The Chief of Miners Mashe/Moshe, the Historical Moses

The quest for the historical Moses is considered by many historians a futile endeavor that has yielded not a shred of primary historical evidence confirming his historicity. The real problem however is not absence of evidence but why the very considerable evidence of Moses is unknown to historians.

See Also: This is a non-technical but enhanced version of my article "The Chief of Miners, Moses: Sinai **346**, *c.* 1250 BCE" in the 2017 issue of the *Bulletin of the Belgian Academy for the Study of Ancient and Oriental Languages* [BABELAO], an electronic journal accessible on the Internet.

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Moses, once reckoned among the great figures of ancient history, is today rarely mentioned in scholarly books on the history and religion of ancient Israel; if his name does appear, it is usually only in citations from the Bible or the writings of scholars of the past. The reason for his dramatic fall from academic grace, plainly and simply, is this: if confirmation by hard evidence is the acid test by which the historical existence of a person of the past must be confirmed, Moses fails the test, and he fails it miserably; because, allegedly, there is no absolutely evidence of any kind in any ancient source from ancient Egypt, Sinai or Israel of a man named Moses who matches or even resembles in the slightest the Moses of the Bible. So some historians claim and, with impeccable logic, conclude that no evidence of Moses has ever been found because there is none to find, no such man ever having existed. Who then is Moses? In their opinion, he is merely a character in the pages of a work of sacred pseudo-history, the Bible; and were it not for this masterpiece of historical fiction, we would not even know of Moses.

There is however one difficulty with the claim that there is no evidence of a historical man named Moses who fits the description of the Biblical Moses: it is untrue. Far from being absent in the historical record, Moses is one of the best attested of the major figures of remote history; for prominent in ancient inscriptions discovered more than a century ago in Sinai, the region of Egypt where much of the saga of Moses is set, is a distinguished figure named Mashe whose personal profile does fit that of Moshe, the Biblical Moses, and the fit is tight.

In the winter of 1905-1906, the father of modern archaeology, Sir Flinders Petrie, discovered at several sites on Mt Serabit el-Khadem in SW Sinai and in its vicinity inscriptions belonging to an early 13th cent. BCE Israelite copper and turquoise mining community. Mt Serabit el-Khadem (3,596 feet) lies about 18 miles inland from the El-Markha plain on the Gulf of Suez. Its broad plateau is dominated by the impressive ruins of the great temple of the goddess Hathor (called Baalt by the Israelites), the divine proprietress of the some twenty turquoise mines on its surface and benefactress of the miners, Egyptian and Israelite, who worked them. Founded in the time of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom (2040-1786 BCE) as a modest structure consisting of two parallel grotto-shrines, one dedicated to Hathor, the other to Ptah) excavated into a hill, each fronted by simple halls, the temple was expanded and embellished by almost every king of Egypt down to end of the New Kingdom (1570-1085 BCE) when it had become a large complex of pylons, halls and shrines sited in a 200 x 140 foot walled rectangular sacred precinct. It is the largest Egyptian temple to have existed outside the Nile Valley.

The inscriptions discovered by Petrie are primarily the simple, routine monuments of everyday life of the leaders of the Israelite mining community on Mt Serabit el-Khadem. Mahub-Baalt of Gath, its founder, and his three sons, Shubna-Sur, Sapon-mashe (also called Mashe/Moshe [Moses] and Maya) and Shesha. Most are written in the Phoinic (Phoenician)

dialect of Gath, Mahub-Baalt's native tongue, and all are set in the highly conservative, traditional forms of the Canaanite (Phoenician) inscriptional tradition. In this tradition, it was not merely what one said but how one said it, and how one said it was strictly governed by these fixed forms that remained virtually unchanged for more than a thousand years, from the Late Bronze Age to the Late Roman period. Two forms dominate, Form A, a simple declarative sentence of the kind **John made this* or **John made the/this object,* and Form B, a non-verbal sentence with nominal predicate of the kind **<This is> the object that John made.* As I shall presently discuss, any translation of a Sinai inscriptions that does not exhibit one of these fixed forms cannot be correct. It is as simple as that. I state this categorically, based on my intimate knowledge of Phoenician acquired over more than forty years of research and publication in the field of Phoenician grammar and inscriptions that is reflected in my *Phoenician-Punic Dictionary* (Peeters, 2000) and *Phoenician-Punic Grammar* (Brill, 2001; recently republished by the Society of Biblical Literature).

Among the first of the inscriptions discovered by Petrie on Mt Serabit el-Khadem was a small cuboid statue (also called block or crouching statue, a well-known Egyptian form) that lay *in situ* in the hall of the grotto-shrine of Hathor, where it had been placed in antiquity. Inscribed on the front and right side of the statue is its dedication (Sinai **346**), written in Form A in the word-order (1) *Direct Object* ("this") + *Verb* ("he made") + *Subject* ("John"). dedication reads *"His (Mashe's) wife presented this to Baalt on behalf of her husband, on behalf of the Chief of Miners, Mashe (Moses)"* (**Z NSʔT MRʕT LBʕLT ʕL N[ʕM] MT ʕL NʕM RB NQBN MŠ).** Sinai **346** is a typical Phoenician statue dedication: it gives the name of the person who presented the statue, the name of the god to whom it was presented and the name of the person on behalf of whom it was presented, that is, the person represented by the statue. Compare the following

Phoenician statue dedications in Form B:*"These are the statues that Bitt-Salom erected on behalf of her grandsons, on behalf of Esmun-adoni and Sillem and Abd-rasap, the three sons of Mer-yehi"* (255 BCE, from Idalion in Cyprus) and *"This is the statue that Abdo . . . the Chief of Scribes vowed and erected on behalf of his son, on behalf of Kalkay, to his Lord, to Esmun."* (320 BCE, from Kition in Cyprus). The form, Form A, in which Sinai **346** is set is well-attested in the Sinai inscriptions: compare Sinai **351** *"Mashe the Miner, [the son of] Ma[hub-Ba]alt, made this"* (**ZT BŠN MŠ NQB [BN] M[ʔBB]ʕLT**); Sinai **353a** *"Shesha <son of> Mahub-Baalt of Gath made this"* (**ZT BŠN ŠŠ MHBʕLT GNT**); Sinai 353b *"Arakht, Shesha's wife, presented this as a gift to Baalt"* (**ZT NŠʔ <ʔ>RḤT ZGT ŠŠ MŠʔT LBʕLT**); Sinai **365** *"Arakht placed this <here> for Shesha, the son of Mahub-Baalt"* (**Z ŠM ʔRḤT LŠŠ BN MʔHBʕLT**).



Sinai 346: Statue of Mashe/Moshe (Moses)

In effect, the statue of Mashe (Moses) and its inscription are the ancient equivalent of a photograph of the man bearing an annotation that identifies him by name. This is primary

evidence of the first order of the existence of a historical man named Mashe/Moshe (Moses) in ancient Sinai. Moreover, Mashe is depicted as the ancient Israelite historical tradition preserved in the Bible describes Moshe (Moses), as an Egyptian, clean-shaven (no beard) and wearing a typical Egyptian headdress. This is the person Moses's future wife Zipporah/Sephora described to her father as "an Egyptian man" (Exodus 2: 19) after she saw him for the first time at the well in Midian, not the distinguished elderly rabbi with long flowing beard created by Rembrandt and Chagall in their paintings or by Cecil B. DeMille in his epic motion picture *The Ten Commandments*. Egyptian men never grew beards.

For the statue of Mashe to have been placed in the holiest part of the Temple of Hathor indicates that he was a person of considerable prestige, not merely among his own people but among the Egyptians as well. But he was also a person who had his enemies. This is made clear by the fact that an attempt was made to erase his name from Sinai **346** and, by so doing, erase him from memory and history. Evidence of this is are the three parallel lines of gouging at the bottom of the right side of the statue, the uppermost running through the letter **Š** of the name **MŠ** (Mashe/Moshe). But Mashe also had his devoted followers, for the letter **Š** was restored, written very small to the immediate right of the **M**. Historical context for this anger directed at Mashe is found in the Israelite historical tradition, which relates that Moses was a fugitive from justice, wanted for the murder of an Egyptian overseer, and, of course, that he was the man who humiliated the king of Egypt by forcing him to release the Israelites midst great damage to the land and people of Egypt.



Sinai 346: Right side, bottom. The wavy line top center is the M of the name MŠ (Mashe/Moshe, Moses). Immediately below it is the original Š, with gouge marks running through it. The tiny restored Š can be seen just to the right of the M.

When did Mashe live? Historians and Semitists disagree as the time period in which the Sinai inscriptions were written, some dating them to the Egyptian Middle Kingdom, others to the New Kingdom, basing their conclusions exclusively on analysis of the script and archaeological context. None have looked at the date of the language in which the inscriptions are written, because they cannot only not read them but have no idea in what language(s) they are written and who wrote them. The date can however be ascertained with reasonable certainty by means of comparative and historical linguistic analysis now that the inscriptions can be translated. In the form of the dialect in which they are written, "his dog" was **kalbo* and "her dog" **kalba*, as in Classical Hebrew and Phoenician: the possessive pronouns *–o* ("his") and *–a* ("her") were

affixed directly to the stem of the noun. In marked contrast, we know that in the period 1400-1350 BCE, these same forms were **kalbuhu* and **kalbuha* respectively, with the pronouns *–hu* and *–ha* affixed to the case-vowel. Similarly, in the period 1400-1350 BCE, we know that the verb "she went" was pronounced **halakat,* with the ending *–at.* In the language of the Sinai inscriptions, however, while we do find **halakat* in the inscriptions of the generation of Moses and his father, the form in the inscriptions of the generation of Moses younger brother Shesha was **halaka*, the verb ending in *–a* as in Classical Hebrew and Phoenician. This evidence clearly indicates that the main group of the Sinai inscriptions was written about 1300-1250 BCE, at the beginning of Egyptian Dynasty XIX, the age of Ramesses II (1279-1212 BCE), the king in whose reign the story of Moses in the Bible is set: it was from his capital city, called Ramesses after him, that the Israelites are said to have made their exodus from Egypt. This was the time of the Egyptian New Kingdom. Most important, the linguistic date of the inscriptions agrees completely with the archaeological date of the objects discovered by the 1977-1978 Ophir Expedition of Tel Aviv University to Mt Serabit el-Khadem in Mine L, the mine at whose entrance and in whose interior the bulk of the Sinai inscriptions was discovered (Beit-Arieh 1987). Therefore, the claim by many Semitists and historians that the inscriptions date to the time of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom, about 2000-1700 BCE, is without merit. If the inscriptions had been written, say, about 1800 BCE, the language would be to Hebrew what Anglo-Saxon is the modern English; and this is just not the case.

But if Sinai **346** is a statue of the real Moses, why do historians so vehemently claim there is no mention of a Moses in ancient inscriptions? The reason is this: the inscription on the statue is known to historians in translations that give no hint of its true meaning, not even of the presence in it of the name Mashe/Moshe (Moses). Many of the translations are impenetrable

and, quite frankly, preposterous; and often the translations of the same inscriptions differ so radically one from the other that is impossible to imagine there is a common original. Understandably, historians are perplexed as to which, if any, is correct and for this reason are reluctant to use any of them as a source of reliable historical information. They wonder, moreover, and with good reason, if the inscriptions are even susceptible of rational, coherent translation, an opinion shared even by some Semitists. But rather than speak in generalities, let me cite here some of the proposed translations of Sinai **346** that illustrate the point I wish to make: "*This for the protection against harm; in favor of the handmaid of Ba'alat; in favor of the head of the stone-setters."* (Butin, 1932); *"O (thou) in whose care is the meadow (or pasturage) on behalf of N[u'mu], a gift for Baalath on behalf of Nu'mu, chief of the miner[s]."* (Albright, 1966); *"Na'am, chief of the statue-makers, erected. Na'am erected the statue for Ba'alat. This for the protection of the pasturages."* (Van den Branden, 1979); *"This is for increase of pasture on the terraces. For Ba'alat. By courtesy of the chief of the prefects."* (Colless, 1990);*"This (this image) is to install a Female Companion for the favor of the high-places <dedicated> to the Lady (Ba'lt) for the favor of the Master of the mine/our miners."* (Puech, 2002); "*On behalf of Nam, the chief of the miners."* (Goldwasser, 2016). Is it any wonder that historians have been utterly bewildered by and deeply suspicious of these translations and that many remain skeptical that they can be translated at all?

If there is any lingering doubt that the Chief of Miners Mashe who is the subject of Sinai **346** is the historical Moshe (Moses), it is dispelled by Sinai **360** and **361.** These inscriptions were discovered in the spring of 1930 along the ancient winding path from the Temple of Hathor to Mine L. Both are historical site-markers that date to 1200-1150 BCE, their linguistic date based on several late features unknown in the time of Mashe. They were placed at sites associated with

memorable incidents in the life and work of Mashe who, at the time they were written, was a revered and venerated historical figure of the past. What is so extraordinary about these inscriptions is that they record concrete objects and events that have exact correspondents in the life and work of the Biblical Moshe (Moses). Inscription **360,** written on a small standing stone (stele) that was perched on a ridge between two dry riverbeds a short distance from Mine K, reads *"This is the site of (where took place) the sign that Mashe Mahub-Baalt performed with the snake"* (**Z ŠḤ ʔT ZT BŠN MŠ [MHBʕLT] BBŠN).** The reference is unmistakable. In Exodus 4: 1-5, 17, 29-31 is the following story: *"Moshe (Moses) threw his staff on the ground, and it became a snake. He reached out and grabbed it, and it turned back into a staff in his hand. <Yahweh said to Moshe, 'Perform this sign for the Israelites to see> so that they believe that Yahweh, the god of their ancestors, the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, appeared to you. And take with you this staff, with which you shall perform the signs.' Moshe and Aharon (Aaron) went and convened the entire senate of the Israelites. He performed the signs for the people to see, and the people believed.*"

The second inscription, Sinai **361**, written on a rock embedded in the ground at the entrance to Mine N, reads *"This is the site of (where stood) the snake of bronze that Mashe Mahub-Baalt made"* (**Z ŠḤ ʔBŠN Z-NḤ[ŠT] ZT BŠN MŠ MHBʕLT**).[4] This incident quite clearly is that relatd ed in Numbers 21: 6-9; 2 Kings 18: 4: *"Yahweh unleashed snakes, vipers, among the people. They bit the people. Many among the Israelites died. So Moshe (Moses) made a snake of bronze and placed it on a pole. If a man was bitten by a snake but looked at the snake of bronze, he survived. <Many centuries later, King Hezekiah> smashed to pieces the snake of bronze that Moshe made, because down to his time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. It was called Nehushtan."*

There is yet a third historical site-marker belonging to the same series as Sinai **360** and **361**. It is Sinai **377**, written on a ridge about 800 meters NE of Bir Nasb, on the ancient path from the oasis to Mt Serabit el-Khadem. The oasis of Bir Nasb was the source of fresh water for the miners and the staging ground for caravans bringing turquoise and copper to the port on the Gulf of Suez and, back from there, food and supplies for the community. Sinai **377** identifies the significance of the oasis of Bir Nasb in the following manner: *"This is the site of (where appeared) the manna."* (**Z ŠḤ ʔMN**). The historical context of the incident reported in the site-marker is found in Numbers 16: 13-14, 21, 31: *"In the morning, there was a layer of dew around the encampment <of the Israelites in the desert of Sin>. When the layer of dew lifted, upon the surface of the desert was a finely pounded powder <that looked> as if It had been smeared on the ground … They (the Israelites) would collect it every morning, each man as much as he could eat, because when the sun grew hot, it would melt . . . the house of Israel named it 'manna'."*

Sinai **360**, **361** and **377** are the rarest kind of historical sources: they contain primary historical evidence that speaks immediately and directly to outstanding, unresolved major problems of history and resolves them dramatically, in a definitive manner. This kind of evidence is *prima facie* or, in the colloquial, "slam dunk," because it links Mashe to Moshe (Moses) and to Moshe alone. After all, how many men named Mashe/Moshe can there have been in antiquity who were leaders of an Israelite community on a holy mountain in Sinai and who performed an act so specific as a sign with a snake and made an object so specific as a snake of bronze? But you would never know of this information from earlier translations of the inscriptions. Compare the translations of **361** earlier given: *"This is the dwelling in the camp of M-Sh <occupied by> ATZT, cherished of Ba'alat; behold! (the whole) camp is cherished [of Ba'alat]" or "The one who built the camp is cherished [of Ba'alat]."* (Butin 1932); "*O, Merciful*

One, O Serpent Lady, (his) two lords, bring a sacrif[ice]." (Albright 1966);*"This is the pit of the melt-furnace which is beloved [of Ba'alat]. Furnace of metal-making."* (Colless 1990); "*This is Shabb. Stele of an offering of olive oil of the beloved of Ba'alt. This one measured it for the lady, for Ba'alat."* (Van den Branden 1979)**;** "*Our bound servitude had lingered. Moses then provoked astonishment, because of the Lady."* (Petrovich 2016) With translations like these, the precious historical information in the inscription remains locked in it; and one can understand why historians believe that there is no evidence of a man in ancient times who resembles the Moses of the Bible. Information so completely concealed can truthfully be said not to exist.

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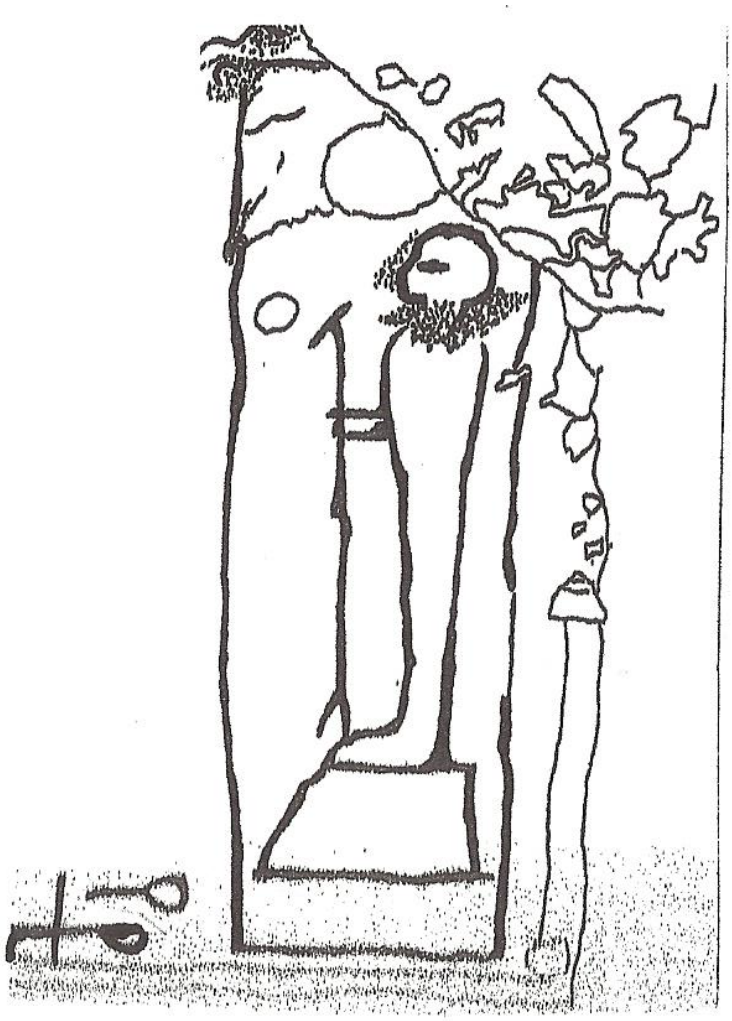
If the personal profile of the Chief of Miners Mashe were presented to professional profilers of major police agencies like the FBI, Scotland Yard or Interpol, they would not hesitate to identify him and Moshe, the Moses of the Bible, as one and the same person: his name is right (Mashe = Moshe/Moses), his position is right (leader of an Israelite community), the place is right (a holy mountain in Sinai), and the time is right (the reign of Ramesses II). But will historians of the Bible accept the identification? Having heard so many learned theories about Moses that are not based on any solid historical evidence, when evidence like that presented in this article is set before them they remain wary and deeply skeptical, reasoning that it is too good to be true and therefore is probably not true; after all, a problem so complex and so long disputed as that of the historical reality of Moses is unlikely to be solved by dramatic new evidence that appears suddenly, as if miraculously, from nowhere. Moreover, they argue that there are still serious unanswered questions that stand in the way of the identification of Mashe and Moshe (Moses) as the same man. For example, the Bible insists that Moses was an Israelite and that he worshipped the God of Israel, Yahweh. However, just as they are certain that there is

no mention of a Moses in ancient documents, so too they are convinced that there is absolutely no documented evidence of a god named Yahweh in the period in which the Bible says Moses lived. Yahweh, they claim, is first attested in the historical record only as late as the 9th century BCE and in inscriptions from Israel proper only in the 8th century BCE. This, if true, is damning evidence: it would indicate that the story of Moses is the Bible cannot be historically factual. No less damning in their eyes is the alleged fact that there is absolutely no historical evidence outside the Bible of Moses's supreme achievement, the Exodus of the Israelite from Egypt. The Sinai inscriptions however contain information that allays these genuine reservations and objections.

To the question if Yahweh was, as the Bible claims, the God of Moses, inscription Sinai **351** provides the answer. It is divided into two halves; the right half is occupied by an image of a god in the guise of the Egyptian god Ptah; he is standing in a shrine. The god is not however Ptah; for at the foot of the shrine, as is normal Egyptian practice to identify by name a god depicted in a text, drawing, relief or sculpture, the god in the shrine is named, and the name is **YHW**, Yahweh. The name consists of two letters. The first is a ligature of **Y** and **H**. The **Y** is the sign of an arm (the name of the letter **Y** in Hebrew is *yod*, meaning "arm"), which is the usual sign for **Y** in the Sinai inscriptions; it is bisected by a vertical line to form a cross, the cross being the simples form of the letter **H**, found in the writing of the personal name **MʔHBʕLT** (Mahub-Baalt) in Sinai **365**. The letter **W**, the usual sign in the inscriptions but here in horizontal stance, is written immediately above and slightly to the right of **Y+H**. In the right half of the inscription is a text in Form A, the same form used in the inscription on the statue; it identifies the person who made the image: *"Mashe (Moses) the Miner, [the son of] Ma[hub-B]aalt, made this*" (**Z BŠN MŠ NQB [BN] M[ʔHBB]]ʕLT).**



Sinai 351



Sinai 351: The God Yahweh, with the Name YHW (Yahweh) at the Foot of the Shrine.

Mashe's equation of Yahweh with Ptah was based on the similarity of the two gods. Unlike all other Egyptian gods, Ptah was not an aspect of nature but its creator, the creator of all things, including the gods. No less important, Ptah was the only god of Egypt who, like Yahweh, had a religious teaching (Hebrew *torah*), the so-called Memphite Theology. This teaching comes down to us in a copy written about 700 BCE; the original is thought to have been written much earlier, perhaps in the time of the New Kingdom, the period in which Mashe lived. In the

Memphite Theology, it is said of Ptah that *"it was discovered and understood that his strength is greater than <that of the other> gods"* by reason of the fact that it was "*he who made all and brought the gods into being."* The passage recalls the remark made by Jethro to his son-in-law Moses after the wonders wrought by Yahweh in Egypt: *"Now do I know that Yahweh is the greatest of all the gods"* (Exodus 18: 11). In the parlance of ancient religion, Ptah and Yahweh were the same god called by different names. There is also an extremely interesting Phoenician tradition that links the Memphite Theology, the religious teaching of Ptah, to the Torah, the religious teaching of Yahweh. The tradition, which has to do with Mashe's elder brother Shubna-Sur, is preserved by the Church Father Eusebius. Although somewhat distorted and garbled, it is nevertheless transparent. It states, *"The god Sour Moubelos (Shubna-Sur <son of> Mahub-Baalt) and Thourō (Torah in Phoenician pronunciation) elucidated the Theology of Taautos (Thoth) which was covered and concealed in allegories (stories with allegorical meaning)."* Here, the Theology of Taautos is the religious teaching of Ptah, the Memphite Theology, as written down by Thoth, the scribal god; as is said in a New Kingdom Egyptian text, *"What Ptah created, Thoth wrote down."* Similarly, the Torah was the religious teaching of Yahweh as recorded by his scribe, Moses. If we understand, therefore, that Ptah and Yahweh were the same god called by different names, what Sour Moubelos (Shubna-Sur Mahub-Baalt) was remembered for was having elucidated the Torah of Yahweh written down by Mashe, his brother. Clearly, the Phoenician historical tradition is derived from a non-Biblical Israelite source that had knowledge of the Serabit el-Khadem community, for it knew and preserved the name Sour (Shubna-Sur) of Mashe's brother used in the Sinai inscriptions. In the Israelite Biblical tradition, Shubna-Sur(Sour) is called by the name Aaron.

Sinai **351** is not the only inscription of the Late Bronze Age (1550-1200 BCE) that mentions Yahweh. There are several others, none of which has been seen by historians to exist: (1) Inscription Sinai **375a** is a plaque which once bore the scene of Mashe or his father Mahub-Baalt serving the goddess Hathor (Baalt). Although the scene is now completely effaced, the inscriptions identifying the two figures are still legible along the edges. The one identifying the male figure runs upward along the right edge and continues along the top; it reads *"This is the [P]riest of the [G]od Yahweh"* (**Z [K]HN [ʔL]HN YHW**). That Mashe and his father were priests of Yahweh is entirely consistent with the Israelite historical tradition preserved in the Bible that the family of Moses belonged to the tribe of Levi, whose members were priests of the God Yahweh.

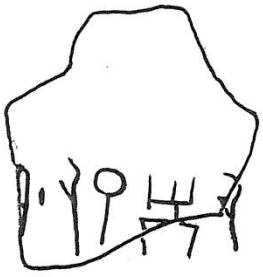
(2) Two inscriptions from Lachish, a city located about 10 miles south of Gath, the mother-city of the Serabit el-Khadem mining community, mention Yahweh. They date to *c.* 1200 BCE. The inscriptions are written in ink on a fragment of a bowl presented to the *Temple of Yahweh that is in Lachish* that was discarded along with numerous other objects in the *favissa* (pit) of the temple. The first (upper inscription), written from left to right, is the dedication of the bowl by its donor: *"[To] my [god], to Yahweh"* (**[LʔL]Y LYHW**); the second (lower inscription), written from right to left, is the registration of the bowl by the temple: *"(Belonging to] the Temple of Yahweh that is in La[chish"* (**[L]BYT YHW Š-BL[KŠ]).** To the name *The Temple of Yahweh that is in Lachish*, compare the name of the Yahweh temple in Jerusalem, *The Temple of Yahweh that is in Jerusalem* (**BYT YHWH ʔŠR BYRWŠLM**) in Ezra 1: 5, 2: 68, 7: 27. The ruins of the Lachish temple itself, located a few feet from the pit in which the inscribed bow fragment was discovered, were excavated in 1983 by the Israeli archaeologist David

Ussishkin; it was a massive, monumental building, 59 feet long by 11.5 feet wide running along the central E-W axis.

3) From *c.* 1550-1450 BCE is a cup with handle and spout discovered at Tell el-Ajjul near Gaza that had been presented to the local temple. Written from right to left on the shoulder is its dedication "For Yahweh" (**LYHW**).

4) The earliest mention of Yahweh is in a request for his blessing. It is written on the body sherd of a jug presented to him that was discovered at Tell Nagila. The object dates to *c.* 1650-1550 BCE. Only the beginning of the invocation survives: "*May Yahweh g[rant grace and long life to . . .]!"* (**YHWY Y[TN ḤN WḤYM L- . . .**]). Compare the Phoenician invocations *"Harpocrates grant long life to his servant, to Abd-Esmun!"* (**ḤRPKRṬ YTN ḤYM LʕBDY LʕBDʔSMN**), *"May Isis grant favor and long life to Abd-Ptah, the sonof Abdo!"* (**ʔSY TTN ḤN WḤYM LʕBDPTḤ BN ʕBDʔ)** and *"May Baal bless him and gant him long life!"* (**BʕL YBRK WYḤW).**

Tall Nagila Shard



Tall al-Ujul Cup



Lachish VI Shard



In the inscriptions of the Late Bronze Age, the divine name Yahweh is written **YHW,** with three letters, and it continued to be spelled in this manner by the Phoenicians, who therefore came to call the name the god of Israel the *Three Letters.* We know this from another Phoenician historical tradition preserved by Eusebius which relates that among the later outside initiates into the Phoenician mysteries was *"Eisirios (for *Eisirilos, Israel), the discoverer/inventor (euretēs) of the Three Letters Tria Grammata), the broher of Khna (Canaan), who changed his name to Phoinikos (Phoenician)."* In the ninth century BCE, when the Israelites began to spell Hebrew with the word-final letter **H** to indicate the vowel *e,* they wrote Yahweh as **YHWH**, with four letters; the divine name so written came to be known and still known as the *Tetragrammaton*, the *Four Letter Word.*

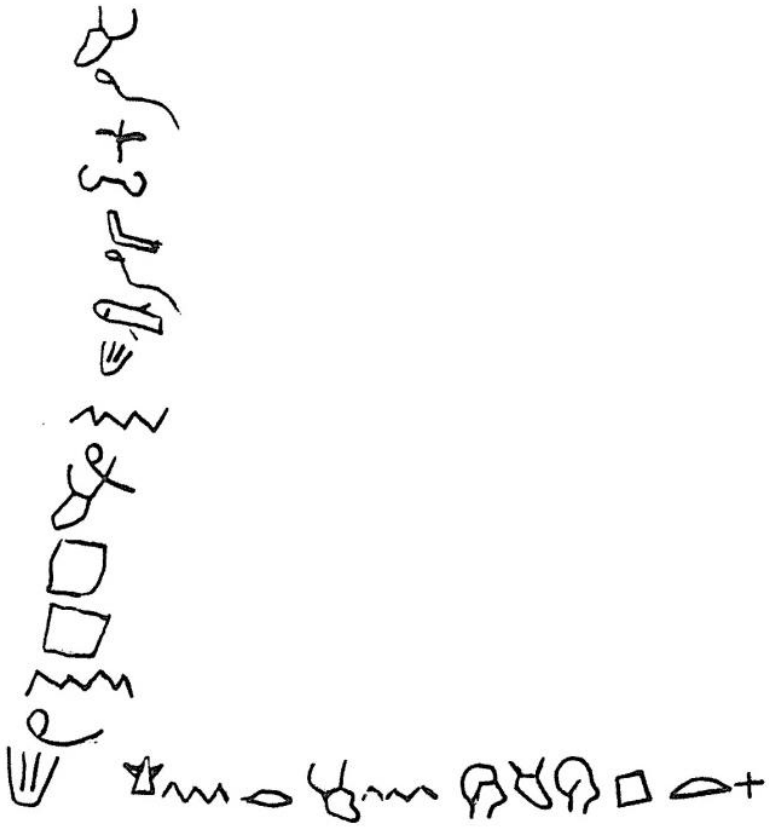
The cities where Yahweh was worshipped in the period 1650 to 1200 BCE are all located in the Shephelah (Lowlands) and along the coast of SW Palestine. Inasmuch as it is clear from all later sources, principal among them the Bible, that Yahweh was the exclusive god of Israel, it is entirely reasonable to infer that this region was the land of the Israelites, Israel. But since the names Israel and Israelites do not appear in the inscriptions, how can we be certain that the inference is correct? The answer is given by the Egyptian king Mainaptah (Merneptah), who about 1210 BCE fought the Israelites in their homeland in SW Palestine and in 1207 BCE erected a victory inscription in Thebes describing his victory. In his inscription, which has come to be known as the Israel Stele, he vaingloriously boasts,*"Ashkelon has been captured, Gezer seized and Yanoam (Na'amah in the Shephelah) utterly annihilated. The Israelite (singular collective) is wiped out! His seed (race) is no more! Khari [Palestine] is become a widow because of Egypt."* Since its discovery and publication in 1897, the Mainaptah inscription has been read exclusively in the light of and with extreme bias towards the Biblical tradition. As it is commonly understood, this tradition holds that the Israelites first came to Palestine after their exodus from Egypt under Moses in the time of Ramesses II (ruled 1279-1212 BCE), the father of Mainaptah (ruled 1212-1202 BCE). It was then that they settled in the land alongside the indigenous Canaanites, the inhabitants of the cities along the coast and in the Shephelah. Mainaptah has been understood to confirm the Biblical account, saying that he encountered and fought two different groups in Palestine, the Canaanites on the one hand, the inhabitants of Ashkelon, Gezer and Yanoam (Naamah in the Shephelah), and the Israelites on the other, a group newly come and as yet non fully settled in the central hill country. But the inscription does not say this! It does not identify the inhabitants of the cities as the Canaanites, and it does not fix the residence of the Israelites in the hills. These details are pulled from the Bible and read into

the inscription. The real question, then, is, how would an Egyptian in the time of Mainaptah have read the inscription, objectively, without any prior knowledge of Palestine and its peoples and without a copy of the Bible as a guide? Logically, he would have understood the passage *"Ashkelon has been captured, Gezer seized and Yanoam utterly annihilated. The Israelite is wiped out! His seed (race) is no more!"* to say that "the Israelite(s)" were the inhabitants of Ashkelon, Gezer and Yanoam, cities located in Israel, from which the Israelites derived their name. The evidence of the Sinai and other inscriptions supports this interpretation. It reveals that Gath, Lachish, Tell Nagila and Tell el-Ajjul, all of which are located in the same region of Palestine as Ashkelon, Gezer and Yanoam, were cities where Yahweh was worshiped in the period c. 1650 to 1200 BCE and, as earlier pointed out, Yahweh is known from all ancient sources as the God the Israelites and the Israelites alone. In other words, the inscriptions from Sinai and SW Palestine were written by those very same Israelites whom Mainaptah says he fought.

Why did Mainaptah invade and attack the Israelites? While we cannot answer this question with the certainty we would like, the Sinai inscriptions perhaps provide some historical context we did not have before. Mainaptah was the son of Ramesses II, the king in whose reign the Exodus story in the Bible is set. Is it possible, therefore, that his military campaign was to punish the Israelites for the humiliation they wrought upon his father and Egypt, assuming of course that there is real historical content in the Biblical Exodus story. Here, it is important to remember that we now have new evidence relevant to this question. We know from the Sinai inscriptions that (i) Moses was a historical person, (ii) that some of the things the Bible says he did are confirmed by the Sinai inscriptions, and (iii) that, as I shall presently discuss, there is even an inscription from Sinai that mentions the Pesah/Passover sacrifice which the Bible says

was made by Moses and the Israelites in Sinai to commemorate the Exodus. The new evidence is certainly worthy of serious consideration. But what happened to the Israel of Mainaptah and Mashe? It was invaded, defeated and occupied by the Philistines about 1180-1130 BCE and the Israelites forced to flee in a large exodus to the central hill country. There, regrouping, thy preserved and nurtured their culture and religion, and about 1150-1000 BCE, under Saul and David, established a new Israel, the Israel of the Bible. Linking the New Israel to the Old was the monumental figure of Mashe/Moshe (Moses).

Finally, and most important, what about the Exodus, the greatest event in the life and work of Moses? Just as Moses is the figure in the Bible next only to God in importance, the Exodus from Egypt led by Moses is the historical event Jewish theology ranks second only to God's creation of the Universe. Yet, historians are of one voice in claiming that there is absolutely no physical evidence of the Exodus and no ancient document that mentions it or gives any hint of it, as smoke of fire. This, too, is not true. Such evidence does exist. Inscribed on the wall of a turquoise mine on Mt Serabit el-Khadem in SW Sinai is inscription Sinai **357**; never never exposed to the natural elements, it has sustained no damage or degradation but is in a perfect state of preservation, every one of its twenty-seven letters intact and legible.



Sinai 357

Sinai **357** is written in Form B, the most common form used in the Canaanite (Phoenician) inscriptions and well-represented in the Sinai inscriptions; It has the modal form "*<This is> the object that John made."* It reads *"<These are> the offerings that Malkishama sacrificed in <the month of> Abib: Four Lambs."* (**ʔNT Š-YNSKM MLKŠMʕ LʔBB ʔMR ʔRBʕT**). The month name Abib (March-April) is unique to the Israelite among the Canaanite (Phoenician) calendars, and the lamb sacrifice in the month of Abib is, of course, the uniquely Israelite sacrifice of the Pesah/Passover, the Paschal sacrifice. That this reading, translation and interpretation of Sinai **357** are correct is indicated by two pieces of supporting evidence. First, the inscription has a precise analogue in Sinai **349,** also the record of a sacrifice couched in the same form, Form B,

and the offerings sacrificed also specified in an appendix: *"<These are> the offerings that the Chief of Miners Mashe placed <and> arranged <on the altar> for Baalt [together with] his brothers: Ten [x-animals], nine [y-animals], ten [z-animals]"* (**ʔNT Z-ŠM RB NQBN MŠ ʕRQM LBʕLT [ʕ]ʔḤN Z-L . . . ʕŠR[. . .] TŠʕ [. . .] ʕŠR [. . .]**). Moreover, Sinai **357** and **349** have parallels in two contemporary sacrificial inscriptions from Ugarit, a city on the coast of S Syria: "*<This is> the sikkānu-stele that Sharyelli erected to Dagan: the pagrū-sacrifice of a [lamb] and an ox as a food-offering."* (**SKN D-ŠʕLYT TRYL LDGN PGR [Š] WALP LAKL)** and *"<This is> the pagrū-sacrifice that 'Uzzānu sacrificed to Dagan, his Lord: [a lamb and an o]x as an offering."* (**PGR D-ŠʕLY ʕZN LDGN BʕLH [Š WAL]P BMḤRT).** Second, the existence of the man Malkishama who made the sacrifice recorded in Sinai **357** is confirmed by other documents from Serabit el-Khadem: he is the author of Sinai **358**, written on an interior wall of Mine M, also in Form B, that reads *"<This is> what Malkishama made"* (**ʔS PʕL MLKŠ[Mʕ]);** and he is the subject of the Egyptian *hotep-di-nesu* funerary table discovered at Serabit el-Khadem that bears his name in hieroglyphics; it reads: *"Hathor Lady of Turquoise, grant good life, praise and love to the ka (soul) of [Malki-]shama!"* (Giveon 1981).

What is truly remarkable about Sinai **357** is that it records the making of the Abib lamb sacrifice in Sinai by a man who was a member of an Israelite community led by a man named Moses! This should be viewed in the light of Numbers 9:1-5, which reports the making of this same sacrifice in Sinai by Moses and the Israelites on the first anniversary of the Exodus: *"Yahweh said to Moses in the desert of Sinai in the first month [Abib] of the second year of their exodus from the land of Egypt, "Let the Israelites make the Pesah sacrifice at its appointed time at twilight on the fourteenth day of this month . . . So Moses ordered the Israelites to make the*

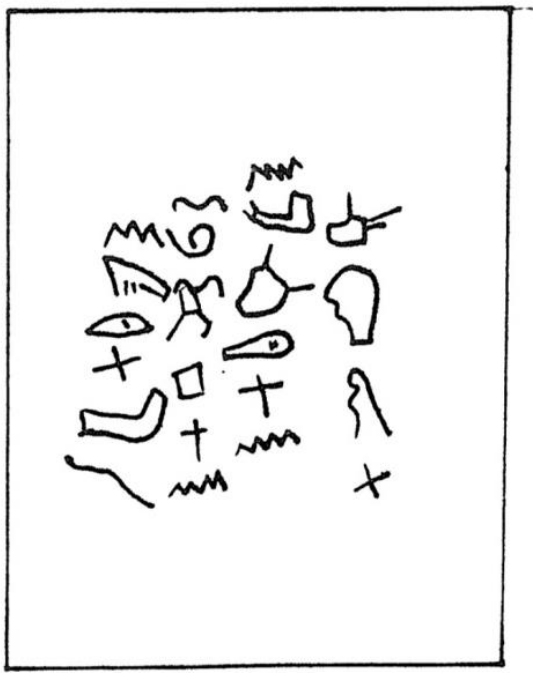
Pesah, sacrifice, and they made the Pesah sacrifice in the desert of Sinai at twilight in the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month."

Once again, we must ask, why, in the light of Sinai **357**, do historians so vehemently insist that there is no historical evidence, direct or indirect, of the Exodus in any source roughly from the time that it is thought to have taken place? Once again, the answer is that the translations of Sinai **357** available to historians give no indication that the inscription has anything to do with the Exodus: Butin (1928) *"The gang, consisting of nine men, successfully protected the baskets (of turquoise?)/huts (camp) for the superior officer (sheik?); (thereupon) R-M and his people (his compatriots [?], or clansmen [?]) made a great celebration."***;** Butin (1932)*"Cave (sleeping-shelter) which SKM (SYM) prepared for 'BBM, LY, (?)MʕʔMR (and) ʔRBʕL.."* **;** Albright (1966) *"Thou, O Shaphan, collect from Ababa eight minas (of turquoise). Shimea, a groom of the chief of car[avaneers(?)]."* ; Rainey (1975) *"You, Thapan, crush (hammer out) for Ababa from you (i.e. from your ore); (signed) Shimʕaʔ, the squire of the chief of the mi[ners(?)].* ; Beit-Arieh (1978) *«You, Shaphan, collect for Abimelek. Shimea, the squire of the region.»* **;** Van den Branden (1979) *«Awn et Shaggan ont extrait pour le père en mnw 8 ; A coupé ʔmr quatre.»* ; Dijkstra (1983) *"You, superintendent of the pestle, give a full quantity to the gate/house of the king. The honorable Shushan <son of> Shimʕaʔ, the mayor of the region."*; Shea (1986) *"I mined out before they were broken up, for Ababa: 8 minas; when they heard he said, 'Four'."* (*Paraphrase*: "I mined out 8 minas of raw turquoise for Ababa; when the other workmen heard, he ordered only four."). Or: *"We continued mining for <the month of> Abib. The king heard and said, 'Four <more months>'*; Colless (1990) *"The vessels of the garden. Pour water from this bag, while filling the pitcher with water of the spring."*; Puech (2002) *«Où égares/z-tu/vous les fondeurs auprès d'un ancêtre/ fantôme par/à propos d'un*

sacrifice molk? Écoute/ez les paroles de lumière de Baʕalat »; Wagenaar (2005) *«O you, give protection to the afflicted of <the god> Abib-Malik.»* **;** Redford (2015) *«I am Teshupna, liegeman to Apop (Apophis) the king. | Hear the words of ʔArbaʕ [. . . (?)].»* Or *«O An! Mayest thou protect me, liegeman to Apop the king. Hear the words of ʔArbaʕ [. . . (?)].»* ; Wilson-Wright (2016) *«Bb-mn fulfilled a vow to Teššob because 'he heard my utterance and gave me rest.'».*

We cannot leave the Sinai inscriptions without taking note of one of the most interesting relicts discovered on Mt Serabit el-Khadem that relates to the Biblical Moses. Surely, the objects most closely associated with Moses in the Bible are the iconic two stone tablets he is said to have chiseled out and on which he, in his capacity as recording scribe, wrote down the word of God, the Text of the Covenant of Ten Commandments, on Mt Sinai. The Bible is however exceedingly vague as to what these tablets looked like, their precise dimensions, height, width, thickness, weight. Artists from antiquity down to the present have therefore had to use their imaginations to recreate an image of them. What they have imagined are two monumental stone tablets that would have been much too heavy for an eighty year old Moses to have carried up and down a mountain much less even to lift from the ground. But discovered on Mt Serabit el-Khadem is an actual archaeological specimen of a real tablet of the kind the Bible is talking about. When discovered, the tablet was in seven fragments. In its original form, the tablet was rectangular, measuring about 12 x 10 inches or slightly larger than a conventional sheet of computer paper; it is only a few millimeters in thickness. It is the writing tablet of a professional scribe but one made of stone, the only material available in Sinai, and of a size convenient for the scribe to use and stack, and so light that even an elderly man like Moses could easily carry several in his hand. On the tablet, alas, is not the text of the Ten Commandments but a

communication (Sinai **375**) sent to the Chief of Miners Mashe (called by his nickname Maya) by the scribe at the oasis of Bir Nasb to inform him that *"Maya's three caravans, which have completed their journeys, have arrived home."* (**TBʔ ŠLŠ ʔRḤT MY ʔS [T]M MSʕTYNM**). Although the text is not religious but quite mundane, the tablet is an important piece of evidence that confirms the historical background of the Moses story in the Bible and requires of historians that they give some serious reconsideration to the view that the Bible is a work of pseudo-history or historical fiction rather than a work of true history.



Sinai 357: The Tablet Restored to its Original Form (Krahmalkov)

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