

Avraham's Camels and the Sinai Trail

Rabbi Michael Shelomo Bar-Ron
Dedicated to Yaakov and Benyamin Smith

QUESTIONS:

- Why does the Torah in *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 1:2 declare that Mount Sinai is 11 days away from Qaddesh Barnea` (most likely to be Petra, Jordan), when Book of *Melakhim* (I Kings ch.19) relates how the prophet Eliyahu (Elijah) took 40 days of trekking from the desert outside of Be'ersheva` to get to Mount Sinai? Is Egyptologist David Rohl correct that this Torah verse is an anachronism; a narrative authored in a later time when travel on camel-back was common in the Near East?
- Considering how rare domesticated camels were in the region in the days of the Exodus, what about the Torah's mention of the camels of Abraham and Jacob? If certain Bible critics are correct, there were not even domesticated camels in the Levant region in the era of the Patriarchs. Does this not falsify those details in the Torah narrative?

Qaddesh Barnea': Eleven or Five Days from Mt. Horeb?

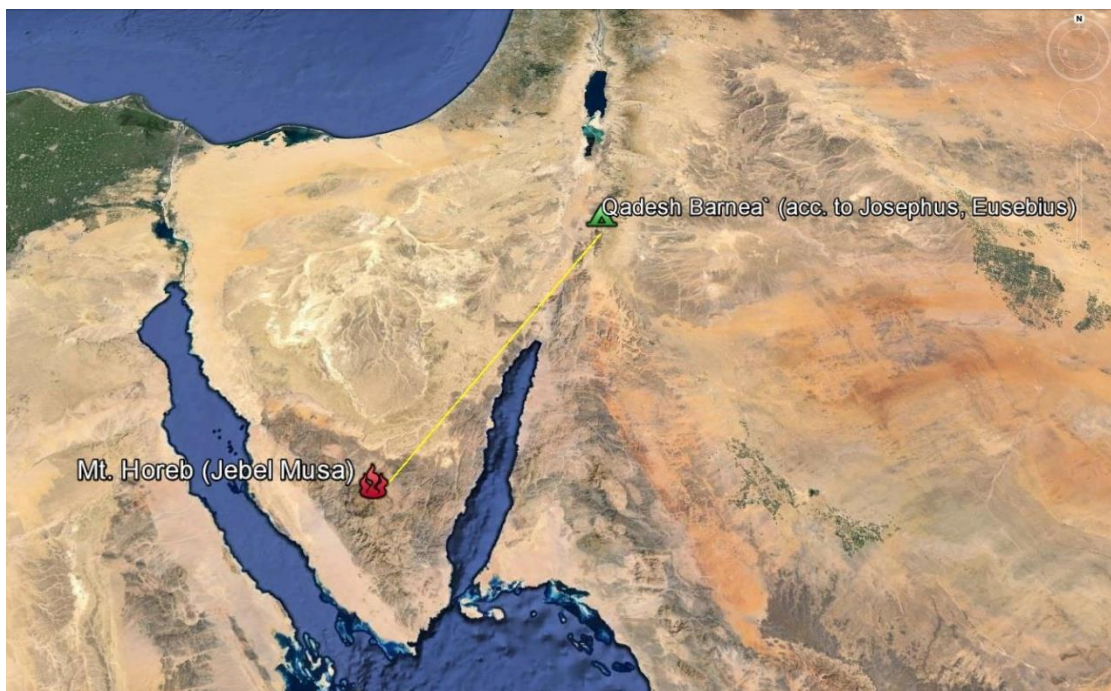
In a book I have come to love and recommend to all, *Exodus: History Or Myth?*,¹ in his chapter on the Israelites' long, event-filled journey from Sinai to Qadesh (p. 237), my brilliant friend and mentor David Rohl briefly picks on Deuteronomy 1:2:

"It is eleven days' journey from Horeb, by way of Mount Seir, to Kadesh Barnea', Mount Seir being the highlands of Jordan on the east side of the Araba valley south of Petra." [emphasis added]

Noting how it took the prophet Eliyahu 40 days to reach the holy mountain by foot, walking from the Negev desert (I Kings ch.19), Rohl concludes:

So it appears that the journey time of 'eleven days' is once again a later addition to the biblical text, made in an era when camels were in common use among traders, enabling faster travel times. The reverse route from Ezion Geber/Eilat down south to Mount Sinai/Gebel Musa was well-trodden by the seventh century BC (when I have argued much of the editing was done on the biblical manuscripts)...

Notwithstanding the peerless, masterful scholarship one gets used to when reading Rohl, this statement is inaccurate. When measured by a straight line, that distance is precisely 150.5 miles (see map below). Travelling by known routes through wadis and mountain passes might add an additional 30% of that distance to the journey -- 45 miles, bringing us to 195.5 miles.



Let's do the math for ourselves. As reported on a website of camel ranchers in Western Australia:³

A camel can carry as much as 450 kilograms, but the usual load weighs about 150 kilograms. **While working**, the animals typically travel about **40 kilometres a day [nearly 25 miles]**, at a speed of 5 kilometres an hour [emphasis mine].

At that pace, you would cover 195.5 miles in just under 8 days. If the terrain was particularly rough, we could add a ninth day. But 11 days doesn't fit. What makes this even clearer is an estimation published at the San Diego Zoo website that, if necessary, a camel "can travel **150 km (93 mi) in 15-20 hours**".⁴ Even if you cut that speed by *less than half* (considering the rough, desert terrain), a camel could surely cover our distance in as little as **5 days**. If you left Petra early Sunday morning, you would arrive by Thursday evening.

How difficult should it be for a brilliant, world-class researcher such as David Rohl to see how ill-suited a camel-ride is to the eleven-day period mentioned in *Devarim* 1:2?

The true animal hero of the Exodus, serving the Israelites' transportation needs in that time period, was not the mighty camel, but the humble donkey. Both donkeys and human beings (whose walking speed is the same) [walk an average speed of 4 miles an hour](#).⁵ Let's decrease that speed to *2.5 mph*, since the Sinai terrain is rocky. At that speed, the distance would take about 78 hours to walk. For a healthy adult, **walking 8.2 hours in a day** is a reasonable pace for a journey through the hot desert, *especially on donkey-back*. At that rate, you could make it in about *9 and a half days*. Here might be an ideal schedule:

- Beginning early morning Sunday, the Israelite wakes up at dawn to pray (as desert travelers have done from time immemorial) and sets off early enough to take full advantage of the cool, morning temperatures.
- He could walk 4.5 hours in the morning (let's say from 6 am until 10:30 am), until the sun becomes unbearably hot. (I am picturing a journey between late Spring and early Autumn, when it is not too hot, and the chances of flash-flooding is low.) It is quite possible that desert travelers would set out even earlier, before dawn, making an on-time arrival according to this schedule even easier.
- The traveler then rests until afternoon, when it begins to cool (let's say from 10:30 to 3:00 pm). During that time, the observant Israelite rests, learns Torah, and prays the afternoon prayer.
- He then resumes the march for about another 3.7 hours until dusk (let's say from 3 pm until 6:42 pm), stopping to set up camp before nightfall. (Again, a journey in summertime might give the traveler a little longer.)

Here are the equations:

$$2.5 \text{ mph} \times 8.2 \text{ hours} = 20.5 \text{ miles per day. } 20.5 \text{ miles} \times 9 \text{ days} = 184.5 \text{ miles.}$$

The remaining 11 miles would take 4.4 hours of the tenth day.

If my calculations are correct, **why might the Torah be giving a time estimate minus one full day and 4 hours?** It's called *Shabbath* (the Sabbath Day). It seems likely that Deuteronomy 1:2 is a figure that accounts for a pace for the Israelite traveler who, from Friday afternoon, would need to stop to prepare for and observe *Shabbath* from Friday evening at dusk, until Saturday night. With full observance of *Shabbath*, an Israelite setting off from *Qaddesh* (today's Petra, Jordan) at 6 am Sunday morning would arrive at Mount Sinai before noontime the following Thursday morning. He would be left with plenty of time to find a comfortable place to lodge for however long he would wish to visit that historical mountain. The mountain where *HaShem's* Presence was once manifested so powerfully, that an entire nation accepted upon itself the observance of the Sabbath Day.

If my calculations are overly optimistic, there is no difficulty in the 11-day figure in the Torah verse marking *the number of days of journeying*, irrespective of *Shabbath*. In that case, for the Israelite, it would take a total 12 days. But how could a regular Middle Bronze traveler (being very strong and hardy in those days, by our standards), require more than 11 days of actual journeying? In normal conditions, he would not.

As for the foot journey by Elijah the Prophet centuries later, we can only guess at the reasons why his trek took closer to 40 days (such biblical numbers are approximate). These could include inclement weather conditions, a circuitous route to avoid the long arm of the King of Israel, or even meditations along the way.

Are Avraham's Camels an *Anachronism*?

I was relieved, reading Rohl's work, that he has apparently escaped a pitfall that other secular scholars have fallen into: the claim that, however rare domesticated camels were in Egypt and the Levant (Canaan) at the time of the Exodus, *they were absent altogether* in the era of the Patriarchs. Archaeologist William F. Albright⁶ views the very mention of camels in Genesis as an anachronism: an imposition of the most common form of transportation in the 8th century BCE on that far earlier time, not knowing any better. Notwithstanding the most liberal positions taken by several of the *Rishonim* (rabbis from the period between 970 and 1460 CE), this would present a formidable challenge to Torah faith to many faithful Jews, Noahides and Christians.

Once again, to be fair: What gives real significance to finds by academics that might vindicate Torah truth, is their agnostic attitude. In a modern, academic world that has been released from centuries of violent persecution, lies and corruption in the name of God and religion, it is not the job of secular historians to confirm or deny any particular faith. And yet, it is no one's job to make reckless conclusions that not only defy good sense, but will likely be refuted by solid evidence in the years to come.

In our day and age, all one needs in order to get an initial, general familiarity with the most well-known opinions and sources on a given topic, is to open Wikipedia. One can then proceed to look up the primary sources they cite. Considering their general antagonism towards Judaism and Israel (not my impression alone), one can be assured of no religious bias on the part of the editors. In their entry for "Camel", we find:

Dromedaries may have first been domesticated by humans in Somalia and southern Arabia, around 3,000 BC, the Bactrian in central Asia around 2,500 BC, as at Shar-i Sokhta (also known as the Burnt City), Iran. In accord with patriarchal traditions, cylinder seals from **Middle Bronze Age Mesopotamia** showed riders seated upon camels.

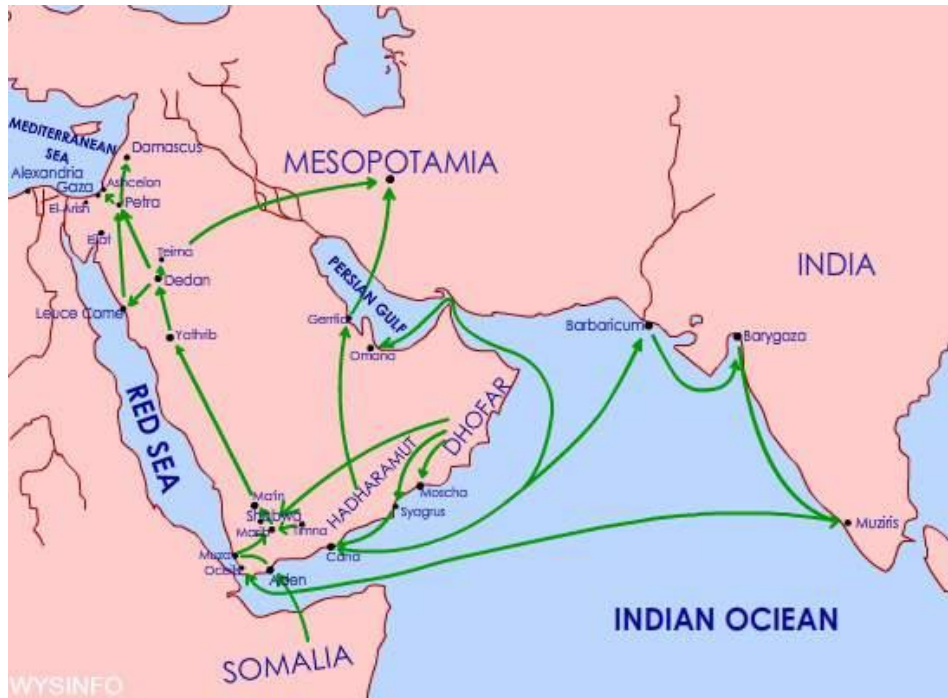
Regarding evidence of domesticated camels in Southern Arabia circa 3000 BCE:

Whoever claims that the camel was not domesticated in the times of Avraham must believe that the know-how of camel domestication remained confined to Southern Arabia *for some 1,300 years*. (For some perspective: approximately 1300 years have passed since the Arab siege of Constantinople and the heyday of pre-Columbian Mayan civilization. It was a century before the dawn of the Viking Age, and roughly 300 years before Columbus...)

That despite trade routes that have connected Southern Arabia to its surrounding lands from deep antiquity -- including the highway that snaked up from southern Arabia into the Levant.



The Nabatean Spice Route⁷



Ancient Network of Perfume and Incense Trade Routes.⁸ Note the route leading from Southern Arabia up to the region of Canaan.

If camels were in Southern Arabia in 3000 BCE, they were in the Levant (Canaan) by 1700 BCE, the time when Avraham the Patriarch flourished.

Regarding the Bactrian camel, domesticated since circa 2500 BCE

The above-mentioned Wiki article on the camel continues:

Martin Heide's 2010 work⁹ on the domestication of the camel tentatively concludes that the bactrian camel was domesticated by **at least the middle of the third millennium** somewhere east of the Zagros Mountains, then moving into Mesopotamia, and suggests that mentions of camels **"in the patriarchal narratives may refer, at least in some places, to the Bactrian camel."** while noting that the camel is not mentioned in relationship to Canaan. [bold and highlighting added]

Abraham came from Ur of the Kassites, which was part of the kingdom of the great conqueror Enmerkar (who is most likely to be the biblical Nimrod). As recorded in the early Sumerian epic, "Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta", Enmerkar conquered Aratta (Urartu), a kingdom straddling eastern Turkey and northwestern Iran, thereby dominating the Zagros mountain region. By sheer logic alone: **if the greater region had domesticated camels by the 26th century BCE, then Avraham --a greatly wealthy, 18th century BCE Sumerian-- would have known about and made good use of them.** It would not be a far-fetched proposition that Avraham himself, with his wealthy camp, could have introduced the Bactrian camel to the Levant region! Its disappearance (perhaps due to the great regional famine in the times of Jacob) might account for the lack of evidence of camel domestication before 930 BCE (the times of the early Davidic monarchy).

However speculative it might seem at first, this logic is vindicated by a grand find that should deeply bother any confirmed skeptic in regards to Avraham's camels. It is an image on a cylinder seal found in Syria (below¹⁰), the greater region of Ḫarran, the new bastion of Avraham's family after having left Ur. (In fact, if it was found west of the Euphrates River, it would hail from the portion of Syria that is part of the greater region promised to Avraham by the Almighty.) **The artifact dates to between 1650 and 1800 BCE, the patriarchal era precisely.** Again, Avraham flourished around approximately 1700 BCE. The museum caption reads, "the seal shows a divine couple [horns symbolize divinity] sitting on the two humps of a Bactrian camel, one of the earliest images of this animal." Could this be an image that records and mythologizes, from the pagan perspective, the arrival of Avraham and Sarah to Ḫarran?



Now I can substantiate my earlier use of the word "reckless": Echoing Albright's not very bright conclusion is a sensationalized find by secular Israeli archaeologists Lidar Sapir-Hen and Erez Ben-Joseph.¹¹ From the same Wikipedia article:

Recent excavations in the Timna Valley by Lidar Sapir-Hen and Erez Ben-Yosef discovered what may be the earliest domestic camel bones found in Israel or even outside the Arabian peninsula, dating to around 930 BCE. This garnered considerable media coverage as it was described as evidence that the stories of Abraham, Joseph, Jacob and Esau were written after this time.

If a claim to the tune of "these bones that I happen to have found are likely to be *the very first* animals of this kind in this land!" would have come from a non-academic, evangelical Christian archaeologist, it would be utterly ridiculed, and for good reason. That such a claim emanates from within the ivory tower of academia (Israeli, no less) does not make it any less wrong-headed. The fact that one skeleton was found makes the likelihood that an earlier skeleton will be found even more likely.

I conclude with a quote from the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: E-J¹²:

Archaeological discoveries have now shown clearly that references to domesticated camels in Genesis are by no means anachronistic, as some earlier scholars supposed. While camel caravans seem to have been used regularly only from the Late Bronze Age onward, archeologists have found numerous bones of domesticated camels. Thus when Parrot was excavating Mari, he found camel bones in the ruins of a house dated to the pre-Sargonic period (ca. 2400 B.C.). An eighteenth-century B.C. relief from Byblos pictured a camel in a kneeling position, and a socket on the back showed that the animal's hump and its load had been attached separately. In accord with patriarchal traditions, cylinder seals from Middle Bronze Age Mesopotamia showed riders seated upon camels. Excavations on the island of Bahrain have revealed the existence of camel bones that may go as far back as the 4th millennium B.C., while other evidence for the early domestication of the camel has been recovered from the Indus valley... and in southeast Persia.

As a student of the RaMBaM (Maimonides) for many years, my Torah faith does not require the Torah to be perfectly historically accurate. Nonetheless, my faith, for one, has been strengthened by the accruing, secular academic evidence that suggest the historicity of the Torah narrative -- even in the earliest events it describes. Any occasional exaggeration, symbolic numbering, and mythologizing are for the sake of relating events of the ancient past in terms that would move and inspire one particular Semitic nation, and for religious, pedagogical purposes. *And yet, their essence is complete true.* To perceive how is a matter of understanding how to read the verses, which were *not* written for the sake of conveying a dry, academically objective history. That would have better suited a Greek audience; not a Hebrew one.

NOTES

1. Rohl, David M. *Exodus: History Or Myth?* Thinking Man Media. St. Louis Park, MN. 2015. 416 pp.
2. From Horev to Qaddesh. Source: "The Sinai Region." Google Earth. 29° 25' 47.83" N 34° 42' 33.87" E. December 14, 2015. December 29, 2015.
3. Camels - Ships of the Desert. Camelfarm.com. Web. January 13, 2016. URL: http://camelfarm.com/camels/camels_about.html
4. "Bactrian & Dromedary Camels: *Camelus bactrianus*, *C. dromedarius*, *C. ferus*". San Diego Zoo Global. Web. Updated April 2013. January 20, 2016. URL: <http://library.sandiegozoo.org/factsheets/camel/camel.htm>
5. O'Connell, J.T. Demand Media. "The Average Speed of Donkeys". www.Animals.mom.me. Web. January 13, 2016. URL: <http://animals.mom.me/average-speed-donkeys-7802.html>
6. Heide, Martin. 2011 "The Domestication of the Camel: Biological, Archaeological and Inscriptional Evidence from Mesopotamia, Egypt, Israel and Arabia, and Literary Evidence from the Hebrew Bible." Ugarit-Forschungen 42: 367-68. (Citation in Wikipedia article on "Camel". January 13, 2016.)
7. The Spice Route. Original source of image unknown. Posted at NegevJeep.co.il. Web. January 13, 2016. URL: <http://www.negevjeep.co.il/english/nabatean.html#>
8. Ancient Network of Perfume and Incense Trade Routes. "The Ancient Perfume Route". WysInfo Docuwebs. Web. January 13, 2016. URL: http://www.wysinfo.com/Perfume/Perfume_route.htm
9. Heide, Martin. 2011 "The Domestication of the Camel: Biological, Archaeological and Inscriptional Evidence from Mesopotamia, Egypt, Israel and Arabia, and Literary Evidence from the Hebrew Bible." Ugarit-Forschungen 42: 368. (Citation in Wikipedia article on "Camel". January 13, 2016.)
10. Cylinder Seal with a Two-Humped Camel Carrying a Divine Couple. The Online Collection of The Walters Art Museum. Location Within the Museum: Centre Street, Second Floor, Ancient Near Eastern Art. Creative Commons License. Web. January 13, 2016. URL: <http://art.thewalters.org/detail/27381/cylinder-seal-with-a-two-humped-camel-carrying-a-divine-couple/>
11. Sapir-Hen, Lidar; Erez Ben-Yosef (2013). "The Introduction of Domestic Camels to the Southern Levant: Evidence from the Arava Valley" (PDF). *Tel Aviv* **40**: 277–285. doi:10.1179/033443513x13753505864089. Retrieved 16 February 2014. (From citation in Wikipedia article on "Camel". January 13, 2016.)
12. Bromiley, Geoffrey W. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: E-J*. Entry for "Genesis". Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1982. page 442.