

View of the Sinai  
Peninsula from space  
NASA photo.

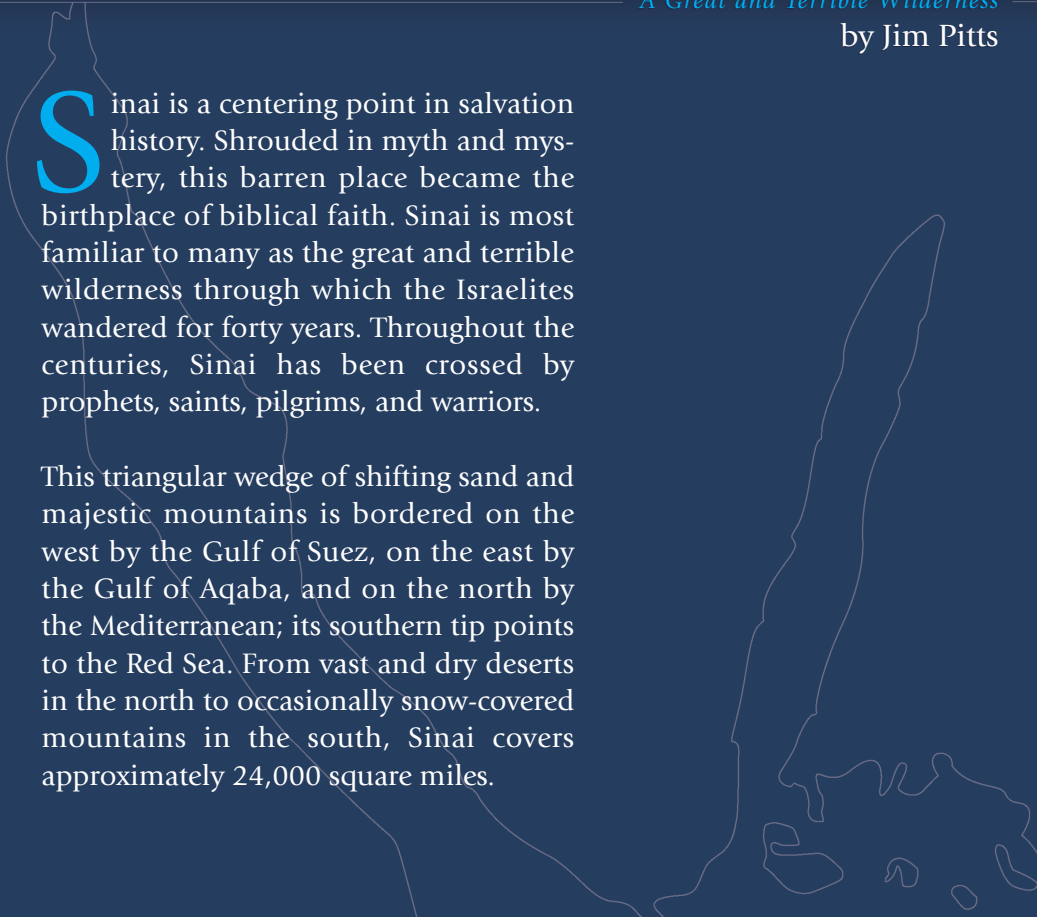
# Sinai

*A Great and Terrible Wilderness*

by Jim Pitts

**S**inai is a centering point in salvation history. Shrouded in myth and mystery, this barren place became the birthplace of biblical faith. Sinai is most familiar to many as the great and terrible wilderness through which the Israelites wandered for forty years. Throughout the centuries, Sinai has been crossed by prophets, saints, pilgrims, and warriors.

This triangular wedge of shifting sand and majestic mountains is bordered on the west by the Gulf of Suez, on the east by the Gulf of Aqaba, and on the north by the Mediterranean; its southern tip points to the Red Sea. From vast and dry deserts in the north to occasionally snow-covered mountains in the south, Sinai covers approximately 24,000 square miles.



A traditional Bedouin Tent with fabric woven from goat and camel hair.

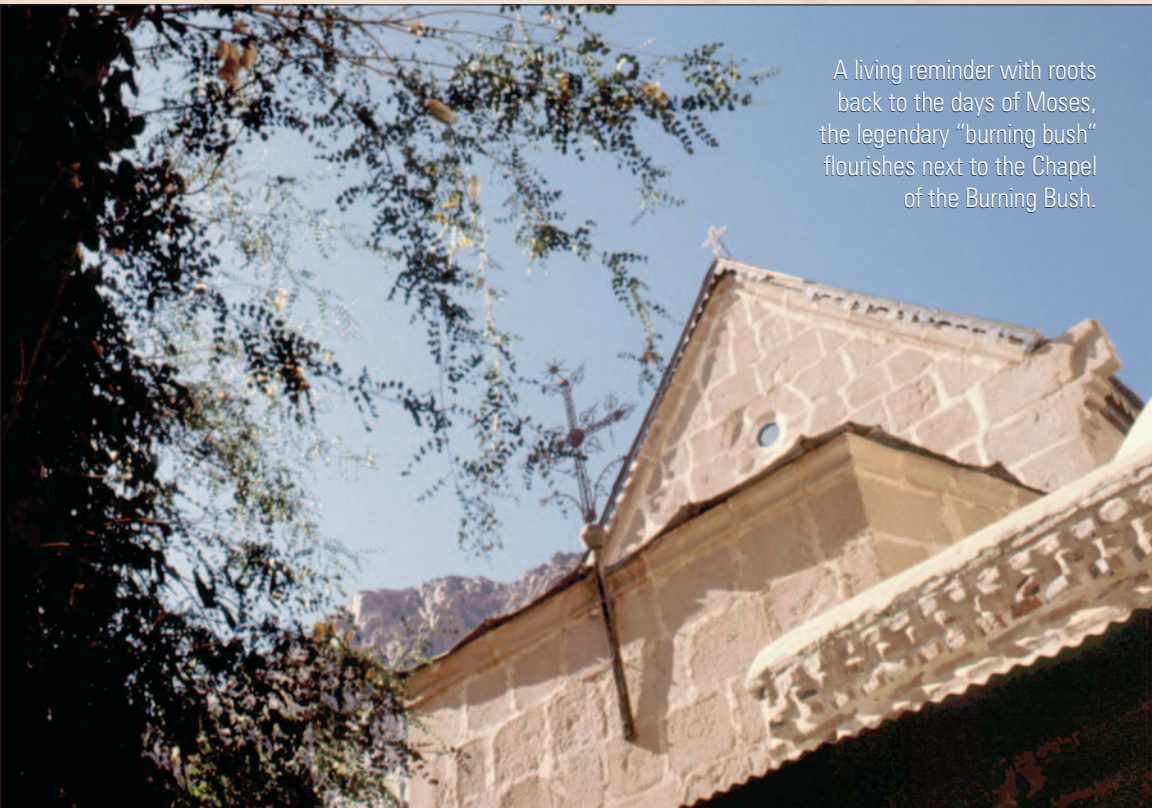


The Sinai peninsula is a land bridge connecting the Middle East to North Africa, the Negev to southern Israel. This vast wilderness is sparsely populated by nomadic herdsmen known as Bedouins. Their tents pitched near water wells and shrouded by date palms are living reminders of sojourners past.

In southern Sinai, monastic communities have been established. As early as AD 327, Empress Helena was impressed when shown a bramble bush. She ordered a small chapel to be built around it. About AD 530, the small chapel was enlarged by Emperor Justinian into a formidable fortress with a church and monastery.

Saint Catherine's monastery is adjacent to Jebel Musa (the Mountain of Moses) and home to a dozen or more Orthodox Monks. Over the centuries, pilgrims and scholars have been attracted to their library of ancient manuscripts and sacred icons.

A living reminder with roots back to the days of Moses, the legendary "burning bush" flourishes next to the Chapel of the Burning Bush.





The monastery library preserves the second largest collection of early codices and manuscripts in the world, outnumbered only by the Vatican Library. The famous Codex Sinaiticus, now in the British Library, was taken from the monastery in the nineteenth century. Their collection of mosaics, icons, and liturgical objects dates back to the fifth and sixth centuries.

With a smile, monks point out to “eager to believe” pilgrims the site of the “burning bush” and Jethro’s well. The monastery’s namesake, Saint Catherine, was an Egyptian from Alexandria who was martyred in AD 395. According to legend, her body was carried away by angels. Some five centuries later it was supposedly found at the top of a mountain near the monastery.

Occasionally, devout visitors are allowed to enter the Charnel House. Because the monastery’s small cemetery is not large enough to accommodate the monks’ remains, after a few years they are moved to the crypt beneath the Chapel of Saint Trifonio. Within the Charnel House, the previously buried and now re-exhumed bones and skulls of deceased monks, who worshiped and worked at the monastery, rest and await the great day of resurrection. This never to be forgotten reminder of mortality places life, death, and our eternal hope in perspective.

Skulls of monks rest in sacred and ordered peace



Unique for a Christian monastery, Saint Catherine's has an Islamic Mosque located inside its massive walls, thus providing hospitality to its near neighbors and indigenous people of the mountain, the Gebeleya. Built in the tenth century, the mosque became a sign of allegiance to Muslim powers, who pledged their protection of the monastery.



Jebel Musa rises some 7,500 feet above sea level. It was here, tradition states, that Moses received the Ten Commandments. Hiking three hours from the monastery along a narrow rocky trail and ascending hundreds of steps in the night offers a reward of a spectacular sunrise.

Sinai was and remains the ultimate wilderness trek. Here rebels were redeemed and reconciled and sent on their way to a place of promise. Here former slaves became a people with a divine destiny and an eternal hope. Fleeing out of Egypt to a land of freedom, guided by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, Sinai became a celebrated chapter and a transitional holy place. Here the Hebrews became a unified, monotheistic, and chastened people.

The Gospel of Matthew, connecting the old with the new covenant, presents Jesus as a new Moses. Mother Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus traveled across Sinai to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath. They remained there until the death of King Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I have called my son" (Mt 2:15). As with Moses and the Israelites, for Jesus and his family the way home was through the great and terrible wilderness of Sinai.

A plaque commemorating a transforming covenant of love and responsibility

