HAGAR, EL-HEGRA AND THE LOCATION OF MOUNT SINAI

with an Additional Note on Reqem

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The location of Mount Sinai remains, despite several recent detailed studies, a topic of serious disagreement among scholars. Each of the main alternatives proposed during a century of critical inquiry has been championed at length during the past decade 1), and an Israeli scholar, M. HAREL, has suggested a quite new identification of Sinai with Gebel Sin Bisr, in the north-west of the Sinai Peninsula, some 30 miles south-east of Suez 2). In an effort to reach a decisive solution several fresh arguments have been brought forward, and these require careful consideration, to see whether in fact they can contribute anything to the investigation of the problem. It is to the examination of one such argument that the following remarks are directed.

Adherents of the theory that Mount Sinai was in what is now Saudi Arabia have usually held that the true location of the mountain was forgotten in early times, and that already within the Old Testament there is evidence of the belief that the mountain was situated in the southern massif of the Sinai Peninsula 3), the location attested by Christian tradition from the early 4th century A.D. onwards 4).


2) Cf. his Masa'ey Sinai (Tel Aviv, 1968), pp. 274 ff (Heb.).

3) Cf. A. VON GALL, AllIsraelitische Kultstätten (BZAW III (1898)), pp. 1-7 (the traditional location already presupposed by the Elohist source), and J. KOENIG, RHPR XLIII (1963), pp. 11 ff (it appears only in the latest stage of the composition of the Pentateuch, after the exile).

4) Cf. Eusebius of Caesarea, Onomasticon 145.25 (s.v. Υαφιδι) and 112.23 (s.v. Χαφι).
But it has recently been suggested, by H. Gese, that Sinai was known to be in the Arabian peninsula as late as the 1st century A.D., and that the 'traditional Christian view' only found acceptance after this 1).

In support of this contention Gese cited a number of passages from writers of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, among them one from the New Testament, Gal. iv 25: τὸ δὲ Ἄγαρ Σινᾶ ὤπος ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ Ἀραβίᾳ 2). The interpretation of this verse has vexed several generations of commentators, the main difficulty, apart from the associated textual one, being to discover the grounds for Paul's equation of Hagar and Mount Sinai 3). Gese claimed that the "missing link" was the Nabataean centre of el-hegra (modern Medain Salih) in the Heqaz, which, he maintained, could have been and in fact was associated in Jewish exegesis with the name of Hagar. If this interpretation of the passage could be established, it would indicate that for Paul Sinai was in the north-west part of the Arabian peninsula, and may even have been one of the volcanoes in the region around el-hegra 4). But what evidence is offered in support of the assertion that Hagar and el-hegra could have been associated in Paul's mind?

Gese has put forward two different arguments: first that a readiness to ignore differences between the gutturals (as in 'Hagar') and π

2) This is the text printed in modern editions, but, as Gese points out, there are important variant readings for the first few words. Sinaiticus and a number of other important witnesses read τὸ γάρ Σινᾶ ὤπος (P. 46 om. γάρ), omitting the reference to Hagar. Of the other passages referred to by Gese, that from Demetrius does not mention Sinai and is inconclusive as to its location; while Pompeius Trogius' location of Sinai in "Damascene" territory (if, as Gese holds, he meant Nabataea) need not necessarily exclude the Sinai Peninsula (cf. N. Glueck, Deities and Dolphins (London, 1966), pp. 3,39), but in any case occurs in a fanciful account which has just previously made Abraham and Israel into "kings of Damascus"! The evidence from Josephus gives no clear indication of where Sinai was then thought to lie, and it is possible that he had only the Biblical data and acquaintance with Hellenistic Μάδιαν to guide him.

3) Cf. (e.g.) J. B. Lightfoot, The Epistle to the Galatians (10th ed., London, 1890), pp. 192-98; W. M. Ramsay, A Historical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (London, 1899), p. 430: "This paragraph (sc. iv 20-v 1) is one of the most difficult in the whole epistle to understand aright"; as well as E. Lohse, TWNT VII, p. 285, n. 35, with literature cited p. 281n.

4) W. J. Phytilan-Adams (PEFS LXII (1930), pp. 135-149, 192-209) and J. Koenig (art. cit.) have proposed identifying Sinai with the now extinct volcanic peak Hala'il-bedr, situated about fifty miles north-west of el-hegra. A. Musil, who gave a description of this mountain in The Northern Hegaz (New York, 1926; pp. 214-216), was initially attracted by this idea (cf. Anzeiger der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Phil.-hist. Klasse, Wien, 1911, p. 154), but later gave it up (cf. The Northern Hegaz, pp. 296-298).