-day journey, the Hebrews reached Mount Horeb, where God gave them

the Law, the foundation on which they were called to build their religious and social organization. Six hundred years later, another great prophet of Israel, Elijah, came to this same place to escape the wrath of Jezebel, the queen. To this day, inside the chapel of the Prophet Elijah, on Mount Sinai, you can see the cave where Elijah lived and was granted the opportunity to speak with God (*III Kings* 19, 9-15 [Western Bible / *Kings*]).

The First Monks on Sinai

The desire to be close to God and well away from the persecutions of pagan Rome brought many of the first Christians to Sinai, where they sought quietude, silence, isolation and sanctity. From the third century onwards, small monastic communities were formed in sacred places around Mount Horeb, such as the site of the bush in flames in Faran and other places in Southern Sinai. The first monks suffered permanent deprivation. Nature was hostile to people there and many fell victims to attacks by thieves. Yet they continued to populate Sinai. These first monks were self-sufficient hermits, who lived alone in caves in great poverty, but also in prayer. But every Sunday they would gather at the site of the bush in flames, in the *Kyriakon* [from which our word “church” is derived], to hear a spiritual talk from their leader and receive holy communion.

Because of their holy lives, the Christian hermits were natural missionaries to the pagan tribes of Sinai. So at the time of the Arab conquest, in the 7th century, most of the local people were Christian. The monks of Sinai asked Saint Helen, the mother of the emperor Saint Constantine, to protect them. And in 330 A.D., on the site of the bush in flames, she built a small church dedicated to the Mother of God, and a tower to serve as a refuge for the monks. Pilgrims report that, at the end of the 4th century, there was an important and flourishing community of monks on Sinai.

Historical Facts

Justinian - the Monastery under the Protection of Byzantine Emperors.

A new period of monasticism on Sinai began in the 6th century, when the emperor Justinian (527-65) ordered the construction of a great, powerful fortress which would surround the buildings of Saint Helen, as well as a large church and cells for the monks. Justinian also envisaged the permanent settlement of soldiers to protect the monks, as well as adequate food supplies from Egypt. Inscriptions in Greek on the beams in the roof of the Church mention the names of Justinian, his wife Theodora and the architect, Stefanos. Prokopios, the emperor's historian,

provides contemporary evidence in his book "On Buildings". Another manuscript, the "Arabic Chronicle" by Patriarch Eftyhios of Alexandria (9th century), which is kept in the monastery library, is another source which refers to the construction of the monastery, though it is somewhat removed from the events in terms of time.

Justinian dedicated the church and the monastery to the Mother of God – as had Saint Helen – due to the fact that according to the interpretation by the Fathers of the Church, the bush in flames is a symbol of the Annunciation, and, just as the bush "was in flames but did not burn" so the Mother of God, who was a human creation, conceived in her womb the fire of divinity, but was not burned by it, instead bearing the Lord and remaining a virgin. Towards the end of the 6th century, after the death of Justinian and some decades after the construction of the church, the brotherhood of the monastery arranged for a wonderful work of art to be made: the mosaic of the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ.

The importance of this for the community of the monastery is clear, especially if you bear in mind that the two prophets who spoke with the Lord at the Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah, had heard His voice and had been found worthy of seeing Him centuries before, on this very mountain of Horeb. So the church was later named "The Church of the Transfiguration of Christ the Saviour" and to this day this is its official name. Towards the end of this period, God made an enviable gift to the monastery: the holy relics of Saint Katherine, which were found on the mountain which today bears her name.